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Congress of the United States
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March 9, 1978

Honorable Parren Mitchell
414 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

*3/14/78
William*

Dear Parren:

I appreciated very much the kind letter you sent me after my speech on the House floor condemning the government in South Africa.

Not long after that speech I was visited by three representatives of the South African government. We met for nearly an hour and the meeting broke up in considerable acrimony. Although they contended that internal South African passports were being discontinued, it was only because the blacks in that country were not to be considered South Africans any longer; they would, instead, be reassigned citizenship in their original "homelands" and would carry passports from those homelands instead. And while many additional jobs have been opened to blacks, others are still denied them, including, apparently, most of those which have a real meaning either economic or otherwise.

I am taking the liberty of enclosing for you (and, with copies of this letter, for other members of the Black Caucus) a copy of an article I prepared for Russell Perry of the Black Dispatch in my district.

I do feel that we have to be careful in the steps we take because we don't want to express ourselves at the high cost of doing harm to this country or to the blacks in South Africa, but we must never stand idly by, without speaking out, when these injustices occur.

Sincerely,

Mickey Edwards

Mickey Edwards
Member of Congress

ME/jc

cc: Members of The Black Caucus

Why We Must Condemn South Africa

By: Congressman Mickey Edwards

Exclusive to The Black Dispatch

If you try to discuss foreign policy with almost anybody you will find very quickly that few issues can be boiled down to simple matters of right or wrong.

It seems there are always grave consequences which result from any decision (or failure to make a decision). There are always other "circumstances" to be taken into account.

And most often those warnings are correct. If we cut off aid to one country, for example, it may begin to trade with the Russians instead -- and begin to rely on the Russians for political and military advice.

But there are times when it becomes very clear what we must do -- times when we simply have no choice.

That's the situation today in South Africa, where a small group of powerful white politicians maintains power over a nation that is mostly black by a deliberate policy of cruelty and suppression.

For many years American politicians have wrestled with the difficult problem of South Africa -- a true pro-American ally, in an important strategic position (the southern tip of Africa), which practices social policies we find repulsive.

South African law is based on the doctrine of apartheid, a principle of complete legal separation of the races which goes well beyond the kinds of segregation that existed for so long in America.

In South Africa, for example, blacks and "coloreds" (coloreds are natives of India and other Asian countries), have had to have internal passports to move from one part of the country to another. Opposition to this procedure was so strong the government has now announced the passports will soon no longer be required -- a clear proof that American criticisms have had some results. Many positions in government and business are open to whites only. Blacks are kept isolated not only by custom and lack of education, but also by law.

Despite this, South Africans have claimed to have a free country by most standards, and have said that Americans are now asking them to eliminate segregation almost overnight although Americans themselves practiced it for nearly 200 years.

One of the prime examples of the comparative freedom South Africa bragged about was the existence of something that is quite rare in most of the world: a free press, with newspapers able to print whatever they wished.

But the South African government apparently has a strange understanding of how such freedoms are supposed to work. For many years, while the world turned its eyes away and did little about apartheid, newspaper in South Africa which wanted to do away with segregation were perfectly free to write whatever they wanted. But now that the world has become increasingly upset by this blatant discrimination against blacks, freedom of the press has become very painful to Prime Minister Vorster

and his government. The result has been much like the practices in countries we have always considered to be the enemies of the free world. Reporters were tossed into jail and kept there for months without being brought to trial and, in some cases, without even having charges filed against them. Newspapers were closed. Critics of the government were also thrown into jail. Over the months, 45 of them died in prison under mysterious circumstances including, recently, Steve Biko, a black leader who "died of starvation," according to South Africa government officials -- although it was later discovered that he had apparently suffered severe beatings while in prison.

There is no question that South Africans are correct when they say that circumstances are different in their country than in the United States, and that it is wrong to single out South Africa for criticism when Americans do not criticize other countries that do the same thing.

The whites in South Africa, for example, are long-time pioneers in that area and can truly claim to be the founders of the country. They are mostly Europeans of Dutch descent who fought bitterly against the British to keep the land and form their own nation. Originally there were no black tribes in the area and only later did they move into what is now South Africa.

It is also true that many of the blacks in South Africa do not consider themselves South Africans, but members of specific black tribes -- and their loyalties are to those tribes, not the entire country.

It is true, as the South Africans claim, that the United States itself acted much more slowly to end discrimination in this country than we are demanding of the white South African government.

And, most important of all, it is true that South Africa is not alone in its policies of suppression. The number of blacks and coloreds who have died in South African as a result of government cruelty is far less than the number of blacks who have died in Uganda under Idi Amin, yet Uganda has not been censured by the United States or the United Nations.

In fact, while Americans did single out South Africa for criticism we have not had similar resolutions in Congress to criticize the Russians, the Chinese, the Cubans, or any of the other governments that also hold power by murdering their opponents or throwing them in jail; who also shut down newspapers.

Every one of those criticisms is true -- and every one is embarrassing. There is simply no excuse for our failure to condemn every one of those practices and every one of those countries.

When South Africa claims it is being judged by a double standard that does not apply to other repressive nations, it is correct.

But that does not change the basic facts of the case. While it would have been far better to bring a resolution to Congress condemning all of the dictatorships of the world, those who so often practice selective morality and feel only selective outrage singled out only South Africa. And even if everybody else was guilty, too, there was no question that South Africa also was guilty and deserving of our bitterest contempt.

It was argued during the debate in Congress that South Africa is a friend of the United States. I argued back that she could not be a friend -- she could be an ally, working with us for interests we both share, but South Africa could not be a friend if she held power

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by repression and possibly even by murder. I argued that in the war between the free world and the unfree world, South Africa had crossed the line to the other side.

It was argued that we need South Africa's friendship. That's true. There is no question that if the Russians ever establish a base at the southern tip of Africa, or take over South Africa's tremendous natural resources and industrial power, we will be very painfully aware of how important South Africa has been to us as an ally.

But there comes a point when one has to look in the mirror and say: am I going to be able to live with myself if I don't do what is right?

There are circumstances in South Africa that are not clearly understood in America. The issues are not as simple as we have been led to believe. There are very important consequences if we make the wrong moves. And it is important that we react properly, not rashly. For example, the President does not want to impose all-out economic sanctions against South Africa. Not only would that drive South Africa into a corner and possibly turn her toward Russia, it would also hurt the blacks in that country and in other African nations that depend on trade with South Africa. That would be cutting off our nose to spite our face.

But the issue that was before Congress recently was relatively simple. Do we as an American people condemn what has been happening in South Africa? Do we condemn the closing of newspapers, the imprisonment of reporters and political opponents, the holding of people in jail without trial, the apparent beating of prisoners in their cells?

My answer was simple. If we are the America we have always said we were -- a nation that believes in liberty and justice for all -- then the things we believe in won't let us ignore what is happening in South Africa. It's true that "liberty and justice for all" (from the pledge of allegiance to the flag), refers only to this country. It's also true that those of us in Congress have no right to govern any country but this one. But we believe that the rights of every man and woman come from God, not from some government, and that they therefore apply to every South African as well as to any American. Maybe we don't have the right to decide what kind of government South Africa will have, but we certainly have the right -- and the moral responsibility -- to let the world know what we think of the South African government and its oppression against the black people in that country. That is why we must condemn South Africa for its recent oppression.

Those of us who believe it is wrong to single out South Africa by herself should keep trying to force the Congress to vote on condemning Angola, Uganda, Mozambique, Russia, China, East Germany, Cuba, Lithuania -- all of the other countries that are not free. But we should not let that keep us from trying to win freedom and justice for the people of South Africa.