
Apartheid's Reluctant Uncle

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The United States
and Southern Africa
in the Early Cold War

THOMAS BORSTELMANN

New York Oxford
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
1993

AFRI
327.62073
B738a
1993

Oxford University Press

Oxford New York Toronto
Delhi Bombay Calcutta Madras Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Singapore Hong Kong Tokyo
Nairobi Dar es Salaam Cape Town
Melbourne Auckland Madrid

and associated companies in
Berlin Ibadan

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Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.,
200 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Borstelmann, Thomas.

Apartheid's reluctant uncle: the United States and Southern Africa in the
early cold war/Thomas Borstelmann.

p. cm. Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-19-507942-6

1. United States—Foreign relations—South Africa.
 2. South Africa—Foreign relations—United States.
 3. Apartheid—South Africa. 4. Cold War.
 5. South Africa—Race relations. 6. United States—Race relations.
 7. United States—Foreign relations—1945–1953. I. Title.
- E183.8.S6B67 1993
327.73068'09'044—dc20 92-29686

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

*For Lloyd and Lynn,
and in memory of Jane*

Preface

Twenty-five years of Cold War historiography have made it clear that certain costs accompanied the choice of the administration of President Harry S Truman to interpret the Soviet Union and the forces of left-wing reform and revolution around the world after World War II as the most evil and powerful conspiracy against human freedom in history. Foremost among these costs was the embarrassingly oppressive behavior of the anticommunist but distinctly nondemocratic allies the United States often found itself supporting as part of the supposed “free world.” The governments of Vietnam, Portugal, Argentina, China, Greece, South Korea, Nicaragua, and the Philippines come readily to mind as examples.

Among American allies in the early Cold War, by far the most striking exception to the “freedom” the United States government espoused was provided by the policies of the government of the Union of South Africa. The accession of the first apartheid regime in 1948 brought with it the only national government of the post–World War II period to proclaim openly and enthusiastically the virtues of racial discrimination and segregation. Ironically, the victory of apartheid coincided with Harry Truman’s strong stand in the 1948 U.S. presidential campaign in favor of greater civil rights for all Americans. Nonetheless, the Truman administration, despite some misgivings, chose in these same years to build an unprecedentedly close relationship with the government in Pretoria. While other important factors influenced this decision, the key for Washington, it turned out, was uranium. Similarly, the United States government gave strong support to the white European rulers of the neighboring colonies of southern Africa, the most important of which was the Belgian Congo—due also to uranium.

As I began to investigate the significance of this story, my curiosity was stimulated by the responses of others to my work. Archivists were invariably friendly and helpful, but also surprised; they had rarely, if ever, thought of American relations with southern Africa. One distinguished historian listened to my description of the topic and responded simply, “Well, that’s a bit offbeat.” Another, while more sympathetic to the subject, warned me to avoid any “special pleading” for the importance of southern Africa to the United States during the Truman era. The latter

advice I have taken to heart, and the evidence I have found stands on its own without needing artificial emphasis.

With rare exceptions, historians and others remain surprisingly uninformed today about the relationship between apartheid and the Cold War in the formative years of each, despite considerable recent interest in the current volatile situation in South Africa. The centrality of southern African uranium to American national security policy in the Truman years seems comparably unrecognized.¹ The crucial relationship between domestic race relations in the United States and American policy toward the Third World and its nonwhite residents—including southern Africa—during the early Cold War awaits comprehensive treatment. And the connections between racism and anticommunism, two of the most powerful and troubling themes in American history, have yet to receive much attention.

One of the fruits of the easing of Cold War tensions in the 1990s will surely be a new openness to looking more comprehensively, and with less partisan defensiveness, at the consequences of American anti-communism in the post-World War II period. United States government decisions made in the interests of “national security” have had an enormous impact on almost every aspect of American life, not to mention on other parts of the world, like Vietnam. Such important stories as the momentous environmental impact of American nuclear policy, for example, or the effects of a highly militarized global foreign policy on gender relations at home and abroad deserve extended consideration. So, too, do the racial consequences of the Cold War, and this is the part of our unexamined recent history that I offer a small piece of here.²

Generous financial assistance from the Department of History of Duke University and the Harry S Truman Library Institute in Independence, Missouri, has been critical to the completion of this project. The staff of Perkins Library at Duke, especially the Inter-Library Loan office, provided superlative professional services at every stage of the research for this study. The entire staff of the Harry S Truman Library has been an extraordinary model of professional expertise and personal hospitality. I had no idea that I would feel so at home, or learn so much, on my visits to Independence. The helpful staff of Oxford University Press contributed the title and the fine editorial skills of Gail Cooper.

This book has benefitted enormously from the kind assistance of many people, whose ideas helped stimulate whatever is of merit here but who bear no responsibility for the interpretations and conclusions I make. Carlos E. Pascual and Lawrence Goodwyn offered insightful suggestions in the initial stages of this project. John L. Platt provided critical doses of literary expertise, brotherly encouragement, and sustaining enthusiasm during the early chapters. Richard S. Kirkendall gave freely of his time and considerable historical knowledge in commenting on drafts of all chapters, while demonstrating unusual hospitality to a fellow scholar ex-

iled to his city for a period. William H. Chafe and Calvin D. Davis generously offered important encouragement and suggestions on the entire manuscript, as did William Minter. Bruce R. Kuniholm contributed critical insights in the final stages of the project, and Gary Y. Okihiro provided help at the end. I am deeply grateful to them all.

Peter H. Wood has long provided guidance and wise counsel at so many levels that it would surely embarrass him if I enumerated them all. Suffice it to say that without him this project would probably never have been started and would certainly not have been finished in a form like the present. I have yet to meet his peer in either scholarship or teaching, and I am profoundly grateful for his friendship.

My wife, Lynn Denise Borstelmann, bears more responsibility than anyone for ensuring the completion of this project. Her encouragement, sympathy, editorial skill, and computer expertise have been crucial. Her presence has deepened and broadened all of my life, and I celebrate our journey together with often unspeakable joy. It is to her and to my parents, Jane Millis Borstelmann and Lloyd Joseph Borstelmann, who first introduced me to the beauty and importance of history, that this book is dedicated.

Ithaca
January 1993

T. B.

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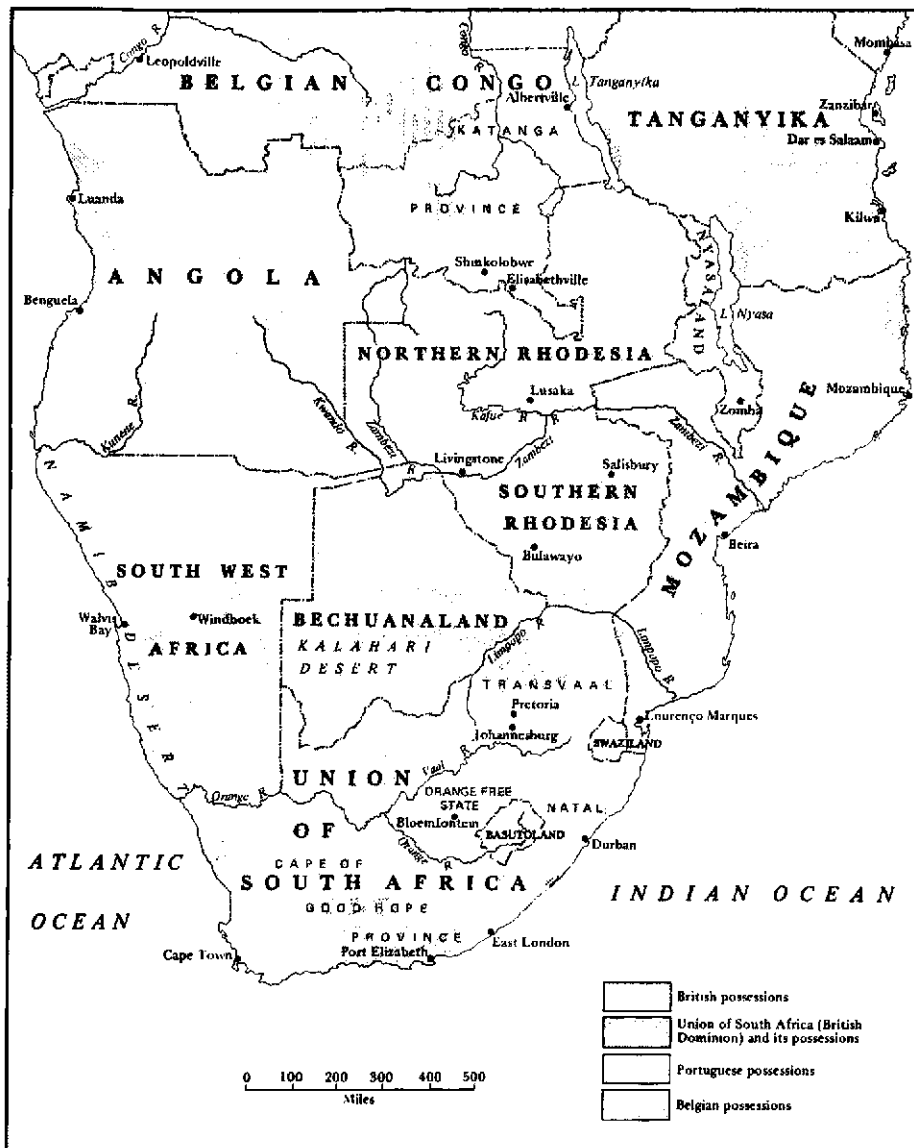
Note on the Text

The terminology employed to identify people of different races in South Africa can be confusing. I follow standard current usage: "white" refers to people of predominantly Afrikaner or English descent; "black" includes all people of color (that is, all nonwhites); "African" describes people with dark skin whose ancestors were indigenous to sub-Saharan Africa; "Indian" means people whose ancestors came from the Indian subcontinent; and "Colored" identifies those people, mostly resident in the Cape province, whose ancestry is a mix of white, African, and Malay.

The city of Cape Town was still referred to as "Capetown" in the 1940s, and for the sake of consistency in the text and notes I use the older spelling. Similarly, I refer to the states, colonies, and territories of southern Africa by the names that were common in the years under discussion: South West Africa (Namibia), Bechuanaland (Botswana), Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), Northern Rhodesia (Zambia), Nyasaland (Malawi), and the Belgian Congo (Zaire).

Occasional use of "Washington," "Pretoria," and "London" is made for the purpose of literary felicity in referring to the governments of the respective countries. I have done this only when the issues involved were largely matters of consensus within the particular government in question.

One of the compromises involved in the South African Act of Union in 1909 designated Pretoria, a largely Afrikaner community, as the country's administrative capital, and Cape Town, a more English city, as the seat of the legislature. The U.S. Minister (after 1948, the U.S. Ambassador) and at least some of his staff therefore spent about half of the year in each city, depending on when Parliament was in session. This double residence will become apparent in the notes.



Southern Africa in 1945

Apartheid's Reluctant Uncle

South Africans tend to hold up a mirror to America so that Americans are struck, however ambivalently, by a weird family resemblance.

—Joseph Lelyveld, *Move Your Shadow*

But alas, I did not ride away: for a while I stopped my ears to the noises coming from the hut by the granary where the tools are kept, then in the night I took a lantern and went to see for myself.

—J. M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*

Introduction

The Cold War produced some remarkable bedfellows. Under the leadership of President Harry S Truman, the United States government from 1945 to 1952 built alliances around the world against what it viewed as a pervasive threat by the Soviet Union to human freedom. The most important new commitment came in war-torn Europe, for the Truman administration had no doubt that Western Europe was the key to containing the spread of Soviet influence; its long history of industrial and military power made it the cornerstone of American policy. The enormous colonial territories controlled by England, France, Belgium, Portugal, and the Netherlands in Asia and Africa heightened the significance of these countries. The United States also developed formal alliances in these years in its own hemisphere and moved toward stronger ties with the countries of the Middle East, East Asia, and Southeast Asia. One of the most troubling and problematic relationships to emerge for the United States in this period, however, was with a nation far removed from the Soviet Union and Europe: the Union of South Africa.¹

Still a self-governing Dominion of the British Commonwealth until 1961, South Africa evolved during the Truman years from minor member of the victorious Allies of World War II to a status approaching that of international pariah. The cause, simply put, was its race relations. Elsewhere, successful prosecution of the war against Nazi Germany and the revelations of the Third Reich's efforts at racial genocide had discredited racial discrimination in international politics as never before. The long-established tradition of exploiting nonwhite peoples overseas would die hard in nations like England and Portugal, but in practical terms the war had devastated the European colonial powers, victors and vanquished alike. Moreover, the two most powerful nations to emerge victorious from the war shared an anticolonial tradition and reputation that seemed to offer a basis for greater racial equality. The Soviet Union had outlawed racial discrimination, and in the United States the movement to end segregation was growing steadily stronger. But the white minority in South Africa during these same years set its face resolutely against this tide of world history, moving forcefully to strengthen its position in what would become the world's last redoubt of white supremacy.²

Nevertheless, strategic and economic interests were simultaneously drawing the United States into closer alliance with South Africa. The apartheid regime that had come to power in 1948 in a surprising victory over the United Party of internationally renowned statesman Jan C. Smuts solidified and expanded previous South African segregation, further impoverishing and debilitating the vast majority of people in the Union. The Nationalist Party government of Dr. Daniel F. Malan made no apologies for this policy to the world abroad or to critics at home, and ignored all threats and pleas to change course. But South Africa's ties with Great Britain remained close, and American trade and investment in the Union expanded rapidly during the late 1940s and early 1950s. The white government's fervent anticommunism and steady support for the United States during the various crises of the early Cold War brought it much credit in Washington. Most important of all, South Africa's agreement in 1950 to produce and sell large quantities of uranium ore exclusively to the United States and England made the Union central to American national security policy. Thus an apartheid regime came to rest prominently among the nations of President Truman's self-proclaimed "free world." By the end of the Truman administration in January 1953, South Africa had become the greatest political embarrassment to the United States in the now vociferous Cold War.

An examination of American support for the white minority government of South Africa and for the colonial rulers of the rest of southern Africa offers a window on the complicated interplay of two major themes of twentieth-century American history: racism and anticommunism.³ The direct relationship between race relations in the international sphere and racial behavior in the United States will also become clear, for it was no coincidence that the Cold War and the civil rights movement in America happened simultaneously. American relations with South and southern Africa both reflected and, in turn, influenced the manner in which the decolonization of most of Asia and Africa proceeded in the context of the Cold War. An exploration of these themes properly begins with a survey of American relations with Africa before 1945 and the impact of World War II on southern Africa, especially the Union of South Africa.

PART ONE

COMMON
INTERESTS

The United States: American Race Relations and Ties with Africa Before Truman

Momolu Massaquoi came to Nashville during the Reconstruction years to attend Central Tennessee College. A son of the royal family of Sierra Leone, Massaquoi had gone to a mission school at home and had become a baptized Christian. In 1872, early in his undergraduate career in the American South, he happened upon a revealing but not uncommon scene of American life that would trouble him for decades thereafter. A large crowd of white people were taking a black man out of the city jail and parading him in a public square. They then tied a rope around his neck, secured it to a nearby bridge, and threw him over the side. What horrified Massaquoi even more than the brutality of the murder was the happy, festive atmosphere of the crowd. Hundreds of white men and women were laughing and joking at what they apparently thought of as sport. Describing this event years later to an audience of distinguished clergy in Boston, Massaquoi noted that despite white Americans' views of Africa as a "savage continent," he had never seen anything there to compare with the savagery he had witnessed in Nashville.¹

The racial contours of American society that shocked Momolu Massaquoi in the nineteenth century were quite familiar to men who grew up in those same years in the South and the border states, like Harry Truman of Missouri and his first appointed Secretary of State, James Byrnes of South Carolina. The long, dark history of race slavery and its aftermath in the United States had left a legacy of racial segregation, discrimination, and violence that still prevailed on the home front during World War II. The struggle of black Americans for equality in their own country gained momentum during the war, laying the foundation for important symbolic changes during the years of the Truman administration and for the massive civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. But in 1945, despite four years of war against the most destructive racists of the twentieth century, the United States was not well prepared as a society to deal with the rising power of the people of color who made

up the vast majority of the world's population. African Americans remained almost exclusively at the bottom of the American socioeconomic ladder. Parts of the Third World had become familiar to some American soldiers during the war, but white Americans as a whole continued to have as little knowledge of the nonwhite world abroad as they had of black communities in the United States. If most white Americans could barely notice black Americans, they could scarcely imagine black Africans.²

Governments tend to share the perspectives and limitations of the societies from which they emerge. The members of the Truman administration were products of a racially hierarchical culture whose values they shared and celebrated. The competitive ideological atmosphere of the Cold War would help move them eventually to adopt certain policies more sensitive to the desires of people of color at home and abroad, but their own experiences before coming to power trained them to identify with Europeans rather than with other peoples in international affairs. Truman and his advisers saw a vital and friendly Western Europe as the cornerstone of American foreign policy. They knew little of southern Africa, and when they considered it at all, they viewed the region through European rather than African eyes. They showed much more interest in events in Asia, where the end of the war revealed highly unstable conditions in China and almost all the colonial areas. Left-leaning revolutionaries threatened European control with far greater immediacy there than did any of the more preliminary discontents in sub-Saharan Africa. Relatively safe and little noticed by the public, American interests in southern Africa—especially in the Belgian Congo and the Union of South Africa—were already substantial by the eve of the Cold War. In the crisis-filled years of the Truman administration, the United States government would continue to define its interests in the region in a manner that would tie it closely to colonial and white minority rule.

I

American images of Africa before World War II emphasized topography and wildlife rather than people or cultural achievements. Few Americans had traveled to the continent, and most who had were either tourists or big-game hunters; while there, they usually shared in the comfortable and even luxurious life of European whites in a still-colonial world. The little information about Africa that reached the United States tended to be welded into a single, simplified image utterly at odds with the marked diversity of African environments and cultures. In this stereotype of the mysterious "Dark Continent," endless jungles teemed with savage and exotic beasts: lions, crocodiles, and huge snakes. The occasional person with dark skin who appeared in this story fell into one of two categories, depending on the degree of his independence from whites: he was either an obedient, childlike servant accompanying white hunters or explorers,

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