



# Global Nonviolent Action Database

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## U.S. activists and politicians campaign at South African Embassy for end to apartheid, 1984-1985

21 November

1984

to: November/December

1985

**Country:** United States

**Location City/State/Province:** *Washington, D.C.*

**Location Description:** *South African Embassy*

### Goals:

South Africa's release on political prisoners, including, among others, Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki, the thirteen labor leaders arrested without charge, and the three black leaders who took refuge in the British Consulate in Durban; government commitment to immediately and publicly dismantle the apartheid system.

## Methods

### Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 013. Deputations
- 016. Picketing
- 038. Marches
- 162. Sit-in
- 196. Civil disobedience of "neutral" laws

### Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 016. Picketing
- 038. Marches
- 196. Civil disobedience of "neutral" laws

### Methods in 3rd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 016. Picketing
- 038. Marches
- 196. Civil disobedience of "neutral" laws

### **Methods in 4th segment:**

- 001. Public speeches
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 016. Picketing
- 038. Marches
- 196. Civil disobedience of "neutral" laws

### **Methods in 5th segment:**

- 001. Public speeches
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 016. Picketing
- 038. Marches
- 196. Civil disobedience of "neutral" laws

### **Methods in 6th segment:**

- 001. Public speeches
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 016. Picketing
- 038. Marches
- 196. Civil disobedience of "neutral" laws

### **Additional methods (Timing Unknown):**

- 162. Sit-in

## **Classifications**

### **Classification:**

Change

### **Cluster:**

Democracy

Economic Justice

National/Ethnic Identity

### **Group characterization:**

- TransAfrica leaders
- celebrities
- community leaders
- members of Congress
- national labor and religious leaders
- students
- teachers

## **Leaders, partners, allies, elites**

### **Leaders:**

Randall Robinson, Executive Director of TransAfrica; US Civil Rights Commissioner Mary Frances Berry; Eleanor Holmes Norton, Georgetown law professor; Congressman (D-DC) Walter Fauntroy; William Lucy Lucy; Roger Wilkens, author and social critic; Sylvia Hill, founding member of Southern African Support Project

**Partners:**

TransAfrica members

**External allies:**

Religious organizations, labor unions, teachers, students, community leaders

**Involvement of social elites:**

Members of Congress, famous civil rights leaders, athletes, Nobel Peace Prize laureates, presidential family, actors/actresses, musicians

## Joining/exiting order of social groups

**Groups in 1st Segment:**

- Desmond Tutu
- Rosa Parks

**Groups in 2nd Segment:**

- Senator Lowell Weicker

**Groups in 3rd Segment:**

**Groups in 4th Segment:**

**Groups in 5th Segment:**

**Groups in 6th Segment:**

**Segment Length:** *Approximately 2 months*

## Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

**Opponents:**

Ronald Reagan Administration, United States; Pieter Willem Botha Regime, South Africa

**Nonviolent responses of opponent:**

Not known

**Campaigner violence:**

None known

**Repressive Violence:**

Not known

## Success Outcome

**Success in achieving specific demands/goals:**

4 points out of 6 points

**Survival:**

1 point out of 1 points

**Growth:**

3 points out of 3 points

**Notes on outcomes:**

After the Washington, D.C. South African Embassy protests lasted for over a year, inspiring global anti-apartheid action, The Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act of 1986 imposed economic sanctions against South Africa, and listed five conditions for ending them, including release of Nelson Mandela and all political prisoners and agreement by the South African government to enter "good-faith negotiations" with the Black majority. The US sanctions were crucial in encouraging global opposition to the apartheid regime. However, the campaign did not win the immediate dismantling of apartheid in South Africa.

The D.C. protests occurred every day for over a year, totaling up to six thousand arrests in D.C. alone. However, the protests inspired actions across the country and internationally, garnering the attention of media everywhere to the atrocities in South Africa

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In 1984, South Africa was ruled by an increasingly brutal and repressive regime under Prime Minister Pieter Botha, a strong supporter of apartheid, a system of legal racial segregation enforced by the National Party government under which the rights of the majority black inhabitants of South Africa were curtailed and minority rule by whites was maintained. In response to increased anti-apartheid protest in 1984, the Botha regime repressed political dissent with increasing brutality. In November of that year, Ronald Reagan had been reelected as President of the United States. Reagan's 'constructive engagement' policy toward South Africa, his proposed alternative to economic sanctions and divestment, was thought to support the apartheid regime more than it was reforming it. It should be noted that many African Americans viewed Reagan and his administration to be racist and supporters of white supremacy.

On November 21, 1984, four African American leaders, Randall Robinson, Executive Director of TransAfrica; US Civil Rights Commissioner Mary Frances Berry; Eleanor Holmes Norton, a law professor of a prestigious law school (Georgetown); and Congressman ( D-DC) Walter Fauntroy visited the South African Embassy in Washington, D.C. To discuss the growing crisis in South Africa. Forty minutes into the discussion, they informed Ambassador Fomnie that they would not leave until their demands were met. Randall stated, as planned, "please convey for us to your government our basic demand, which is twofold. All of your government's political prisoners must be released immediately. These would include, among others, Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki, the thirteen labor leaders arrested recently without charge and the three black leaders who have taken refuge in the British Consulate in Durban. We are further demanding that your government commit itself immediately and publicly to the speedy dismantlement of the apartheid system with a timetable for this task."

Outside the embassy protesters marched on a picket line saying, 'South Africa will be free; Mandela will be free,' 'South Africa will be Free; Namibia will be free,' 'Sanctions Now or One Person; One Vote.' The press was there, both domestic and international, both electronic and print. As the protesters sang "We Shall Overcome" in the spirit of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the US civil rights protesters, several handcuffed protesters were led to the police cars. The strategic decision to hold the sit-in on the day before Thanksgiving proved successful; the protest gained national attention.

Over the holiday weekend, the action was named 'Free South Africa Movement.' William Lucy Lucy, Roger Wilkens, author and social critic and Sylvia Hill, a founding member of the grass roots organization Southern African Support Project, joined Randall, Mary Francis and Fauntroy as the Steering Committee. They began to meet daily, early in the morning, to chart a strategic course of political action and protests.

Arrests became a daily occurrence at the embassy, with a combination of labor, black congressional representatives, and civil rights leaders volunteering as the first to be arrested. Within the first week after the holidays, dozens were arrested including congressional representatives, City Mayors, the President of the Washington Teachers Union, the United Auto Workers Vice President, and Yolanda King, daughter of Martin Luther King, Jr. Within the same week, public demonstrations and actions spread throughout the United States against Krugerrand coin (South African coin) dealers, South African consulates, and corporations tied to South Africa.

On December 1, Rosa Parks was arrested at the Embassy, on the anniversary of her arrest in Montgomery 29 years earlier, inspiring a wave of movie stars, musicians, athletes, and members of Congress to join ranks of protesters. Bishop Desmond

Tutu, who had just been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize came to the demonstration and spoke against the 'sin' of Reagan's constructive engagement policy.

Daily arrests quickly became a well-rehearsed ritual. A group of protesters, both black and white, numbering anywhere from 1 to 100 would march during the day, being sure to keep at least 500 feet from the embassy. In the afternoon, Randall Robinson would hold a news conference from the front of the line and give the names of the celebrity guests joining the protest for the day. Then together, those risking arrest would approach the embassy, cross the 500 foot boundary, and be peaceably arrested and taken to jail, where they rarely spent more than a few hours.

The ongoing protests in Washington rapidly inspired other actions in the US and abroad. Universities in the United States slowly began to divest, followed by pension funds and corporations. Worldwide demonstrations were taking place and being reported by the press, including a protest in the South African embassy in London. Due to the actions, Americans regularly started seeing images of brutality in action on television nightly news.

On December 25, demonstrators from several Jewish organizations took over the daily protest at the Embassy in Washington to allow their Christian colleagues to spend Christmas at home. More than 100 Jewish demonstrators marched outside the Embassy. Other anti-apartheid demonstrations were held by Jewish groups in New York, Boston, Cleveland, and Seattle.

Several weeks later, Senator Lowell Weicker, Republican from Connecticut, was the first Senator to get arrested in the protest on January 15. Even as President Reagan canceled his inauguration march that month because of low temperatures the protest marches continued. Protesters wanted to send the message that through sleet, snow, rain or shine, they were determined to protest the U.S.'s constructive engagement policy.

The South African Embassy protests and arrests took place every day for over an entire year after the first sit-in, inspiring similar protests in 26 other US cities. In all, between three and six thousand people were arrested at the embassy in Washington including 23 members of Congress. Also arrested were clergymen, national labor and religious leaders, students, community leaders, teachers, and celebrity figures including heavyweight boxer Larry Holmes, Amy Carter, daughter of former US President Jimmy Carter, and Rev. Jesse Jackson and his two sons. Five thousand additional people reportedly were arrested in other cities in the US.

The protests led to a heightened awareness among Americans of the atrocities of apartheid and influenced monumental action in Congress. Representative Ronald V Dellums introduced the first anti-apartheid legislation in 1972, and in 1986 his bill was finally passed. Support for the Dellums bill was so strong that it withstood a veto by President Reagan, the first time in the 20th century that a president had a foreign policy veto overridden. The Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act of 1986 imposed economic sanctions against South Africa, and listed five conditions for ending the sanctions, including release of Nelson Mandela and all political prisoners and agreement by the South African government to enter "good-faith negotiations" with the Black majority.

The Anti-Apartheid Act inspired sanctions in Europe and Japan and the loss of confidence by the global banking community in the economy of South Africa. At the same time the divestment movement forced scores of universities and businesses to withdraw investment dollars from South Africa. From 1985 to 1991, the number of American companies with South African operations fell from 267 to 104. It is estimated that South Africa lost \$10 - \$50 billion in investment capital.

Apartheid would continue in South Africa for several years. After suffering a stroke, Botha was replaced by F.W. de Klerk. In de Klerk's opening address to parliament in 1990, he promised to repeal discriminatory laws and to lift the ban on anti-apartheid groups. De Klerk also made a commitment to release Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners not guilty of common-law crimes. Nelson Mandela was released in February 1990. Apartheid was dismantled through a series of negotiations that culminated in the elections of 1994, the first in South Africa with universal suffrage, in which Nelson Mandela was elected president.

## Research Notes

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