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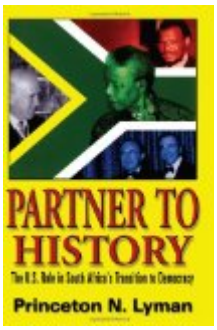

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Beyond Constructive Engagement: The United States in South Africa's Transition to Democracy

South Africa's transition from racist apartheid regime to multiracial (or "nonracial") democracy marks one of the most stunning transformations in the history of the twentieth century. Yet far from being the "miracle" of many people's imaginations, this transition was the function of the hard work of many people and organizations, the (perhaps reluctant) cooperation of some of apartheid's bulwarks, and not a little bit of luck. Princeton Lyman offers a heretofore unexamined view of the United States's role in South Africa's (essentially) peaceful transition.

The reader who first encounters *Partner to History* will be forgiven if she approaches it warily. After all, is it not typically American to seek to aggrandize the role of the United States in the good things that happen in the world, even if the outcome actually has little to do with events and approaches in Washington? Nonetheless, the skeptical reader should be assured that Lyman does not present a triumphal view of the United States. He is clear throughout the book that much of the credit for the transition belongs to the South African leaders and people who shepherded the sometimes treacherous and always volatile peace process through to the 1994 election, which serves as the logical denouement of Lyman's work. The U.S. role in South Africa was, in Lyman's terms, one of facilitation rather than one of mediation. In other words, the United States did what it could to support the process, but it was not America's role to force events. Ultimately, Lyman and the ambassadorial staff wielded little power in the negotiations between Nelson Mandela, F. W. deKlerk, and the others who played a vital role in the transformation of South Africa.

Lyman was well positioned as a witness to these proceedings. He was the U.S. Ambassador to South Africa from 1992 to 1995, and before that he had served as Ambassador to Nigeria, among other posts. Lyman thus also represents the shifting winds in American foreign policy toward Africa generally and South Africa in particular. He can, in some ways, be seen as a bridge between the Constructive Engagement policies of former Undersecretary of State Chester Crocker,

who helped create the Reagan and early Bush administration approaches to South Africa, and the changes beginning to take place in the later Bush presidency and lasting into the Clinton administration.

Lyman is the consummate ambassador. He is intelligent, articulate, and remarkably diplomatic in the more personal sense of the term. He has a Ph.D. in political science, and is familiar with the scholarly debates about southern Africa, but above all, he takes the measured tone of a high-ranking official in the State Department. Often this serves him well--he does not let emotion mar the telling of his account, he marshals his arguments well, and he allows every side a hearing.

Occasionally, however, Lyman is too measured. Too often his lack of judgmentalism translates into moral equivalence. In measuring the ANC and National Party with the same ruler Lyman, at times, seems to suggest that their moral claims were equally valid. Lyman would never actually say this, nor does he believe it, but his presentation leaves that impression. Similarly, when he depicts the left-wing Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) with the same level of extremism as he paints the far-right whites of groups such as Eugene Terreblanche's Afrikaner Weerstandbeweging (AWB--Afrikaner Resistance Movement) he engages in claims of moral equivalency that, far from being measured and fair, are morally and intellectually bankrupt. The PAC may have had its excesses, and it may not have spoken for the interests of the majority of South Africans, but it does not follow from there that it had the same moral status as a right-wing white supremacist group. In this reader's view he is also far too kind to Crocker's Constructive Engagement, which most critics see as little more than a buttress for apartheid South Africa's worst excesses during the 1980s.

The book begins somewhat inauspiciously, with Lyman recounting the broad swath of South African history under apartheid. This section is perfunctory and there are periodic errors of fact and interpretation; there is little new here for specialists. It was probably necessary that such a chapter be included since the United States Institute of Peace Press, which published the book, surely wanted to be able to draw as broad a readership as possible. As such, Lyman had to address the apartheid past in some sort of systematic way, yet this is not the strongest part of *Partner to History*.

Lyman soon hits his stride, however. While not the most vibrant stylist, the former ambassador writes with enough verve to push the story forward. The negotiations for peace did not devolve into violence or chaos, but there were ample opportunities for that to happen. Lyman admirably juggles all of the potential pitfalls the negotiators faced, showing how the United States did its best to keep the process from falling apart, although most of the credit goes to South Africans. This is not to say that the United States diplomatic staff, and Lyman himself, did not play an important role at various times. Indeed the author is sometimes humble to a fault, as he clearly played a far more significant role than he reveals.[1]

Especially problematic throughout the negotiations was the role of Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, the leader of the Zulu Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), who could be, at turns, bombastic, truculent, charming, and deferential. Lyman reveals the many sides to the IFP leader and shows how tensions surrounding the roles of Buthelezi and Inkatha in the negotiations almost derailed the whole process on more than one occasion. Lyman shows how the Americans often intervened in such cases, with himself at the front and center, in order to nudge Buthelezi toward closer engagement with the negotiating process. This was an even more tenuous situation than most realized. After all, Buthelezi was an advocate of stronger American intervention, and it took American involvement to bring him into the process. But the Americans knew that they could not enter into the

process as the kind of mediators that Buthelezi wanted (largely in hope that such mediation would scuttle the process entirely, as Lyman and his staff understood). This delicate balancing act was fraught with dangers and filled with ironies, and Lyman's account is as good an exposition of the inner workings of sensitive, trepidatious, high-level diplomatic wrangling as exists.

Lyman addresses a number of concerns, including the question of South African biological and chemical weapons and how America perceived them as a potential destabilizing influence throughout the negotiations and beyond. He carries his narrative just past the election and inauguration of Nelson Mandela. He then concludes with a useful chapter titled "Lessons Learned--and Relearned" in which he shows that there are lessons to be drawn from the South African example, and that it was not just an isolated incident, a miracle, from which we can draw nothing.

In recent years, an often highly readable literature on South Africa's transition has emerged. These works include T. R. H. Davenport's ***The Birth of a New South Africa***, which he initially presented as the Joanne Gorman lectures at the University of Western Ontario in 1995; ***Tomorrow is Another Country*** by the doyen of South African journalists, Allister Sparks; and Patti Waldmeir's ***Anatomy of a Miracle***.[2] Add to these the extensive literature on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and one quickly realizes that the transition era already stands as a discrete and fruitful area of scholarship and interest. Lyman's important book is a welcome contribution to this field.

Notes

[1]. An example of this comes in the too-brief appendix at the end of the book, which consists of but one document, the late Commerce Secretary Ron Brown's 30 November 1993 address at the University of the Western Cape in Bellville. While this was a wonderful speech, and it serves as Lyman's homage to the fallen Brown, Lyman gave a number of important speeches, some of which he even seems to know had a greater effect than he would ever admit. It is a shame that a few of these speeches, as well as other documents that might illustrate the United States's role in the transformation do not appear in a more expansive appendix.

[2]. T. R. H. Davenport, ***The Birth of a New South Africa*** (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998); Allister Sparks, ***Tomorrow is Another Country: The Inside Story of South Africa's Road to Change*** (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995); and Patti Waldmeir, ***Anatomy of a Miracle: The End of Apartheid and the Birth of the New South Africa*** (New York: Norton, 1997).

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