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Edward Kennedy's 1985 Visit to South Africa

In 1985, South Africa had been suffering under an apartheid government for nearly four decades. Black South Africans' rights were stripped away from them; they were forced to carry passes, and forced to move out of homes and into Bantustans. South Africa had become a violent country. Many, however, wanted to use non-violent tactics to end apartheid. Anglican Bishop of Johannesburg Desmond Tutu, a non-violent anti-apartheid activist who had played a leading role in the United Democratic Front (UDF), convinced Edward Kennedy, also known as Ted Kennedy, to visit South Africa. Ted Kennedy was the Senator of Massachusetts, and most of his career focused on equality and peace. Once Kennedy had visited South Africa he knew he had to implement new policies and withdraw American industries from South Africa. Kennedy's experience was covered in many newspapers at the time, but historians have not extensively explored its significance. This essay demonstrates how Kennedy's emotional 1985 trip to South Africa led him to push economic sanctions. Guidance from activists linked to the United Democratic Front and the African National Congress inspired Kennedy to collaborate with Senator Lowell Weicker, to secure Senate passage and override Reagan's veto of the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act in 1986.

Ted Kennedy had always believed everyone deserves equal rights: in the United States, he had been involved in gay, women's, and civil rights movements. Kennedy was never afraid to take a stand on what he believed in, learning this from his family. In 1966 his brother, Robert Kennedy, had visited South Africa and voiced his support for the anti-apartheid movement. However, Robert Kennedy was assassinated, leaving Ted Kennedy to take on his brother's role.

At Robert's funeral, Ted gave the eulogy. He discussed his brother's accomplishments, but most importantly his brother's speech in 1966 at the University of Cape Town. Ted took from this speech and added his phrasing, "It is the shaping impulse of America that neither fate nor nature nor the irresistible tides of history, but the work of our own hands, matched to reason and principle, will determine our destiny" (Mettler 1968). After this speech, Kennedy would take on his brother's legacy and fight alongside anti-apartheid activists for South Africa.

In 1984, Ted Kennedy had met Desmond Tutu at a Robert Kennedy Fund event. The Robert Kennedy Fund is a human rights organization to teach others the importance of speaking truth to power. Tutu remembered the impact that Robert Kennedy's visit had made and suggested a return visit by a Kennedy family member to South Africa. Tutu believed it was crucial to keep the topic of apartheid circulating in the United States, mainly because Reagan was against sanctions (Miller Center Foundation 2016). Ted Kennedy agreed and landed in South Africa in January, 1985: here Ted would be faced with the hard truth of South African apartheid. Kennedy was in South Africa for one week and would visit Soweto (where Tutu lived), Brandfort (where Winnie Mandela was exiled), migrant workers hostels (where he spoke with ordinary South Africans), and Pollsmoor Prison (where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned).

Kennedy's Critics and Allies in South Africa

Kennedy's trip was controversial in the United States and South Africa. Kennedy was going against the Reagan administration and Afrikaner nationalists. Non-UDF anti-apartheid activists in South Africa were not happy about his visit. In an interview with an American journalist, Tutu explained how Kennedy was criticized by "the U.S. Ambassador, who lectures him. Everybody would lecture him." Tutu also quoted the U.S. ambassador as saying "that what

he was doing was not kosher” (Miller Center Foundation 2016). Politically, the United States government did not believe Kennedy should make a trip to South Africa and advised him not to. However, Kennedy did not take this advice and decided to travel to South Africa anyway. When Kennedy had first landed, the Azanian People’s Organization were protesting at the airport. This group was an anti-American and anti-capitalist group and opposed Kennedy’s visit. They believed that apartheid should be resolved by blacks only, and no whites or outsiders should be involved.

However, the rally at the airport did not stop Kennedy from continuing his journey in South Africa, where he spent time with activists linked to the UDF and ANC. Kennedy’s first night he ended up staying at Tutu’s house in Soweto. This was very unusual for a political figure, and it was also completely illegal for a white man to be staying with a black man. At Tutu’s house, he had a warmer welcome than at the airport. A group of about 500 people was standing outside with candlelight welcoming him. After his first night, he continued his journey through South Africa for a week. One of the most significant visits was with Winnie Mandela.

On his third day Kennedy had visited with Winnie Mandela, who was married to Nelson Mandela and banished for her activism to the rural Free State town of Brandfort. Although there is not much coverage on what words were spoken between Mrs. Mandela and Kennedy, the *New York Times* briefly covered the meeting. After the meeting, Mrs. Mandela was interviewed and asked if Kennedy’s visit would bring change to the radically divided nation. She answered, “We have never really dreamed that our salvation lies with someone else. We believe our salvation lies in our hands. We do not think he can necessarily bring about meaningful change as such, but we do believe he could use the visit positively when he goes back home to inform the American public about conditions in this country” (Cowell 1985). Kennedy said he was inspired by her

hopes and beliefs in her country, and he would gather information and highlight the harshness of the system to bring this back to America.

Along his route through South Africa, Kennedy visited hostels for migrant workers. These were men who were forced to leave their families to work in order to support them. The quarters the men lived in were cramped and quite lonely. Wilson Ngobeni told Kennedy that the worst part was the loneliness, how much he and the other men missed seeing their families. However, they knew if they had stayed and had not left home their families were going to starve, and this way he could send money home for them to eat. After seeing this and talking with different men, Kennedy described the experience as, “One of the most distressing and despairing visits that I have made to any facility in my life. Here individuals are sought between trying to provide for their families or living with their families. That’s alien to every kind of tradition in the Judeo-Christian ethic and I find it appalling today” (Horowitz 1986). After this experience, Kennedy described the people he met as “some of the most courageous, bravest, warmest men, women and children that I have ever met anywhere” (Cowell 1985).

A couple of days before Kennedy was supposed to leave, he wished to stop to see Nelson Mandela, at Pollsmoor Prison. The South African government would not allow Kennedy to see Mandela unless he signed a document saying he would not discuss political violence in his public statements. However, Tutu told him not to sign it for it was not worth it. Instead, Kennedy created an illegal protest outside the prison, calling for the release of Nelson Mandela. At this time Mandela was portrayed by many as a controversial figure who was for terrorism and communism. Kennedy, however, promoted Mandela as a great democrat and freedom fighter. Not many newspapers had covered this illegal protest from an American political figure. The *African Legacy* grabbed a quote from Kennedy during his protest, “Behind these walls are men

that are deeply committed to the cause of freedom in this land” (Jacobs 2018). Years later, Mandela confirmed that they knew Kennedy was outside the walls protesting, and that he “gave us a lot of strength and hope, and the feeling that we had millions behind us both in our struggle against apartheid but our special situation in prison” (Jacobs 2018).

While the ANC activists were welcoming of Kennedy’s visit as an opportunity to publicize their fight, AZAPO still opposed him. The last day of Kennedy’s visit he was supposed to give a speech at Regina Mundi Cathedral in Soweto. Around 3,000 to 4,000 people assembled to hear Kennedy but in the crowd were 100 demonstrators from AZAPO. AZAPO chanted, “No more Kennedy!” (*New York Times* 1985). Tutu, who was hosting this, pleaded with the crowd to calm down, but in the end, the speech was canceled. There was such heavy police presence, and many people were growing angry with AZAPO. Senator Kennedy agreed to the cancellation, for he feared violence would break out and the police would have to interfere. This was the last thing Kennedy wanted to occur.

Kennedy’s Return Home

Kennedy’s battle against apartheid continued when he returned home, when he met with several different media outlets. One in particular was *Good Day* with host Ellen Prose in January 1985. This was an American morning television show in Boston. Kennedy discussed his visit to South Africa and enlightened the viewers on precisely what he saw and how apartheid was affecting the black community. Kennedy explained there were about three hundred laws that affected black employment, living, citizenship, and education. The South African government was a “democracy” only for whites, while for blacks it was totalitarian. Prose asked Kennedy why he thinks American business are opposed to take a stand on apartheid. He replied: “Well

first of all a number of them are opposed to apartheid... but many of the workers there say that the only real time the businesses are really concerned is when it means profits, they are not interested that the workers are discriminated or forced to separate from family” (*Good Morning* 1985). Kennedy believed many businesspeople may be personally opposed to apartheid but the main problem was profit. Kennedy had a great example of American business’ human rights violations: if an American mine company had black African workers, 97% did not get to live or see their families, while white mine workers got to go home and were not separated. This was a prime example of how American industries were enforcing apartheid. Kennedy added that he was looking at the future relationship between South Africa and the United States: if America did not take part in ending apartheid, how would a future, truly democratic government look at the United States?

The United States government and the economy had a lot to lose when it came to dealing with apartheid. The United States had much economic income from South Africa; many American companies were placed in South Africa. Reagan’s administration had what was called a “Constructive Engagement” policy. This policy allowed for certain export restrictions but would still allow a friendly relationship with the South African government, which was necessary for American economic and trading interest. Reagan claimed that this still, however, enabled Washington to influence South Africa towards a gradual change from apartheid. The Reagan administration envisioned, “The emergence in South Africa of a society with which the United States can pursue its varied interests in a full and friendly relationship, without constraint, embarrassment or political damage” (Davies 2008). But it was never really in the United States’ interest to interfere with apartheid for it would cause an economic decline and American

business to lose thousands of dollars. Kennedy realized after meeting with many people in South Africa that the people wanted political change, radical change, and economic sanctions.

The Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act of 1986

Once Kennedy returned home, he began working with Senate on a policy that was far different from constructive engagement. However Kennedy was faced with a problem; it was difficult for Kennedy to push his policy though because he was a Democrat while the President and the majority of the Senate were Republicans. Kennedy worked to gain some Republicans on his side: on March 7, 1985, Kennedy and Republican Senator Lowell Weicker introduced the Anti-Apartheid Act.

The Anti-Apartheid Act prohibited four kinds of economic engagement. First, new loans by U.S. banks to the government of South Africa. Second, new investments in South Africa by U.S. companies. Third, the sale of computers to the South Africa government. Fourth, the importation of Krugerrands, a gold coin prized by collectors. Kennedy stated to the press, “We cannot continue policies that encourage American to invest in racism or profit from apartheid... There will be stronger steps to come if South Africa continues its oppressive ways” (Horowitz 2014). Kennedy believed that if United States companies no longer were involved in South Africa, it would prove to the government and people of South Africa that the United States does not support apartheid. However, Reagan did oppose this policy and believed in continuing his constructive engagement. Kennedy was not happy about this and would not take no as an answer. He went to Senate and got them to pass a resolution, 89-4. Even though Kennedy teamed up with Republican Weicker, crossing Reagan was difficult. The Foreign Relations Committee

defeated the bill by 9-7. However, Christopher Dodd, a Democrat, backed the bill and was able to push two sanctions through: no bank loans or computer sales were allowed with South Africa.

In October of 1986, Congress passed the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act. Reagan had vetoed this bill initially, but Congress overruled his veto. This act was a watered-down version of Kennedy-Weicker bill, but this was a victory for Kennedy and his South African allies. The act had sanctions that Reagan had opposed: “Barring import of South Africa coal, iron, steel, Krugerrands, and agriculture products, banning new corporate investments in South Africa and new loans to government agencies” (Horowitz 2014). Reagan did had originally vetoed this because he feared the amount of money that would be lost.

The Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act did have an impact on South Africa. In February 1990, Nelson Mandela was released from prison. Kennedy heard this great news and invited Mandela to visit Boston. Kennedy and Mandela had a luncheon at the Kennedy Library. Here Kennedy told the media, “We will not give up, we will not give in until apartheid has been wiped off the face of the Earth” (Horowitz 2014).

Ted Kennedy’s visit to South Africa made a difference for the South African people. In 2012, Kennedy was posthumously given the government Order of the Companions of O.R. Tambo in Gold, “an order of peace, co-operation and active expression of solidarity and support” (Schwitzer 2012). Ted Kennedy Jr. flew back to South Africa to accept, honoring Senator Kennedy’s work battling apartheid. Kennedy’s son explained of anti-apartheid activists, “They were once considered Communists and terrorists and revolutionaries, and now many of those people are now in position of power. Now they are considered mothers and fathers of the country” (Schwitzer 2012). Kennedy’s legacy will live on in South Africa and the United States.

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