

Book Review: Partner to History: The U.S. Role in South Africa's Transition to Democracy

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Lyman, Princeton. *Partner to History: The U.S. Role in South Africa's Transition to Democracy*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2002. 344 pp. \$19.95 (paper).

Princeton Lyman was the American ambassador to South Africa from 1992–95, a period during which that country completed a remarkable transformation from a racist dictatorship to a multiracial democracy. *Partner to History* provides details about Lyman's experiences during his term as ambassador, a description and assessment of America's contributions to that transformation, and a discussion of the extent to which American contributions to the South African transition may be relevant for other cases. A career Foreign Service Officer who has spent most of his career dealing with Africa, Lyman is well-qualified to undertake such a study.

Policy toward South Africa had been very controversial in the decade prior to Lyman's posting to the country. While Americans had long criticized South Africa's racial policies, there was much debate about how to use America's limited influence to promote change there while not also undermining the country's strong economy and pro-west orientation. Chester Crocker, President Reagan's Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, advocated quiet diplomacy with Pretoria, cooperating with it to resolve regional issues, and then concentrating on domestic reform. This policy of "constructive engagement" had become very controversial by the mid-1980s, and many Americans began to call for economic sanctions. That effort succeeded with the passage of the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act of 1986. Sanctions were only eased in the early 1990s as South Africa began its reform process. Lyman sees merit in both approaches, concluding that both worked in South Africa, constructive engagement because of the support it provided to South African reformers and the entree it gave to South African decision-makers, and sanctions because they added to white South Africans' sense of insecurity and isolation. He advocates such an approach toward other dictatorships, arguing that the "lesson is that following dual... policies in the face of such a situation is not at all a bad thing. It adds up to a valuable array of tools by which to influence such a situation" (274). Unfortunately, it is doubtful that agreement can be reached on such a strategy. The typical tendency in Washington seems to be to engage a government and ignore its excesses or to isolate it because

of its excesses, not to utilize a more subtle and sophisticated strategy of the sort advocated here. American policy toward South Africa in the 1980s provides an illustration. While Lyman's "dual policy" implies a concurrent implementation of carrots and sticks, policy toward South Africa was sequential. Constructive engagement put little pressure on Pretoria, and then sanctions sought to isolate and punish the regime. Yet another problem is implementing such a strategy once it is agreed upon. Lyman describes the difficulty: implementation "takes case-by-case decisions on where to draw the line, where to apply the brakes on cooperation, how to develop incentives, and what to hold back" (274).

By the time Lyman arrived in South Africa, divisions within the United States over South Africa policy and its differences with Pretoria had largely ended. In this sense, his job was easier than that of his immediate predecessors. At the same time, the South African parties had embarked on a difficult transition process and often sought the support of outside parties. Lyman believes the United States played an important role in that transition. Although South Africans are the ones primarily responsible for their country's transition, the "role played by the international community, especially the United States, was an extremely active and, without exaggerating its significance, influential one" (xiii). The United States had first considered playing the role of mediator, but both the government and the African National Congress disapproved, so it decided to play the role of a facilitator, i.e., trying to help the parties reach an agreement, but not taking part in the negotiations themselves.

Still the United States was very active. The bulk of the text describes the multiple and varied American efforts to facilitate the South African transition. It worked with the negotiators, providing support and expert assistance when requested. For instance, the embassy funded a visit by an American law professor to assist a panel seeking to devise rules for mass marches, provided expertise to the South African Defense Force on topics such as civilian control of the military, civil-military relations in a democracy, and affirmative action, and brought ANC officials to the United States so that they could see the workings of the American federal system. A second American policy was to try to persuade parties outside the negotiations—especially Constand Viljoen, a military hero with widespread support among conservative Afrikaners, and Mangosuthu Buthelezi, leader of the Zulu-based Inkatha Freedom Party—to participate in

the talks, or, minimally, not to wreck the process. A third American policy was to work with ordinary South Africans to prepare them to assume roles in the new South Africa. The U.S. supported programs in leadership development and conflict resolution and funded scholarship programs for black South Africans to attend university in either South Africa or the United States. The United States also provided more election-related assistance than any other country. This took the form of voter education programs, funds for the parties participating in the election, and coordination of more than one thousand American election observers.

Sometimes the American role was symbolic. Following the assassination of Chris Hani, one the ANC's most popular figures, in the Spring of 1993, for instance, Lyman and his wife decided to go the memorial in Soweto's Jubiliani Stadium. Along with two others from the embassy staff, they were the only diplomats in attendance (many others attended a memorial service in Johannesburg) and the only white faces in the crowd. The funeral of Oliver Tambo less than two weeks later provided another occasion to demonstrate American support. The U.S. sent a major delegation, including Donna Shalala, Secretary of Health and Human Services, Maya Angelou, Jesse Jackson, and Randall Robinson. Mandela told Shalala he was "ecstatic" at the American presence (85). To cite one final example, President Clinton gave an interview to South African journalists in the tension-filled week prior to the election. Richard Steyn, editor of the Johannesburg *Star* and a participant in that interview, later cited its importance: "In that frightening period when everybody was stockpiling, the President of the U.S. came in with a very major interview, saying look, we're behind you" (215).

These policies made a difference. The primary players in South Africa, Nelson Mandela and F.W. de Klerk, both praised the American role. Mandela argued in August 1992 that the "United States and the ANC are moving closer together. We are seeing problems from the same perspective." De Klerk made a similar assertion in November 1993, claiming that South Africa's relationship with the United States had "moved from a stern one to a warm one" (77). American programs had a direct impact on many leaders in the new South Africa. Eleven of the 27 members of Mandela's first cabinet had visited the United States as part of the USIA Visitor Program. More than 1,000 members of newly-elected town councils had participated in U.S.-sponsored leadership development programs. More than 1,300 Africans had earned college degrees in the U.S. or South Africa as a result of an American scholarship program. Nearly seventy percent of South African NGOs believed American assistance had made a considerable contribution to human rights and the social and political empowerment of blacks in their country.

Lyman believes there are lessons in the South African experience for American policy toward other conflict situations. To reach this conclusion, he rejects the widespread notion that what happened in South Africa was a "miracle," because "doing so leads to seeing it as an aberration, a special case with limited relevance to other conflicts" (263). One of his recommendations was noted previously, i.e., adopting a dual policy of carrots and sticks toward rogue regimes. Another important idea is to keep the process in the hands of the parties, i.e., to play the role of facilitator and not of mediator. Americans often want to take the lead and get frustrated with lack of success, but allowing the parties to negotiate their own agreement gives them a greater stake in its success. It is necessary to have a large and well-trained diplomatic presence in the country in order to be in contact with and understand the perspectives of leading political forces. In South Africa, for instance, it was possible to understand conservative white opinion because two officers spoke Afrikaans, ANC opinion because an officer was essentially stationed at ANC headquarters, and Inkatha opinion because there was a consulate in Durban. It is also important to coordinate policy with other governments in order to send the same message and to increase resources. Finally, Lyman writes of the need for American ambassadors to speak out on conditions in the country but to do so rarely, in order to husband their influence.

These proposals are sensible, but it is doubtful that they can be implemented in most cases. While South Africa's transition may not have been a miracle, it was unique in many ways. The country is one of the largest and most important in Africa, guaranteeing that it would receive American attention and resources. It also possessed many of the background conditions for conflict resolution: both leading parties realized that they could not win militarily, both had enough understanding of the other that some degree of mutual understanding existed, and both had leaders committed to a peaceful transition and willing to compromise toward that goal. Moreover, the leading parties in South Africa wanted the United States to play an active role. Most other civil conflicts in Africa are different. None of them receive much attention from the U.S., and few have leaders of the quality of Mandela and de Klerk.

Even if the South African experience and the American role there are unlikely to be repeated, *Partner to History* nonetheless provides a very interesting and informative case study. It offers the perspective of a diplomatic insider on the South African transition, describes the day-to-day initiatives that often constitute the essence of diplomacy, and demonstrates the influence the United States can have on those situations where an American role is sought and American influence exercised.