CHAPTER 3

“THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS”:
THE KENNEDY ADMINISTRATION, 1961–1963

Traditionally, when explaining the Kennedy years, scholars of U.S. foreign policy toward South Africa tend to look back to this era with relative approval. The early 1960s saw a harsher rhetoric directed toward Pretoria, and the implementation of an arms embargo. If criticisms are laid, researchers point to too little attention being given to the Republic by senior decision makers. The phrase “benign neglect” is occasionally used. The Kennedy administration, although a champion of universal human rights, was too entangled in the prosecution of the Cold War to be able to risk, or allocate the time to, taking on Pretoria over apartheid. The result was a “holding operation” making clear the U.S. opposition to the Republic’s racial practices, but little new by the way of concrete action.¹

The paragraphs below offer a revision of this benign neglect thesis.² The chapter agrees that the Kennedy administration was indeed employing a holding operation, but this had little to do with neglect. Instead, Washington DC was deliberately executing a dual policy. The administration continued to cooperate actively with the government of South Africa where it could, but avoided policy areas too closely associated with apartheid. Overall, the aim was mutual assistance where politically possible.

This chapter is divided into five sections. The first of these charts how concerns over Pretoria’s racial policies gained more prominence during the Kennedy years. Several factors combined to demand this: the continuing evolution of apartheid; the growing civil rights movement back home; the sympathetic approach Kennedy developed toward the Third World; and personal beliefs of key personnel within the executive. Consequently, as it will be seen in the second section of the chapter, Washington DC did confront Pretoria during the early 1960s over its human rights record. Yet, as highlighted in section three, this concern did not translate into a decisive South Africa policy. An analysis of the motivations behind the imposition of the 1963 arms embargo, Kennedy’s most prominent act of confrontation, for example, reveals a confused, pragmatic approach toward apartheid. The United States did not take an unambiguous stand at this time. Instead, there was an ad hoc mixture of confrontation and

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cooperation. This strategy is further illustrated in sections four and five of the chapter, which respectively look at the protection of U.S. economic and military interests vis-à-vis the Republic. Strategic and economic concerns continued to be pursued, diluting the impact of the administration's antiapartheid rhetoric and the arms embargo.

Growing External and Internal Pressures

The Sharpeville shootings of March 1960 had brought apartheid to the world’s attention, but the South African government chose not to draw back at this point. Instead, Pretoria invited greater criticism through enacting additional security legislation and by expanding its experiment of “separate development.” Soon after the Sharpeville incident, the two main black opposition movements, the African National Congress of South Africa and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), were legally banned in the Republic and a mass detention of activists followed. Many black leaders who avoided jail went into exile, while others attempted to operate an underground sabotage campaign. This latter strategy was soon negated, however, by the arrest of this campaign’s leadership at a farm in Rivonia, outside Johannesburg. The subsequent “Rivonia trial” proved to be another touchstone of world opinion.

As for the evolution of apartheid itself, Pretoria’s intentions were made clear in 1963, when it granted “self-government” to the Transkei. This was the beginning of an “independent homelands” policy where blacks and whites would be separated territorially throughout the Republic, on a permanent basis. The segregation of petty apartheid had now evolved into larger scale notions of a grand apartheid based on ethnically cleansed “Bantustans.” As early as August 1961, this more radical approach from Pretoria drew predictions from within the Kennedy administration that the Republic would face “a blood bath within a few years and native radicalism that will dwarf anything hitherto seen on the African continent.”

Also complicating relations between the Kennedy administration and Pretoria was the domestic civil rights campaign within the United States itself. Although, as a U.S. senator, he had opposed Eisenhower’s 1957 civil rights legislation, Kennedy in his presidential campaign, nodding to the African American vote, had committed himself to this issue. His nomination acceptance speech at the 1960 Democratic Party national convention talked of “A peaceful revolution for human rights—demanding an end to racial discrimination in all parts of our community life . . .” Once in office, Kennedy hesitantly used federal resources to enforce existing civil rights laws. In 1963, for example, he commanded national guard personnel to defend African American students’ rights at the University of Alabama. The president was also finally persuaded to table a more comprehensive civil rights bill of his own. A political response was needed to meet the demands of the Freedom Riders and the March on Washington. Kennedy, asking Congress to outlaw discrimination in all public places, declared that the country faced “a moral crisis,” which could not “be met by repressive police action. It cannot be left to increased demonstrations in the streets. It cannot be