Interview with Herman W. Nickel

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

AMBASSADOR HERMAN W. NICKEL

Interviewed by: Willis Armstrong

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Q: Herman Nickel was ambassador to South Africa from 1982 to 1986. Mr. Nickel, was this your first diplomatic assignment, so to speak? Had you come out of another walk of life?

NICKEL: It was. I've spent most of my professional life as a journalist; as a foreign correspondent. I started as a foreign correspondent for Time magazine in 1958 and in the course of my career, had all kinds of foreign assignments, including one in South Africa. The irony of my appointment was that my tenure as Time correspondent in Africa, the seat in Johannesburg from 1961 to 1962, ended with my expulsion by the South African Government after exactly one year.

Q: That's an interesting turnabout. [Laughter]

NICKEL: I don't think that this was their expectation of Ronald Reagan's nominee for ambassador.

Q: Some time had elapsed.

NICKEL: Yes. It was amusing that when I arrived in South Africa in April of 1982, that very same afternoon the Foreign Minister, Pik Botha, asked me to come by because I was

going to present my credentials right the following day, and they were in a great hurry to get me properly installed. And at the end of our discussion, he said with a rather thin smile that, of course, the South African Government remembered the circumstances of my departure from South Africa some years ago, and he added with this touch of delicate Boer-humor, that they hoped they wouldn't have to do this again. [Laughter]

Q: That's fair enough. [Laughter] Well, what did you feel as you approached your assignment as ambassador to South Africa under the circumstances of the year 1982? How did you feel in the context of your previous experience in U.S. policy and all that sort of thing?

NICKEL: South Africa is a kind of addictive problem. While I didn't follow South African affairs in detail in the following years, it's a fascination that never really quite leaves you. And I suppose it fascinates you because it is an intractable problem. It takes place against a very beautiful backdrop, and so it is a country that one fervently wishes could find a way for people to live at peace with each other and with their neighbors.

I had gone back to South Africa for the first time on a Fortune assignment in 1978 and got sort of “reinfected” with that South African bug. I felt very strongly then that if we were going to play a significant and helpful role in coming closer to this objective, that one had to give encouragement to those forces in South African society on both sides of the racial divide that were working to peaceful change. I say encouragement because it seemed to me that a totally confrontational approach was not realistic. A confrontational approach might be useful when you have the power to coerce other people into doing things that they regard as being against their vital interests. And I do think that in the case of South Africa, we lacked that kind of coercive leverage. Therefore one had to reach out, especially to Afrikaners who, after all, controlled the power of the state in South Africa. The challenge was working with them to convince them that the continuation of the system of apartheid and the continuation of a system in which Afrikaners tried to monopolize political

power was not in their own long-term interest, and that a new order had to be based on negotiation with them and the consent of the black majority.

And it seemed to me that the policy outlined by Chet Crocker in his well-known Foreign Affairs article which he wrote before taking office, held out some promise.

I never had any illusion that we were anything more than a marginal influence. But when the balance of forces in a society is fairly close, I think that once in a while our influence can help to tip the scales. I think that is what I wanted to accomplish: to use this influence in such a way that occasionally you can help to give the forces of change—the good guys in this particular situation—the kind of critical mass that moves things forward.

I also was acutely aware of the fact that what drives the issue in the United States is less the strategic importance of South Africa than our national concern with the issue of race. I, myself, have doubts that South Africa rates as a first-rank strategic problem for the United States.

Q: World War I or World War II terms, yes. Future warfare, less likely.

NICKEL: That's right. I think that over the years the concern about the Cape route, I think has receded considerably. And, while it is perfectly true that South Africa has a vast store of strategic minerals which are very important to the industrialized world, it is also true that any South African government would have an interest in selling these minerals because you can't eat them.

Q: Of course. [Laughter]. You can't eat them and you've got to eat, anyway, so you might as well sell them.

NICKEL: And the natural market for these minerals is, of course, the Western world because the Soviet Union, which is the other major producer of many of these minerals, has, you know, its own supplies, and in any case, does not constitute that kind of a market.

Our national interest is in not seeing a situation in South Africa develop that becomes so de-stabilized that the very production of these minerals is put in question. And, indeed, we have a significant national interest in stability, not only in South Africa itself, but in the entire region. You can't separate informal stability in South Africa from regional security. You can't have one without the other.

But it was clear to me, and indeed, that was always implicit and explicit in what Chet Crocker outlined as his policy vision; that our interest in stability must not be confused with commitment to the status quo, because the status quo in Southern Africa had become patently unstable. And meant that the emergence of a more stable order in Southern Africa hinged on peaceful change, especially within South Africa itself, but also in better relations between South Africa and her neighbors.

Q: That's a good overview of basic U.S. policy and I remember working with Chet Crocker when he was at Georgetown, because I did some teaching there when he was associate dean. I always admired Chet for the clarity of his thought in regard to Africa and his policy since.

You were there for four years. What would you say were the sort of peak events of those four years? Were there any specific crisis and peak events that you felt were important in terms of your trying to achieve your objective?

NICKEL: Yes. I think there were several phases in my tenure.

The first phase—roughly from 1982 to mid-'84—involved the constitutional changes that P.W. Botha was trying to bring about and the constitutional referendum for the establishment of the tricameral Legislature.

And while in retrospect it is quite clear that the failure of that constitution to make any provision for the participation of blacks in the central political process was a crucial mistake, the problem was viewed by the government then as one of how much the

political traffic could bear among white voters. And P.W. Botha, of course, was very much concerned at the time that he would not be able to get the majority in a constitutional referendum from the white voters for any constitutional provision that allowed blacks to come in, too. It was a constitution which was bound to fail, but, it was a stage that created the momentum for further change

There were other changes that were important. In our contacts we were very much concerned with key pieces of apartheid legislation like the Group Areas Act, the old pass law system and so on. We spent a good deal of effort chipping away on these pillars of apartheid.

After the new constitution was adopted, our work moved into a different phase because, as a response to the exclusion of blacks from the constitutional dispensation—as the South African's call it—was the beginning of massive unrest, and the repression that went with it. That began in mid-1984.

Q: It had been fairly placid up 'til then.

NICKEL: Up until that point it had been reasonably placid. I mean there was always a dimension of protest and repression, obviously, but that dimension became considerably greater. And the repression that set in began to out-crowd news of any kind of reform process that was taking place. Indeed, the repression seemed to negate any claims that reform was taking place at all.

Now, that had an enormous effect on public opinion in this country and undermined the credibility of the administration's contention that, indeed, there was a reform process going on at all.

Q: It was hard to perceive.

NICKEL: Hard to perceive. Now, you may say that in a historical prospective, it is very often that you have repression at a time when a good deal of change is taking place because, indeed, I think it was de Tocqueville who, writing about the origins of the French Revolution, pointed out that the revolt happens not usually when the regime is at its most repressive but, quite the contrary, when things seem to be in a process of change, when people then conclude that the status quo is no longer something that they have to put up with.

Q: Russia in 1905.

NICKEL: I hope we don't see the same thing happening in the Soviet Union now. Well, there maybe some very grim alternatives for the Gorbachev government to the Baltic countries and so on. So, indeed, there is no contradiction really in a historical sense when repression does take place at times when change is in the air. But in the public perception here, it completely negated the view of the South African government as a regime that had set in motion a process of change.

The other aspect to our work in South Africa was diplomacy. I think that the most important culmination of our efforts came, in fact, just before the unrest started when in March 1984 we were able to witness the signing of the Nkomati Accord between South Africa and Mozambique. I think that was a very signal achievement and we had worked very hard on both sides, the Mozambicans and the South African government to bring that about. I think the promise of the Nkomati Accord of 1984 was delayed by the South African government's split personality. Its attitude towards its relationship with its neighbors reflected the divisions between the security establishment, which was very close to P.W. Botha, and those diplomats who felt that better relations with the neighbors were one way for South Africa to work its way out of the isolation into which apartheid had put it. After the outbreak of unrest at home, the hawks were once again in the ascendancy. P.W. Botha's counter-revolutionary instincts prevailed again.

Q: I suppose the security forces were the ones who stimulated, say, the opposition forces within Mozambique.

NICKEL: That's right. I mean there was . . .

Q: And other places.

NICKEL: You know, there was convincing evidence that the supply relationship between the South African military and the Renamo movement continued even after the signing of the 1984 agreement.

Q: And does it still continue today, in your judgment?

NICKEL: Of course, I have been out of government for three years by now. But, I do believe that the “doves” in the South African government have finally prevailed and that that kind of supply relationship has come to an end. That is now attested by spokesman for the Mozambican government.

I think that there's still a murky area of so-called private supply routes, you know. There's a large Portuguese community in South Africa and there are still some reports of some illicit traffic back and forth, but I think that even the Mozambican government has finally accepted that the South African government is no longer supporting Renamo as a matter of policy.

Q: Do you see any hope for the Mozambican economy or society as it seems to have been, you know, a very depressed, miserable area?

NICKEL: Right.

Q: But once very rich and comfortable.

NICKEL: It is one of the tragedies that both Mozambique and Angola were—in terms of natural endowments— among the most promising countries on the entire African continent.

Now that the Mozambican government itself has renounced some of the socialistic experiments which aggravated their problems, the most crucial issue is the restoration of internal peace. For so long as this destructive guerrilla war continues, foreign aid is very difficult to administer effectively, foreign capital stays away and the government itself can't get a handle on things. So I think this depends crucially on creating peace and sometimes finding some kind of political solution. I think the Mozambican government has come a long way in accepting that there must be a political solution.

There also is now a growing willingness to concede that what gave rise to the emergence of Renamo was not solely the machinations first of the Rhodesian Central Intelligence Organization or later of the South African security forces, but some very fundamental mistakes that were made by the Mozambican government in the earlier phases which led to quite an estrangement between the urban and the rural populations. That is why Renamo was able to establish a base.

Q: This is characteristic and like Africa, isn't it?

NICKEL: That's right. And while I'm not talking as an expert on Mozambique, I know that this is now acknowledged even by the Mozambican government. The other day there were a group of Soviet African experts in Washington, including their former deputy chief of mission in Maputo. When asked about the origins of Renamo, instead of emphasizing the South African involvement and so on. He was, in fact, putting his finger on that fundamental problem— Frelimo's mistakes in the rural areas. And I think that that problem needs to be redressed and I think that the fact that the Mozambican government does recognize this is a hopeful development.

Q: So that was the '84 event of particular importance?

NICKEL: Yes.

Q: That started the move towards ending cross-border violence and a reasonable relationship with Mozambique.

NICKEL: Unfortunately the better relationship was delayed by continued South African violation of the Nkomati Agreement in letter and in spirit, but they're now beginning to see the fruits of that kind of development.

The other effort that we were spending a great deal of time on, obviously, was the Namibian-Angola settlement. While I was not there when things finally came to fruition, it was clear to us, even then, that it was only a matter of time when all the parties to this dispute and I mean the MPLA government in Luanda, UNITA, the Cubans, and, very importantly, the Soviet Union and South Africa, were going to realize that a political settlement was preferable to an indefinite continuation of that costly conflict. We had many ups and downs and it took a long time to get all these unlikely parties to this negotiation with the right constellation.

Q: A real congeries of characters, isn't it?

NICKEL: It was an extraordinary negotiation which cast, in the broker role, the United States which had no diplomatic relations at all with Cuba, no diplomatic relations with the MPLA, very difficult relations with the Soviet Union, although that changed towards the end. The Soviet Union became very cooperative in bringing about the settlement. And then, of course, we had to move along the South African government, with which we had always had very difficult relations.

Q: Plus, then you throw in Mr. Savimbi and the SWAPO and you've got other factors in the situation.

NICKEL: Yes, although they were not directly part of the negotiations.

Q: They were indirectly there.

NICKEL: But they were indirectly there. SWAPO, frankly, was not much of a player in the diplomacy. But we could not ignore the concerns of Savimbi.

Q: Who supports Savimbi?

NICKEL: Well, I think, first of all, you have to start . . .

Q: We were in and out, weren't we?

NICKEL: Yes. But the first thing one must say is that Savimbi has a genuine support base within Angola.

Q: Oh, yes. Sure.

NICKEL: And I think that that is the real key to his longevity, rather than the foreign support he received— though it obviously was important.

Q: No, they're not mercenaries.

NICKEL: They're not mercenaries. I think they are in quite a different category from Renamo, since Renamo was very much a creation at first of the Rhodesian Intelligence Service, whereas UNITA was a genuine liberation movement. The South Africans, of course, were very much concerned about the projection of Soviet surrogates into the continent, because they were the only people who could constitute a genuine military challenge to South Africa's military and strategic preeminence of the continent. They saw support in Savimbi a way of fighting the spread of Soviet influence into the region, and they spent a good deal of effort and money in keeping Savimbi supplied. Savimbi accepted that because, for him, it was, of course, a critical strategic link.

Q: Sure. Sure. And he couldn't be too fussy about it.

NICKEL: No.

Q: Is there some European support for Savimbi also, isn't there? French Intelligence?

NICKEL: Yes. I think that they were certain sympathies on the part of the French and perhaps on the part of the Belgians, too. I think that there was always some support from within Africa, too. I mean there was a close relationship with the Moroccans, between Savimbi and King Hassan. There were other Francophone countries which did provide some support for Savimbi, including the Ivory Coast and Gabon, which at least tacitly, were very helpful and, of course, very critically, Mobutu.

Q: Yes. And, of course, that gave access to supply routes and all that sort of thing.

NICKEL: That's right.

Q: Getting the things into Savimbi that he needed.

NICKEL: Right.

Q: That was a fascinating process and it started really back in '81-'82 as an objective of the U.S. Government to somehow get an end to this ambivalent situation.

NICKEL: Yes.

Q: And do you feel that it's reasonably well on the way to solution now, or that what's going on are a few hitches, but not . . .

NICKEL: Well, I think it was clear that an Angolan-Namibian settlement would not go off without hitches. And, indeed, we had a big hitch right on the first day when SWAPO, in an extraordinarily ill-considered move, violated the agreement by the massive infiltration of

SWAPO guerrillas. This left the United Nations with little choice but to call on the South Africans to contain this incursion.

I think that we are in for continued hiccups on this matter, but I have no doubt that the overwhelming interest of all the parties in a peaceful resolution or—let's put it less ambitiously—the prevention of a revival of this warfare are going to prevail. I mean, all the parties have an interest in the settlement at this stage and I think that when that strong motivation exists, it does become possible to work out these hitches.

Q: Even with such an extraordinary array of contestants.

NICKEL: Yes. Perhaps I'm being too optimistic, but I think that the interest of the parties, in the end, will see to it that these hitches can be worked out.

Q: Governments pursue their interests.

NICKEL: Yes.

Q: One should never forget it. To go on to the domestic side, how do you see the situation is between South Africa and their puppet black regimes? I forget what you call them.

NICKEL: The so-called independent homelands.

Q: Yes.

NICKEL: Whose independence, of course, is only recognized by South Africa.

Q: They're homeland, they're not independent.

NICKEL: The four that are nominally independent have only a sham kind of independence. By now the independent homelands have really become something of an embarrassment to the South African government.

Q: By now.

NICKEL: By now, because the whole preposterous notion that you could deal with the problem of the political rights of blacks by relegating them to these independent homelands became even more untenable. While they could live in this sham independence and have their own political participation, their own political institutions, they were, of course, totally dependent on the good graces of the South African government. This was all knocked into a cocked hat by the economic realities. Verwoerd had this crazy dream that by the mid-'80s, the flow of blacks into the urban areas would be reversed and blacks would be streaming instead into these independent homelands, which, of course, lacked the resources and job opportunities.

Q: And where there was nothing to do.

NICKEL: Where there was nothing to do, in spite of some terribly expensive and ill-conceived schemes to create jobs and industries. It was a singularly futile effort to make water run up hill. Having created these homelands, the South African government now is in the awkward position of not being able to simply abandon them and saying that this was all a sham independence anyway; you're no longer independent . . .

Q: You're now back to square one.

NICKEL: You're back to square one. But by now you obviously have a considerable number of blacks who are civil servants in those countries, people who have built political power bases in these so-called countries and so on. All of which makes it rather difficult to simply go back to square one.

Q: Sort of like the District of Columbia, isn't it?

NICKEL: [Laughter]

Q: Excuse the reference, but . . .

NICKEL: Yes. What we saw during my years was the final discrediting of the grand apartheid blueprint.

Q: The whole idea was totally kaput.

NICKEL: That's right. But while the old paradigm was discredited and lost all its legitimacy—and this was acknowledged even by members of the South African government of the National Party which, after all, embraced this scheme—the new paradigm is much more difficult to find. The old paradigm is dead, but what is the new one?

Q: Yes. I suppose, at least, they've got some more experienced blacks in administration and civil service now than they had before, as a result of creating bureaucracies, because they had to create bureaucracies in these places.

NICKEL: Yes.

Q: Whether that simply leads to corruption is a . . .

NICKEL: I think that, unfortunately, the quality the administration has built up in these homelands is very much tainted by the fact that first of all, an awful lot of black did not want to participate for reasons of principle, and practically all of these homelands are rife with political corruption.

Q: Yes.

NICKEL: This has become a considerable embarrassment, indeed, also a financial drain for the South African government, which, in the end, must pick up the bill.

Q: Has to pay for it. How do you feel about the African National Congress, the ANC, the black movement for greater rights or equality or whatever you want to call it?

NICKEL: Well, there was never any doubt in our mind that the African National Congress still was seen by the great majority of blacks as the leading black liberation movement.

And that even though it was banned, in fact, many of the leaders of the organizations that were allowed to exist legally—the United Democratic Front and other organizations- -had strong ANC ties. So there was never any doubt in our mind about the very strong political base of the ANC in South Africa. This is not to say that the ANC is the sole, legitimate liberation movement. In the view of Chet Crocker, it would have been a great mistake to act as if the ANC was the only movement, because there's another very important strand of the African liberation movements, you know, the black consciousness strain, which is important and, indeed, you have the phenomenon of Gatsha Buthelezi and Inkatha which has a very strong and very real base among especially rural or traditional Zulus in Natal. You ignore these other groups at your peril.

Q: I remember meeting Buthelezi in New York some years ago. He was a very impressive person.

NICKEL: He is, indeed. And it would be a great mistake to pretend that you can make up an equation for South Africa that leaves him out. Nelson Mandela, I think, to some extent, surprised and perhaps even slightly shocked the commonwealth eminent persons group when he told them, very explicitly, that in his view Gatsha Buthelezi had to be at the negotiating table. I say it surprised some of them because they had come to believe the ANC propaganda that Buthelezi was simply a puppet of the South African regime, which simply is not true.

Q: Not true. No.

NICKEL: Simply not true. And I think it's, by now, if you may have noticed that even the ANC quite publicly now, is seeking some kind of a dialogue with Inkatha. If they don't, there will be trouble. But to return to the subject of the ANC, at the same time when, you

know, while there were recurrent acts of terrorism on the part of the ANC, and I use that term especially with respect to bombing attacks which were quite indiscriminate, I find the word terrorism is truly applicable when the bombs go off in hamburger stands or at bus stops or in city streets. We had to take a principled position against that kind of terrorism to lend credibility to any condemnation of violence by the government.

Q: These were ANC operations.

NICKEL: They were ANC operations, but they were not very effective.

Q: Well, they just killed people.

NICKEL: As a guerrilla operation the ANC was ineffective. The bombs they had set off were morale raisers for the internal cadres of the ANC, to show that the armed wing of the ANC still had a presence in South Africa. The effect on the white-body politic was probably counterproductive. It appealed to the feeling of insecurity on the part of whites. Fear is the driving political emotion of South African whites, and by playing to that fear, it helped the right wing.

Q: Sure.

NICKEL: It strengthened the far right.

Q: That had tended to polarize—I mean, a lot of the operations of ANC is intended to polarize the society even more.

NICKEL: That's right. That's right. And I think that the ANC has undergone a considerable theoretical transformation, because it used to say the struggle for liberation will actually be won by military means, by liberation struggle in the most literal sense of fighting. That was certainly the line of the South African Communist Party, which, of course, has always had a formal and a very public relation with the ANC I think what has happened in recent years is that the argument has shifted to saying, “Yes, we have to negotiate. But if you

want to negotiate, you have to strengthen your own position by having a military dimension to your struggle, as well." That is now the basis for the ANC defending the continuation of the armed struggle, for defending the continued operations of the military branch of the ANC, Umkhonto we Sizwe, even as negotiations begin.

Q: Do the Russians supply the ANC—have they in the past— with funds and other kinds of resources?

NICKEL: There is a Russian connection with the ANC to this day, Gorbachev notwithstanding. I think the Soviet Union has long seen its close relationship with the ANC as a political asset. and it is not about to abandon that kind of relationship altogether. I think it did supply the ANC with the wherewithal, the limpet mines and so on, that were necessary for Umkhonto we Sizwe to carry out some of these operations. In financial terms, that probably didn't amount to a great deal, because I don't think that the quantity involved was all that great. One could probably argue that some of the donations which the ANC has gotten from some western, or certainly non-communist countries, like Scandinavia- -were, in quantitative terms, at least, as important as the Soviet contribution. You know, arms are readily available in the world, and if you have the money, and if the money given to the ANC is not very closely controlled as to what it's used for, one could well imagine that the ANC was able to use money from Western sources to carry on these operations.

Q: Of course, South Africa is not necessarily entirely a poor country. A lot of black people are reasonably well paid, aren't they?

NICKEL: Yes. Some are, but you have vast differences. There's a generalization the South African government likes to use that, our blacks are better off than the blacks almost anywhere else in Africa . . .

Q: Well, some are, anyway.

NICKEL: But some of the poverty in the rural areas matches some of the worst places in Africa. But there's no doubt that you have an emerging black middle class in the urban centers. I think there is probably a broader base of qualified, educated professional people than almost anywhere in Africa.

Q: What about the educational system in South Africa in terms of education for blacks? How far can they go? How much do they have to pay themselves, or does it get provided?

NICKEL: First of all, I think you have to deal with the bitter legacy of the apartheid-Bantu education madness.

Q: Yes.

NICKEL: Bantu education was conceived by Verwoerd quite openly as providing inferior education that would just be enough to allow blacks to perform the menial tasks that would be available to them under the apartheid system.

Q: Literate enough to take orders.

NICKEL: Literate enough to take orders, but not so literate as to raise expectations.

Q: Yes.

NICKEL: And that, of course, had a disastrous effect. It became very clear that with the economic growth that South Africa went through, especially the big boom of the 1960s, that the greatest constraint to further economic growth was not so much a lack of capital, but the lack of trained manpower. And there weren't enough whites to go around.

So industry had to take over where the state had fallen down on the job and do a lot of training that normally would be done, in most countries, by the public school system.

Q: Sure.

NICKEL: But the system is still laboring to overcome this criminal, deliberate neglect of black education. So that even now, in per capita terms, the government spends five times as much on a white student as it does on a black student. You might say there are all kinds of reasons for it, because white students tend to stay in school longer, you have a tremendous shortage of qualified black teachers, etc. Most of the black teachers don't have high school certificates, so they get less than qualified teachers.

Q: Well, you can't do these things overnight.

NICKEL: Of course all these things take time, but what has happened is that with the assistance of both public and private scholarship programs, the number of black university graduates has—and attendance has—grown really dramatically in the last few years. There are now more blacks graduating from high schools than whites. Of course, you have had the breaking down of segregation at the university level. Both the University of Witwatersrand, and the University of Cape Town, the two largest and best white universities now have pretty open enrollment so that you have something like 30% or more of the students at those institutions being black. Now, the universities have gone out of their way to provide the special bridging year to allow black students who enter these universities to make up for the flaws in their secondary education, because obviously, the secondary schools—black schools—are still palpably inferior to them. The matriculation exams are now standard for blacks and whites, but there are clearly shortcomings there.

Q: That's very interesting that there is a progressive movement on in regard to black education. It has been for some time.

NICKEL: Right.

Q: It's gaining momentum.

NICKEL: Yes. And the government is allowing at least the private schools to have open admission policies.

Q: That's very interesting.

NICKEL: But even somebody like De Klerk is still reluctant when it comes to public education, because he is afraid of the political backlash, especially from among the lower middle class and poor whites to any real public school integration.

Q: Well, because of the competitive factor, yes. Like the old south in this country, yes.

NICKEL: Correct.

Q: Let me ask you about your relationship with your colleagues- -your American mission chiefs in, say Mozambique or the surrounding countries there. Did you have a reasonably good collegial relationship?

NICKEL: We had a very collegial relationship, and I think that we had a very good relationship.I wish I could have done more travel to neighboring countries. I did get to Zambia on a couple of occasions when we were there negotiating, but I didn't get to Zimbabwe. However, my colleagues, who obviously had to deal with the issue of South Africa all the time, and to explaining what our policy was, came down to South Africa to spend some time.

Q: I see.

NICKEL: And to inform themselves of what conditions were, what our policy was. On top of that we had regular chief of missions' conferences, which we did have on an annual basis in Washington.

Q: Did you re-analyze that by Southern Africa or Africa as a whole?

NICKEL: Well, the chief of missions' conferences were all African.

Q: All Africa. They were a big group.

NICKEL: Big group. South Africa always took up probably more time than any other single issue because . . .

Q: You became a central character.

NICKEL: I became a central character at those meetings because the focus was on Southern Africa.

Q: I can see that readily, yes.

NICKEL: To explain to my colleagues from West Africa or from the Sudan as to what was going on.

Q: Some of those countries are a long way from South Africa.

NICKEL: That's right.

Q: The African Bureau still handles Morocco and the Mediterraneacountries?

NICKEL: No. That's . . .

Q: That's another bureau.

NICKEL: Yes. It's in NEA.

Q: I remember when that change came. In terms of Foreign Service, what were your impressions of your staff and your support in the embassy, in relationship between you as a, so to speak, political appointee and the career people in the embassy, or back in the bureau?

NICKEL: I'd like to think of a very happy relationship both ways. Perhaps it's because I was an unusual kind of political appointee.

Q: Well, you didn't buy it. [Laughter]

NICKEL: No. I would like the record to show that I didn't spend one dime on a political contribution. So Ronald Reagan really didn't owe me anything. If you're not a professional diplomat- -being a foreign correspondent comes about as close to being in the Foreign Service as you can get. I think my staff realized that I had a considerable amount of international experience. My first foreign tour was in 1958 and I spent 20 years in Europe and in Asia and in Africa and knew the world. Of course, as a foreign correspondent, you always have a very close relationship to people in the Foreign Service.

Q: Oh, sure.

NICKEL: And they have a close relationship to people in the press corps.

Q: Particularly the American press corps.

NICKEL: That's right. I think that there was a sense that, while they were not getting a career Foreign Service Officer as Ambassador, that they had somebody who had considerable foreign experience.

Q: A career foreign experience officer.

NICKEL: In fact, if I may say so, I probably had more foreign assignments and more years abroad under my belt than most people in the embassy. And I had also covered the Department of State and therefore knew the Washington end as well.

Q: Sure.

NICKEL: I had a very, very good and close relationship. I think the one thing that I wanted to encourage in people was to speak their mind. One of the things that you do—this is true in any organization—is that you always have to nudge people to speak openly This was important to me since I did feel that I was new to the diplomatic drill, so I was very keen to get the input of my political counselor, political officers. If my instinctive reaction was to do this, I wanted to know whether they had any reservations about that. I think that once I made this clear, it was understood that I genuinely welcomed it. That it was not just, sort of, a pro forma invitation to voice different views. I think we had a very good and open relationship in the embassy. I think the fact that I came out of journalism did have some effect on our reporting, too. As a journalist, one does feel that one ought to get the story out, and that cables ought to be written reasonably quickly after the event happens.

Q: Quality and quantity went up, I'm sure.

NICKEL: I hope so.

Q: I'm sure they both did.

NICKEL: We got a reputation for being very quick in our reporting, and that matters because if you want to make an impression back in Washington on what particularly that means, if people have read it first in the New York Times or the Washington Post or over the wire services, that is the first impression of the event that they form, and that puts you behind the eight ball.

Q: Of course.

NICKEL: I think it's very important, therefore, to come in fairly quickly before people in Washington act on the basis of what they read in the press. I think that's very important.

Q: How about the area of sanctions we put on—I've forgotten the chronology—the Congress imposed certain sanctions, although Mr. Reagan didn't like it very much. I've forgotten the dates, too.

NICKEL: Right. The sanctions campaign really picked up— and as I said earlier in our conversation—after the outbreak of the unrest in the second half of 1984 and the repression which followed in its wake. This built and built.

In 1985, the President barely avoided the passage of congressional legislation by the device of, in a way, preempting congressional action with an executive order in September, 1985 In essence it codified some of the restrictions which we have already practiced in economic dealings with South Africa; such things as computer sales and things of that sort. The practice had already existed, but it was codified through a presidential executive order which required the declaration of a state of emergency under the law that would justify this kind of action.

But by 1986, it was clear the politicians on the South African issue had become very much a main-stream issue in American politics and the politicians wanted a chance to send their own message.

There had always been segments of the Congress that had their own particular interest in the South African issue—I'm talking particularly about the black caucus, and about various liberal constituencies, like the churches. By 1986, when you had Simon Legree-like scenes on television screens, night after night after night, something had to be done to punish the villains. South Africa became a morality play.

Q: I know.

NICKEL: Practically every politician in the country felt that he had to address himself to that problem and show his indignation. So, under those circumstances, what do you do to show your indignation?

Q: You pass a law.

NICKEL: You pass a law. We have to give some tangible signal. Well, this was supposed to be a signal to P.W. Botha as if he had somehow misunderstood that Americans didn't care about apartheid. P.W. Botha didn't quite see it this way. It was also meant as a message to the American constituencies that mattered to these politicians.

That led, in 1986, to the passage of the Comprehensive Anti- Apartheid Act of 1986, which imposed much stricter restrictions on economic dealings with South Africa than had existed before, including a ban on any further investments, and so on, the total stopping of all agricultural trade, and severe limits on other trade.

The Reagan Administration was an administration which was prepared to spend a considerable amount of capital on the issue, probably more political capital than any succeeding administration. My guess about the Bush Administration would be that this readiness to spend political capital on the issue is much less.

I think the opposition to sanctions was based on a number of considerations. One is that the peaceful resolution of South Africa's very, very difficult problems was much more easily achieved against the background of economic growth than against a background of shrinking economic pie, in which whenever somebody else is supposed to get something, it comes off your plate.

I think that we have already seen some strengthening of the far right in white politics. Among the poor whites, the fears of black economic competition, the resentment of what

they think that the blacks are now getting more of the pie than they should, fear about jobs—I think that's all helping the far right in white politics.

Q: As we said earlier, poverty doesn't promote change.

NICKEL: No. That, of course, is our own experience. It's hard to see the emergence of the New South in the middle of the Great Depression. [Chuckle] It's clear that the growing industrialization of the South helped put an end to Jim Crow.

There were also other considerations that the sanctions clearly made our negotiations under Namibia much more difficult. It is now argued, in retrospect, that the sanctions put pressure on the South African government to settle on Namibia. But if you talk to Chet Crocker, he would agree that the total hiatus, which followed the override of the president's veto on the imposition of American sanctions, and our relations with the South Africans, may have cost us a delay of about six months. There was a time when P.W. Botha's anger was such that he, in fact, instructed people in his government not to deal with us. There was an attempt at one stage, by P.W. Botha—ill-conceived and it didn't get anywhere—to carry on the negotiations without participation of the United States. To meet directly with the Angolans in Brazzaville. But, of course, the Angolans were not so stupid as to go along with that, because they had no particular interest in being left all alone with a big bad Boer at the negotiating table all by themselves. Sanctions were a delaying factor, there's no question in my mind.

Q: Oh, I'm sure it was. Were there times when you, as ambassador, had difficulty having access to the people you needed to see in the South African government?

NICKEL: Well, let me say about our relations to the South African government that they were always difficult. They were most difficult with P.W. Botha himself. Because P.W. Botha was, as a personality, a choleric, somewhat paranoid, bully-boy.

I think it might be interesting, from a historical point of view, to recall my first meeting with him.

Q: Yes. By all means.

NICKEL: “Well, Mr. Ambassador,” he said, “we are glad to see you in South Africa as the personal representative of President Reagan, and let me say that we have great admiration for President Reagan. We certainly prefer President Reagan to both his predecessor and to the man who ran against President Reagan, Fritz Mondale.” (They had had experiences at a famous meeting in Vienna between Prime Minister Voerst and Mondale.) “But, on the other hand, let me be quite blunt with you. I really have no great confidence in the United States. I learned my lesson in 1975 when you—you, the Americans encouraged us to go into Angola, and then you pulled out the rug from under us and forced us to withdraw. Now I can see your lips pursing, Mr. Ambassador, because you are about to tell me that that was the Congress—The Clark Amendment. But let me say to you, it doesn't really matter to me who does it, so long as it's your country. How do I know that President Reagan, when he tells me now that he's against leading economic warfare against my country, is going to prevail over the congress?”

Now, P.W. Botha was, in many ways, a very provincial Afrikaner politician who didn't know very much about the rest of the world, and about how our political system worked, but, in this respect, one must say that he was quite astute.Of course, one could only say to him, “Please avoid doing things that make this gloomy forecast inevitable.”

Q: Yes.

NICKEL: He was also very skeptical of constructive engagement.

In that first encounter, I said “Tell me, what are you engaging in? Are you telling me that you want to engage in the internal affairs of my country?”

Q: That's a hard question to answer. [Laughter]

NICKEL: Well, what one does say is that—I said, “We have a legitimate interest in the stability of this country. We don't want to de-stabilize your country. Our interest is stability in your country, but we cannot ignore things which threaten that stability.”

Q: At least, in our judgment.

NICKEL: “In our judgment.” He didn't like the answer, but . . .

Q: Well, it was the only answer you could give.

NICKEL: Well, it was the only answer that one could give.

The notion that P.W. Botha thought that constructive engagement was just manna from heaven is absurdly wrong. He saw it as an anti- apartheid policy and a more dangerous one than the previous one because it was more subtle, because it appealed to those elements in South African society . . .

Q: Who wanted change.

NICKEL: Who wanted change and who saw, as one of the benefits of such change, a better relationship with the United States of America.

Our concept of constructive engagement was never just an engagement of the government. It was for the engagement of the whole spectrum of South African opinion, especially, as I said, at the very outset of those elements who shared our interest in peaceful change, a non-violent change, which meant negotiation.

Q: Did you have contact of any consequence with people like the ANC and with black groups that were challenging the government?

NICKEL: May I just continue on my answer . . .

Q: Oh, sure. I'm sorry.

NICKEL: Inside the South African government, even though P.W. Botha had a very oppressive effect on other members of his Cabinet—because he was a bully-boy and they were all scared of him— there were considerable differences among various ministers.

I had developed, I think, what was a very constructive relationship with the Minister of Justice, for example, Kobif Coetsee, with whom I had a long debate on the concept, for example, of a Bill of Rights, which he initially rejected, and the whole concept of an independent judiciary, which he—over the months of our discussions—came to accept. And he was helpful on many things, on grievances that we were trying to deal with.

There were other ministers who were much less receptive, like Louis LaGrange was, in fact, the Minister of Law and Order, as distinct from the minister of justice . . .

Q: Two separate . . .

NICKEL: . . .who handled the police, and who was invariably loyal to his policemen no matter what they had done. That was not helpful at all.

There were other ministers, like Gerritt Viltoen, Minister of Education for some of the time that I was there—he also was put in charge, for a while, of dealing with the crisis in black education He was a man with whom one could take up specific grievances and get some action. The same with the Minister of Labor. But we were engaged on a very broad front with the government. Foreign Minister Pik Botha, of course, is the man I dealt with more than anyone else— we saw each other certainly almost every week once, because we had so many items on our respective agendas, especially the regional items. Also, he became the conduit for expressing some of our concerns about some of the internal developments. Pik Botha saw himself, presented himself, as a so-called Verlichte,

a reformer. Very often made it quite plain that if he had his way, things would be done differently from the way P.W. Botha was handling them. Pik Botha, however, was given to histrionics. But, sometimes, you became so inured to it when he pushed his chair away from the table and said, “Well, this is the end. We go our way—you go your's. There's no point talking anymore,” and then you would head for the exit, and he would tug on your sleeve and say, “Now, wait a minute. Wait a minute. Let's get back here, and talk about it after all.” [Laughter]

But there were some rather bizarre scenes, I must say, that we went through. In the end, there was always sort of a glint of humor in his eye, and in mine, too.

Q: I used to deal with George Brown in England. All histrionics, you know.

NICKEL: That's right. I dealt with him as a journalist, too.

Q: Oh, yes. I'm sure you know what I mean.

NICKEL: Yes. They also shared another quality, incidentally—Pik Botha and Brown—they liked their drink occasionally. [Laughter]

Q: Oh, yes. Your never quite sure whether Georgie was drunk with his own verbosity or whether he was really drinking. [Laughter]

NICKEL: That might be true with respect to Pik Botha, too, because he had a real problem sometimes. How he could put away so much without actually dying from it, I'll never know. But he could be quite coherent, in spite of enormous consumption.

Now, on the question of the embassy's contacts with blacks, let me say that there was not only the effort made, but we also managed to keep the lines of communication open. Much of the credit goes to my staff, of course. We were always plugged in very, very well. And this in spite of the undoubted fact that the policy of constructive engagement was not popular with South African blacks. They tended to see the opposition to sanctions

as a litmus test. If you weren't for sanctions, you couldn't be all that much against apartheid. That's what many of them thought, but by no means all. I'm talking about elites here, because there's no question in my mind, and every single opinion survey has demonstrated that when you get down to the rank- and-file who have to bear the consequences of sanctions, unlike the elites who talk about it, sanctions are not necessarily popular in the reality.

Q: No.

NICKEL: Though they may be seen as a useful threat to use against the oppressive South African regime when it comes to the implementation, a lot of blacks don't really like it, especially when they discover that sanctions don't translate into political progress all that easily.

And this in spite of the fact that people like Desmond Tutu, for example, saw support for sanctions as a kind of acid test—had made it into the acid test—whether we were for apartheid or against apartheid. It was a difficult relationship. I said, in spite of Tutu's very vitriolic attacks on President Reagan's policies, I kept seeing Desmond Tutu, in fact, he received me for a farewell call when I left in 1986, although his public stance said he wasn't meeting with representatives of the Reagan Administration. Oddly enough, my successor—for whom I have great respect—Ed Perkins, who is our first black ambassador, was never...

Q: Yes. I saw him on Thursdays.

NICKEL: . . . was never received by Tutu.

Q: Never. Really.

NICKEL: I can't say that my sessions with Desmond Tutu were particularly easy-going, although there was always a bit of good- natured banter back and forth between us. I think

that Desmond Tutu was very keen to demonstrate that while he loathed the policy, he didn't have anything against me personally. I think by way of demonstrating this, by sort of, letting me know that he thought that, personally, I was a good guy, he, in fact, followed his own rule in the breach and saw me repeatedly, many times. I think that's true.

It's interesting, my farewell receptions, especially in Johannesburg, where most of the black political elite live, there was an enormous spectrum of people from the UDF, from Black Consciousness, from all kind of groups. From their public rhetoric, you might have thought that they wouldn't show up at my farewell party. They were all there and extremely cordial and I still have very cordial relations with them. For they knew that if they came in to ask that we take up a grievance—whether a forced removal, or a travel problem, or a case of police abuse, we would take it up with the government and that as an embassy we had the most clout.

Q: Have you been back since you left . . .

NICKEL: I have been back. I have been back three times, in fact. I will be going back in connection with a study project which I will be doing for the U.S. Peace Institute.

Q: You mentioned that you were going to be with them, yes.

NICKEL: It deals with the political implications of economic interdependence in southern Africa . . .

Q: Very important study.

NICKEL: Yes.

Q: I'll be interested to see how that goes.

NICKEL: I think economic interdependence is the proper description. It is not just a dependence of the front-line states on South Africa, but it's a real economic

interdependence and, it provides political incentives for South Africa as it does for the frontline states for political settlement. This is not to say that you can simply ignore the continuation of apartheid. I think most black political leaders find it very difficult to ignore the internal developments. I've always felt that I think it was a very important element of the approach of constructive engagement that success in negotiations between South Africa and black neighbors had salutary effect on the political environment of South Africa itself. It demonstrated that negotiation is possible, that it can produce beneficial results. I think it has a clearly positive impact in what happens internally.

Q: It's definitely related to internal change, too.

NICKEL: Absolutely.

Q: An opportunity for internal change.

NICKEL: Yes.

Q: Because what you're talking about is growth instead of stagnation.

NICKEL: Right. Any kind of cross-border violence, I think, has polarizing effects in South Africa itself, which make political accommodation more difficult.

Q: Do you have a comment on the Anglos in South Africa as against the Boers? They're a smaller element, aren't they?

NICKEL: It's about 60% Afrikaner and 40% English speakers in the white community, that actually omits a rather sizable Portuguese minority and some other groups. You know, there are Germans, but, basically, it's about a 60/40 split.

Due to the legacy of the Boer war, and the emergence of the National Party as the legitimate political expression of Afrikanerdom, most English speakers were basically anti-government. But that has changed very drastically.

Today the National Party has lost, perhaps, more than half of the Afrikaner constituency. It has lost it in large part to the far right, to the Conservative Party. And, indeed, it has lost a substantial number of better-educated professional Afrikaners, who are more reform minded, to the New Democratic Party. And the way in which the National Party has managed to survive is that it now relies very heavily on the support of English-speaking voters, who see the National Party as the safe party of reform.

Q: It's a stable element.

NICKEL: There is a central issue where there is little difference between the average Afrikaner and the average English speaker. For even if the English speaker presents himself as being more liberal, the notion of unfettered black majority rule is as unpopular and as feared with English speakers as it is by Afrikaners.

Q: Well, that depends on the color of your skin, not your national origin. [Laughter] Perfectly natural act.

NICKEL: This common element of fear, of course, is the greatest obstacle to transfer of power, until whites come to recognize that there are safeguards for them. That is, of course, incumbent on the other side to make clear that...

Q: That there are.

NICKEL: ...it's addressing those security fears.

Q: Sure.

NICKEL: It's been said that the liberation of blacks leads through the minds of whites, a sense on their past that democracy does not make them helpless victims. One has to find come constitutional way, which is not just simply race-based, to address these fears of whites before the transfer of power is really going to take place. There have to be checks

and balances and protections for individual rights, and unless that is done in a convincing manner, both English speakers and African speakers are going to resist the transfer of power and will continue to see it as a kind of political suicide. That also applies to other minorities.

Q: Is there any significant Marxist influence among the black people apart from—I know ANC has to some extent that, but how about others?

NICKEL: Well, you get a lot of Marxist rhetoric in the statements of liberation movements, because the liberation struggle has been defined, not just as a struggle against white minority rule, but also the struggle against capitalist exploitation. Rightly or wrongly—wrongly in my view—capitalism has been presented as the other side of the apartheid coin.

Q: Well, most of the business owners are white, I suppose.

NICKEL: That's right. There is this notion that apartheid is really the ultimate form of capitalist exploitation.

There was a time—there's no question—when the mining industry in South Africa benefited from cheap labor. I think now, not only is the nature of the structure of the South African economy such that mining has relatively receded in importance, but the industrial sector has become more important than the mining sector. The nature of the mining industry is also changing. It's no longer as labor- intensive an industry as it used to be.

But that notion of the unholy alliance of capitalism and apartheid is a very, very strong one. Since one is reacting against the present system, the result is a kind of Marxist rhetoric that you no longer even hear in the Soviet Union these days. It is a funny thing that the last outpost of this kind of talk in the world seems to be Southern Africa. I think one has to separate between what's simply rhetoric and what is in the minds of these people that form the economic future.

I think one has to say that until now, the ANC has really thought very little about coherent economic blueprints for the future, and to the extent that they have now been forced by various useful dialogues that have taken place, to define what they really mean, they have become considerably more moderate. They're now talking more about the mixed economy. But, of course, they're still talking a great deal about redistribution of wealth. And they're talking in terms of nationalizing the commanding heights of the economy than the kind of wholesale socialism that they seemed to be endorsing some years ago. That may be the result of the collapse of their old socialist role model.

Q: It's beginning to sound something like the British Labor Party.

NICKEL: It seems to be moving in that direction. It's still, in my view, rather half-baked, because there has been a tendency on the part of the ANC to say, “Well, we'll think about that when we come into power, but the first thing is to win the struggle of liberation, then we'll get down to these economic problems.” And that, of course, is going to be a tremendous challenge for the future, because South Africa does face a kind of Malthusian nightmare, with an exploding population and very little prospect of generating enough jobs to absorb this additional population.

Q: Has the effect of sanctions, shall we say, increased self- sufficiency in manufacturing, or haven't the sanctions had enough bite to have that happen?

NICKEL: I think that the South African government has always anticipated sanctions, and in various areas, and, of course, was very keen to build up that autarky even before the sanctions were actually imposed.

The example that is most frequently cited, of course, is the arms industry. South Africa, perhaps as a result of the sanctions, has become the major arms exporter these days, which is a matter of necessity, because, otherwise, the unit cost of these items that they do produce would be even greater than they are now. I think the biggest damage that

sanctions have done is basically to dry off the capital inflow. South African businessmen have, in some respects, profited over the short run from their ability to buy up multi-national companies at fire-sale prices. They've made some tremendous bargains in this respect. But the trouble is that the simple acquisition of these manufacturing facilities, and so on, has not added new jobs, hasn't really been, in that sense, new investment.

Q: Like a takeover.

NICKEL: That is like a takeover and it simply doesn't create jobs the way the South African economy needs to create jobs. That is, I think, the biggest single damage that sanctions has inflicted on the South African economy.

There's clearly also a technology loss that has occurred through the severing of these ties with multi-national companies. It's not that the technology becomes unavailable, but it does become available at a higher cost.

Q: It doesn't flow naturally because of the corporate relationship.

NICKEL: That's right.

Q: There has to be a separate process in acquisition.

NICKEL: Right. Right. And that is damaging. I think the actual trade sanctions, so far, have not really been all that crucial in their impact. For example that South African coal continue to be exported, whether it goes through Taiwan. It's a tangible commodity.

Q: Well, the world is a big market.

NICKEL: This is almost impossible to track down and South Africans have developed some very important new markets, since the sanctions. Mainly in the Pacific Rim in Southeast Asia. Taiwan has turned out to be a very important economic lifeline to them. They've had very close relations with Taiwan throughout—when Taiwan was still in that

position of being another one of those pariah states. They've developed a very close relationship.

Q: Well, that's not a bad connection. Taiwan's a very efficient operation.

NICKEL: That's right.

Q: I remember when I was Assistant Secretary for Economic Affairs, when the energy crisis hit us in '83, the South African ambassador came to see me to tell me that—in case we were having trouble with our energy supplies—we had a lot of coal—that they developed some pretty good techniques for extracting a lot of coal, maybe we could do some business. So I said, "We'd bury the mine."

NICKEL: Yes.

Q: Of course, it's highly expensive, but it does work.

NICKEL: I mean, on the whole question of self- sufficiency, in energy, first of all when there's been an oil glut, it's almost impossible to impose any kind of . . .

Q: This is totally irrelevant now.

NICKEL: . . . oil embargo. Secondly, they did spend a good deal of money in improving on the German World War II process— the Leuna process. It's still more expensive, but they built up the synfuel capacities to about one-third of their needs. They also sit on a considerable reserve of crude oil. They've been selling some of it off now, because obviously when you sit on oil you've bought at high prices, it becomes a very expensive business to just have it sit there. Actually, they've been selling off oil in the world market, some of their reserves.

Q: With an oil glut, you can always buy oil somewhere.

NICKEL: That's right.

Q: So you don't need to stockpile it.

NICKEL: Right.

Q: Which is, of course, why we haven't filled our own reserves.

NICKEL: Yes. You know, you're dealing with a country that has an enormous wealth in coal.

Q: Yes.

NICKEL: And in Mossel Bay there are some reasonably promising oil and gas-drilling operations going on. So long as oil prices are low, they may not be economical, but the South Africans figure that might change again.

Q: They have experimented some with nuclear power, haven't they?

NICKEL: Not just experimented. They have a nuclear power plant at Koeberg, which is outside Cape Town, which has been operational for quite a few years. Basically Westinghouse-designed reactors, supplied by the French and serviced by the French. The one explosion, an attempt at sabotage at the Koeberg Nuclear Power Station, evidently was done with the help of a French communist who had gotten into the plant as one of the technicians there.

Q: Have you got a comment on the Israeli relationship with the South Africans? People talk about it a great deal.

NICKEL: They talk about it a great deal, and of course, its hard to get at all the facts, because they're being kept very, very closely.

Q: It's not the information that the Israelis share with us.

NICKEL: No. Obviously, there's quite a number of Israeli nuclear physicists and other technical people, and vice versa, South African scientists who have gone to Israel. I'm sure there has been a good deal of cooperation on the technical side. It's a very sore subject with the Israelis, as you know. It's not such a sore subject with the South Africans who like to emphasize the parallels in the situations, you know, with two beleaguered nations, both of which have in common that they are afraid of being swamped by those hoards that surround them.

Q: One thing they don't have in common is the U.S. policy towards them.

NICKEL: There's a big difference in policy, yes. I often wondered what kind of leverage one would have if one had that kind of aid program in South Africa. But, as we know, sometimes our leverage with the Israelis, in spite of the enormous aid relationship that we have with them, also seems to be quite limited.

Q: It's so big, we don't have any leverage.

NICKEL: That's right.

Q: It's not crucial or vital; it's the main show.

NICKEL: It's the opposite end of the spectrum, but sometimes the opposite ends of the spectrum seem to converge.

Q: That's fascinating. Well, this has been very interesting and I think we're coming towards the end of the tape. But I wondered, have you got any other final comments?

NICKEL: What made this kind of ambassadorship so interesting—some may say difficult—is that you're dealing with a foreign policy problem which deals with the domestic policies of the host country and is driven in this country by domestic politics.

Q: Yes.

NICKEL: You cannot construct a sustainable foreign policy unless you have some kind of domestic consensus and support. On this issue when many politicians on the Hill, quite naturally—it's in the nature of elected officials—to cast their policies in terms that will appeal to them or will meet their domestic political needs. But what is needed from the point of view of domestic politics and what is needed in terms of foreign policy is sometimes very difficult to reconcile.

I think you do have a tremendous need for presidential leadership. I must say that I admire Ronald Reagan's willingness to stick with the issue, both on the sanctions issue and sticking with the negotiating track that we had worked out in Namibia and Angola, and his willingness to spend political capital on the issue. But I must say that had he been better able to communicate real empathy and concern with the whole question of racial injustice, not just in the South African context, it would have made our job a bit easier.

Q: He didn't do that.

NICKEL: He was not a great communicator on the issue, because he didn't seem to feel it quite as urgently as perhaps other Americans do. Had he been able to communicate such a sense of urgency, I think his ability to sustain his policy would have been much greater.

End of interview