

PRESSWATCH



A SAFE CRUSADE

by Dinesh D'Souza

According to what criteria do progressive passions surge? Today South Africa is the *cause célèbre* with the national media, just as yesterday it was nuclear power, the imperiled ozone layer, and those damn snail darters. Tomorrow it will probably be homophobia in Brazil, or alcoholism among American Indians. These media flare-ups are demonstrably unrelated to events—indeed the evidence in the Third World is that Western press coverage shapes what goes on more than the other way round.

A hint of this came in the lead story of the September 5 *Washington Post* where it was revealed that “dozens of mixed-race students were set upon by police after they started singing ‘We Are the World’ outside an entrance to Cape Town’s newest shopping mall.” Now anyone with an ear for music will realize the perfect justice of this reaction by the authorities. But the comic irony of African discontented adopting the jingle of a Philadelphia rock concert should not be missed. Reportedly Pinochet’s opponents have taken up Bob Dylan, and the guerrillas in the Philippines are rehearsing some of Prince’s latest stuff.

Until South Africa came along, the U.S. media was cowed and sullen. The best it could come up with was that we live in an age of solipsism and self-aggrandizement, an accusation whose credibility is a bit singed when it is leveled by Talking Hairdos on the TV networks who, everyone knows, would massacre their families for a point in the Nielsen ratings. But even talk about the dearth of Yuppie altruism was not indignant, only sneering. Now indignation and self-righteousness are back in full opulence. The press is doing a collective rain dance, utterly uninhibited by the perplexed expression on the faces of most Americans. The question I am

asking myself as I witness the frenzy is: Why South Africa?

The answer is hardly obvious. In the fall issue of *Policy Review* my colleague Adam Wolfson documents “what governments do to blacks in the rest of Africa.” That continent is really a hell-hole, it turns out. As in South Africa, blacks are denied the vote in Angola, Benin, Burundi, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Ethiopia, Gabon, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Mauritania, Mozambique, Nigeria, Seychelles, Somalia, Namibia—the list goes on.

South Africa practices forced expulsion or relocation of blacks, but the Ivory Coast expelled 16,000 Beninese in the 1960s, Ghana kicked out half a million “aliens” in 1969, during the 1970s Zambia relocated 150,000 undesirables and Uganda expelled 50,000 Asians, in the last two years Ethiopia relocated 1.5 million people

and Nigeria expelled 700,000, often using tear gas to break up refugee camps.

In the past 18 months South Africa has detained 2,000-3,000 blacks without trial, but a hundred times as many people face not only incarceration but torture and “re-education” in Ethiopia, Mozambique, Angola, Zaire, Tanzania, and elsewhere. Uganda has since 1971 killed more than half a million of its political prisoners. Amnesty International reports that torture tactics in Ethiopia include “dipping the body in hot oil,” “inserting a bottle or heated iron bar into the vagina or anus,” and “tying a bottle of water to the testicles.” (Even in Greenwich Village, this sort of activity is no longer regarded as pleasurable.)

I have only given snippets, but the evidence is indisputable: Blacks in South Africa are better off. Migration patterns attest to this too: Blacks seem to find the quality of life—that

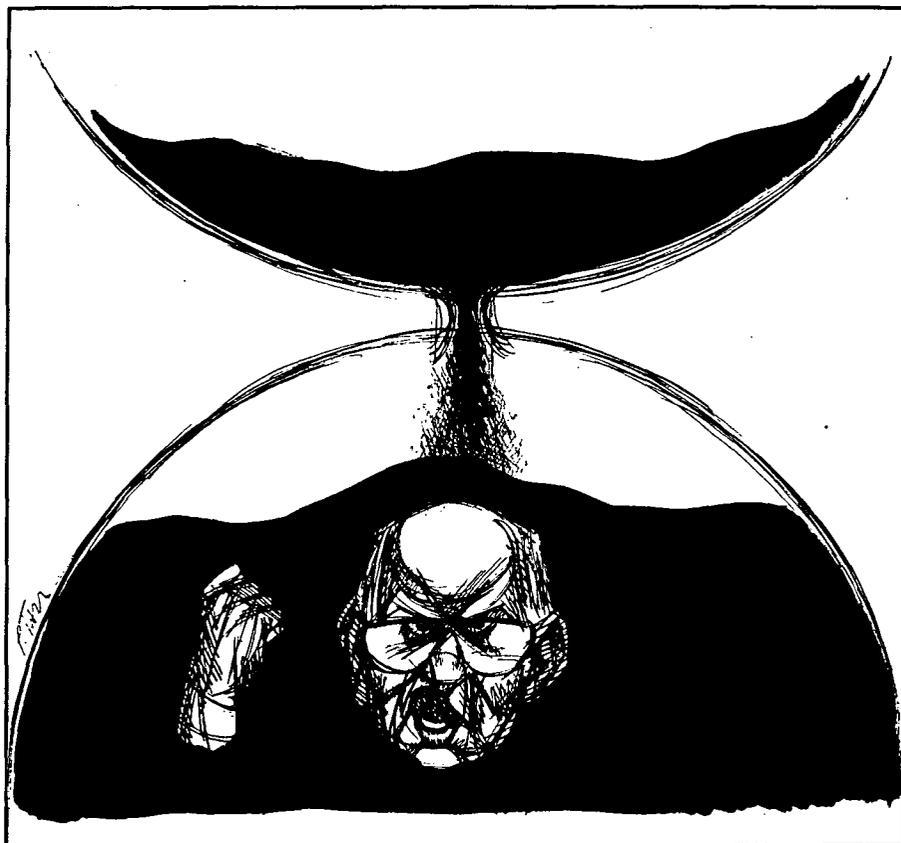
weighted average of economic and human freedoms—higher in South Africa than in the rest of that wretched continent. Yet the U.S. press consistently treats South Africa differently, and surely it couldn’t be because it expects greater virtue of white people than black people.

Also compare the plight of South Africa and the Soviet Union. The Soviets already have this on the scoreboard: 30 million of their citizens killed, several countries invaded, poison gas sprayed on Afghans and Cambodians, villages leveled, all basic freedoms (political, religious, press) controlled both at home and abroad, dissidents placed in psychiatric wards—the most brutish Afrikaner must eye this partial listing with envy.

Yet, the media assumes that the best way for the U.S. to oppose the evil of apartheid is to launch boycotts and sanctions, ostracize athletes and artists, eliminate cultural ties, support the militant opposition, and do everything to distance ourselves from South Africa; while it simultaneously insists that the best way to fight Communism is to increase cultural exchanges and leverage, expand trade and tourism, employ cautious rhetoric to encourage moderate elements in the regime, and continually search for common areas of agreement and concern.

Recently the press has uncritically amplified statements by Randall Robinson, Jesse Jackson, and others that South Africa is the most immoral regime known to man. I must say, I was deeply alarmed to hear this, because it reminded me of the “evil empire” rhetoric of that irresponsible fellow Reagan. In particular, I worry about such provocative and inflammatory talk coming at a time of heightened tensions between the two countries.

Okay, I’m mimicking Tom Brokaw. But I still don’t see why we respond differently to South African totalitarianism than to Soviet totalitarianism. Remember that the main argument for



Dinesh D'Souza is managing editor of *Policy Review*. (John O'Sullivan is on vacation and will return to this column next month.)

dealing cordially with the Russians—"They have nuclear weapons"—applies in all probability to South Africa. Which inspired a rumination from Joseph Eule of Washington, D.C. in a letter to the September 20 *National Review*: What if South Africa aimed its nuclear weapons at American cities? Threatened to blow up New York if the J.S. Congress tried any stunts, say. Would the Western media hang tough, or would it quickly begin to rationalize the most repugnant aspects of apartheid, its arms control appetite suddenly kindled?

Better: Imagine what would happen if the South African government suddenly allied itself with the Soviet Union. Wouldn't that pose a real dilemma for the Gorbachev lobby at the networks and the *Washington Post*? I suspect that much of the huffery would be muted overnight. And poor Carl Rowan would have to return to his fall-back subject, Reagan's insensitivity to the plight of minorities in this country.

Neal Ascherson, in a recent cover article in the *New York Review of Books*, denies that there is either a logical or a direct connection between Pretoria and Moscow. He informs us that "Botha's problem is not the external threat of 'communist' guerrillas." Oh, it isn't? What is it, then, his recurrent backache? Of course what Ascherson means by his tiresome use of quotation marks is that there are no real Communist guerrillas—only "communists" in the fertile fancy of the Afrikaners.

Notice, these days it is becoming increasingly difficult to be treated as a Communist by the U.S. media. In the 1950s you merely had to say you were a Communist to merit the label. In the 1960s and 1970s you also had to hitch up to the Soviet Union, promise to establish Soviet bases, and so on. Today—well, it's impossible to do it. No matter what you say or do, the networks and newspapers are convinced that you aren't really a Communist.

All this has got me thinking about "apartheid." Is there such a thing, really? I wonder how anyone can say that, as there are so many different variations of racial segregation.

And as for the South African leadership, let's not be simplistic—they can't all believe that talk about racial superiority. Come on, this is 1985. They live in the real world. They have a country to run. They have to adapt their ideology to reality. They're not ideologues, following some macabre doctrine of "apartheid," they're pragmatists. They reject labels. They ask not to be pigeonholed, but to be treated on a human level.

We should respond positively, not atavistically. Disinvestment will only

play into the hands of hardliners. Instead we should think about how to use our economic might to help the South African government solve its problems. Perhaps something along the lines of a new Marshall Plan is in order. It can be done; after all, if we can put a man on the moon . . .

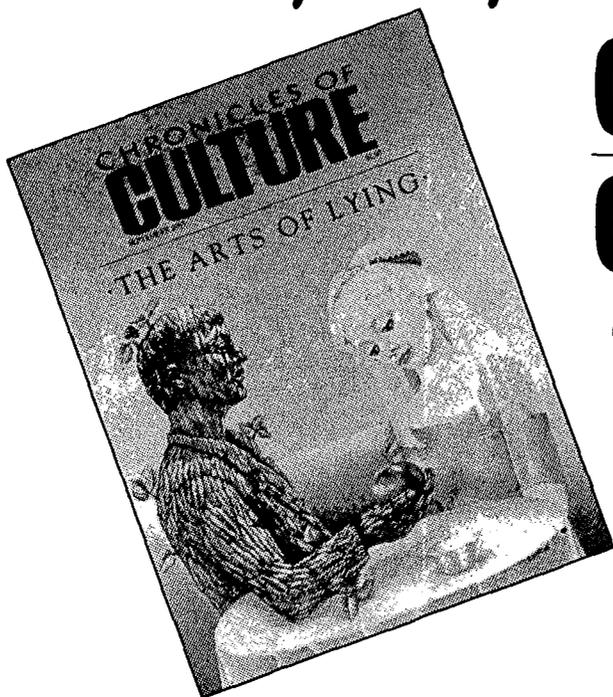
Can't resist lapsing into media-talk. I admit it: I know what makes South

Africa different from the Soviet Union or other countries, what makes it eligible for special indignation. The first reason is that, unlike the Soviet Union and even some African states, South Africa is only moderately totalitarian. As we've discovered with our experience with Bob Dole, being wishy-washy about anything is always a strategic mistake, and this applies also

to totalitarianism. If you're going to stay in power, you've got to go the whole hog.

For example, the South Africans imprison Nelson Mandela for life, so he can become the focus of world attention and a living legend; the Soviets would have killed him, so he would only be a wistful memory—and a reminder of the price of dissent. The

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Afrikaners permit freedom of the press, so the world can witness sobbing blacks at cemeteries; the Soviets would have expelled the international media and placed the sobbers in lunatic asylums, and the only photographs we'd see would be of cheery, well-dressed government officials arriving in Washington for summit talks.

The second, more important, reason that South Africa is different is that it is a U.S. ally. The foreign policy of the elites in our media, academy, and government permits the Soviet Union to treat its citizens any way it pleases and to make alliances based on strategic necessity alone; the U.S., by contrast, is only permitted to ally with countries that a) are democratic, b) have outstanding human rights records, c) expropriate land for redistribution, d) are racially integrated, and so on. Since most countries in the world do

not satisfy the escalating list of liberal moral demands, the U.S. is prevented from recruiting their support in the anti-Communist struggle, and is urged instead to overthrow their governments. Thus America is reduced to a policy of pulverizing her friends as she appeases her mortal enemies.

From the media's point of view, South Africa offers the advantage of being a "safe issue." All the other bleeding heart causes, taken up by the cheerleading press in the 1960s and 1970s, have lost their moral steam. Abortion, reverse discrimination, busing, welfare programs—the correct approach to these is ambiguous, at best, and in many cases the moral momentum has shifted to the right. The South Africa issue, on the other hand, is crystal clear, a safe crusade.

The journalistic consensus was refuted recently by Paul Johnson's *Commentary* article, "The Race for South Africa." But don't expect most journalists, products of the public school system, to understand the complexity so elaborately outlined by Johnson. Indeed, the *New Republic*, continuing to rely heavily on its interns, editorialized about South Africa that "there has not been an evil so simple since the fall of Berlin."

Our suave President must also take some of the blame for the media epilepsy over South Africa, not only because of his man Chester Crocker's complete inability to articulate the case for the Administration's policy, but also because Reagan has, in his second term, failed to set the foreign policy agenda. The result has been a vacuum which the media has exploited by creating its own issue.

I do not expect the frenetic press effort to destabilize the South African government to subside soon. The sneakiest tactic being used by journalists who want to seem objective is the ventriloquist self-fulfilling prophecy. My September 16 issue of *Newsweek*, for instance, quotes "one senior U.S. official" saying that "South Africa is on the slippery slope" to revolution.

This reminds me of the way that *Time* and *Newsweek*, in almost every foreign policy article, print fluid, lengthy quotations, summarizing the thesis of the story, attributed to anonymous high-ranking officials. Ever wonder how such articulate and appropriate quotations are come by, especially under deadline pressure? "We make the damn things up," I was told by top editors at *Time* and *Newsweek*, who asked not to be identified. □

EMINENTOES



THE GENERAL'S BIG MOUTH

by Gary Mead

When General Wojciech Jaruzelski spoke to the Polish nation on December 13, 1981, he promised that martial law would restore order to society and repair the economy. Almost four years later few can dispute that an order of sorts has indeed been imposed, even though as the Polish government press spokesman, Jerzy Urban, observed soon after the start of military rule it has merely "trapped the Devil inside a bottle." The tanks no longer rumble through Warsaw streets, and gas bombs rarely get lobbed into basements, but the opposition has turned inwards, rather than given up all hope. As for the economy . . .

One thing Jaruzelski never promised was that he would staff his regime with charismatic personalities, and he has not disappointed. The Military Council of National Salvation (as the regime initially styled itself) was composed of Jaruzelski clones: enigmatic, colorless senior officers who shone only when TV lights glinted on their medals. As Poland elegantly slides into the status

of "Kampuchile" (a term coined by one of Poland's best journalists, Stefan Bratkowski) the civilian replacements for the Military Council have simply supervised the decline, and they haven't an ounce more charisma than their predecessors. It has become a dictatorship by shabby, pedantic officialdom,

overseen by deadpan figures in identical suits.

The only ripple on this otherwise stagnant pool is Jerzy Urban, the man whose task it is to explain and justify the actions of the regime to the world. Amongst the present Polish leadership Urban stands out as a personality in his

own right, deeply unpleasant though that personality is. Since August 1981 he has acted as government press spokesman, holding regular (usually weekly) conferences for both Polish and foreign journalists, giving interviews, interpreting political developments for the media, and generally acting as PR man for the regime. It's a task he has taken to with relish, handling it with some sophistication and a large helping of sophistry. He is no doubt the best man for the job.

Urban's career is a fascinating illustration of how calculated, unbridled ambition can transform a rather competent journalist into a Polish Minister. That, plus a life-long determination to be on the winning team, has elevated Jerzy Urban into the government ranks. In performing possibly the most testing job in the government, he has become the regime's most detested member. "The dislike of my person, as a government spokesman, comes from people who hate the government and its policy," he has said. "I personify this hatred." This delights him. Indeed, the most remarkable facet of Urban's



Gary Mead reports on Eastern Europe for the *New Statesman*.