

The US Responds to Apartheid: POLAROID

*What is the responsibility of corporations to apartheid?
What is the responsibility of individual Americans?*

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I. Prologue & context: US-South African relations

Document 1: Robert F. Kennedy speaking at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, June 6, 1966:

In 1966, Robert Kennedy was invited to South Africa at a time of deep despair there, because it seemed that the movement for freedom had been crushed and all its leaders imprisoned. It was also a time when some in the US, including Martin Luther King, recognized a disturbing similarity between the US struggle for Black equality and the South African struggle, also against racism.

Kennedy began his talk this way:

WE NEED TO INCLUDE A PHOTO HERE OF HIM SPEAKING AT UCT

I came here because of my deep interest and affection for a land settled by the Dutch in the mid-seventeenth century, then taken over by the British, and at last independent; a land in which the native inhabitants were at first subdued, but relations with whom remain a problem to this day; a land which defined itself on a hostile frontier; a land which has tamed rich natural resources through the energetic application of modern technology; a land which once imported slaves, and now must struggle to wipe out the last traces of that former bondage---

I refer, of course, to the United States of America.²

¹ *Facing History and Ourselves* will publish a shorter version of this piece in the forthcoming book about apartheid, written in partnership with Boston University and Facing History and Ourselves.

² The full text of the speech can be found RFK in the Land of Apartheid website (The site was produced in support of the Film "A Tiny Ripple of Hope"). The site also provides background to the speech:

Connection Questions:

- Why do you think Kennedy deliberately held back the fact that he was talking about the United States and not South Africa?
- What were the parallels that he cited between the US and South Africa at that time?
- What do you see were the biggest differences between the two countries then?

2. Introduction

The connections between the two countries went beyond their similar histories to encompass their significant economic ties. In the 1970's and 80's the ethics of such ties were widely challenged.

By 1977, 312 American companies were doing a booming business in South Africa, worth over \$1.7 billion.³ They made an average profit of 12%, over double the rate of companies operating in the US.⁴ This high rate was in part the result of South Africa's cheap Black labor. Average family income for Whites that year was just under \$10,000 while Africans earned \$1,000.⁵ Many of the largest American corporations were there: General Motors, Ford, Coca-Cola, Mobil, General Electric, Firestone, IBM, and others. US loans made to South Africa equaled over \$3 billion.⁶

That apartheid was a crime against humanity--few in the US had any doubts. What was in question was what steps Americans should take to support South African efforts to end apartheid. The US campaign focused on ending US economic ties with South Africa—what is called divestment. This campaign turned out to be critical to South Africa's achievement of freedom.

One South African explained the importance of this outside support by referring to the lion in the Zulu song “*Wimomeh*” (“The Lion Sleeps Tonight”). The lion is the lion of freedom who is about to awake. It needs 4 legs in order to run for freedom: the 1st leg represents Black trade unions which went on strike for equality; the 2nd leg represented community and students organizations, which demanded an end to tyranny; the 3rd leg represented the freedom fighters. The final leg represented people in the US and around the world who actively supported the liberation struggle. Any lion can hobble on 3 legs, but with 4 legs, the lion can make the run for freedom.

<http://www.rfksafilm.org/html/back.php#a>. The PBS film *RFK in the Land of Apartheid* shows him giving this speech. The film may be borrowed from BU's African Studies Center.

³ worth \$6.6 billion in 2013 dollars.

⁴ Africa Fund, “South African Fact Sheet,” 1977, (NY: American Committee on Africa).

⁵ This amount was below what families needed to provide for their basic needs for housing, food and transportation. Ibid.

⁶ worth \$11.6 billion in 2013 dollars.

3. Choosing to Participate: *What would be an ethical role for US corporations working under apartheid?*

This 4-minute clip offers the essential introduction to the rest of this section, which focuses on the US campaign to end apartheid. It comes from the film “*Have You Heard from Johannesburg?*”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5yk8SD3LJNU>

Connection questions after watching the film:

- What are the several reasons Hunter gave for raising the issue of Polaroid’s presence in South Africa?
- What several steps did Hunter and Williams take after they learned that Polaroid was in South Africa?
- For background, please read the chapter from *Kaffir Boy* on the passbook.
- Why did the government want Blacks (and only Blacks) to carry these passes?
- What was the effect of passes on Black people’s lives?
- What do you think Hunter meant when she said, “we believed that no one was free unless everyone was free”?
- Would you agree? Can you be free when others are not? (Yes/No/Partly) and Why?

Should Polaroid stay in or leave South Africa? This question wasn’t just for Polaroid to answer, but soon became the question that all the US corporations would have to answer.

Who Is Being Ethical? Both the Corporations and the Activists Present Their Case

What was in question was *how* to make a difference. Both Polaroid executives and people who challenged Polaroid’s business in South Africa agreed on one thing: that what the company did in South Africa would have an impact on apartheid. What they disagreed profoundly about was whether Polaroid’s presence in South Africa was positive or negative.

At Polaroid, Hunter and Williams formed an organization, which spread out into the surrounding communities: the Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement. Their goal: to force Polaroid out of South Africa. But making divestment happen was enormously difficult, because it was asking a healthy large corporation to give up both a market and profit.

Edwin Land, head of Polaroid, understood the stakes his company faced: “I know one thing, if we at this moment cut off all our business in South Africa, then the newspapers will be full of the vast Polaroid Revolutionary Movement . . . The world is watching us right now. If Polaroid can’t make the grade, none of us can.” *Business Week* agreed with Land, warning in early 1971, “there could be repercussions if such anti-apartheid protest spreads.” The company resolved to stay, arguing that it could combat apartheid from within the country.

In the documents below, from late 1970 and early 1971, each side presented its case to the public.

The Polaroid Corporation chose to make its position widely known through full-page ads taken out in ten major US newspapers, titled “An Experiment in South Africa.” Excerpted here are the key arguments:

Recently a group has begun to demand that American business stop selling in South Africa. They say that by its presence it is supporting the government of the country and its policies of racial separation and subjugation of the Blacks.

We did not respond to the demands [of this group]. But we did react to the question: is it right or wrong to do business in South Africa?

The committee of Polaroid employees who undertook this study included fourteen members—both black and white—from all over the company. The first conclusion was arrived at quickly and unanimously. We abhor apartheid.

They addressed themselves to a single question. What should Polaroid do in South Africa? We rejected the suggestion that we ignore the whole question and maintain the status quo.

It was decided to send four of the committee members to South Africa. Since this group was to include two black and two white members, it was widely assumed they would not be granted visas. They were.

The group returned with a unanimous recommendation.

For the time being we will continue our business relationships there (except for sales to the South African government, which our distributor is discontinuing), but on a new basis which Blacks there with whom we talked see as supportive to their hopes and plans for the future.

First we will improve dramatically the salaries and other benefits of their non-white employees. Our business associates will initiate a well-defined program to train non-white employees for important jobs. We believe education for the Blacks, in combination with opportunities now being afforded by the expanding economy, is a key to change in South Africa. We will commit a portion of our profits earned there to encourage black education.

Why have we undertaken this program? To satisfy a revolutionary group? No. South Africa alone articulates a policy exactly contrary to everything we feel our company stands for. We cannot participate passively in such a political system. Nor can we ignore it. That is why we have undertaken this experimental program.

The Polaroid Revolutionary Workers stated their position in a number of flyers as well as in a 30 pp. booklet. The excerpt below comes from their booklet.

Brothers and Sisters:

The Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement is a group of black workers in Cambridge, Massachusetts, who have come together to act and protest against the sale of Polaroid products in South Africa. We see the South African apartheid system as the symbol of the many 'inhumanities' in the United States. We cannot begin to deal with racism in Polaroid or in the U.S. until Polaroid and the U.S. cease to uphold and support apartheid. Black people in South Africa are enslaved and dehumanized in order to insure the security of apartheid and the capitalists'

margin of profit. The United States and its corporate society have made explicit its intentions of profits at any human expense. We demand that we no longer be used as tools to enslave our brothers and to insure corporate profits. On October 8, the Movement presented Polaroid Corp. with the following demands:

- 1. that Polaroid announce a policy of complete disengagement from South Africa. We believe that all American companies doing business there reinforce that racist system.*
- 2. that Polaroid announce its position on apartheid publically, in the US and South Africa.*
- 3. that Polaroid contribute profits earned in South Africa to the recognized African liberation movements.*

Polaroid has refused to meet with the PRWM or recognize the demands. On October 27th, the PRWM called for a world-wide boycott of Polaroid.

By demanding complete disengagement, the workers at Polaroid are acting in solidarity with calls by African liberation movements and the conclusions reached by countless United Nations committees who have studied South African racism. They have concluded that only economic withdrawal can begin to erode, divide, and weaken South Africa's white front of oppression. During World War II trading with the enemy--the Nazis and Fascists--was considered a crime. Apartheid is an enemy for decent people all over the world. Collusion with South African fascists is no more justifiable than collusion with the Nazis was.

Discussion Questions after reading the 2 documents:

- A.** Discussion questions on the company's full-page ad:
 - a. What changes did Polaroid make in South Africa?
 - * in its distributor's sales to the government?
 - * in its distributor's policies toward Black employees?
 - * in a new charitable contribution
 - b. What result/s did the company expect to achieve in opposing apartheid?
 - c. What decision-making process did the company use to arrive at its decision on doing business in South Africa?
 - d. Think more deeply: what considerations probably propelled Polaroid to take out full-page ads in 10 major American newspapers?
 - e. Who do you think their audience was? What did the company hope for from its audience? (Think back to Edwin Land's statement.)
- B.** Discussion questions on the PRWM's document (Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement):
 - a. What arguments did the PRWM offer to support their position that the company should pull out of South Africa?
 - b. What did they say would be the impact if American businesses left South Africa?
 - c. The PRWM chose to ask for more than withdrawal from South Africa: What did they ask for and why? Do you agree? Why/why not?

C. Comparing the 2 documents:

- a. How do you think the PRWM would respond to the company's position?
- b. How do you think the company would respond to the PRWM position?
- c. Which position do you find more persuasive and why? (If appropriate, also consider whether you need additional information to help you decide on your own position and what that information would be.)

An interesting similarity between the Polaroid Corporation and the Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement is that they both believed it is the right of the oppressed to decide what they need. Both sides saw the role of Americans to be “good allies”—respectful, ready for dialogue, but at heart willing to take leadership from South Africans themselves. The difference is that Polaroid went to South Africa and asked Blacks (and Whites) there what the company should do, while the PRWM chose to listen to the South African liberation movement. The liberation movement advocated closing foreign businesses. Those living inside South Africa knew that such a statement put them at risk of death. South African law specified that supporting economic sanctions was a “terroristic activity.”⁷ Steve Biko, Black Consciousness leader, stated “If Washington is really interested in contributing to the development of a just society in South Africa, it would discourage investment in South Africa. We Blacks are perfectly willing to suffer the consequences! We are quite accustomed to suffering.”⁸

Can Polaroid's New Policy in South Africa Make a Difference?

Two years after its ads, Polaroid released its report on the effectiveness of its new South Africa policy. Read the *New York Times* report from *October 31, 1973*, then discuss the questions below:

[Polaroid Focus Is on Jobs For South African Blacks; Other Assistance Given](#)
[Polaroid and Others Set Focus On Jobs for South Africa Blacks](#)

Discussion Questions:

- What changes occurred?
- What changes did not occur? Why?
- Do you believe that Polaroid succeeded in the mission they laid out in their 1971 ad of “opposing the apartheid system”? Or, were Hunter, Williams and their supporters across the country right in believing that, by staying in South Africa, Polaroid was in fact propping up apartheid?

The Endgame for Polaroid:

The Polaroid divestment movement continued to organize, despite the difficulties. Several months after the PRWM campaign began, Polaroid fired Hunter. Williams had

⁷ In 1975, nine South African students were indicted for advocating divestment under the Terrorism Act.

⁸ in a 1976 interview with Bernard Zylstra, (Canadian Forum December-January 1977-78.)

already resigned in protest over corporate policy. Hunter, Williams, and others who joined with them, worked hard to make their campaign succeed. They got letters published in newspapers; they spoke at churches, schools and public places; they held protests at Polaroid's headquarters—even burning a Polaroid camera—no mean trick when the camera consisted mostly of plastic. But to change a big, respected company that has publicly staked out a position is close to impossible.

The article below describes a small demonstration and the camera burning at Polaroid's headquarters:

<http://www.thecrimson.com/article/1971/3/23/100-demonstrate-against-polaroid-pover-100/>

Meanwhile, the Polaroid Corporation had one big vulnerable chink in the armor of its policy: in its 1971 ad, it had made one clear promise to the public and one demand of its South African distributor: that Polaroid would never again sell to the South African government. In 1977 the evidence came out: Polaroid was still selling to the government. The surprising revelation came from the cooperation between the US anti-apartheid network and the South African liberation movement.

Indrus Naidoo, a South African Indian had served 10 years in prison for sabotage against apartheid. On leaving prison, he returned to his old position, working for Polaroid's South African distributor. In 1975, he discovered that the company was secretly selling Polaroid equipment to the South African government, including to its military: to keep it secret, the company dropped the goods off in unmarked boxes at a local drugstore for government vans to pick up.

As a member of the liberation movement, Naidoo understood the enormous significance of this fact. He copied one of the invoices made out to the government and gave it to a visiting member of a trusted American anti-apartheid organization. But it would be dangerous to Naidoo if the document became public, so the American Committee on Africa sat on the incriminating document and waited. Two years later, Naidoo was fired from his job; he went into exile and no longer feared government retribution. The American Committee on Africa was now free to turn the incriminating invoice over to the *Boston Globe*. Polaroid followed up with an investigation, found that their distributor had lied to them--perhaps because it was illegal to refuse to sell to the government.

Polaroid publicly announced it was pulling out of South Africa, making it the first corporate withdrawal from apartheid. So significant was this achievement that it was front-page news, in both in South Africa and the US.

Discussion Questions:

1. If Naidoo had stayed in South Africa when the story broke, what might have happened to him and why?
2. Why did South African newspapers consider this story important enough for the front page?
3. Why did American newspapers considered this story front-page news?

The Impact of the US Anti-Apartheid Movement

From the one hundred who protested in 1971 at Polaroid headquarters, the movement grew to include tens of thousands, organizing against all corporate and government ties with apartheid.

3-4 photos go here, showing growing protest, which will help students connect w/ this history. a small protest, then a larger one, then a huge one in NYC, each one dated a bit later. I'd like to use the photos on pp. 89, 124, NS 152, in the book No Easy Victories. I know the publisher and the authors, so getting permission should be easy.

The movement essentially made the same demands that the Polaroid workers movement had: that all US companies pull entirely out of South Africa, an act called divestment. Corporate boards responded very similarly to how Polaroid had responded: firmly stating that staying in South Africa would be the ethical thing to do.

What happened was that apartheid had become a dirty household word. While the world watched on television, South Africans rose up, striking, organizing consumer boycotts, carrying out sabotage, risking their lives and sometimes dying—for freedom and equality. Americans were spurred into action. Hundreds of thousands of students marched and picketed, created teaching forums, with hundreds arrested. Union and religious leaders also became involved. In 1986, after years of pressure, Congress responded. They overrode President Reagan's veto to pass the US Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act. Banks stopped making loans to South Africa. Other corporations withdrew from the country. Capital—money to be used for investment in new ventures in South Africa—pulled out or dried up.

By the 1980's the lion of *Wimowee* was walking strongly on all four of its legs: unions + people's resistance + armed resistance + the international solidarity movement. In 1994, apartheid finally fell. That year, Nelson Mandela, 27 years a political prisoner, became the first president of a free South Africa. The world rejoiced. The tens of thousands of Americans who had signed petitions, marched, protested, and organized were jubilant. They had connected with and helped change a distant part of the world for the better.

Bobby Kennedy concluded his speech in Cape Town, with which this section began, with these powerful, true words of confidence in the strength of human beings:

"It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped. Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance."

When South Africa finally was free, its leaders spoke of the role the international anti-apartheid movements played in helping to end race rule. Desmond Tutu, archbishop of Cape Town and Nobel Peace Prize recipient, simply stated:

In South Africa, we could not have achieved our freedom and just peace without the help of people around the world, who through the use of non-violent means, such as boycotts and divestment, encouraged their governments and other corporate actors to reverse decades-long support for the Apartheid regime.

4. Choosing to Participate: *What would be an ethical response of individual Americans to apartheid?*

While Polaroid's work in South Africa raises the question of what an ethical company should do, the Polaroid case goes further, also raising the question of how to be an ethical individual. Hunter and Williams made hard, bold choices as individuals. They both lost their jobs for doing what they believed was right. (Because of the controversy around Polaroid, the firing of Hunter was even covered by the *New York Times*.)⁹ No other corporation would likely hire them. They both lived without work for a while, then found part-time and later full-time employment. Hunter became a high school math teacher in Cambridge MA. All along, they continued to organize to force Polaroid out of South Africa.

In the interview here, Hunter talks about sources of her sense of justice and some of its sources.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BUBLkiV17hg>

In the US, few took stands as bold or as risky as Hunter and Williams. Other helpful stands were possible: people work for justice in many ways. Yet others chose to be bystanders and did not participate when they saw this injustice.

Questions for discussion:

1. What are some of the origins of Hunter's social activism?
2. Think and write about some sources of your own social activism. What values do you hold most dear? What are the sources of your values?
3. Think of an occasion when you stood up for someone or something and why you did. (*It might be standing up for a sibling or for a friend who is being mocked or mistreated. It might be bigger, such as standing up for a particular fairer policy in school or in the world.*)
4. What risks did you face?
5. Why did you keep standing up in spite of these risks?
6. What is unacceptable to you—where you cannot stand by and watch?

Closing

Watch/listen to the wonderful reggae song by Gil Scott-Heron

"Have You Heard from Johannesburg?" "Appropriately for this unit, he is playing at a huge rock concert, "Artists against Apartheid," held in London in 1988. 600 million people around the world watched, though none in South Africa was able to watch.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0SPj8PRf9Z>

⁹ *NYT* 2/25/71

