

AMBASSADOR HERMAN W. NICKEL

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

Interview date: June 3, 2005

Copyright 2005 ADST

NICKEL: I came into this ambassadorship in a rather unusual way because normally political appointees are people who have worked hard in the vineyards of their respective political party. I came into it with a background as a journalist and as a foreign correspondent with 22 years of experience in Europe, Africa and Asia. It was a matter of my professional integrity not to get involved in politics in anyway. My first exposure to South Africa came in 1961 when I was reassigned from London to become Africa correspondent. with the base in Johannesburg which was the natural place to put the African bureau in those days . Johannesburg was the one place where you could hop on a plane any day of the week to fly to both East and West Africa. It was in 1961, when flights from South Africa were still allowed to land there.

Q. The year when Africa was opening up?

NICKEL: Exactly. The most frequent story we had to tell was the passage from colonial rule to independence ... the lowering of one flag and the raising of another. That put demands on your imaginativeness in writing a new lead because it was pretty much a repetition of ceremonial, but of course some of these transitions were not as peaceful as others. So after I got my little family settled in Johannesburg, I had to spend weeks at a time in what was then still called Leopoldville, now Kinshasa. However, I stayed in South Africa long enough to arouse the ire of the existing government because our coverage of apartheid, which then, was at its very peak, was highly critical. It especiallupset the South African government that the man they were looking for, the number one wanted man in the country, a gentleman by the name of Nelson Mandela, had been interviewed by us while he was on the ruhe was known as the Black Pimpernel then - and of course they wanted to know where this took place and who had helped us arrange it. Of course we told them to buzz off, and so they told me to buzz off, too, within a week's time. They extended that deadline by one week, to allow my wife to leave hospital after the premature birth of a little boy, who sadly only lived a couple of days. So we left South Africa, and headed for my next assignment in Germany. Our furniture was packed up under the watchful eyes of South African police after our departure, and they did a careful job. Except they left our lift van sitting on the Durban docks without directions where to ship it. So we had to live with borrowed furniture for a number of months.

Q: You were kicked out?

NICKEL: I was kicked out, and the Time bureau was not allowed to open until 1976. So I think it was a matter of huge surprise to them and it certainly was beyond my own wildest imagination that twenty years later they should have me back as American ambassador. It probably was the last thing they expected of Ronald Reagan - that he, of all people, would pick one of those troublesome journalists. The reason why the president, I believe, did choose me to represent the United States in South Africa at that time was that I had gone back to South Africa for the first time in 1978 on assignment from Fortune magazine with a new perspective. I had returned convinced that a process of change had taken hold that raised hope for a negotiated end to apartheid and that this was a process the United States should encourage and facilitate. And that's what his Administration's policy of Constructive Engagement was all about. The managing editor of Fortune, Bob Lubar, had remembered that I had this earlier South African exposure and wanted me to do a couple of articles on an issue which was then beginning to raise its head and causing problems for American companies-namely disinvestment.

I should stress that when I left South Africa in 1962 I felt very, very pessimistic about the future. As I said earlier, apartheid was then at its peak. The great majority of South African whites and the elites that supported the Afrikaner dominated National Party were really convinced that apartheid was the solution to the problem of keeping the white minority on top and from being swamped by the black majority. (I will avoid the word final solution). It was obvious to me that this meant that this was not going to work. It was going to lead to tragic conflict, with serious destabilizing effects for the entire region, and, in the process, for our own national interest. Indeed, it was the consensus of international public opinion that South Africa, if it stayed on that course, was headed for some kind of racial holocaust.

Q: I was an intelligence researcher in the African bureau and I think we were all looking forward around 1960 we were all thinking that there was big trouble ahead....

NICKEL: Yes, and even though at that point the regime was at that time at its most repressive and perhaps because of the very repressiveness, resistance, open resistance, was still relatively weak compared to what was to come 20 years later. It was the passive resistance campaign against the hated pass laws, when blacks burned their pass books and police fired into a crowd at Sharpeville, that first drew wide international condemnation of the apartheid system. It had happened just a few months before we arrived in 1961. That was the first time that the world was really alerted to what seemed to be in store on a much bigger scale in South Africa for the future. The importance of my trip back in 1978 was that I felt that the important elites in South Africa had begun to see apartheid as the problem, not the solution. By elites I don't necessarily mean the leadership of the government, but people in the once largely English business community, who by that time included a lot of Afrikaners, people in the churches, even the Dutch Reformed Church, which was long regarded as the National Party at prayer, people in such strongholds of the Afrikaner intelligentsia as the University of Stellenbosch. In essence they had come to the conclusion that apartheid was a dead end street. To put it differently, they were concluding that when you are in a hole, stop digging. This is not to say that they were prepared at that stage to concede one-man-one-vote majority rule. But they were looking for reform and pushing the government to repeal at least some of the most obnoxious features of apartheid, such as the Group Areas Act, the Separate Amenities Act, the ban on interracial marriages, among others. They had also come to the conclusion that in the interest of stable labor relations they needed to deal with the growing black trade union movement, and that that movement had to be recognized legally. The Congress of South African Trade Unions was to become a hugely important tool of political mobilization later. In all this, the enlightened business community was well ahead of the government which was then of course headed by the intimidating figure of P. W. Botha. Of course, they often had their own practical, self-interested reasons. Certainly for business apartheid increasingly conflicted with economic rationality. The functional requirements of an expanding industrial society had become ever more incompatible with the racial ideology and the mad scientist laws of apartheid. For example, the notion of apartheid that you could preserve the urban areas for whites went back to depression days when poor rural Afrikaners had flocked to the cities to find work and sought protection against competition from poor blacks. In those days it was even the South African Communist Party which railed against the "swart gevaar" to the jobs poor whites.

Job reservation was really an affirmative action program for poor Afrikaners. That's why even unskilled jobs like elevator operators were reserved for whites, because many poor rural Afrikaners had themselves little more training than blacks. Well, what had happened in the following decades was a mighty industrial expansion led by the rapid rise in the price of gold in the 1970s and the only way in which you could keep the economy growing was to rely on blacks. Blacks had to be brought into the urban areas and this of course collided with the notion of the group areas, areas that were supposed to be reserved for whites only and it also, you know if you train blacks to do enough jobs it means you have to give them education, you have to give them housing, allow them to own real property, allow them to live with their families. To be sure, in the mining sector, to this day, you still have the pattern of men-only dormitories for mine workers, many from neighboring countries like Lesotho, but on the industrial side it was different. And since more and more blacks were living and working in the so-called white urban areas, you could no longer claim with a straight face that you had addressed their political rights by allowing them to vote in the nominally independent homelands (which no other country recognized). So these internal contradictions were putting growing strain on the system and more and more people, especially in the white elites, began to realize this had become totally untenable. As I argued in my Fortune article, what was happening in South Africa was strikingly similar to the effect which industrial growth had in destroying Jim Crow in the American South. That point had previously been made, persuasively, by Andrew Young. Clearly, here as there, peaceful change was easier to achieve against a background of economic growth than of stagnation and decline.

Another factor, of course, was the obvious disapproval of apartheid by the rest of the world. Businessmen worried about losing access to capital and markets because of a system which defied economic rationality. Moral disapproval also mattered a great deal. Nobody wants to be a polecat. White South Africans, like people anywhere, didn't like to see themselves regarded as moral lepers and certainly there was that element of shame as well. The moral pressure was very strong. South Africans are mad about sports, and being banned from international competition was painful to their pride. What they resented, however, was to be talked down to by outsiders, who in the same situation might not have acted so differently. Indeed, one wonders where we would be now if the civil rights struggle had been about majority rule rather than minority rights. That's why I thought there should be a difference between engaging South African whites on problems we Americans had also been struggling with, and smugly lecturing them from a posture of moral superiority. After all, people are more inclined to take advice from friends than from those who treat them as enemies and moral inferiors. Above all, talk to them in terms of their own enlightened self-interest, and help them re-define that self-interest. That, I think, is the essence of diplomacy. Moral posturing and breast-beating may play well with domestic constituencies and make you feel good, but that's not the diplomat's job.

But to get back to the articles I wrote in Fortune, which led to my appointment. So I felt, and I expressed it in my article, that there was a possibility for a negotiated settlement. In coming to that conclusion, in fact I remembered that one interview that we had with Nelson Mandela in a secret place in 1962, just a few months before he was finally arrested. In essence, what he said was this: "Look, we in the African National Congress realize that South Africa is a multiracial society. This is not strictly a colonial situation. White South Africans have been in this country for as long as Europeans have been in the United States. Here they came with the Dutch East India Company and there it was the Dutch West India Company which bought New Amsterdam from the Indians, and at just about the same time. We are all dependent on each other." And he stressed that theme of mutual interdependence, and rejected the notion of driving the white man into the sea. I was convinced that this recognition of interdependence was a building block for a negotiated settlement... .. if only the South African government of the day grasped that opportunity. The problem was that Mandela was locked up and the ministers I dealt with had never met him. I often told them what Mandela had told us in 1962, and urged them to engage him before it was too late.

The articles which I wrote in Fortune appeared in 1978 came to the attention of a number of people who were to play a significant role in shaping the African policy at the incoming Reagan administration, notably Chet Crocker who would serve as Assistant Secretary for African Affairs throughout the Reagan years. He was teaching at Georgetown, but we had not met before. He called me up to say he found the articles interesting and suggested we meet for lunch. As we got to know each other we found that our policy approaches toward the South African issue were remarkably compatible. We kept in touch. Then in mid-1981 he amazed me by asking me if he could put forward my name as his candidate for the ambassadorship. The White House had decided that they were going to have a political appointee to signal a different policy approach. Of course there were many more conventional political candidates for the job. Some of them probably would have faced very difficult confirmation hearings for a variety of reasons, even though they had stronger GOP political claims on the job than I had. Anyway, Bill Clark, who was the First Deputy Secretary of State in the Reagan administration and a long-time confidant of the President, was eventually detailed to vet the various candidates. He called me in and finally said, "Well, this might be just the solution to pick someone who actually has South African experience and has written about it. And the fact that they expelled you 20 years ago might actually help you on the Hill." Several months passed. Finally, early in November 1981 the phone rang in my Washington home, and there was the President of the United States asking me if I were prepared to represent him as American ambassador in South Africa. It would have been an overwhelming moment for any American, but especially for one who like me had only come to this country shortly after World War II.

In spite of the fact that I had been expelled from South Africa in 1962 and of my civil rights record of working with the NAACP and doing legal research for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund under Thurgood Marshall, my reading of the South African situation was by no means popular with the prevailing liberal view that the only way to get white South Africans to relinquish power was to bludgeon them with sanctions and economic and political isolation. The National Council of Churches was particularly hostile. But that may actually have helped me on the other end of the political spectrum, where Jesse Helms at one point seemed ready to put a hold on my nomination because he suspected me - and Chet Crockeof being too liberal. Eventually I was confirmed unanimously and arrived in South Africa in March of 1982.

Q: Did you have any problems when you worked for Fortune to go interview? You had been kicked out. Any problems coming back, did you sense any hostility or had the people changed, time had changed?

NICKEL: Well, it took a good long time for the South Africans to issue me a visa in 1978. Perhaps they had finally concluded that Fortune was not exactly a radical rag, but also they had concluded that banning American correspondents had not improved their image. Following my own expulsion, one by one, they had closed down all the bureaus of major American publications. As luck would have it, they allowed them back in just before Soweto erupted in 1976 when school kids rebelled against the introduction of compulsory Afrikaans language instruction in their schools.

But since you're asking this question, when I arrived in South Africa as Ambassador is was quite amusing. I got off the plane in Cape Town where the parliament was then in session. You know the parliament sits there from the end of January until about the end of June and then all the ministers are there because it is a parliamentary system. So my first six month stint was down in Cape Town. Through my DCM, Walter Stadler, the very voluble and long time Foreign Minister Pik Botha sent a message that he wanted to see me right away. So I barely had time to take a shower after the long flight before I was whisked off to the foreign minister's office. The reason why he wanted to see me was to tell me that Prime Minister P. W. Botha (later President Botha) wanted to see me in a couple of days. Pik had given me a defiant interview during my Fortune assignment, but he obviously wanted to check me out. They wanted me to present my credentials to the (then ceremonial) State President right away, so that I could take up my duties without delay. As he walked me to the door, he turned to me with a thin smile and said: "Mr. Ambassador, of course we're glad to see you, but of course we remember the circumstances of your last departure," referring to my expulsion, "and I trust we won't have to do that again." So I said to him, "Don't worry, minister, I'm not a vindictive man and I would like to think that people learn from experience and will not make the same mistake twice."

Q: Did you have any trouble getting an agreement?

NICKEL: No, I think it would have been very short sighted on their part to start their relations with the Reagan Administration by denying agreement to the new President's nominee. The South Africans weren't that stupid. Of course they put a great deal of stock in Ronald Reagan, because they thought he would see them as allies in the Cold War. The agreement came almost immediately.

Q: Well, when you got there, in the first place how stood relations with South Africa at the time? Were sanctions in effect?

NICKEL: No. Like its predecessors, the Carter Administration had opposed economic sanctions, though after the brutal killing of African Black Consciousness leader Steve Biko it had supported the ban of military sales, a policy which the Reagan administration also adhered to. But relations were difficult. Remember that in the previous Administration, during a disastrous meeting in Vienna between Vice President Mondale and Prime Minister John Vorster, Mondale had insisted that the U.S. would not be satisfied with anything less than one-man, one-vote, "each vote equally weighted" (which it isn't even in the US). That sounded like a demand for total surrender, and Vorster used the backlash among South African whites to call an election that resulted in a right-wing landslide. I think they thought that Ronald Reagan was more sympathetic. Before he was elected, he had made statements to the effect that South Africans were our allies in the struggle against communism and that they had stood by our side in two world wars and the Korean conflict. As you'll recall, the South Africans had their Air Force units in Korea and I think they built on that. When he was a radio commentator Reagan had also said wrongly - that the South African problem was more intertribal than it was interracial. And because they suspected that people like Chet Crocker and myself didn't really reflect Reagan's personal views, they kept trying to open up back channels to right-wingers in the White House like Pat Buchanan and even Jean Kirkpatrick, and to Senator Jesse Helms. Fortunately, George Shultz was able to foil most of these end-runs through the relationship of trust that he had developed with the President. (But he hit the ceiling when he noticed that at the last moment Pat Buchanan in 1986 had taken the sting out of a carefully drafted speech in which Ronald Reagan was to call on the South African government start talking to the ANC. Buchanan had defanged the demand by conditioning it on the ANC renouncing terrorism, in a way that seemed to shift the onus from the South African government to the ANC.)

The South Africans also felt that, since the United States had become very apprehensive about the Cuban presence in Angola and since they had their troops there, we would see them as allies in dealing with that particular threat, and that we would soft-pedal the apartheid issue. During my very first session P.W. Botha let me know that he had learned his lesson with the U.S. when he was defense minister. Henry Kissinger had signaled that he supported the South African decision to move into Angola to counter the Cubans, he claimed, but then the Congress, through the Clark Amendment, had banned any US support for that military operation. "You may say that this was not the Administration, but the Congress. How do I know", he asked prophetically, "that this won't happen again?" I replied that we hoped we could make enough progress to avoid that. He got my message, but did not like it one bit.

The South Africans, especially their security establishment, were focused on the Angolan problem, which they saw as a threat to their position in Namibia (then Southwest Africa.). It was in 1981 when Chet Crocker and Elliott Abrams were involved in the first contacts with the South Africans that the concept of linkage emerged, linkage between getting the Cubans out of Angola in return for the South Africans pulling out of Namibia. In terms of the regional diplomacy, that linkage became the name of the game. Eventually, of course, it came to pass that the Cubans pulled out of Angola and the South Africans pulled out of Namibia in 1990. In the end, however, what brought that long negotiating process to a successful conclusion was the fortuitous collapse of the Soviet Union. Seeing the handwriting on the wall, the Cubans themselves decided that the time had come to pull out.

When that happened, the South Africans no longer had to worry about the expansion of a communist military and political presence all the way to the Orange River. They worried that an independent Namibia would expand the sphere of Soviet influence to their own borders. Without that threat I think they were much more prepared to relinquish Southwest Africa to an independent African government, which by itself couldn't have posed any threat. Keep in mind that the principal objective of South African military strategy was to prevent the African National Congress from establishing the necessary cross-border bases from which to launch guerilla attacks into South Africa. That also accounts for their destabilization campaign against Mozambique, and their repeated commando raids aimed at any evidence of ANC cells in Lesotho, Swaziland and Botswana. That strategy caused us a lot of grief, but, frankly, it was very effective in preventing ANC guerillas from ever becoming a serious threat to the regime. The bombs that occasionally went off in South African cities, killing both black and white civilians, were of no military consequence, though they had some impact psychologically, giving a boost to the morale of the internal resistance, but also rallying South African whites behind the government's security crackdown.

But, above all, it was the Cuban presence in Angola, supported by the Soviets, that was a serious concern to them and it was a serious concern to us. So this was something that created a kind of commonality of interest on the regional front, but I think what they did not expect was that this common concern would lessen our concern about the injustices of apartheid, and what these implied for the internal stability of the most important country on the African continent. It didn't take long for P.W. Botha to realize that this was wishful thinking. At our very first meeting he demanded to know what "constructive engagement" meant. "Does it mean you want to meddle in our internal affairs?" he demanded. He glowered at me when I responded that since South Africa's internal policies were its greatest foreign policy problem, we had a common interest in progress on both the internal and regional front. Such progress was necessary to make constructive engagement politically sustainable. I am sure he understood my point, but he would never acknowledge that we had a legitimate interest in South Africa's "internal affairs". That didn't keep him from telling you that he was doing more to change South Africa than any of his predecessors.

When Chet Crocker enunciated the policy of constructive engagement, which was very much his own intellectual product, he wisely saw there was a correlation between the regional and internal problems. Our objective, to put it simply, was to have a South Africa at peace with itself and with its neighbors. Over the long run, you could not have one without the other. That's why the policy was not to stabilize the situation on the basis of the status quo. If you wanted to stem Soviet influence, the apartheid regime was not part of the solution, but a central part of the problem. It would have been much more difficult, if not impossible, to carry through a diplomacy of regional conciliation and accommodation against the background of a totally recalcitrant internal South African policy. So there was a correlation between working on normalizing and improving the relations between South Africa and its neighbors and internal peaceful change away from apartheid.

On the regional front, Chet Crocker, aided by an impressive team that included the likes of the late Bob Frasure, Frank Wisner and (later) Chas Freeman, conducted the critical negotiations himself. Wisner handled much of the negotiations on the Mozambican-South African problem. In retrospect, the fact that Crocker spent most of his time on the regional Southern African issues led his critics to conclude, quite unfairly, that he didn't care that much about the internal developments of South Africa which were becoming increasingly politicized in the Congress, fed by massive media coverage.

It was the internal process of change that I saw as the most important part of my job. It was clear to me, as it was to a growing number of thoughtful South Africans, that apartheid was doomed. The real question was not whether it would end, but how. Would there be a disastrous crash, or a soft landing? Of course, our objective was to facilitate that soft landing, which is to say, a negotiated settlement. Of course that meant addressing and engaging both sides of the divide, both privately and publicly.

In terms of the raw balance of power, the South African regime still had the edge because its security forces were extremely strong as was their readiness to use them, ruthlessly if necessary. As I said earlier, the ANC, African National Congress, guerilla effort was essentially ineffectual, except in a propagandistic way. Preemptive crossborder strikes by the South African army into neighboring countries effectively kept the ANC from establishing bases from which to conduct sustained operations. Whenever one went in to protest they would cite the Israeli example. They saw themselves in a very parallel position to the Israelis.

Q: What was your relation to the Israeli ambassador?

NICKEL: Very friendly. I often was, in a private way, rather critical of the Israelis getting a little too close to the South African government. I never had instructions to pound the Israeli ambassador on this matter but in private communications I expressed some concern that they were getting a little too close, especially in security matters. I have little doubt there was close covert cooperation on nuclear matters. For most of my time, the South African ambassador was a strong Likud man. Eliahu Lankin had been Menachem Begin's personal lawyer and his wife was a native born South African who had been in the Irgun as a young woman and had written an autobiography that she entitled "The Lady was a Terrorist," but she was a very nice woman and at the personal level they were both good friends.

But let me get back to my previous point. My analysis of the situation was that the most important thing that I could do was to encourage the white elites to push their own government towards more and bolder reform, and towards negotiations. That would imply the eventual un-banning of the ANC and the release of Nelson Mandela. To those critics who felt I was concentrating on whites, my reply was that it was they who held the power, it was they who had to relinquish it. My job was to help them in re-defining their own self-interest, encourage them to conclude that the effort to defend apartheid by internal repression and defying international isolation was self-destructive, and that the only way out was to negotiate a constitutional order based on the consent of the governed. Of course, you could not do this without recognizing that while it was the black majority who had been denied their basic rights, the white minority, too, had equities which had to be recognized. Democracy, after all, is not only about majority rule, but also about minority rights. Let's remember that our own civil rights struggle was all about minority rights. Unless you made it clear that you understood this, you had no credibility with white audiences. And in establishing this credibility, it was essential that I took a stand against a punitive approach, which is to say, economic sanctions. The unspoken, implicit part of the message was, however, that for Constructive Engagement to remain politically sustainable in the United States, South Africa had to be seen moving in the right direction. Once the township rebellion and the ensuing images of repression on American television screens crowded out the evidence of reform, that policy became a political liability. Even so, Ronald Reagan stuck with it until, in September 1986, the Congress overrode his veto of the sanctions legislation. It was a logical moment for me to leave and for someone else to take over. As a "stick in the closet", the sanctions threat may have provided us with some leverage. Once the sanctions were imposed, that leverage was gone. The arrow was gone from our quiver. No sooner had we imposed the sanctions, P.W. Botha imposed a draconian State of Emergency. So I remain convinced that whatever happened afterwards had very little to do with the sanctions that so preoccupied our domestic politics.

In the end, what makes the often cited South African miracle so unique in history, is that it involved an extremely powerful elite relinquishing power irreversibly before they had actually been defeated. In terms of raw power, they could have held out much longer. It would have been disastrous, but they could have. I mean they could have followed Ian Smith's example in Zimbabwe, with at least equally awful results..

There is no question in my mind, that the message we were sending had a significant effect in encouraging and helping the white South African elites re-define their long-term self-interest. In delivering that message, I became the ambassador with the highest public profile. I did a good deal of public speaking, gave many interviews, and was a frequent guest on radio and television programs. My journalistic background turned out to be extremely useful. The South African media which overwhelmingly favored reform, in varying degrees gave me prominent and sympathetic coverage. That even included some anchors and interviewers of the government-controlled South African Broadcasting Corporation much to the annoyance of P.W. Botha who bristled at my prominence on the domestic scene. (His parting shot was that he ordered the SABC not to broadcast an interview which I had recorded on the day of my departure in September 1986.) I think it irked him that I had become an important opinion maker in the internal debate, with a wide following among those who wanted him to move faster. In that process, I addressed business groups, think tanks and university audiences. But I didn't just preach to the choir. An influential philosophy professor at the elite Afrikaner Stellenbosch University, Willie Esterhuysen, organized a private meeting with members of the secretive Broederbond, long considered the powerful inner core of the Afrikaner establishment, who were beginning to have a second look at their support of apartheid. I also addressed a meeting of the youth branch of the ruling National Party, something none of my predecessors had done. They, too, had been firmly in the apartheid camp. But these were groups critical to the reorientation of Afrikaner politics. And Afrikaners made up two thirds of the white electorate and thus had dominated South African politics. That's why they were more crucial to the change than English-speaking liberals, much as one felt at home in their company.

To be sure, the changes that Afrikaners were willing to contemplate at that stage fell far short of the transfer of power to the black majority. Repealing such apartheid laws as the segregation of public amenities, the pass laws, and laws preventing blacks from owning real property, even the so-called Immorality Act banning interracial marriages were one thing. Handing over political power was another. At most, they were prepared to discuss a black African chamber of parliament, so long as that did not entail black control. But even piecemeal reforms, often derided as cosmetic, were like bricks taken out of the wall of apartheid, until it finally collapsed. And each piecemeal reform raised the expectations and demands for more radical change, culminating in the transfer of political power.

I kept recalling a wonderful paragraph in Alexis de Tocqueville's famous essay on the origins of the French Revolution in which he points out that the most dangerous time for a regime is not when it is at its most repressive, but when it begins to mend its ways. Conditions long endured become intolerable when they are no longer seen as immutable. That's what happened in France, it also happened in the Soviet Union, and that's what was happening in South Africa.

The township rebellion which began in 1984 was fuelled by an act of "reform" which cost P.W. Botha the defection of his right wing, something no previous leader of the National Party had ever risked. To resulting Conservative Party, the new tricameral constitution, creating a white, a Colored (mixed race) and Asian chamber of parliament was the thin end of the wedge, ending the white political monopoly. To blacks, the new constitution added insult to injury, because it excluded the majority of the population. This led to the organization of the United Democratic Front which made it its business to "make South Africa ungovernable", and was far more successful than the ANC exiles in generating the pressure from below to force the pace of change. Unlike the ANC in exile, which adhered to the Soviet model of top-down "socialist centralism" in its decision-making, the UDF had a culture of bottom-up grassroots consultation, a difference that still causes strains within the ANC to this day.

There is no denying that "constructive engagement" did not sit well with black activists, who instinctively would have preferred a policy of confrontation instead, on the dubious and wishful assumption that if only the American superpower wanted to, it could have brought down apartheid in short order. They wanted us to adopt their agenda, including comprehensive sanctions, even the breaking off of diplomatic relations with the South African government. I recall a conversation with a white ANC sympathizer and then Washington Post stringer, Allister Sparks, who wanted the U.S. to blockade the South African ports with nuclear submarines. Such an approach would have polarized the situation still further and thus would have negated the chance for a negotiated settlement. But in their view, our refusal to follow their demands was evidence that we weren't really serious in fighting apartheid. I should add that this view was by no means shared by all black South Africans. Impartial opinion surveys consistently showed that a majority opposed sanctions and disinvestment because they feared for their jobs, something that the more prominent advocates of sanctions, including Arch Bishop Desmond Tutu, didn't have to worry about. In my many encounters with Tutu, he kept pressing me on the sanctions issue. I remember asking him whether he thought our sanctions policy towards Cuba had been successful. He didn't reply. In my view he was more interested in the gesture than in the likely practical consequences. Our opposition to sanctions was also shared by the leader of the Zulu-dominated Inkatha movement, Gatsha Buthelezi, then the chief minister of KwaZulu, who had broken with the ANC over the sanctions issue, as well as the ANC's pursuit of the "armed struggle", which he shrewdly recognized meant attacking the regime where it was strongest. The ANC exiles were out to destroy Buthelezi as a traitor, but after his release Mandela wisely reached out to him and brought him into his government. That defused what threatened to be an extended bloody conflict between the two political movements.

Convincing the black majority that constructive engagement was an anti-apartheid policy, albeit a more subtle one than rhetorical confrontation and symbolic gestures, was an uphill struggle. We worked hard on this, on several levels. Along with political officers of the embassy and of our three consulates general in Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town we reached out to black community leaders, opinion makers, educators, journalists and union leaders. Did we always tell them what they wanted to hear? Probably not, but that's not the point of diplomacy. Did we always agree with what they wanted us to do? No. Of course, the voice of the victim deserves respect, but victimhood does not automatically confer wisdom either. Embracing the agenda of either side would have undermined our ability to serve as facilitators in the movement towards negotiation. But we had to make it clear that unequivocal opposition to apartheid did not require support of sanctions, and why we thought sanctions would be counterproductive. And we had to demonstrate that opposition to apartheid went beyond rhetoric and that we were putting our money where our mouths were. One wonderful tool was our self-help program, as I recall the biggest of this kind in the world. These were small grants of 25,000 dollars maximum which we could make without the dubious benefit of expensive and time-consuming AID feasibility studies and consultants. (AID arrived only during my last year, with its familiar bureaucratic culture). Nothing was more satisfying than to visit a poor village where the women no longer had to walk for miles to get water from a putrid creek, because a \$2000 self-help grant had given them a bore hole that not only provided clean water, but also irrigation for vegetable gardens. We supported NGO's like Operation Hunger, which was feeding over a million undernourished children, with the local women handling the distribution. We supported legal challenges to "forced removals", through grants to such human rights organizations as the Legal Resources Center. When a tropical storm devastated stretches of KwaZulu, we were first with a grant from the Ambassador's emergency relief fund. And we were first again when the government tried to demolish the huge Crossroads squatter camp, by stirring up gangs who went around setting fire to the shacks. All these programs helped our embassy and consular officers keep their finger on the pulse of what was really happening at the grassroots level. And we sent black as well as white opinion makers, academics and judges to the U.S. on 6-week IV grants which proved tremendously useful. I also invited one of the great figures of the American civil rights struggle, the late Judge Constance Baker Motley, a close personal friend since my early NAACP days in 1948, to visit South Africa, where she deeply impressed all she met, including members of the South African judiciary.

Our outreach to the black community was such that our CIA station chief reported to me to report that South African security was convinced that we were running a covert operation against the government, and that one of our finest political officers, Betsy Spiro in Johannesburg, might just meet with an "unfortunate accident." We had to pull her out quickly. My own son, who was attending the University of Cape Town, had his car vandalized shortly after P.W. Botha's daily intelligence brief contained an item that the American ambassador's son was on the board of a student organization that worked with "illegal" squatters in the Crossroads squatter camp. So much for the bum rap that we had no black contacts, and that we had a cozy relationship with the government.

Q: How did you read P. W. Botha and his cabinet? How was your contact with them?

NICKEL: Well, P. W. Botha was an extraordinarily difficult man. He was a bully, with a choleric temper. Intimidation was his stock in trade, even within his own cabinet and party, and eventually that did him in. In 1989, after he suffered a stroke, he tried to hang on to the presidency while relinquishing leadership of the National Party. At that point the party rebelled and his cabinet insisted that he give up both posts. When he needed friends, he didn't have any. He had pushed them around and threatened them long enough. So I was by no means alone at being at the receiving end of his wrath. I recall an occasion when I was with his Foreign Minister Pik Botha when he got a call ordering to see the State President right away. As Pik left he turned around and sighed, "I never know whether I will still be foreign minister when I come back here." I remember a couple of particularly grueling sessions with him. He was famous for wagging his finger, as he did in the famous speech in 1985, which had been billed in advance as a signal that South Africa was leaving apartheid behind and had "crossed the Rubicon". Instead, television audiences around the world saw an angry man wagging his finger at the screen and growling defiantly "Don't push us too far." The next day Chase Manhattan abruptly informed its South African clients that it would stop rolling over short term credits, and when the other banks followed suit, that threw the country into a financial crisis and a moratorium.

A year later, I received an instruction from the President to deliver an oral message to P.W. to warn him that his repressive measures made it ever more difficult for the Reagan Administration to resist rising Congressional pressure to impose sanctions. Botha flew into a rage. "I am here to deal with the internal problems of my own country, and not to help you with yours," dismissing my point that it was in our common interest to help each other. And he shook his finger at me and it came ever closer to the tip of my nose and I was asking myself what an ambassador should do when the head of state to whom he has been accredited becomes physically violent. I just decided that I would fix him with a stare that was supposed to signal, "you're out of line." Some of his bitterness, I believe, stemmed from his sense that the world had not given him proper credit for the political risks he had taken in making more changes in the apartheid system than all his predecessors put together. He never conceded the right of the outside world to tell him what to do, but he wanted recognition for what he had done. And he had a point. One by one he had repealed most of the key laws of apartheid, culminating in the repeal of the Group Areas Act in 1986. That act, which meant the hated Pass Laws, was perhaps the most offensive, intrusive and humiliating aspect of apartheid in the daily lives of black South Africans. The trouble was that by that time reform was no longer enough. Black South Africans had their eye on the prize and demanded political power. And here they came up against Botha, the Afrikaner, the man determined to keep his "volk" from being swamped by the black majority. When my friend and ex-colleague Marsh Clark had a rare interview with P.W. Botha for TIME, he asked him how he wanted to be remembered. "As a good Afrikaner," he replied. Even before I left in 1986, Botha was beginning to look for face-saving and conditional ways of releasing Nelson Mandela. His interlocutor was his Justice Minister Kobie Coetsee with whom I had developed a close and trusting relationship. With Coetsee urging him on, P.W. had come to realize that Mandela was the man who mattered and needed to be talked to. And, indeed, Mandela, the prisoner, was secretly taken to meet with Botha, who for once, according to Mandela, managed to be courteous and controlled. But the conditions which Botha demanded for Mandela's release—a disavowal of the "armed struggle" and of the ANC's link with the South African Communist Party—were more than Mandela was prepared to meet, and Botha balked at ordering the release of Mandela from weakness, under internal and international pressure. But I doubt very much that Botha, if it had come to negotiations then, would have been prepared to concede majority rule. That, I believe, was the principal difference between him and his successor, F.W. de Klerk. And that's why P.W., now retired in a place called Wilderness, is still railing at de Klerk as a sell-out.

Q: But as you saw it on the ground, was apartheid not breaking down, laws or no laws?

NICKEL: Yes, it was. Even before the Group Areas Act was formally repealed, black South Africans were repealing the law with their feet, so to speak. The gravitational pull of jobs drew them to the so-called white urban areas and it overpowered any artificial legal barrier. The pass laws could be used to harass them, but they couldn't stop them. What's more, the economy needed them there. I live in Arizona, and I'm reminded of our own immigration problem. We, too, have to learn the lesson that you can't stop the flow, though you can regulate it. On another level, there were more and more places, especially in Cape Town and Johannesburg where laws were observed in the breach. In Johannesburg, the Hillbrow section had for some time turned into a racially mixed area. (It's now solidly black, heavily Nigerian in fact.) I must say to their credit, that the leading English-language universities, the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg and the University of Cape Town, were constantly pushing the envelope and allowing black students, not only in their classes but also in the dorms. Later the Afrikaans universities, like Stellenbosch, followed suit, though in their cases the students were mostly "colored", mixed race, because their main language is Afrikaans.

Q: By the way, looking at this in proportion, but when you came back you were under tremendous pressure in the United States in local communities on sanctions? What was your impression of the fight and the effect of sanctions before you went there and when you got there?

NICKEL: I was skeptical and critical of sanctions and I'll tell you why. As I explained earlier, I saw how economic growth was eroding apartheid, and it didn't make sense to me to slow that dynamic by hurting the economy and putting people out of work. In our own Jim Crow flourished during the depression and waned when industrial growth came to the South. And I didn't think that the economic pain would translate into political progress, especially since the proponents of sanctions demanded nothing short of total surrender on the part of the government. Between a little economic pain, inflicted mostly on victims of apartheid, and political surrender, what did we expect the government to choose? And once we had imposed sanctions, what arrow was left in our quiver? P.W. Botha kept taunting us to impose sanctions, because he was convinced that this stick would turn out to be a twig, and that the South African economy had enough natural resources, energy, and industrial capacity to shake off the results. He was basically correct, and the sanctions, once imposed, had little impact. South Africa's trade balance remained positive, even with countries like Canada, which had imposed sanctions before we did. (Remember that strategic minerals were carefully exempted from the boycott.) Where P.W. Botha was dead wrong was that he failed to understand the financial vulnerability of his country, its dependency on foreign capital inflows. When the international banking community pulled the plug on South Africa in 1985, it was not because of legislated sanctions but because they had decided that South Africa had become a bad business risk. What's more, turning over loans was becoming controversial, and thus not worth the trouble at home. No doubt the passage of the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act in September 1986 was celebrated as a symbolic victory by black activists and gave them a psychological lift, whatever that was worth. But in terms of access and leverage, it cost us dearly. The stick was more useful so long as we kept it in the closed. P.W. put out the word to his cabinet to stay away from the U.S. embassy after the imposition of sanctions, and even the Namibian-Angolan negotiation went into a prolonged limbo.

At that point Constructive Engagement was effectively taken over by the British. During the critical negotiation phase, it was Maggie Thatcher's ambassador Robin Renwick who became the diplomat with the best access to both camps, and he played that role brilliantly. In spite of Maggie Thatcher's steadfast refusal to impose sanctions and her harsh criticisms of the ANC, it was Renwick who became the first ambassador to spend two hours one-on-one with Mandela following his release (no foreign ambassador was ever allowed to visit him in prison). The U.S. ambassador was received by Mandela in a later joint session with some other ambassadors. So I wonder what sanctions bought us even on the black side of the political spectrum. The ANC may not have liked Thatcher, but they appreciated Renwick's access to the government. That's what made him an important player.

In the final analysis, the main thing which sanctions did achieve was to relieve the pressure which members of the Congress felt from their constituents, which is to say that sanctions were a way of dealing with an international issue that touched the most sensitive nerve in our domestic body politic, race. And it allowed politicians to do so at no political cost to themselves. As Chet Crocker once put it in a careless moment of candor, it was the political equivalent of the free lunch. Of course, in resisting the political pressure, we got no help from P.W. Botha. But it must also be said that it hurt us that President Reagan, who was rightly known as the Great Communicator, somehow failed to communicate that he personally shared the outrage over racial injustice and repression in South Africa. I hasten to add that I remain convinced that there was no racist bone in Reagan's body, to quote Colin Powell.

Let me say a word about another aspect of the sanctions movement, the movement to force American companies in South Africa to disinvest. Frankly, I never understood how an American company selling its plant and assets cheaply to a South African business interests was going to hasten the end of apartheid. Moreover, by adopting the Sullivan Code of fair employment practices the American companies had become pacemakers who set a positive example which many South African companies gradually followed. They set a standard that went well beyond their own employees. Many of them did leave, not out of conviction but because their CEO's got tired of the hassle factor. But in effect their withdrawal took an American chip off the South African table. And the black South African employees, I suspect, were not as pleased as, for example, Bishop Tutu. For him it was a matter of symbolism.

Q: Of course the ANC had sort of a Marxist philosophy which completely dissolved when it came in didn't it?

NICKEL: Right. I believe it was one of the great lucky coincidence of history that when apartheid was collapsing from its own internal contradictions it came roughly at the same time when the Soviet system collapsed. For many years the National Party had depicted the ANC as the Kremlin's fifth column. As communism collapsed, so did the vaunted "total onslaught", and that freed de Klerk when it came to legalizing and negotiating with the ANC. At the same time, with the collapse of communism, so did the ANC's political and economic role model. Once it took over the reins the ANC government quickly realized that the old socialist notions would spell renewed economic isolation, and that, in the age of globalism, South Africa needed to make itself an attractive destination for international investment. That meant a market economy, and fiscal and monetary discipline. To be sure, the failure to pursue an aggressive policy of redistribution does not sit well with left wingers in the trade union movement and the Communist Party, which are part of the ANC and are increasingly critical of the government's failure to close the huge gap between rich and poor, even as the economy is showing impressive growth. So we must wait and see whether "realists" in the government can hold the line against these mounting pressures. The jury is still out on that one.

Q: During the time you were ambassador there, this was maybe 1985, 1986 you must have been exposed to all sorts of political interlopers from within the United States, many who were sort of carrying on domestic battles. I can think of Jesse Jackson, liberals coming in, folks get out in the street and demonstrate and the Jesse Helms crew and the conservatives in the Republican party particularly. Didn't this complicate your mission? How did you deal with it?

NICKEL: You got it. Yes, of course. It's very difficult to conduct diplomacy and foreign policy when your particular issue has become a domestic political issue and politicians deal with it in terms of what plays best domestically rather than in terms of the consequences on the ground. The anti-apartheid movement had become sort of an extension of the American civil rights movement, and who wanted to seem "soft on apartheid?" So pound your breast and bring on the sanctions. Whenever politicians feel they have to be seen to be "doing SOMETHING" and often sanctions is that somethinwatch out. Even some of the moderate Republicans, like Nancy Kassebaum and Dick Lugar, who had been trying to hold the line, finally couldn't take the political pressure. And P.W. Botha acted as if he didn't care.

Q: Do you have any sort of impressions of some of these people who trotted out from the United States, the Ted Kennedys, the Jesse Jacksons, the Helms? He didn't travel much.

NICKEL: Helms didn't travel, but some of his friends on the far right did. They were convinced that they knew what Reagan really felt better than Reagan himself, and that it was the cabal of George Shultz, Chet Crocker and myself who didn't let Reagan be Reagan. They took us to task for not seeing that the South African government was our best friend in the cold war struggle in Africa and instead were opening the gates to the Marxist ANC. It fell to me to try to explain to them that when it came to countering communist influence, apartheid was the problem and not the solution. I am sure they went back to the U.S. unconvinced. By that time, they were far to the right of the mainstream of white South African opinion.

But most of our detractors came from the other end of the spectrum. Because apartheid had morphed into a domestic political issue, the old rule that politics stopped at the water's edge had long gone out of the window. The temptation to use apartheid South Africa as the backdrop for a politically effective photo-op had become irresistible, taking the place of posing defiantly at the Berlin Wall. Without a doubt, the visitor who was the most egregious and unhelpful in this respect was Teddy Kennedy. It was January 1985, and I believe he was at that time considering another run for the presidency. So what better place to start than South Africa. He got himself invited by Bishop Tutu and the Rev. Allen Boesak, who later had to serve jail time for diverting charitable contributions to indulge his personal life style. Kennedy's advance men made it clear that his trip would have nothing to do with the US Embassy and Administration policy, and that all arrangements would be left to his South African hosts. A week before he was to arrive with a large entourage of political writers and TV teams, it turned out that the arrangements were in such chaotic stage that Kennedy was forced to go to the Senate leadership and to ask that his visit be turned into an official CODEL. That meant that, at the last moment, our embassy had to scramble to take on the job of security, accommodations, transportation and logistics. A couple of days before Kennedy's arrival, a supremely arrogant young aide to the Senator called to request that I not go to the airport to greet my official visitor, since the reception was to be led by Bishop Tutu. I told him in no uncertain terms that I was not going to take instructions from him and would, of course, greet the Senator as an official visitor, as I would with other CODELS. After a fleeting handshake with me on the tarmac, Kennedy left in a large motorcade, including of course the press corps, and headed for Soweto, where he was to spend the night in the house of Desmond Tutu. Our embassy security officers were in the lead car along with South African police when they got a radio message that a large group of anti-Kennedy protesters from Buthelezi's anti-sanction Inkatha movement were blocking access to Tutu's house, and that there was a possibility of scuffles once the motorcade arrived. The motorcade stopped to review the situation. That was not the hero's welcome photo-op Kennedy's handlers had had in mind. The press buses were told to turn around and deliver the press corps to their hotel. Eventually, Kennedy first wanted to proceed on his own, but then it was decided that he, too, better turn around and spend the night at a hotel in Pretoria. By the time he was due to arrive at the Tutu home the protesters had largely dispersed. Shortly thereafter, one of my embassy security officers called me in a high state of anger to tell me that Kennedy staffers had accused him and the embassy with having colluded with South African security to "set them up" and sabotage Kennedy's Soweto visit. I shared his outrage at this insult, and called the Senator. My message was blunt: either get your staffers under control, or I will withdraw all embassy support from your visit. Make up your mind, for you can't have it both ways, and use my staff even as they are insulted as accomplices of the South African government. At that point, Kennedy apologized and promised that there would be no repeat of such misbehavior. It was not an auspicious start to his visit, but there was more trouble ahead. The next photo-op was to show the Senator looking solemn at the grave site of an African child, which even some sympathetic members of his press entourage thought was putting it on a bit too thick. Durban was next, where Kennedy rather reluctantly agreed to meet KwaZulu Chief Minister and Inkatha president Mangosuthu Buthelezi for breakfast. Even as the two men were eating breakfast, they could hear the chants of a large Zulu crowd outside the hotel protesting Kennedy's pro-sanctions stand. Buthelezi insisted that they go and talk to members of the crowd, and virtually frog-marched a reluctant Kennedy to the hotel entrance where he looked understandably uncomfortable as Zulu warriors waved anti-Kennedy signs and spears. Again, it was hardly the kind of photo-op his handlers had hoped for. The culminating event of the visit was a big luncheon with the South African business community which the American Chamber of Commerce had organized at the Carleton Hotel in Johannesburg. The chairman of the AmCham had asked me to introduce Kennedy. I agreed, but warned him that I would go beyond the brief niceties of a conventional introduction to sound a message of my own. I was determined not to allow Kennedy to present us as the "soft on racism" camp while he paraded as the true champion of the anti-apartheid struggle. He agreed. I also phoned Chet Crocker in Washington and got the green light from him. I wrote my introductory remarks on a yellow pad as we flew from Cape Town to Johannesburg on the air attaché ½ King Air.

My message was that for all our policy differences over the best means to achieve peaceful change away from apartheid, there was unity in our purpose: "Let everyone take note that there is no constituency for racism and apartheid in respectable American politics." I added that while we welcomed an honest debate on the best means to fight apartheid, we should remember that "indignation is not a substitute for policy and that anger and self-righteousness are often poor counselors." The audience erupted in demonstrative applause, as Kennedy sat stone-faced. "Thank you, I think," he began, but his speech fell flat and it was my introduction and not his speech which dominated the news coverage. On the next morning there was a cable from Admiral Poindexter, then the National Security Adviser, telling me that my remarks had come up in the President's morning briefing and that the President wanted to compliment me on my remarks. When Kennedy called on me at my office in Cape Town to say good-bye I presented him with a "peace pipe", in the form of a box of Cuban cigars, a comment on what I think of sanctions. He took it in good humor, though I doubt that he remembers nor his ill-starred South African visit - fondly. I think in that situation it would have been very difficult for a career ambassador to do what I could do as a one-shot political appointee.

Q: How about your embassy? How did you find working with the officers? What were they up to and what were your relations with them?

NICKEL: Well, I think that our relations were excellent throughout. I understand very well what foreign service officers are, to put it mildly, of two minds when they hear that they are going to have a political ambassador. As I said, very early on, I was a rather unusual political appointee and I think they respected the fact that as a foreign correspondent I had as many foreign assignments as any of them, including service in South Africa. In those years I had gotten to know many foreign service officers, as friends and sources, and having served as a State Department, I knew how the Department worked. And they knew that I had dealt with foreign leaders at a high level. There was almost a symbiotic relationship between foreign correspondents and foreign service officers, as I'm sure you know from your own experience. I have nothing but the highest regard for the people who worked for me. I was very fortunate that Crocker's shop, the Africa bureau, quickly got a reputation in the department as an interesting place to work. It attracted absolutely first class people. When I look at my DCMs, Walter Stadtler and Dick Barkley, I think I was very lucky, and I had a succession of absolutely fabulous political counselors. My first one was Dennis Keogh, who was, tragically, killed in Namibia when he went there on TDY to observe the ceasefire there. He was in the wrong place at the wrong time when a bomb blew up at a petrol station. He was my first political counselor. Then I had Tim Carney who later became ambassador in Haiti and Sudan in that sequence. And finally there was the superb Robert Frasure, who lost his life in Bosnia while serving as the right hand to Dick Holbrook. These men were absolutely the cream of the crop and they were terrific people and they became dear personal friends. My only problem, at the outset, was to convince my country team that I really, honestly wanted their frank opinions, precisely because I was new to the trade.

Q: Could you describe our attitude, the embassy's attitude, what it had been and when you were there, towards discrimination and contacts with the black population and all that?

NICKEL: Well obviously we encouraged contact across the spectrum of the South African population. We were very keen to develop and keep our contacts, and we succeeded. I mentioned that I concentrated on the people who held power, but this did not mean we were only seeing whites. Thus I made a point of seeing Tutu regularly. To be sure, he didn't like our policy, but that didn't keep him from inviting my wife and myself to his daughter's wedding. In our official entertaining, we made a point of keeping it interracial, so that it became a way for South Africans who might not have met otherwise, to get to know each other. Of course it would not have made sense to invite people from opposite ends of the spectrum, for the purpose was to foster dialogue, and not to cause pointless confrontations and embarrassing walk-outs. Incidentally, interracial entertaining became quite common during our years, especially in Cape Town and Johannesburg. Long before the start of formal negotiations, the principals from all sides had gotten to know each other, not only at social occasions, but in any number of conferences and workshops, both inside and outside South Africa, and that turned out to be enormously useful later when the formal negotiations began.

Q: How did you find Desmond Tutu? He was quite a name. He was what archbishop?

NICKEL: He became the archbishop of the Anglican Church, which actually, numerically, is by no means the biggest church in South Africa, and then, of course, became even more famous when he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. This made him the most effective, passionate voice of black South Africans abroad, and I think that role abroad may have been more important than his role in South Africa itself. This is not to belittle his role, because no one was more eloquent in making the world aware of the evils of apartheid and in drumming up international pressure on the regime. He was a master of the sound bite, and his sense of humor made him a darling of the foreign press. As I said, on the personal level we had a nice, joshing kind of relationship even though he certainly didn't agree with us.

Q. How about Pik Botha? What was his role?

NICKEL: Pik Botha regarded himself as a reformer. When he was ambassador to the United Nations in the seventies he said famously that he was not prepared to fight for the sake of keeping blacks out of elevators, and he certainly put himself into the camp of the verligte, which is to say the "enlightened" Afrikaners. (As opposed to "verkrampste", the up tight ones). He always made a lot of the fact that Afrikaners are, as the name implies, Africans, and that Africans have to come together for African solutions. His style often was theatrical and melodramatic, especially after a few stiff drinks, but behind his occasional bluster there was a shrewd and quick political intelligence. Though he learned the diplomatic ropes as one of the longest serving foreign ministers (1977-94), he was not a career diplomat, he was a politician. Despite his macho image and demeanor, he was intimidated by P. W. Botha, but in that he was no different from most of his ministerial colleagues. So he must have felt liberated when P.W. was followed by F.W. de Klerk. He became Minister of Energy in the first post-apartheid government of national unity under Mandela, and later went so far as to quit the National Party and join the ANC.

Q: How about Chief Buthelezi?

NICKEL: "Gatsha" was an interesting guy. He was highly intelligent, is highly intelligent, as he is still alive. He had a genuine political base mainly in rural Zululand, and he kept it under control like the traditional chief, which he was. The sociology of Zululand was changing because the more urbanized areas around Durbin became less tribal and more pro-ANC. The conflict in Natal was not between Zulus and non-Zulus, but between rural and Inkatha Zulus and pro-ANC Zulus. It was not really an ethnic conflict, but that did not make it any less bloody. There was a lot of killing going on in this province.

Q: This was not a peaceful situation was it?

NICKEL: Far from it. No, there were hundreds of people, if not more that were killed in these sectional fights. Buthelezi had actually started off in the ANC Youth League. When he got the offer from the government to become chief minister of KwaZulu, he claims, and I think it's true, he actually consulted the ANC in exile on whether he should do that or not. He got the green light from the ANC to accept that position, on the grounds that this would give him an institutional base. Later the ANC charged that this had made him a tool of the apartheid regime. What this ignores is that by steadfastly refusing to accept a phony independence for KwaZulu, the most important homeland, he undermined the legitimacy of the whole homeland scheme. Buthelezi broke with the ANC over two issues. One was the use of violence and the "armed struggle". You may remember that Mandela's last speech to the court acknowledged that he engaged in an act of violence but only because the regime had not allowed him any other means of changing things. The other issue was sanctions which Buthelezi thought would inflict hardship on blacks without leading to a political breakthrough. After that, the ANC in exile saw Buthelezi as a Quisling who had to be destroyed, politically and, probably, physically as well. Indeed there was some evidence that at one time or another they tried to knock him off. I think it was the wisdom of Nelson Mandela to recognize that you had to bring him into the tent because he commanded a substantial black constituency. To really fight him would have become a very bloody affair, much worse than the violence that did happen. So Buthelezi was brought into the government as the minister of the interior, a position that he retained until a few months ago when he resigned from the government. I think that had the exile ANC's leaders prevailed in taking on Buthelezi it could have ruined the peaceful transition.

Q: Who could you talk to about the black movement while you were in South Africa?

NICKEL: Well, thanks in part to our excellent political officers, we had lines into the ANC, and also into the United Democratic Front which was really the ANC in disguise. A lot of the people who are now in office are people who I knew quite well. Trevor Manuel, for example, the Minister of Finance, who emerged as probably one of the strongest ministers in the cabinet. A very able fellow, who was critical in imposing fiscal discipline and a market-oriented economic policy. When I first knew him he was wearing a Karl Marx T-shirt. After the great transition, when I was a private consultant, we got together again as friends, and with his help I organized the first post-apartheid institutional investment conference in Washington. Nelson Mandela himself came to give the opening address, much to the annoyance of some of the anti-apartheid activists who had me on their enemies list for opposing sanctions.

We also paid a lot of attention to the black trade unions, especially to Cyril Ramaphosa. Trained as a lawyer, he had risen to the leadership of the Mine Workers, and then of the Congress of South African Trade Unions. In the seventies, big South African business had come to recognize that they were better off dealing with a well organized black trade union movement, than having no legal representatives contract I with. Ramaphosa had earned great respect from them. I first met him at a luncheon given by one of the leading mining houses and decided that he was a man to keep an eye on. In the constitutional negotiations it was Ramaphosa who became the key man on the ANC side, and at one time he seemed to be Mandela's first choice to succeed him. But Thabo Mbeki maneuvered him aside. Today Ramaphosa is an enormously rich businessman, but there is speculation that he might yet re-enter the political arena when Thabo Mbeki's term is up.

It's very satisfying to me that every time I go back to South Africa or meet them in Washington, my black contacts, now in high positions, greet me as an old friend and let me know that they understood and appreciated what we were doing during my tenure.

Q: Was Winnie Mandela a figure when you were there?

NICKEL: Well, she was certainly a powerful and colorful figure. She is a very charismatic person. When I first arrived in 1982 she was in so-called internal exile in a small township in the Free State. Later on she was allowed to move back to Johannesburg where the embassy officers went to visit her. I met her at a number of social occasions in Johannesburg with white liberals who had Winnie Mandela over. She fills a room when she comes into the room. She also has some other qualities, which are not at all attractive. She always had a little bit of Imelda in her. She was certainly a very grasping and, shall we say, acquisitive person. Because of her charismatic and fiery personality she was, for a long time, the heroine of the ANC Youth League and with the dispossessed poor. It was only later, when her various excesses and her corrupt dealings became known that her star began to fade. Of course, Mandela divorced her, not least because of her many affairs. But she is still around. She is lucky to be out of jail because the judicial system didn't go after her the way it would had she been anybody else. It's not a glorious chapter in the story of the South African judiciary, which obviously worried that putting her in jail might have made her a martyr again.

Q: Was Nelson Mandela a figure while you were there? Were people talking?

NICKEL: He was a key figure, absolutely the key figure. Obviously, I dutifully put in my request to visit him on Robben Island and later at Pollsmoor Prison. They wouldn't allow any foreign ambassadors to talk to him. In my conversations with ministers I kept coming back to what he said to us in that interview in 196the one in which he sounded the theme of interdependence of black and white South Africans, and what that portended for a negotiated settlement. Those ministers had never met him, for Botha did not want them to engage him in political discussions. But I developed a very important relationship with the man who, in a manner of speaking, was Mandela's landlord. He was the Minister of Justice, and thus was also in charge of the prison system. "Kobie" Coetsee was a quiet, almost shy Free State lawyer, a conservative, to be sure, but endowed with a sense of probity that set him apart from others in the security apparatus. He kept me informed on what he was doing to make sure that detainees who were held without trial were treated humanely, by appointing judges to visit them, and to have detainees by examined by doctors before and after police interrogations, to make sure they were not abused. Those were positive steps which we encouraged. Naturally, I talked to him about his most celebrated prisoner, and how important it was to engage him, which, of course, required his release. Coetsee and I kept meeting quite regularly, and one day he let me know that he had obtained permission from P.W. Botha to visit Mandela. He came back vastly impressed by Mandela, his commanding dignity and statesman-like demeanor. And so he became the most important advocate for Mandela's release. Mandela gives great credit to Coetsee in his memoir, and selected him to chair the Senate. The week I was to leave, Coetsee called me and asked me to save my last luncheon in Pretoria for him. So we lunched in the dimly lit formal dining room of the Burgers Park Hotel, pretty much the only guests. Coetsee explained that he wanted me to know how much he had appreciated the dialogue we had developed, from issues like prisoner rights, to the importance of a justiciable bill of rights (which initially he opposed, on the grounds that it would conflict with the sovereignty of parliament, but eventually agreed should be part of a new constitution), and also on the matter of Nelson Mandela. I was very moved by this tribute. When he died two years ago, I wrote his widow, who replied with a gracious letter in which she recalled her husband talking warmly about our relationship. It meant a lot to me.

Q: What about de Klerk? Was he a figure while you were there?

NICKEL: Oh yes. When I first came he was minister of interior affairs and I remember dealing with him almost immediately after my arrival. As minister of the interior he was in charge of travel documents for South Africans. The government was loath to let oppositional, especially oppositional black figures travel. Desmond Tutu had been invited to address an Episcopal conference in New Orleans at which Vice President Bush was supposed to be a speaker too. Tutu had applied for his travel documents and had not received them. It was Friday and he was supposed to travel on Monday. I got a cable saying, do everything you can. So I got hold of de Klerk and he agreed to see me at his office on Sunday. Keep in mind that de Klerk was not only a member of the Dutch Reformed Church, but belonged to an especially strict branch, the Doppers, who are very strict about not conducting business on the Day of the Lord. Unlike P. W. Botha with his theatrical style, I found de Klerk to be very lawyer-like and we got down to business. Tutu got his travel documents, and henceforth became the most effective anti-apartheid voice abroad. Similarly, I was able to get the first travel permit for Nthato Motlana, a prominent Soweto community leader and long-time doctor to Mandela, whom we had invited to the U.S. on an International Visitor grant. At that time de Klerk was seen as a conservative. He was the part chairman for the most crucial provincial base of the National Party, the Transvaal, and he was said to be wary of the kind of split that eventually took place over the tri-cameral constitution, when the Conservatives split from the party. But de Klerk was a realist who could look at the situation with lawyer-like detachment. So when he was chosen to succeed P.W. Botha, he decided that when you have to shoot the rapids you can't stop and turn around. You have to go forward. He showed a lot of courage, and fully deserved to share the Nobel Peace prize with Mandela.

Q: You were mentioning travel documents. Were we able to have a significant visitors program for both whites and blacks? It's probably the greatest tool we have.

NICKEL: A wonderful tool. I couldn't agree with you more and we used it to the hilt. We used it for blacks, black leaders, educators, community leaders, etc. and also for whites. One mustn't always preach to the choir. I had a particular interest in sending white judges, even some of the more conservative ones. They came back very impressed with the American judicial system. On many of these people, the visit to the U.S. made a huge impact.

Q: Was there any problem in getting South African blacks to the United States?

NICKEL: No, once we had set the precedent with Motlana, I can't recall a single case where black South Africans who had been selected for scholarships or IV grants were denied their travel documents.

Q: How did you find the media in South Africa?

NICKEL: The English language press was, broadly speaking, liberal and in opposition to the National Party government. It had the largest circulation and also the most multiracial readership. Circulation of the Sowetan, white-owned but written and edited by blacks, was growing quickly. The Afrikaans press was going through the same process of agonizing reappraisal that the rest of Afrikanerdom was involved in. For example, Die Burger, which is published in Cape Town, which used to be the most conservative voice of the National Party, became much more independent, often urging P.W. Botha to lead more boldly and step up the pace of change. The press labored under many reporting restrictions, but on the whole enjoyed freedom to comment. In 1977-78, it was the English language press exposed the so-called Muldergate scandal, a government slush fund to influence press coverage abroad and at home, which rocked the government of the day. Parliamentary privilege allowed liberal members, notably the wonderful Helen Suzman, to expose the government's dirty linen, as it were, and that in turn allowed the press to report about it. Keep in mind that South Africa in many aspects was a democracy for whites. Radio and television the South African Broadcasting Corporation was in fact government-controlled, though supposedly it was autonomous. But even within the SABC, some editors, anchors and reporters were more independent than others, frequently drawing P.W.'s ire.

There's no doubt that most South African journalists, some of whom I knew from my tour as TIME correspondent, saw me as a professional colleague and that made it a lot easier for me to talk to them, and for them to talk to me.

Q. How about Helen Suzman, and Nadine Gordimer. Did you have any relation with them?

NICKEL: Of course. Helen Suzman to this day is probably one of my very closest personal friends. I spent a good deal of time with her in December. She remains as feisty and gutsy as ever, quite critical of Thabo Mbeki. As for Nadine, the two are actually related by marriage. Both were uncompromising in their opposition to apartheid. But Helen is an old-fashioned liberal, which is to say that today she is regarded as conservative by some. She insists that it isn't she who has changed, a feeling I share. Nadine, on the other hand, considers herself a radical and became a full-fledged ANC supporter.

Q: Were there within the Afrikaner communities any particular places where you found tremendous opposition, as well as interest in what we are pushing?

NICKEL: As a general proposition, people are more inclined to take advice from those who don't treat them like enemies. I wouldn't say treat them like friends because that would be overstating it. Of course, there were arch-conservative types, like the Conservative Party leader Andries Treurnicht, who clearly were not in agreement with us. But, in fairness, they were usually courteous in listening to what you had to say. They obviously didn't agree with me but they were never really particularly hostile either. By contrast, "verligte" Afrikaners saw in me an ally in pushing the government to pick up the pace of change, and they seemed to be encouraged that the U.S. ambassador was with them in that endeavor.

Q: Where did the Afrikaner churches fit in?

NICKEL: By way of providing moral legitimacy to apartheid, if that's possible, the Dutch Reform Church, had for a long time been critically important. By the same token, the Dutch Reformed Church de-legitimized apartheid when it moved away from their position that apartheid was biblically ordained and predetermined, then saying there is no biblical foundation for apartheid and then going yet one step further, and actually declaring apartheid a sin. Thus it came a long, long way, and it made a big difference. After all, Afrikaners like to think of themselves as people of probity, and they'd like to believe that they were doing the Lord's work. Thus, the change in the position of the church was an absolutely vital component in this whole process of change.

Q: Did you have any dialogue with church leaders?

NICKEL: Oh yes. There were some that were very far ahead. Beyers Naude, who was a Dutch Reformed minister, was a leading opponent of apartheid who was under a banning order, which meant he was under house arrest in Johannesburg. He was one of the first people I called on.

Q: What about the Dutch Reformed Church and the Dutch? What was the connection there and were they coming in and saying you're giving us a bad name?

NICKEL: The relationship with the Dutch generally was somewhat problematic. I think that the Dutch were seen by many Afrikaners as being holier than thou hypocrites who were lecturing them and they didn't like to be lectured to all that much. The Catholic Church obviously also was very much engaged and against apartheid, but then it was not a terribly strong church in South Africa.

Q: What about other embassies? Did you find that the United States was carrying most of the water for the movement?

NICKEL: I think we were the main movers and shakers on the diplomatic scene. But we were working very, very closely, hand in glove and with almost total compatibility, with the Brits. They had excellent ambassadors and we enjoyed our "special relationship."

Q: Was there a strong, almost unified embassy movement, I'm talking about embassies going together and making joint representation?

NICKEL: Very occasionally. Not very often. But with the exception, with the possible exception of the Argentineans, who then had a military government and were represented in South Africa by a notorious admiral, we were pretty much on the same page. We attended briefings together and asked critical questions. There were some issues on which we did not agree, such as sanctions, but on the whole our relations were cooperative and cordial. Of course, since many countries did not have embassies, the diplomatic corps in those days was quite small.

Q: How much contact did your attaches have with the South African military? What was happening there?

NICKEL: Let me say to begin with that in most cases it worked out perfectly well. There was one instance when the senior attaché rather fell in love with his colleagues in the South African Air Force, which actually was a pretty impressive Air Force which did well against Cuban pilots in Angola. As a fighter pilot himself, he felt that bond with his South African counterparts. I had to send him back to Washington because he had strayed off the reservation as it were. I don't want to go into chapter and verse on this, but he was trying to send recommendations, through his own channels, to the Pentagon which certainly were not part of our policy.

Q: Looking at the military, was there ever a chance that they might stage a coup? Was that not in the cards?

NICKEL: It was not that kind of an army. The real problem were the people who were referred to as the securocrats. Under P. W. Botha the security services were given very free reign, and they did all kinds of nasty things, with more or less credible deniability as far as the political leadership was concerned. I think it went on with a nod and wink from P. W. Botha. I will give one example, and one could cite many more. After we helped to broker the Nkomati Accord of 1984 between Mozambique and South Africa which was supposed to end South African intervention in the Mozambique civil war between the Frelimo government of Samora Machel and Renamo, it was South African military intelligence which continued covert support for its Renamo clients. Renamo initially was the creation of Rhodesian intelligence, and after Rhodesia became Zimbabwe, it had been taken over by the South Africans. But this was not a coup, for it could not have taken place with that wink and nod from P.W. Botha. When we negotiated on Namibia and Angola we always made a point of insisting that the military intelligence people be there, too, because they were a factor.

Q: Did the issue of nuclear proliferation, you know one always thinks about the great flash, whether it was Israeli or joint Israeli, South African? Was that during your time?

NICKEL: Actually the flash had taken place before the time I came. It was my own judgment, or instinct, that the South Africans had a nuclear device. They were developing missiles and warheads, and it was also pretty clear that they were working very closely with the Israelis. It is quite possible that the flash was in fact an Israeli test. Of course, the South Africans, under de Klerk, became the first government to give up and dismantle their nuclear arsenal, under U.N. inspection.

Q: If the South Africans had missiles sitting down there all they had to do was look at the map what am I going to do.

NICKEL: Right, what do you do with the damn things in Africa?

Q: The next major industrial area was Milan. That's a long ways away. The colored and the Asians, were they a factor?

NICKEL: Yes. The Asians were about one million or so mainly concentrated in Natal where they dominated commerce trade. The Asians kept, on a whole, pretty low political profile.

Q: Excuse me, are we talking about coloreds or Asians, who is who?

NICKEL: Asians are mainly Indians, and coloreds are really the offspring of mixed unions between whites, the original inhabitants of the Cape, once known as Hottentots but now known as Khoi, Malaysians, and Bantu Africans. The Asians originally had been brought to the Cape colony by the Dutch East India Company and, later, the British, as indentured servants. The one thing that the Asians and coloreds have in common is that while they both suffered under apartheid, they were not enthusiastic about coming under the rule of the African majority, either. So, in the first free elections the majority of "colored" and Asian voters did not support the ANC. In the Cape, they voted for the National Party, even though that was the party that had them removed from the common voter roll in 1948. The Indians were heavily concentrated in Natal, where they controlled much of retail commerce. They did that even though they were not supposed to own shops in "white" Durban, by using white front men. They of course were also disenfranchised until that famous tri-cameral constitution came along.

Of course, despite the ambivalent feelings of these two communities, there were and are prominent Coloreds and Asians who supported the ANC and are now represented in the government. There is, in fact, a disproportionately high number of Asians in high government positions, reflecting their educational and professional qualifications. The first post-apartheid ambassador in Washington, Franklin Sonn, was a prominent colored educator. He had ambitions to become the leader of the ANC in the Cape province, but being colored was not helpful with the ANC. Trevor Manuel, the able finance minister, also is a Cape colored, but that practically eliminates him as a candidate for Thabo Mbeki's succession.

Q: How did you feel about how things were going and how you felt the role of the United States, what we've done right and what we've done wrong up to that point? We're talking about 1986.

NICKEL: Well, I left in 1986 convinced that there was going to be a negotiated settlement. It was going to be a rocky road, as indeed it turned out to be, and that there would be many crises along the way. But I felt that in the end there would be a negotiated settlement. I think that South Africans of all groups are the ones who really deserve the credit. They are the ones who pulled off the miracle. But I feel good about the role we played in encouraging that process. Especially on the white side, we encouraged them to do what no other minority in these circumstances has done, namely to relinquish power once and for all before they were forced to do so in a tragic, destructive showdown. The soft landing which was our objective, was achieved. I think that Chet Crocker deserves a lot of credit for his efforts to make peace between South Africa and its neighbors, even though in the end, it was the dramatic change in the geopolitical situation resulting from the Soviet collapse which transformed the regional scene as well. I do think that the policy of constructive engagement is now seen by most South Africans as having played a benign role in making the soft landing possible. That was good for them, and also good for us, and I feel good and proud that I was able to play a small part in that drama.

End of interview