

# An American Alternative To Sanctions

Robert W. Poole, Jr.

**P**olitical sophisticates are currently engaged in a showdown over economic sanctions. Liberals have won their battle to get the Reagan administration to impose sanctions against the repressive regime in South Africa. And conservatives have won their fight to have the administration do likewise against the repressive regime in Nicaragua. Each supports its own sanctions program as morally obligatory and denounces the other's as naive and ineffective.

Curiously, at the same time as this war of words is being waged in New York and Washington, out in the rest of America people have a different view. Americans abhor South African apartheid and want to see it ended. But by large majorities they oppose US government attempts to *force* this to happen.

For example, a 1985 Louis Harris poll for *Business Week* found that Americans oppose a government ban on US bank loans in South Africa by a 51-to-41 percent margin. A ban on all new business investment there by US firms is opposed 54 to 39 percent and a full trade embargo, 66 to 29 percent. A forced withdrawal of US firms is opposed by 76 percent and favored by only 18 percent. Interestingly, polls show similar opposition to imposing sanctions and embargoes against Nicaragua.

It is clear that most Americans do not view these foreign-policy issues in the same ideological terms as do the experts and opinion leaders. Repressive governments, left or right, are deplorable, they agree. But let's *us* stay out, mind our own business, and not try to solve all the world's problems. We're unlikely to know how, anyway, and the danger of getting sucked into a shooting war is very real. The memory of Vietnam, where noble intentions led to a terribly costly quagmire, still burns very brightly in our memories.

This plague-on-all-their-houses sentiment is dismissed as naive and simplistic by those in the business of making foreign policy. But is it really? In a recent paper for the Washington-based Cato Institute, historian Ted Galen Carpenter presents a sophisticated case for precisely the policy preferences of grassroots Americans, which Carpenter characterizes as "benign detachment." Our government, says Carpenter, should maintain diplomatic relations and encourage full trade relationships with *all* other governments. But it should evenhandedly refrain from attempting to control and manipulate outcomes, whether by foreign aid or by meddling "human rights policies" à la Jimmy Carter.

**T**here are three mainstream arguments for active interventionism of the kind favored by political sophisticates: strategic, economic, and ideological. But all of them are weak needs on which to hang worldwide intervention.

The *strategic* argument asserts that America has vital strategic interests all over the globe. Repressive right-wing regimes that are "pro-Western" must be courted as part of a strategy to protect those interests.

It's often not clear, however, what those "interests" really are. Is the Philippines truly the *only* place in the western Pacific where air and naval bases can be located? Wouldn't some other countries eagerly bid for the myriad jobs (pegged at 39,000) generated by those bases? And unless the Yankees have forever alienated the democratic opposition—for example, by embracing a Ferdinand Marcos as the only alternative to communism—why assume that a successor regime would be our enemy? In the past 15 years a number of right-wing dictatorships have been overthrown and replaced by *democratic* governments—

Argentina, Brazil, Portugal, and Spain, to name a few.

The *economic* argument says that we must prop up dictators so that we won't be cut off from vital resources by leftist or communist successor regimes. This argument simply ignores some of the major events of recent history. It was our allegedly pro-Western friends—Iran and Saudi Arabia—that engineered the destructive OPEC oil-price hikes and embargoes in the 1970s. And our communist enemies Angola and China, far from cutting us off, have eagerly rushed to sell the West oil and consumer products, respectively, as long as such trade has been allowed.

People engage in trade because it is in their economic interest to do so—regardless of ideology. And with world markets, it is virtually impossible for a government to selectively keep something out of some countries' hands while selling it to others. The "others" have every incentive to turn around and sell it to the highest bidder. Only in exceptional circumstances can governments successfully use trade as a weapon; even the OPEC cartel is now on its last legs.

Finally, the *ideological* argument makes the point that authoritarian regimes are less bad than totalitarian ones and so should be favored in trade arrangements and military support. At least the former often permit private property and sometimes a semi-free press and quasi-independent judicial system.

That's true, as far as it goes. But should the government of the United States lend its moral support to brutal regimes that torture and kill? In the worldwide battle of ideas and ideologies, to do so is to abdicate the moral high ground, handing the thugs of the world an easy propaganda target. Far better to denounce evenhandedly repressive regimes of both the right and the left,

championing only the forces of freedom.

Consider what might be the results of applying such a policy of benign detachment. Rather than seeking to prop up (or to destabilize) such creatures as the Shah of Iran, Anastasio Somoza, and Ferdinand Marcos; rather than slapping embargoes on trade with Cuba, Nicaragua, or South Africa—rather than engaging in such petty intervention, what if our government simply maintained formal diplomatic relations and *encouraged* trade and tourism?

Dare we imagine the impact of

thousands of American investors and millions of American tourists in Cuba and South Africa, bringing American political and cultural values with them? It is widely acknowledged that US firms have been a major force against economic and social discrimination in South Africa. How much more could be accomplished by large-scale interaction with ordinary Americans? Wherever we go, we bring our culture along with us—our abiding individualism (disregarding race and class), the work ethic, diversity and choice, and tolerance of others'

views and lifestyles. American music, movies, TV shows, and consumer products are powerful implicit expressions of these values...which add up to one thing—freedom.

Reinforcing that message would be the rest of the "benign detachment" policy—no meddling, no aid programs, no sanctions; simply an exposure of the "offending" country to the mainstream of Western culture, such that its repressions would be sharply contrasted with the virtues of freedom and individualism.

Of course, for that very reason, the regimes that hold the reins of power in such countries as Cuba and Nicaragua would doubtless find Americans' presence unwelcome. But then the burden of denying to their people the benefits of trade with the United States would fall on those regimes. No more would they be able to paint the hated *Yanquis* the villain when trying to explain away their foundering economies.

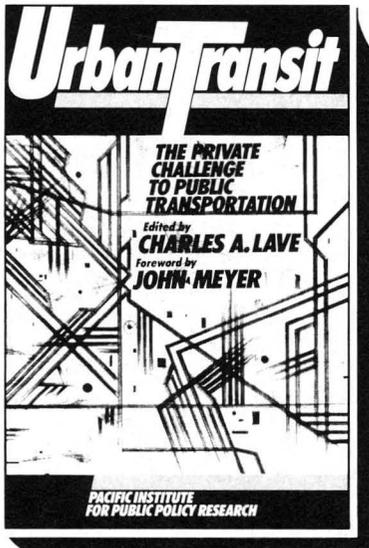
Those who make their living out of foreign policy will no doubt attack the benign detachment prescription as "isolationism." Yet how can you call isolationist a policy whose core is greatly expanded *interaction*? In truth, the policy would translate into action the best of American values. As is often the case, on this issue the people are far ahead of their purported leaders. □

## quotable quotes

■ The great ambition professed by public school managers is, of course, education for citizenship and self-government, which harks back to Jefferson's historic call for "general education to enable every man to judge for himself what will secure or endanger his freedom." What the public schools practice with remorseless proficiency, however, is the prevention of citizenship and the stifling of self-government. When 58 percent of the thirteen-year-olds tested by the National Assessment for Educational Progress think it is against the law to start a third party in America, we are dealing not with a sad educational failure but with a remarkably subtle success.

—Walter Karp  
Harper's, June 1985

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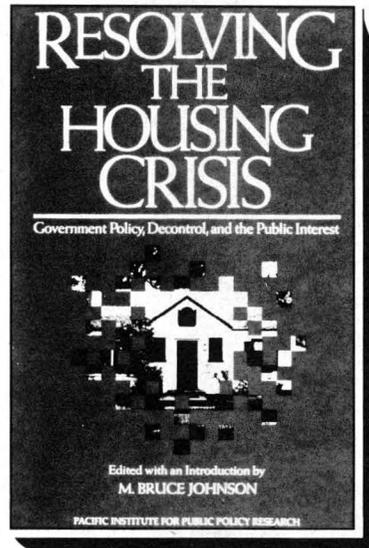
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