

boycott



south africa ?

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This article is about people, governments, and a particular form of governmental behavior made manifest in boycotts. On the international level, boycotts usually involve political or economic restrictions and constraints or at least threats of such. Sometimes a combined strategy of limited actions and threats of harsher measures is employed. Throughout history, such attempts to control the behavior of nations and their people across international boundaries have been a shining example of the inability of coercive tactics to achieve their stated objectives. Yet actions such as boycotts continue to fascinate governments which, at the expense of their taxpayers, play their games with little or no understanding of the behavior of their opponents or of the mechanism which they attempt to employ. The purpose of this article is to explore the use of coercion in terms of boycotts and other similar measures, to attempt to explain their failures, and to consider alternative forms of expression.

Governmental boycotts illustrate Jay Forrester's concept of the counterintuitive behavior of complex systems [see "Counterintuitive Behavior of Social Systems," page 14 of this issue—Editor]. His thesis suggests that, in dealing with social systems, what might at first appear to be a logical strategy to employ in order to achieve a given goal or objective often produces the wrong (and frequently just the opposite) effect or result because the strategy is based on a simplistic "intuitive" notion of the behavior of the system. Furthermore, such notions fail to recognize the important effects of apparently insignificant or unconsidered relationships and responses. Only in the case of simple systems (those with a small number, say less than five, of significant cause and effect interrelationships or feedback loops) is our intuitive or "common sense" understanding useful enough to predict successfully their response.

Machinery provides many examples of simple systems, because machines are usually required to function in easily predicted patterns. A car will accelerate if the gas and air supply rates are increased and will decelerate if the brakes are applied (within the range of normal operating conditions). Complex systems have a larger number of significant cause and effect relationships than (most) human minds can accommodate. (The concept of accommodation is akin to seeing several moves ahead in a chess game, except that in the chess game the causes and effects are separated by time, or moves, but in most systems many feedback loops may be in operation at any given instant). When planning a strategy to effect a change in a complex system, a natural tendency is to disregard feedback loops in order to derive a simple system which then yields to a straightforward or intuitive analysis. Feedback loops are often ignored because the planner is unaware of their significance, because by so doing, the list of complicated relationships is shortened.

ISOLATING SOUTH AFRICA

A striking example of the

inadequacy of the common sense approach occurred at the British Commonwealth Prime Ministers Conference in London in 1960. Although not a true boycott, it had all the major elements of one and for the purposes of this illustration may be considered such.

The leaders of several black member states opposed the (then) Union of South Africa's white supremacy policy of apartheid (literally "separateness"). They threatened Britain with a mass resignation from the Commonwealth unless Britain expelled South Africa. So poorly planned was this strategy that the fundamental goal (abolition of apartheid and white rule in South Africa) was subjugated to the emotional involvement of the threat and to the less significant and undefined goal of ousting South Africa from the Commonwealth. The resulting behavior of the South African Prime Minister, Dr. Hendrik Verwoerd, must have surprised all concerned. He dramatically preempted the black statesmen by withdrawing from the Commonwealth, thereby easing a potentially difficult and embarrassing situation for Britain and completely deflating the sails of black brinkmanship.

The black threat was based on the belief that South Africa's survival depended on the salubrious economic association that existed between members of the Commonwealth. Faced with possible expulsion, it was felt that South Africa would alter its political course rather than succumb in the resulting economic solitude. Behavioral feedback loops abound in this example, but the important ones were exposed by

the results of South Africa's resignation.

Firstly, Verwoerd was able to gain significant support in South Africa by showing how the black leaders were threatening all South Africans, black, white, brown, and yellow! This political maneuver resulted in a powerful vote of confidence for the government and further strengthened many of the bigotted arguments for apartheid ("irresponsible blacks are not fit to govern, etc."). Even the disenfranchised South Africans voiced pride in their "national identity," and a general wave of unity pervaded the streets for several months. The black leaders in the North failed to recognize the danger to their objective in their threat. A normal response to any threat, implied or expressed, is to dig in one's heels and fight back. The South African government was able to capitalize on this threat effect by offering to lead all threatened South Africans in their fight. The response to the political ploy was particularly sad to witness in the case of black South Africans, since their support was the result of a carefully organised public relations campaign (via government-owned media in some cases) aimed at taking advantage of the failure of the ill-conceived, though well-intentioned, plan of the Northern blacks to liberate their brothers in the South. By emphasizing the negative aspects of their plan, the South African government was able to achieve its objectives.

The second feedback loop that was not considered by the blacks actually contributed to South Africa's growth. By taking advantage of her new found freedom

of trade outside the Commonwealth, South Africa was able to extend her markets and find market value prices for her expanding list of exports, rather than the artificially controlled "favorable" Commonwealth prices. The Republic of South Africa is today a far stronger and more independent state because of the black threat in 1960 than she might have been had she remained a Commonwealth member. Instead of toppling the white regime, these same black states have actually *contributed* to the problem as they perceived it by forcing the South African government to find and exploit new markets. Now, because they are completely cut off from contact with South Africa, these black states have lost any potential influence or control. Other nonwhite nations trade with South Africa, and each has made its mark on both her foreign and domestic policies.

In retrospect, the system involved in the black/white encounter *appears* to fit into the simple category, or at least its behavior has been explained by only two feedback loops. Although there were many more (which, while individually less significant than the above two, collectively played a supportive role), the important point to note is that these two responses were clearly not anticipated by the black leaders; else they would certainly have altered their plans. Even a simple model which included *only* the above two feedback loops might have shown the black leaders how weak their plan really was.

NEXT, RHODESIA

A second episode in which coercion failed miserably as a means of attaining stated objectives occurred between Britain and Rhodesia. Again, a racial problem provoked the boycott, but this time it was white against white, on behalf of blacks. After a cold period of threat and counter-threat, Ian Smith, leader of the ruling white minority in Rhodesia, declared unilateral independence in 1965 (Rhodesia was at that time a colony). In establishing his sovereign state, Smith defied the British Parliament who had threatened "dire consequences if Smith declared independence," and the world waited for all the worn-out power of that aging Empire to descend

on him. Instead of military force, however, Britain responded with a boycott, and, yes (you guessed it), after six years, Ian Smith still holds the reins of power in Rhodesia.

Britain attempted to control Smith's Rhodesia by exercising the economic muscles of the Commonwealth. By curtailing all trade with Rhodesia, Britain intended to bring Smith to his knees as vital commodities were exhausted. However Britain soon learned that she could control neither Rhodesia, nor other Commonwealth members, not to mention nonmember nations. Although many well-meaning countries around the globe joined Britain's crusade, there were always enough trading partners to ensure white Rhodesia's survival. Short of a naval and aerial blockade (both illegal under international law) not even British diplomacy could prevent free trade with Rhodesia. Furthermore, it would be strategically dangerous for neighboring South Africa to allow the white buffer state to fall, so that, in addition to the free trade reasons, there were strong political forces to prop up Mr. Smith's government.

It would appear, from Britain's unwillingness to use military force, that the expressed goal of toppling Smith was *not* valued very highly. However, it is reasonable to suggest that Britain realised the ultimate futility of exercising her military muscle, since Smith had garnered "total support" for his policies. (The white electorate voted their support while the black Rhodesians expressed their favor through the mechanism of "indaba," or tribal pow-wow. The reasons for the white support are clear, the blacks may have been persuaded by Smith's promises of increased chief's salaries and greater power and control over the distribution of land.) This second example clearly illustrates the impotence of boycotts, threats, and other coercive attempts at control.

One alternative might well be found in the judicious use of military force (Kennedy's Cuban blockade for example). However it is important to note that military force, if used to control the behavior of a people, is subject to the same shortcomings as a threat or boycott: by coercively conditioning a nation, the continued use of force is made obligatory. This is as true in Czechoslovakia as it is in

the United States. No free-thinking people would contrive to behave in a subservient manner if the coercion were removed. (Kennedy was dealing with a governmental *body* rather than a nation of people, but the same arguments apply.) A far more effective *alternative* is communication, and one important vehicle of communication is trade. Several interesting examples illustrate how trade can influence behavior.

QUID PRO QUO

In applying apartheid, the South African government classifies all citizens by racial origin: whites, colored (mulatto), Bantu (black), and Asian. Each group is restrained by law from intercourse of any kind (except verbal, and that is socially restricted) with the other groups and from activity or presence within the other's group area (racially defined geographical sectors). Thus a black may *not* purchase beer in a white bar, etc. In recent years, the Japanese have become the principal purchaser of South African pig iron, and when their trade delegations visited the Republic, they were treated to a taste of life in South Africa, Asian style! None of the white amenities (such as hotels, transportation, and entertainment) were available to them since they were restricted by law to utilize nonwhite facilities. While white businessmen who knew them probably accorded them common courtesies, the average white citizen, including civil servants, probably treated the Japanese visitors as they would any other nonwhite South African—with obvious disdain. Furthermore, the well-cut suits of the Japanese businessmen would have "threatened" many white South Africans who are not used to seeing well dressed nonwhites.

Duly impressed, the Japanese suggested that they might seek other sources of pig iron unless they were treated in the manner to which they were accustomed elsewhere in the "civilised" world. The South African government was not about to lose an excellent market merely because of a little political philosophy, so they immediately labelled

the Japanese visitors "honorary whites," allowing them access to most whites-only privileges!

This in itself was no great step forward for South Africa, and the Japanese were astute enough to realise that the compromise was a political strain domestically. But *both* sides agreed on the new arrangements, and now both Japan and South Africa share in the satisfaction of free trade.

In making this compromise, however, the absurdity of the racial policy was manifest for all the world (including South Africans) to see. As a result, white South African government officials (up to and including the Prime Minister) today entertain delegations from *any* nation that seeks commerce with South Africa. Trade with friendly black nations is actively pursued, and economic and other aid is continually made available to nations which need it. In summary, in attempting to generate an understanding and acceptance of apartheid, the South African government has learned to pursue a progressive trade policy, which, in turn, has caused noticeable and significant modifications in the policy of apartheid.

A similar case of learning has occurred outside South Africa. The Polaroid Corporation, long a forward-looking and progressive company, has responded rationally to demands by the Polaroid Workers Revolutionary Committee that it cease trade with and in South Africa because of apartheid. Rather than merely accede, Polaroid dispatched a racially mixed employee committee to study the problem in South Africa. The goal is to study this experiment to see *if* it is possible to cease all dealings with the South African *government* by which the enforcement of apartheid laws is directly or indirectly aided, while at the same time continuing to trade and communicate with the South African *people*. For example, all sales and service activities related to Polaroid's ID-Two identification system (used in the passbooks or permits which all blacks are required to carry when in white group areas) will stop, while assembly of Polaroid sunglasses (in a South African factory which employs 200 blacks) will continue.

In this way Polaroid hopes to be able to express its antiapartheid corporate will meaningfully, while at the same time retaining valuable trade, and thus the opportunity to communicate. Not the least important aspect of this move is that 200 black families will continue to be employed and enjoy the associated upward mobility (however limited it may be) that they might otherwise be denied.

All too often well-meaning people and pressure groups react irrationally to what they consider to be a bad state of affairs. The Episcopal Church in the United States for instance, recently put General Motors on notice that it wanted that automaker's manufacturing activities in South Africa to cease (that church owns more than 12,500 GM shares). If the church really hopes to achieve the betterment of the black man's lot in South Africa, it should realise that what it has neglected in its latterday crusade is the effect of a GM pullout on the thousands of families (of all races) who depend on GM in South Africa and, more importantly, just how the South African government might respond. The trustees of Stanford University, who also control a large block of GM stock (about 23,000 shares), have urged GM to "do whatever is feasible to improve the conditions of nonwhites in South Africa," but they abstained from voting on the Episcopal proposal for the following reasons:

We have abstained from voting against [GM on the South African issue] in order to avoid any possible implication of support for the policy of apartheid. We agree with the apparent intent of the proposal to oppose racial discrimination, although we do not agree with the steps it proposes to this end. We doubt that withdrawal from South Africa by General Motors now would significantly aid the cause of racial equality in South Africa or advance the welfare of nonwhites subject to discrimination there. Instead we believe that the corporation's greatest contribution to lessening racial discrimination in South Africa can be made by using all feasible means to combat racial discrimination.

This is an example of a reasoned approach to the problem, rather than an emotional or irrational one such as the church's.

Another example of reason was evident in the recent activities of the United Presbyterian Church. Last February, Gulf Oil (under pressure from UPC) included on its annual meeting agenda, four resolutions critical of Gulf's involvements in Mozambique and Angola, Portuguese colonies in southern Africa. Of the four, only one was negative (it would prohibit investments in colonial territories, period), while two sought to study Gulf's involvements in Africa (the fourth involved corporate structure).

The main point to note here is that reactions and policies need not be binary, full on or full off. They can and should be modulated to suit each situation so that maximum effectiveness can be achieved with a minimum of pain inflicted upon innocent participants in the system.

In summary, then, boycotts appear to be useful only in limited contests. They usually fail because of a poor understanding of the behavior of the many mechanisms of systems which are affected and even upset by boycotts. Very often an analytic approach will expose unexpected responses; however, boycotts are usually motivated emotionally and are thus not justified by serious rational thought.

Boycotts are by nature very general (rather than selective) in their sphere

of influence, affecting not only the governments against which they are enacted but also individual citizens. Often the welfare of these people deteriorates, even though it is they whom the boycotters intend to help. Governments, like crusaders bent on "saving souls," would do well to realise the gravity of their policies and actions with regard to those they would aid.

Communication, as the effective alternative to boycotts and with trade as its means, can have positive and constructive (though unobtrusive) results. How might relations between the United States and the U.S.S.R. (not to mention between Americans and Russians) have developed had not the cold war of the 50s thawed? Consider the horizons now made visible by the State Department's recent easing of restrictions on trade and communications with China (and therefore with the Chinese people). Imagine, if you will, the potential results of a similar move of economic and cultural recognition with respect to Cuba.

Boycotts set people against each other. Free trade and communication bring people together for mutual benefit. Since there is no one to benefit mutually with the South African government in the maintenance of apartheid, contacts with that body for trading will accomplish what boycotts never have—the demonstration of apartheid's futility and stupidity. ●

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