

# SELLING APARTHEID

## South Africa's Global Propaganda War

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# Apartheid Is Good for Blacks

*‘We shall steadfastly refuse to allow any county, power or organization to determine our destinies—that being a right we reserve to ourselves as a free and independent nation.’*

*– D.F. Malan, 4 June 1948*

When the National Party came to power in May 1948, it paid only modest attention to promoting its image to the outside world. The party, under the leadership of Daniel François Malan, a former newspaper editor and Dutch Reformed Church cleric, had won the election by playing to white dissatisfaction with domestic and economic problems in South Africa after World War II.

A strong turn-out from the rural Afrikaner population had led Malan and his supporters to a victory that few South Africans—and not even some in the party—had predicted. After years in opposition, the National Party was ready to set about transforming the country into a bastion of white dominance, under the banner of Afrikaner nationalism, on the basis of the policy of apartheid. Prior to 1948, South Africa had long pursued a system of racial segregation, but under apartheid this was to be tightened, formalised and extended in unimaginable ways.

The Malan government didn’t completely ignore the need to have an overseas propaganda effort. It reorganised its Information Office—not

to be confused with the Department of Information, which was created in 1962—to concentrate on expanding its messaging abroad. The Office produced booklets and other promotion materials about South Africa and its new government.

One of the first changes made at the Information Office was transferring its overseas information officers, who were formerly under the Department of External Affairs, to the State Information Office, which was under the direction of the Department of the Interior. The director of the Information Office was then given access to the heads of all government departments and was instructed to come up with an overall media plan to coordinate the government's public relations efforts abroad. The budget for this office and its international propaganda activities was about \$146,000 (about \$1.4 million or R14.8 million today). A large part of this modest sum was used for efforts aimed at the US and the UK.

Malan considered the US a critical ally and sought to win its backing by working to convince the American government that black rule in Africa would amount to a takeover of the continent by communism, and that white rule was the only way to ensure that that didn't happen. In order to protect South Africa against growing calls for sanctions by an increasingly hostile United Nations, Malan sought America's friendship by participating in the Korean War in 1950. South Africa provided a squadron of pilots to help in the war effort.

Keeping the UK on its side was also a key focus of the Malan government. He courted British protection on the United Nations Security Council by keeping South Africa in the British Commonwealth, even though there was considerable opposition in his party to remaining part of this successor to the British Empire.

In the late 1940s there was actually little need for a sophisticated propaganda apparatus aimed at the great powers. Much of Africa and Asia was still colonised by European powers, whose colonial governments were often not very different from South Africa in terms

of racial policies. Even the US, which had emerged as a superpower after World War II, was still a long way from being racially integrated. President Harry S. Truman had appointed the first federal black judge, William H. Hastie Jr, and a few months after the National Party's victory he had signed an executive order which abolished segregation in the US military. Still, most blacks in the US, particularly in its southern region, lived in conditions similar to their counterparts in South Africa. Blacks were barred from certain neighbourhoods; and 'Colored' and 'White' signs announced segregated drinking fountains and bathrooms.

Yet even the Truman administration was somewhat concerned about the harshness of the apartheid laws and the racial policies of the new South African government, for the US was trying to convince the world of its own progress in moving toward an integrated society. But most of Truman's worries about South Africa centred on a possible loss of access to strategic minerals, such as uranium, which were critical to powering the growing nuclear arsenal of the US military and which South Africa could provide. The Truman administration also worried that the Malan government might be distracted by its preoccupation with its racial policies and pay less attention to the larger issue of stopping communist expansion in Africa.

Despite these concerns, many in the Truman administration expressed sympathy for the new South African government and its decision to rigidly separate the country's population by race. Robert McGregor, an American diplomat in Durban, wrote to his seniors in Washington that it was 'quite possible, even likely that we would act in the same manner if we endeavoured to govern as a white race among a black population five times as numerous'.

Dean Acheson, the American secretary of state, who was sensitive to the racial situation in the US and its impact on American foreign policy—even writing that racism in the US 'jeopardizes the effective maintenance of our moral leadership of the free and democratic nations of the world'—nevertheless saw the apartheid government as a critical



ally against Soviet expansion. Acheson believed that communists dominated black liberation movements like the ANC, which received their orders from Moscow. Truman himself put aside his feeling about apartheid, saying that South Africa and other African countries could not be allowed to fall into the hands of the Soviet Union because ‘We would lose the source of our most vital materials including uranium which is the basis of our atomic power’.

Much to their surprise and delight, it was a black American whose support for apartheid provided a major public relations coup for the South African government in the early 1950s. Max Yergan hardly seemed like the man who would serve as a spokesman for the apartheid government or defend its policy of racial segregation. Himself barely a generation removed from slavery, he graduated from college—a rare feat for a black American in the 1910s—and joined the Young Men’s Christian Association, being posted to India as a missionary. Following work in Britain’s East African colonies, Yergan applied for a post in South Africa. After protracted talks among officials at the YMCA and numerous conversations between the organisation and the South African government, Yergan was approved. He arrived in Cape Town in January 1922 and then settled in Alice in the Eastern Cape, home of Fort Hare Native College, now Fort Hare University, set up to provide higher education to black South Africans. A good number of black South African leaders attended the university, including Nelson Mandela. The Yergans’ house and Max’s office were on the campus of Fort Hare.

For the next 14 years, Yergan would travel, by foot, horse and car, throughout the Eastern Cape and other parts of southern Africa, teaching and observing the conditions of blacks in the country. It was during this time that he also met and befriended a number of individuals who would play a crucial role in the history of South Africa, including Davidson Don Tengo Jabavu, a professor at Fort Hare and later president of the All African Convention; John Langalibalele Dube, founding

president of the ANC; Dr Alfred Bitini Xuma, who would later become president-general of the ANC during the 1940s; and Z.K. Matthews, a professor at Fort Hare and another future ANC leader.

No one was more taken by the black American than the young Govan Mbeki, who would become a leader of the ANC and of South Africa's Communist Party as well as father of Thabo Mbeki, South Africa's second black president. The 24-year-old Govan, who was a student at Fort Hare, was a regular visitor to the Yergan household and often accompanied Max on his trips through the Eastern Cape. Mbeki recalled that Yergan fed him with literature, including Lenin's *The State and Revolution*. Another Fort Hare student equally impressed with Yergan was Wycliffe Tsotsi, who remembered Yergan as being a staunch foe of segregation, but someone who was secretive about his feelings, mindful of the watchful eye of the South African authorities. Yergan's meetings with some of the future leaders of the ANC and the All African Convention did not go unnoticed. From the time he set foot in South Africa, the government, or black informants who worked for them, monitored nearly all of his activities.

The experience in South Africa radicalised Yergan. He had arrived in the country as a young Christian idealist who believed that his missionary work could make a difference in the lives of Africans there. But as time passed, he began to see that despite his best efforts, the conditions of black people in the country remained largely unchanged. They continued to live in segregated areas; they were at the bottom of the pile economically; and they had few political rights.

Yergan began to believe that the religious works and teachings of the YMCA would not be enough to alleviate the problems facing blacks. This loss of faith in his missionary work also happened to coincide with Yergan's embrace of Marxism. He allegedly became a Marxist after making a trip to the Soviet Union in 1934. 'He was a changed man,' Mbeki said in an interview with Yergan's biographer. 'He was no longer the Max Yergan that we knew.'

In a series of letters and personal pleas made when he travelled back to the US for vacation, he urged the YMCA to do more to challenge the country's segregation policy and the deplorable living conditions of blacks. But the organisation refused to budge, not wanting to upset the South African government. In 1936, Yergan, after considerable thought and reflection, issued his resignation. In his resignation letter he wrote:

The government in South Africa is not only not interested in the development of Africans but is quite definitely committed to a policy which is destructive of any real growth among Africans of that country ...

In terms of the effective arrangements operating both the material resources as well as the great mass of the population are exploited by and in the interest of the overseas imperialist power, Great Britain, and the local governing class. To make this possible, Africans have been robbed of their land, deprived daily of their labor with exceedingly inadequate compensation and are being reduced to a level worse than serfs. And the business of any government, representative of the theory and practice of imperialism and the deeply rooted convictions of the dominant class in South Africa, is to maintain the status quo.

In an interview that was published in *Imvo Zabantsundu*, a Xhosa-language newspaper, on 17 April 1937, after returning home, Yergan elaborated further on his decision to leave both South Africa and the YMCA. 'I cannot go on as I am in the face of the so-called liberalism which is condoning the increasing political and economic repression of the Africans,' he said. 'The time has come when the African natives must be assisted in their right to organize themselves whereby they can act united in resisting the powers that exploit them.'

Returning to the US in 1936, he began to lay the groundwork for an organisation to do just that. Together with the famed actor, singer

and political activist Paul Robeson, Yergan set up an anti-colonialist and pan-African body called the Council on African Affairs (CAA) in the same year. The two black Americans couldn't have complemented each other better. Robeson, because of his international reputation, brought instant recognition to the new organisation. He would be the face and chief spokesman for the new group. In contrast, Yergan was the consummate organiser and, because of his time in both East and South Africa, was considered one of the foremost authorities on issues related to the African continent. But more than knowledge, he had connections with various figures involved in African opposition movements, particularly the ANC, and with the Communist Party.

The new body created by the two men was initially called the International Committee on African Affairs but the name would later be changed to the Council on African Affairs in 1941. With its headquarters in the Harlem neighbourhood of New York City, then the cultural and political centre of black America, the CAA became what the historian Hollis Lynch called the most 'important American organization concerned with Africa'. It would serve as the precursor to the worldwide anti-apartheid movements that emerged during the 1960s and would provide them with a blueprint for attacking the apartheid system, with its focus on organising mass protests, sit-ins and demonstrations, and enlisting celebrities, to bring attention to racial discrimination and government repression in South Africa.

For the new organisation, Yergan recruited a veritable who's who of black America to serve on its board, including Ralph J. Bunche, who had toured South Africa in the 1930s and who would become the first black American to win the Nobel Prize. W.E.B. Du Bois, co-founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and renowned educationist and writer, served as vice-chair of the CAA African Aid Committee. As South African representatives there were Xuma and Jabavu as well as Rosebery Bokwe, one-time treasurer of the ANC in the Eastern Cape.

South Africa was a major focus of the CAA, and its two lobbyists at the United Nations worked closely with diplomats from the newly independent India, which was beginning to make its voice heard at the international body. The CAA also fought against South Africa's attempts to legally annex South West Africa (now Namibia), which it then administered under a mandate from the League of Nations.

The CAA sponsored a number of educational conferences that would bring to the US some of Yergan's old colleagues from South Africa, including Alfred Xuma and D.D.T. Jabavu, for speaking tours. The CAA's action on the South West African vote at the United Nations received worldwide press coverage, including in South Africa. It also drew praise from the ANC. During its 1947 annual conference the ANC passed a resolution that read, 'Congress desires to make special mention of the Council on African Affairs for its noble efforts to defend fundamental human rights.'

By now, the CAA was also catching the attention of the South African and US governments, both of which placed the group and its members under surveillance. The South African Department of External Affairs sent one of its officials, Robert Webster, who was the consul-general in New York, to attend the CAA's Madison Square Garden rallies to gather intelligence. Webster reported that the movement against South Africa had 'reached dangerous proportions' and concluded that the aim of the participants seemed to be 'Africa for communist-organised labour-controlled black Africans'.

US intelligence was more aggressive than its South African counterparts. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) had begun to monitor the movements of both Robeson and Yergan as early as 1942 because of their activities in the CAA. The FBI's director, the notorious J. Edgar Hoover, ordered a full-scale investigation of the CAA, believing it to be an 'active front' for communism. The telephones of both men were tapped, and the bureau bugged their homes, went through their trash and opened their mail, 'looking for the identities of espionage agents'.

The surveillance of Yergan, Robeson and the CAA escalated after a speech on 12 March 1947 by President Truman to Congress, which many consider to mark the beginning of the Cold War. Truman made it clear that his administration would consider as subversive any groups that criticised its foreign policy while it was engaged in a battle with the Soviets for the hearts and minds of countries in Africa and Asia. In November the attorney general listed the CAA as one of the many 'front' organisations that he called 'totalitarian, fascist, communist and subversive'.

While Paul Robeson was unfazed by the listing and continued to speak out, the escalating pressure unnerved Yergan. Yergan tried to get members of the CAA to 'disavow any communist or fascist ties', but the majority, including Robeson, refused to be 'redbaited' into stopping their criticism of the US government's foreign policies. A fight soon ensued between the pro-Yergan faction and Robeson supporters, with each hurling accusations at the other side. The biggest complaint was over the issue of money; more specifically, Yergan's spending of CAA funds for his personal use. Finally in May 1948, Paul Robeson demanded that Yergan 'relinquish all financial and other records' and vacate the CAA offices, effectively firing his former partner.

Yergan didn't go quietly. Almost overnight he would undergo a startling transformation. Once a committed foe of the colonial powers in Africa and of US government policies that supported them, Yergan now fashioned himself as an American patriot and staunch opponent of communism.

As his fight with Robeson and others at the CAA escalated, he came up with a plan he thought would protect him from both the accusation of financial mismanagement and a potential government investigation and criminal charges. He walked into the federal building in Manhattan and began informing on former colleagues to the FBI. He told the FBI that Robeson and others in the CAA had 'met repeatedly with the Communist Party leadership and members of the Soviet Consulate in

New York to determine how best to funnel money to the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa', particularly the ANC. Yergan's successor as executive director was later called before a congressional committee to produce all correspondence between the CAA and the ANC.

It seems the FBI had also learned that Yergan was trying to extort money from a former lover, the wife of Frederick Vanderbilt Field, wealthy scion of the Vanderbilt family, who was the main financial backer of the CAA. In exchange for his testimony at congressional hearings and information he provided on individuals and organisations of which he was once a member, the FBI made the charges of blackmail go away and helped him get a visa to visit South Africa. He was clearly in their debt and would remain so until he died in 1975.

Shortly after approaching the FBI, Yergan wrote to the South African embassy in Washington on 30 March 1949, seeking a visa to visit the country so he could enlighten Africans about the dangers of communism. A sceptical D.D. Forsyth, South Africa's secretary for external affairs, fired off a letter to the US ambassador in Cape Town, asking if Yergan's change of heart was indeed genuine. The ambassador, after checking with his superior, Dean Acheson, the American secretary of state in Washington, informed a delighted Pretoria that the transformation was indeed true. Yergan was no longer the man they knew from his days in South Africa or the activist who had drawn world attention to the problems facing black South Africans. He was now a committed Cold Warrior dedicated to the destruction of communism. The South African government quickly approved Yergan's visa.

It was a startling turnaround for a man who had been one of the government's most prominent global critics. Getting Yergan on its side was a major public relations coup for Pretoria. For one thing, it removed a prominent international critic, and it aligned the US and South African governments more closely in their fight against communism by having Yergan address black Americans and Africans about the Red threat. Secondly, it put an approving black face on the country's racial policies.