

Backgrounder

Heritage Foundation

214 Massachusetts Avenue N.E.

Washington, D.C. 20002

(202)546-4400

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SOUTH AFRICA SANCTIONS: BLACKS WOULD SUFFER THE MOST

(Updating Backgrounder 427, "An Investment Strategy to Undermine Apartheid in South Africa," April 30, 1985.)

Ronald Reagan will decide this week whether to veto the "Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act of 1986," a package of punitive economic sanctions aimed at forcing the South African government to speed the dismantling of apartheid, its institutionalized system of racial segregation. For the past two years the President has come under fire from Congress for refusing to impose such sanctions. He has argued that sanctions will not work, and will in fact hurt the very people they are designed to help. Reagan is right on both counts and should veto the legislation. The Congress should allow the veto to stand and then support constructive measures to encourage the development of a multi-racial political and economic structure.

The sanctions package on the President's desk was passed by the Senate in early August and by the House two weeks ago. It includes a ban on imports of South African uranium, coal, textiles, iron, steel, and agricultural products; a prohibition against the export to South Africa of computers, nuclear-related goods and technology, and petroleum products; a ban on new loans and new investment; and it revokes landing rights for South African Airways.

Supporters claim that such a package will not cause serious damage to the South African economy, but will merely "send a signal" to Pretoria. In fact, the measures are wide-ranging and will have a significant impact. The ban on agricultural product imports, for example, will cause the loss of almost 450,000 black jobs. Since each South African worker on average supports five persons, over 2 million blacks would lose their primary means of support. The bans on imports of coal, iron, steel, and textiles would entail the loss of some 187,000 jobs, and some 940,000 would suffer as a consequence. Just from these measures alone, then, some 3 million blacks--roughly 15

percent of the entire black population--would be deprived of their livelihood.

Despite the claims of supporters of sanctions, the pain would not be felt by the South African government. Pretoria recently announced that it had been stockpiling strategic materials for the last ten years, in preparation for just such sanctions. With a 2500-mile-long coastline, moreover, South Africa could without much difficulty obtain materials it has not already stockpiled.

History teaches that external pressures are not successful in modifying fundamental Afrikaner attitudes. The voortrekkers settling the interior of South Africa in the 1830s deliberately isolated themselves from the West; and in 1899, Afrikaners went to war with the British Empire at the height of its global power--and held on for almost four years--rather than accept outside domination. In 1977 the United Nations imposed a mandatory arms embargo on South Africa. Forced to develop its own arms industry, South Africa by 1986 was the 10th largest exporter of arms on the world market, and the U.N. was reduced to asking its members not to buy arms from Pretoria.

Clearly, then, sanctions will not achieve their purported purpose: they will not force the Afrikaner government to speed the dismantling of apartheid. That is not to say, however, that sanctions will not have a significant impact; millions of blacks will lose their livelihoods. And that is the true irony of the situation: for in poll after poll, significant majorities of black South Africans have opposed the imposition of sanctions.

What is needed instead is a strategy to increase Western contact with--and hence influence in--South Africa. The U.S., therefore should not withdraw investment from South Africa; rather it should increase Western investment there, while continuing to place diplomatic pressure on Pretoria.

President Reagan has taken a courageous stand against those who would make policy on the basis of short-term domestic political considerations to the detriment of both U.S. interests and the interests of South African blacks. Sanctions will result in a lessening of Western influence for positive and peaceful change and will lead to a further political polarization that can only benefit forces seeking a radical and anti-democratic outcome. The President should veto the sanctions package and Congress should sustain his action. Then they can continue through other, more productive, methods to encourage Pretoria to speed apartheid's demise.

William W. Pascoe, III
Policy Analyst