

CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

"APARTHEID AND THE DEBATE ON THE ROLE OF
THE UNITED STATES IN SOUTH AFRICA"

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ADDRESS TO STUDENTS AT THE CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
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The present upsurge of interest in America about South Africa is something which Black South Africa welcomes. We see the heightened debate on the disinvestment question and rising protest giving expression to American indignation about apartheid as positive signs that the United States is moving a step nearer its international responsibility, as the world's leading democracy, to do something effective to help bring about fundamental change in South Africa. For us, however, the debate is not without dangers and I would like to take this opportunity of making a number of observations about the role of the United States in South Africa.

My first observation is that the debate necessarily must be viewed from both a South African and an American point of view. I really do understand, and accept as genuine, some of the statements which are being made. I understand an American who says simply: "Apartheid is abhorrent and there is no real move towards fundamental change and I regard it as immoral for me to invest in a situation which is dominated by an oppressive government making obnoxious racist laws to suppress millions of people." If that American has no sense of his international responsibility, or if he chooses to express that responsibility elsewhere and in a different way, he has the right to withdraw whatever investment he has in South Africa, and to do with it what he will. That is his prerogative and I know that there are Americans who adopt this point of view who are genuine human beings affronted by the indignity thrust upon every Black person in South Africa.

This point of view may be understood by us and even respected by us but the context in which we as Black South Africans would look at it leads me to suggest that a lot more is at stake than the right of Americans to express their freedom to do as they wish in making moral statements. From a Black South African point of view, there are a host of questions which must be asked and some of these questions are pertinent and are not being asked nor answered by many of those who are taking firm positions on what America's response to apartheid should be. A Black perspective of American responsibility is that it is a responsibility which America shares with the rest of the Western world about the whole field of Third World/First World relationships, and what the West can do or should be doing to tackle the global question of the great divide between the haves and the have-nots.

While America has never been a colonial power in Africa, it is located in that family of interests which has colonial pasts.

America is the leading industrial democracy of the world and the industrialised West has over the generations grown affluent at the expense of the Third World. If some dismiss this view as an untenable view of guilt by association, they must be reminded that beyond the historical reasons why the West should in part bear a responsibility for the deprivation of the Third World, moral and survival issues must also be raised. In ultimate terms, in a community of nations the good of one nation cannot be pursued regardless of other nations. America as the world's leading democracy has a moral responsibility to the world, and in medium and long term American interests would be greatly served by the industrialisation of the Third World and adversely affected by continued poverty in four-fifths of mankind.

There may be some debate today in the United States about the rights of corporations, cities or pension funds to withdraw or continue to invest in South Africa, but the real debate should be about how best to make an American impact on apartheid, and to register objections to apartheid, while at the same time furthering progress towards the emergence of a just society in South Africa. It is this dominant theme in the current debate which leads me to say that the issues must be looked at both from an American and from a South African point of view. I would like therefore to place in perspective options open to Black South Africans between which they can realistically choose and between which a wise and prudent course of action must be taken.

It is in this field that debate gets bogged down and where uninformed opinion is so dangerous. It is also in this field that Americans receive a great many conflicting signals from Black South Africa. My own latitude of choice of the options open to me are somewhat limited. There are a multitude of political forces at work in South Africa which in some circumstances conflict with each other and in other circumstances reinforce each other. I recognise that the threat of violence, and particularly the threat of escalating violence, is a matter of deep concern to the South African Government, and attempts by Black South Africans in exile to mount an armed struggle against apartheid have not been without their impact. The symbolism of a bomb exploding in an urban area is not without any significance. Threats of economic boycotts against South Africa, and threats to isolate South Africa diplomatically, have also concerned the South African Government, and these threats of violence and the possible application of effective sanctions against the country, have been sustained over a long period of time and most certainly have had an accumulative effect inside the country.

South Africa has been made a pariah of the world; debates in the United Nations and other international forums and the repeated condemnation of the South African Government's apartheid policy by numerous Heads of State, have been moral statements worth the making. I have no problem with accepting that across the broad spectrum of Black political attitudes and thinking, threats of

violence, boycotts and the diplomatic isolation of South Africa, have had positive results. My problem begins to emerge when it is not recognised by Americans that these approaches to the South African situation are approaches by people who have got nothing else they can do. Black South African exiles, away from the forefront of the struggle at home, have set themselves the task of heightening international awareness of the odiousness of apartheid and in this they have succeeded. Perhaps if I were labouring in New York, Washington, Toronto, London, Amsterdam or Berlin as a Black South African exile, I too would have been drawn into these tactics and strategies because they were the only ones open to me.

22 million Black South Africans, however, are not in these places. They have different options and I am all too frequently judged because my real options are the options of these 22 million people in their own circumstances. Good men and brave men are often totally immersed in options of very limited utility. Americans must understand the extent to which situational differences necessarily dictate different options.

As a Black South African in the forefront of the struggle at home where the real battle is being waged, I share a perspective with millions of other Black South Africans that liberation will not come to us from across our borders; we will not be delivered from the evils of apartheid by marching armies of Black exiles, and we will not be delivered from the evils of apartheid by the West or the international community. If ever we are to eradicate apartheid in South Africa, it will have to be eradicated by people inside South Africa, and we who are inside South Africa must choose between options open to us there, where there are a very much wider range of options which are far more effective than the options of protest and threat to which Black South African exiles are so frequently confined.

For me the choice between these options is, however, rather limited. In the 1950's and 60's I was an active member of the African National Congress. I like other Black South Africans was appalled when the Government banned the ANC and the PAC, and like other Black South Africans, I anticipated that the Mission we had sent into exile in anticipation of this final crushing act on the part of the South African Government, would so raise international ire and so mobilise international support that the South African Government would find itself under international siege and would be forced to embark on a process of change. I and millions of Black South Africans waited in vein for this to happen. After a decade had passed, we began to cease looking over our shoulders for help from elsewhere. By the early seventies, there emerged a widespread feeling in South Africa that we who were in the country had to take our own initiatives and assume our own responsibility to bring about fundamental change.

Inkatha and what has become known as the Black Consciousness

Movement arose out of this feeling of disquiet about the effectiveness of our brothers and sisters in exile. The rise of the Black Consciousness Movement and the rise of Inkatha in South Africa resulted from new initiatives entirely unrelated to the Mission in Exile. The wave after wave of protest and the new tactics and strategies which were mounted since 1976 originated from within the country.

The founding father of the African National Congress was my uncle, Dr. Pixley ka Isaka Seme. People like Nelson Mandela, Robert Sobukwe, Oliver Tambo and Walter Sisulu were my contemporaries on the political scene, and I was a confidante of Chief Albert Lutuli who was the National President of the ANC when it was banned. I had an intimate knowledge of Black politics then and when I was forced to reconsider my options in the early and mid seventies, I had to analyse what went wrong if Black South Africa, in the face of such terrible oppression, had been cast into a political vacuum which had lasted more than a decade and a half.

When I look back, and when I discussed matters with many of my contemporaries who like me were steeped in the Black political tradition and had been members of the old ANC, I came to realise that one of the cardinal failures of the old ANC was the lack of attention that was paid to the hard grinding work of organising people and building up a membership-based organisation involving constituency politics. In the late fifties and early sixties a rousing spokesmen drew crowds and protest heightened; there were massive demonstrations and marches; there was pass burning and defiance campaigns but after the fire hoses, the police baton charges, the police dogs and tear gas, and the jailing and banning of leaders, there was nothing left which anyone could work on.

I therefore set myself the task of establishing a Black political movement which would be membership-based, which would be structured, disciplined and employable as an organisation. I determined that whereas the old ANC employed its leaders, I should establish an organisation in which the people themselves were employed.

I established Inkatha in 1975 and Black South Africa's response exceeded my wildest imagination. I found that people were yearning to be organised; were yearning for a stable and structured political home; were yearning for the politics of realism and above all, were yearning for a kind of organisation in which they dictated to their leadership, and in which the leadership did not lead them up primrose paths to failure after failure, with ordinary people having to pay the prices of these failures. There was nothing wrong with the old ANC's aims and objectives. People rallied to these aims and objectives which were being discarded one after the other by the leadership of the Mission in Exile. Today, a short ten years after the founding of Inkatha, Inkatha's paid-up membership runs to nearly a million members, and beyond each paid-

up member there are two or three supporters and even more sympathisers. In the space of ten years, Inkatha achieved an organisational strength which the old ANC had failed to achieve in 63 years.

I now necessarily have to operate within the defined options of the people. Inkatha is a democratic organisation in which the Annual General Conference of delegates, drawn from all walks of life and from all areas, constitutes the supreme body. The Annual General Conference chooses its leaders and dictates what they should and should not do. Everything I say and do I put before this Conference so that I might be guided by it and judged by it. Inkatha's leadership does not have the options open to others. We cannot indulge in Utopian flights of fancy because the people commit us to the politics of reality, to constituency politics, to the hard, back-breaking politics of developing negotiating bases and to the politics of bringing about change through non-violent and democratic means.

Many other Black leaders have to surmise what people think and feel because they have no mechanisms for testing their strategy choices and their options against the will of the people. There are Black leaders who idealise Blackness in beautiful Utopias; there are others who vent their spleen in anger in series of rash, ill-considered spectacular acts of non-achieving confrontation, but I have to report to nearly a million members of Inkatha what I am saying today. I have to get endorsements for the stands I am taking. I came here with a mandate from the people and I will return to the people to report upon what happened while I was in the United States.

Americans can be assured that the majority of Black South Africans are committed to bringing about change through non-violent means by the harsh realities which surround them. There are no springboards in neighbouring States from which the armed struggle can be mounted. There are no areas in South Africa which can be liberated to give back-line support for an armed struggle. There are overwhelming logistic considerations why only a few weapons and the isolated bomb or hand grenade can be delivered to points in the country's hinterland. South Africa, simply in terms of terrain and structure and in terms of development, cannot be used as an arena for an armed struggle. People know this; they know that South African armies can romp where they will across the length and breadth of Southern Africa, and they understand why people like President Samora Machel has bluntly told the ANC's Mission in Exile that he does not believe they can succeed in doing what they had been attempting to do.

If we are committed to membership-based constituency politics seeking to establish bargaining power to be used in the politics of negotiation, and if we are committed to bringing about change through non-violent means, and if we are to employ democracy in

bringing about things which are necessary, these strategies are prescribed for us. Those tactics and strategies have to be pursued within the realities which surround us. A Black South African reality is that if we destroy the productive capacity of the economy, millions of people will starve. More than half of the country's 22 million Africans live in urban areas. They are cash dependent millions. The less than 11 million who are located in rural areas are located in areas where the density of population puts such pressure to bear on resources that people there too are dependent on cash coming in from those in their families who can get work somewhere.

Not only are we as Blacks dependent on cash incomes and hence on a sound economy, but we also face the frightening implications of the fact that over half of the 22 million Blacks in the country are 15 years and younger. This places awesome responsibilities on our shoulders to bring about radical change without destroying the economic growth base of our economy. Every failure to do so will exacerbate already widespread poverty and the horrendous backlogs which already exist in housing, education, health, welfare and essential services.

Americans who are genuinely interested in South Africa should inform themselves on these matters and they will inevitably have to come to the conclusion that it would be counter-productive for them wilfully to destroy the South African economy. I ask the American who has the right to withdraw his investment from South Africa because he sees it as an obnoxious place, to re-examine his responsibility as a free American, and to ask how America can play a meaningful role in South Africa.

I now want specifically to address myself to academics and opinion makers. The social sciences at their best give us insights into what has already happened and social sciences are at their worst when they become predictive and prescriptive. Successful revolutions are not produced by social scientists; they are produced by the people themselves and radical change in South Africa simply will not be brought about by learned prescriptions. Yet I find that all too frequently university communities are very prescriptive about South Africa. There has been debate on a great many campuses about the question of divestment. University boards have withdrawn investments from companies holding interests in South Africa. I respect them for doing so to the extent that they were motivated to express solidarity with the oppressed, and the extent to which they have done something wrong and ineffective for the right reasons.

I know as yet of no study of the South African situation which has produced a wisdom greater than the wisdom of the ordinary people in Inkatha about their own circumstances, and which has been put into practice to achieve anything. I am the suffering man whom some academics theorise about. I am the labouring leader some academics

prescribe to, and I can assure you that if there was anything which could alleviate my suffering or ease my labours, I would welcome that relief and ease. No single academic from the United States has done a detailed study on Inkatha within the context of real options open to Inkatha members in the South African situation. No university can be assured of being right in rejecting the millions Inkatha represents, and in rejecting what I say today. I ask this University, and other universities in the United States, to heed the wisdom of the people because it is the only wisdom they have and it is the only wisdom around which their leaders can mobilise them. I come back to the statement that if apartheid is to be abolished, it will have to be abolished by people inside South Africa. They will have to do it in their way and do it both within the riches and the limitations of their wisdom. The people are the only working partners who could assist Americans to make their contribution towards change in South Africa more effective. Inkatha is open to such partnerships in a wide range of activities.

I cannot see where the current debate in America is going to lead but I ask above all that those who are genuinely interested in assisting positive developments in South Africa do whatever can be done to guard against the new American debate from becoming no more than debate by Americans about other Americans for American interests. A noble struggle is taking place in South Africa; a struggle for democracy, a struggle for freedom and a struggle for decent human standards of living. I ask Americans to debate issues with this in mind.
