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# U.S. Pays a Price for Past Diplomatic Bungles

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WASHINGTON

It looks as though it is happening again. Violence breaks out in a country deemed important to the United States, in this case South Africa. The Administration in Washington finds that it has failed to develop adequate ties to opposition forces. The choices narrow starkly to support for the current government, which survives through savage repression, or pressure for political change, which may result in a government that harbors fierce resentment of the United States.

That was the pattern in Angola, Iran, Mozambique and Nicaragua. Already some commentators are suggesting that South Africa may soon join the list.

But, at least for some time, South Africa is unlikely to suffer that fate. In the other cases a governing class outwardly impressive in its strength abruptly collapsed from within. Formerly haughty autocrats suddenly displayed unexpected absence of will, which in turn caused a political implosion that confounded even the opposition by its scope. A new government took over with ease because there was little left to stand in its way.

The leaders of South Africa are short of many qualities—compassion, wisdom, tolerance—but will is not among them. Contributing to their ruthless determination is the knowledge that they have no place to go. The generals who policed Iran for the shah could head for the ski slopes of Switzerland. The generals who ran Nicaragua could set up residence in Miami. The availability of a luxurious escape was a major source of regime instability. But the 4.5 million white South Africans know that they must remain where they are.

Nonetheless, there seems to be a general consensus that the white minority regime in South Africa is in grave trouble. Although the whites have the guns and the blacks primarily their anger, the latter is now so strong that the country is likely to experience continuing unrest that at some point could devolve into general chaos.

So even though South Africa does not precisely fit earlier models, it is close enough to raise a troubling question: Why in the last 10 years has the United States been so inept in dealing with revolutionary situations in the Persian Gulf, Southern Africa and Central America? There are plausible answers but they point not so much to this Administration

or its predecessor, although each has made important diplomatic mistakes, but rather at the Administration of Richard M. Nixon and Henry A. Kissinger, whose efforts with the great powers are still lauded but whose mistakes with the small powers are conveniently forgotten.

Americans tend to allow each administration to begin its term with a blank slate, as if history started on Inauguration Day. But one reason why U.S. options seem so limited in the 1980s is that the real options occurred in the early 1970s.

It was, for example, the Nixon Administration that pushed the shah into assuming the role of regional gendarme, bankrupting the country and polarizing its politics. But that same Administration took the view in National Security Study Memorandum 39 that in Africa the "whites are here to stay" (including in Portuguese Africa) and that the United States "through selective relaxation of our stance toward the white regimes" could "encourage some modification of their current racial and colonial policies." And concerning Central America, that same Administration showed little concern when Jose Napoleon Duarte won a fair election in El Salvador only to have the military steal it away.

In retrospect, all were disastrous decisions by an Administration that many still argue showed real artistry in the foreign-policy field. An Iran that devoted its fabulous oil wealth to domestic concerns instead of massive arms purchases might have weathered the coming storm. A Southern African policy that took into account the fragility of Portugal's African empire might have adopted different policies toward the liberation movements soon to succeed in Angola and Mozambique. If the United States had helped Duarte spend the 1970s building a democratic El Salvador, the political geography of Central America might be totally different today.

Nixon's ambassadorial appointments to these three key areas were particularly egregious. In light of the dark role that the shah's secret police played in Iran, can there have been a more inappropriate ambassadorial appointment to Tehran than the ex-head of the Central Intelligence Agency, Richard M. Helms, who Nixon wanted to move in order to appoint George Bush in his place?

In South Africa, what impression was the black majority to receive when the Nixon Administration sent as ambassador

a man who showed so little understanding of the internal situation that he accepted a Cabinet minister's invitation to hunt small game on Robben Island—site of South Africa's most notorious political prison—with political prisoners as beaters?

In Nicaragua, the Nixon Administration appointed Turner Blair Shelton, a friend of presidential confidant Charles G. (Bebe) Rebozo. Shelton developed such an extraordinary relationship with the notorious dictator Anastasio Somoza that the latter put Turner's picture on the national currency. Admittedly, most administrations have little appreciation for the real responsibilities of an ambassador and believe that anyone with a good personality and a tie to the President can do the job. But this record of the Nixon Administration is exceptional. Damage was done and subsequent administrations now pay the price.

Yet it is also possible to argue that it is futile to criticize the Nixon Administration, or any other, for that matter, for failing to shift U.S. foreign policy toward such sensitive countries as Iran, Nicaragua and South Africa. For these three countries had so successfully inserted themselves into U.S. domestic politics that significant shifts in U.S. foreign policy may have been impossible except in a crisis.

The shah, through a carefully orchestrated public-relations campaign, largely eliminated all serious criticism of his regime in this country. From responsible left to responsible right, most were seduced by trips, conferences and legally laundered money—often spent for worthy causes. It is no accident that during the hostage crisis both David Rockefeller and Kissinger pressed a very reluctant Carter Administration, which foresaw the consequences but was ultimately too weak to resist, to admit their friend the shah into the United States. Years of effort had gone into the development of such powerful friends in the U.S. Establishment.

Meanwhile, about the same time, the South African government was covertly channeling funds to the United States to manipulate public opinion. The so-called Muldergate affair, named after the responsible member of the South African Cabinet, caused temporary embarrassment but no serious action by the United States to protect its political process from such outrageous outside manipulation. And in Central America during the Carter

Administration, the U.S. ambassador in Managua entered the office of dictator Somoza, under instructions to inform him that the United States wanted him to leave in dignity, only to find, to his astonishment, that seated in the office acting as an adviser to Somoza in resisting Washington's advice was none other than a U.S. congressman, John M. Murphy (D-N.Y.) (later convicted in the Abscam bribery scandal and sentenced to a three-year prison term).

Can the United States do better this time around? In South Africa itself, immediate choices are limited. The crisis has moved to a point where guns are now the likely ultimate arbiter. Yet for both moral and domestic reasons the United States will not provide guns to the resistance and cannot endorse the use of guns by the government. Its main hope is for dialogue, which the Reagan Administration has correctly endorsed. It might go further, urging the immediate and unconditional release of Nelson Mandela, the only black man in South Africa who clearly speaks for the black majority, and by informing the South African government that its position on future relations will be affected by Mandela's fate.

In other areas of the world, if earlier Administration's loaded the dice for the Reagan Administration, it may be returning the favor to future Administrations. The new Third World flash points are likely to be in such key countries as South

Korea, Pakistan and the Philippines. Except with the Philippines, the Reagan Administration shows few signs of anticipatory planning. And in Latin America, the Administration's hard-nosed approach to the debt crisis may be paving the way for a political explosion. In the Great Depression the collapse of commodity prices helped stimulate 50 revolutions between 1929 and 1933. Will we look back on the great debt crisis of the 1980s and detect a similar malignant connection between economic distress and political turmoil?

For revolutionary situations generally, the country needs to learn some lessons from the last decade. The Congress needs to take steps to restrict the ability of foreign governments to manipulate the American political system. Administrations need to upgrade the quality of U.S. representation in Third World countries. And the country generally needs to recognize that even countries that suffer under dictatorships still have a political life worth investigating. Even if the contact is covert, the United States cannot afford to approach other societies only through the top leader. In the long run, in an age of mass politics, the masses will count and U.S. identification with narrowly based regimes that stand in the way of popular feeling are bound to fall. □

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