

Title: Winking at Apartheid

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President Reagan thinks that apartheid is repugnant, in which belief he is joined by most civilized people. President Reagan also thinks that apartheid is disappearing, that segregation has ended in South Africa under a "reformist" regime reacting to a civil rights movement resembling that of the American 60's. In this belief he is joined by no one who cares about life and liberty and the South African abyss.

If Mr. Reagan believes what he says, he hasn't yet grasped the essence of apartheid. If he does not, the explanation is more troubling - that he assumes Americans don't care if their President misrepresents as "substantial changes" a recent chain of negative events in South Africa.

The issue is not how America can best use its limited influence with the whites who subjugate a huge black majority. The issue at the moment is simpler: Why does Mr. Reagan volunteer such a richly cosmetic portrait of racism when the act of doing so aligns him with the oppressors?

The President's aides have already lamely corrected the most obvious misstatement, made in a radio interview. It isn't true, as he said, that segregation in hotels and restaurants has "all been eliminated." The White House says he meant "not totally," and even that's an overstatement. Perhaps a few dozen hotels and restaurants in large cities have been desegregated.

Mr. Reagan claims that blacks "can buy property in heretofore white areas." Some blacks can buy leasehold rights for land in black townships, but only in Soweto has this policy taken effect; and nonwhites may not buy or rent property outside their designated "group areas." Blacks can indeed join trade unions, as Mr. Reagan said, but their right to strike and bargain collectively is restricted. It is true that the Pretoria regime has ended its ban on racially mixed marriages. But nonwhite spouses cannot live in areas designated as white, or send their children to white schools.

And how meager is even this list. Look at what is missing: Voting rights are denied to blacks. The school system remains grotesquely unequal. Nonwhite dissent is systematically suppressed; for weeks now, the Government has used emergency powers to rout demonstrators and detain their leaders.

Neither did Mr. Reagan make any reference to President P.W. Botha's failure to deliver the reforms that Washington believed he would announce two weeks ago. This silence contrasts with the views of the national security adviser, Robert McFarlane. He says that the failure to pursue reform is bringing South Africa to the abyss of massive violence.

Even Presidents can be glib, roseate or mistaken - but rarely without effect. What hurts most about the President's ramble is that it will be taken seriously by South Africans of all races as they try to fathom where America stands. Mr. Botha and apartheid's victims may both read his woolly words to mean, wrongly, that most Americans are willing to speak piously but wink at monumental racial injustice.

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