

2013

H-Diplo

H-Diplo Article Reviews

<http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/>

No. 391

Published on 21 March 2013

H-Diplo Article Review Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane N. Labrosse

Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

Commissioned for H-Diplo by Diane Labrosse

Simon Stevens. “From the Viewpoint of a Southern Governor’: The Carter Administration and Apartheid, 1977-81.” *Diplomatic History* 36:5 (November 2012): 843-880. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-7709.2012.01067.x. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2012.01067.x>

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/AR391.pdf>

Review by **Andy DeRoche**, Front Range Community College

Featuring a groundbreaking roundtable on Connie Field’s documentary about the global anti-apartheid movement,¹ an excellent article by Eric Morgan on Arthur Ashe and his role in the fight for justice in South Africa, and Simon Stevens’s fascinating examination of the Carter administration’s policy toward Pretoria, the November 2012 issue of *Diplomatic History* offered a tasty treat for scholars of U.S./Africa relations, just in time for the holidays. The piece by Stevens, under review here, provides an insightful re-assessment of the moderate anti-apartheid approach championed by President Jimmy Carter and Andrew Young, a former civil rights leader and US congressman who served as Carter’s ambassador to the United Nations from 1977 to 1979. With this outstanding article, Stevens, a doctoral candidate in Columbia University’s international and global history program with two degrees from Cambridge, earned a spot on the roster of promising young historians working on African affairs. In addition to its thought-provoking lengthy text, “From the Viewpoint” included four illuminating photos (three of Young).

Stevens opens by reviewing previous works on the Carter administration’s policy toward South Africa, and concludes that most of them are either too positive or too negative, or that they place too much emphasis on either race or national security. In his view, which is quite convincing, the more accurate interpretation is a combination of these earlier versions that is ultimately more “complex” (845). President Carter and UN Ambassador Young shared “a strong commitment to racial equality in South Africa” which resulted from their backgrounds, and was quite different from the views of their predecessors or successors. At the same time, though, they did not believe that this policy of gradually

¹ Reviewed on H-Diplo on 17 January 2013. <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/AR382.pdf>.

seeking racial equality in South Africa would “conflict with Cold War concerns” (845). Stevens pointed out that Carter and Young received considerable support from not only Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and Vice President Walter Mondale, but also from National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski. Indeed, this revisionist analysis of Brzezinski’s influence on U.S.-African relations is one of Stevens’ more important contributions.

For the most part, this stimulating essay holds up very well to close scrutiny, in part because it is based on solid archival research and a very impressive and careful mining of published and on-line primary materials. The most important sources, not surprisingly, are the documents produced by various Carter administration officials and housed at the Carter Library in Atlanta or in internet collections such as the Declassified Documents Reference System or the Digital National Security Archives.² Other useful sources for Stevens’ argument are interviews by other scholars with former diplomats such as Steve Low (Ambassador to Zambia), William Edmondson (Ambassador to South Africa), and Donald McHenry (Young’s assistant and then his successor at the UN) which are available online in the Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection.³ Stevens deserves credit for his careful and revealing use of Congressional hearings and State Department publications. Some of his sources demonstrated a creative willingness to think outside the box, such as his use of Young’s appearance on the *Colbert Report* television program on 22 January 2008 and his 1977 *Playboy* interview. Finally, on the plus side in terms of research, Stevens drew insightfully from both published primary African sources such as the writings of Tanzanian leader Julius Nyerere and *Sechaba*, the official journal of the African National Congress, and an interview of South African diplomat Pik Botha by Sue Onslow, as well as secondary African sources such as articles by the esteemed South African scholars Jackie Grobler and Martha van Wyk.

The only mild criticism this reviewer can offer of Stevens’ research is that he did not include African voices from the archives. It is mildly surprising that even though he obviously looked carefully at the materials in the Carter Library, he did not include any of the documents in Atlanta that are related to the 1977 and 1978 White House visits by Nyerere or Kenneth Kaunda, the long-time president of Zambia. Even more surprising is the fact that Stevens did not consult the rich archives in South Africa, or in Frontline nations such as Zambia. It seems likely, however, given his thorough research in secondary and on-line sources and U.S. archives, that Stevens simply has not yet undertaken a southern African research safari. This reviewer, who admittedly did not conduct any research in Africa until five years after completing his Ph.D dissertation, can

² Declassified Documents Reference System, <http://gdc.gale.com/products/declassified-documents-references-system/#>; Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com>

³ Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, <http://memory.loc.gov>

certainly sympathize. When Stevens does venture to African archives, it will make his already sound scholarship that much better.

At some point during my graduate school days a professor astutely advised us that it would be much more helpful when we critiqued books if we commented on the strengths and weaknesses of the book that was written instead of wishing for the one that was not written. With that in mind I will now turn from my brief criticism regarding the research which Stevens did not undertake to comment on the many strengths and few weaknesses of the work that he did complete. “From the Viewpoint” makes numerous compelling points about the context and background of U.S.-African relations in the late 1970s, such as analyzing the importance of Carter’s youth and years as Georgia governor on his later presidential policies, and similarly summarizing the significance of Young’s work in both the civil rights movement and in Congress. Stevens supplies an excellent synopsis of Vance’s objections to Henry Kissinger’s approach to Africa in general, as well as Brzezinski’s related desire for better relations with Nigeria specifically. This essay also provides a convincing argument that the Carter administration was motivated by its belief that seeking a peaceful end to apartheid would help keep Cuban and Soviet influence out of southern Africa and was thus in the strategic interests of the U.S., officials such as Carter and Young therefore saw no fundamental contradiction between moral and strategic goals. (849-851)

As Stevens clearly explains, both Carter and Young believed that the United States could provide outside pressure which would facilitate the overthrow of apartheid, similar to the role played by the U.S. Supreme Court during the African-American civil rights movement. Key to this approach, in their view, was how they applied the pressure: “Their experiences gave both men a deep sympathy for the position of the white South Africans and a determination to promote change through cooperation with them, rather than confrontation” (857). The president and his ambassador to the UN felt that in order to help the whites in Pretoria enact the necessary changes to their racist system, it was necessary to give them a way to save face. During a March 1977 National Security Council meeting, Carter and Young agreed that Washington should not drive Pretoria into a corner, and should instead attempt to develop a “correct” policy without being too tough (860).

Stevens’ explanation for why top Carter administration officials preferred such a moderate and gradual approach is relatively thorough and convincing. In addition to emphasizing the background of Carter and Young and strategic concerns for preventing Communist intervention, he also points out that there were economic factors, a desire for South African cooperation on nuclear non-proliferation, and a hope for help in the major diplomatic initiatives to end the war in Rhodesia and foster freedom in Namibia. The one significant factor which Stevens fails to adequately consider is the importance of domestic political priorities. With the Carter administration pushing Congress to first repeal the 1971 Byrd amendment which had allowed renewal of chrome imports from Rhodesia into the United States, and then maintaining these sanctions against Rhodesia, and then

making a new treaty with Panama an even higher priority, there simply was no realistic way it could also ask for tough sanctions against South Africa. While it might be argued quite convincingly that Carter was not good at prioritizing and that he surely bit off more than he could chew, Stevens fails to consider this aspect.

In one of the stronger sections of this fine essay, Stevens details how Young and Vance drafted a revealing document entitled “A New Approach to Relations with South Africa,” and then submitted it to Carter through Brzezinski on 1 April 1977. The policy plan proposed a balanced approach that would make clear to Pretoria the need to move rapidly away from apartheid, but at the same time not push the South African white minority regime into a “position of greater intransigence” (861). He then discusses efforts by Young during a May 1977 visit to remain moderate, as well as Carter’s attempt to temper Mondale’s criticism of the Pretoria regime as he got ready to meet President John Vorster in Vienna. In spite of trying not to be offensive, however, the reaction in Pretoria to this diplomacy was “hostile” (865). This in turn prompted the Carter administration to begin discussing the implementation of small but significant measures against apartheid during the summer of 1977. At that point it decided to hold off, which Stevens convincingly attributes to their desire for South African support for the Rhodesian proposals.

The brutal September 1977 murder by authorities of the leading South African political activist Steve Biko, however, sparked a strong reaction in Washington. Carter decided to impose several small steps that he had previously been considering but had decided to postpone in hopes of first getting assistance regarding Rhodesia. Among these measures included in the U.S. response to Biko’s death were a ban on the sale of “gray” military items to the apartheid regime, the withdrawal of the American naval attaché from South Africa, and support for a UN mandated? mandatory arms embargo against Pretoria. Stevens then offers a powerful criticism of my earlier contention in my 2003 book *Andrew Young* that the ambassador advocated comprehensive sanctions after Biko’s murder.⁴ Stevens crafts a convincing critique, and on this specific point I stand corrected. (873)

While Stevens’ reassessment of Young’s stance in the sanctions debate of September 1977 is one of the most important contributions in his essay, it is unfortunate that he chose to include an extensive quotation in his footnotes from Brenda Gayle Plummer’s 2005 review of my book.⁵ He repeats Plummer’s questionable claim that Young “did not support the divestment campaigns that typified the antiapartheid movement nor did he approve of economic sanctions against oppressive racial regimes.” (Plummer as quoted by Stevens, 873, note 104) However, in her review Plummer ignores Young’s work in Congress to

⁴ Andrew DeRoche, *Andrew Young: Civil Rights Ambassador* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 2003).

⁵ Brenda Gayle Plummer, “Black Ambassador: Andrew Young Appraised,” *Diplomatic History* 29 (June 2005): 565-7.

enact legislation successfully banning U.S. assistance for Portugal's racist colonial regimes in Angola and Mozambique; ignores his tireless efforts both as a Congressman and Ambassador to overturn the Byrd amendment and reinstate sanctions against Rhodesia, which finally bore fruit in March 1977; ignores his central role in the Carter administration's strong stance against Senate efforts to reverse the repeal in 1978 and 1979; and perhaps most significantly ignores Young's testimony while mayor of Atlanta before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1985 in favor of sanctions against South Africa. All of these examples are well documented in *Andrew Young*, but Plummer paid no attention to them.⁶ This aspect of her review was unconvincing when she wrote it in 2005, and it remains unconvincing when Stevens quotes it in 2012. Let me be perfectly clear here. I do not disagree with Stevens' reassessment of Young's role in the debate over sanctions after Biko's death in 1977, but rather with his decision to quote at length from Plummer's review.

After his strong section on September 1977, Stevens provides excellent discussion of the Carter administration's policy toward South Africa in 1978. He rightly emphasizes that Carter and Young embraced the reformist approach exemplified by the Sullivan Principles, which advocated working with American corporations and encouraging them to treat black South African workers better, rather than advocating immediate divestment by U.S. companies. In his thought-provoking conclusion, Stevens argues that the Carter administration attempted to promulgate a complicated policy that blended a "clear opposition to apartheid" with simultaneous cooperation with white South African officials. (878-880) While this did to some degree and in some ways foreshadow the Constructive Engagement later championed by Ronald Reagan's Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Chester Crocker, it also reflected lessons that Carter had learned in his youth and while governor of Georgia. This essay by Stevens should be read carefully by anyone interested in Carter's foreign policy or U.S.-African relations.

Andy DeRoche teaches history at Front Range Community College and international affairs at the University of Colorado. He currently serves as an H-Diplo editor for African topics. His major publications include a study of US/Zimbabwe relations and a biography of Andrew Young. He is working on a book about Zambia's relations with the United States during the Kaunda era.

Copyright © 2013 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online.

H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for non-profit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author(s), web location, date of

⁶ See DeRoche, *Andrew Young*, 46-47, 51-52, 58-59, 78-79, 110, 131-132, 135-136, 138-139. For an even more thorough discussion of Mayor Young's 1985 testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in favor of sanctions against South Africa see Andrew DeRoche, *Black, White, and Chrome: The United States and Zimbabwe, 1953-1998* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2001), 330-332.

H-Diplo Article Review

publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses, contact the H-Diplo editorial staff at h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu.