Partner to History

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The U.S. Role in South Africa's Transition to Democracy

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To Tova, Sheri, and Lori and your beautiful children.
This story is testimony that a better world is possible.

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Foreword

PARTNER TO HISTORY, I believe, is destined to become a classic account of U.S. diplomacy in action. It is honest, gripping, and enlightening. It also has much to tell us about the U.S. role in South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy in the first half of the 1990s.

Partner to History parts company from most other studies of U.S. diplomacy —whether classics or not—in one important, and very instructive, way. Typically, such studies put the United States at the forefront of the action. Whether portrayed as orchestrating the activities of a coalition of like-minded states, launching its own mediation effort, or employing coercive measures to bring reluctant parties to the negotiating table, the United States is unquestionably and conspicuously at center stage.

There are of course good reasons why the United States is so much in the limelight: it is the world's only superpower, with interests that reach all four corners of the globe and with the ability to project unmatched diplomatic, military, and economic power. Yet the fact that the United States is often cast as a leading actor unfortunately encourages a belief that the United States can play no other role. The idea that America should act overseas purely on its own terms or not at all has its place, especially, perhaps, where large-scale military deployments in support of vital national interests are concerned. But the idea can also be damaging, both to the peace and security of the international community and to specific interests of the United States. On occasion, indeed, the art of diplomacy is to know when to let others take the lead; to offer support rather than to exercise control.

Such an occasion presented itself in the early 1990s, when the South African government and the African National Congress (ANC) struggled first to negotiate a peace deal that would end the country's apartheid system and institute majority rule, and then to keep that deal alive during the tumultuous and violent period leading up to national elections. The eventual outcome—a largely peaceful transition

of power from President de Klerk and his National Party to President Mandela and an ANC-dominated Government of National Unity—was a great success. But this denouement was by no means inevitable. It is for good reason that the transition has been widely hailed as a "miracle." In the eyes of the U.S. government, which had substantial political and strategic interests in seeing South Africa become a peaceful, democratic, and multiracial society, the peace process often seemed to be teetering on the edge of collapse. As Princeton Lyman, who was U.S. ambassador to South Africa at this crucial time, describes in the following pages, on more than one occasion the U.S. government offered itself to Mandela and de Klerk as a mediator, fearful that without the direct, active, and prominent participation of the United States the process would break down. The South Africans on each occasion refused the offer, obliging the Americans to continue to play a secondary, supportive role.

It is to the great credit of the United States, and to the great benefit of South Africa itself, that the American ambassador and his staff in South Africa, and policymakers in Washington, played their supportive role with great sensitivity and skill, deploying economic incentives, political influence, diplomatic suasion, and a host of other resources to sustain and advance the peace process. "The ground rules were firmly set," writes Ambassador Lyman, "and they would guide U.S. policy throughout the next two years: the South Africans would 'own' this transition process. This did not mean that the United States and the international community in general did not have a vital role to play. What it did mean was that we had to fashion our assistance to this process to facilitate it, help it through several crises, and encourage it in a multitude of ways. . . . It was an active, intensive involvement. And it made a difference."

I will leave it to the reader to discover in the following chapters exactly what difference was made by those U.S. diplomats who, together with representatives from other states and from a host of nongovernmental organizations, worked in the wings to give the protagonists the room for maneuver and the confidence needed to steer South Africa clear of tragedy. Suffice it to say that Princeton Lyman had once considered, half seriously, entitling this volume "Best Supporting Actor."

Much of *Partner to History* was written while the author was a senior fellow at the United States Institute of Peace, an organization mandated by Congress to stimulate and disseminate first-rate research on the varied means by which international conflict can be prevented, managed, or resolved peacefully. Ambassador Lyman's book can be read as an inspiring case study of one such means: facilitation. We at the Institute work to bring to the attention of U.S. policymakers, scholars, and all interested citizens the full range of options available to the United States as it seeks to encourage international peace and stability. Facilitation as undertaken by the United States, like other activities in which U.S. diplomacy

plays a supportive rather than a directly managerial or commanding role, has received less attention than it deserves. Hence the Institute is particularly pleased to publish a book that demonstrates that facilitation is a role in which the United States can excel. It serves to remind policymakers and practitioners that they have a more restrained, less frontal mode of involvement by which they can promote U.S. interests and end violent conflict.

Partner to History also offers a new perspective on the South African "miracle." The Institute has already published books that examine South Africa's transition from three very different vantage points: Susan Collin Marks's *Watching the Wind* describes the work of grassroots peace workers in the first half of the 1990s; Pierre du Toit's *State Building and Democracy in Southern Africa* asks whether democratic institutions can take root in African soil; and Dorothy Shea's *The South African Truth Commission* focuses on the politics and the performance of the body created to foster acknowledgment of the crimes committed under apartheid and to promote reconciliation within the new South Africa. *Partner to History* adds another dimension to our understanding of South Africa's narrow escape from full-fledged civil war and of the prospects for its fledgling democracy.

Ambassador Lyman's volume thus sits well alongside many other books published by the Institute. For instance, it enhances the work the Institute has supported on how new democracies deal with the legacy of human rights abuses committed by former regimes, the subject of Neil Kritz's three-volume edited study, *Transitional Justice,* to which Nelson Mandela contributed the foreword. It enlarges our knowledge of ethnic conflict and the means by which it can be managed or resolved, a topic dealt with in such varied volumes as *The Effects of Violence on Peace Processes* by John Darby, *Peoples versus States* by Ted Robert Gurr, *Federalism and Ethnic Conflict in Nigeria* by Rotimi Suberu, *Building Peace* by John Paul Lederach, and two compendious volumes edited by Chester Crocker, Fen Hampson, and Pamela Aall, *Herding Cats* and *Turbulent Peace.* And it adds to our growing series of books in which practitioners recount their efforts to contain violence and foster peace, a series that includes Mohamed Sahnoun's *Somalia: The Missed Opportunities,* John Hirsch and Robert Oakley's *Somalia and Operation Restore Hope,* Paul Hare's *Angola's Last Best Chance for Peace,* Cameron Hume's *Ending Mozambique's War,* Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah's *Burundi on the Brink, 1993–95,* and my own *Exiting Indochina.*

It is no coincidence that *Partner to History* complements so much other work that has been supported by the United States Institute of Peace. Although Ambassador Lyman's subject is specific in terms of time and place, the lessons that can be drawn from his account are numerous and pertinent to many other areas of scholarly inquiry and diplomatic endeavor. Here I have emphasized the lesson that *Partner to History* can teach us about the ability of the United States to play

a variety of roles in conflict resolution: we do not always need to stand center stage in order to make a difference. But other readers will no doubt focus on other lessons. For *Partner to History,* like other classics of its kind, has a great deal of insight and experience to offer new generations of American officials, diplomats, and students of foreign policy.

Richard H. Solomon
President
United States Institute of Peace

Preface

IN THE WAKE OF NELSON MANDELA'S ELECTION as president of South Africa, one of the most dramatic events of the twentieth century, two excellent books came out that told the story. Allister Sparks's *Tomorrow Is Another Country* chronicled the slow, halting movement toward accommodation—the secret talks, the tortuous negotiations, the violence, and the resolution. Patti Waldmeir's *Anatomy of a Miracle* put a human face on this history, adding new insights and an up-front vision of the men and women who had made this history. Neither of these books, excellent as they are, gives much attention to the international role in this process. It was understandable, for most of the credit belongs to the South Africans. But it was strange in a way, for the struggle for international support and attention had marked much of the anti-apartheid effort. Moreover, for those of us present in these final years of the transition, the role played by the international community, especially the United States, was an extremely active and, without exaggerating its significance, influential one. Describing this role is the purpose of this book. Doing so adds something relevant to this history. And it adds something to the study of how diplomacy is conducted in the cause of peace and democracy.

I first visited South Africa in 1976. I was then with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). USAID had no programs in South Africa at that time. I was visiting our programs in the neighboring states of Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland. Day after day we crisscrossed South Africa by car, passing through the border posts of the Bureau of State Security, with its intimidating emblem, BOSS, emblazoned over the gate, and had our luggage searched each time for "subversive" or "pornographic" material. I was struck as we drove through the countryside at the beauty of this country. At the same time, the sight of black farmworkers riding along the road, as they then did, in pony-drawn carts seemed like a scene from the antebellum U.S. South.

At the end of the visit, I had a day free in Johannesburg. I walked through the city, with its segregating signs for "whites" and "blacks" on park benches, water fountains, and virtually every public facility. I noted the pleasant banter between whites and blacks that hid the deeper tension. That evening I found myself at the railroad station. I wandered in and encountered an eerie silence. On the platform, hundreds of black workers, men and women, were huddled together. Hardly a word was being spoken. Workers there by day, they were not allowed to own homes in the city and were heading for the townships miles away. They were downcast, reminding me of Maya Angelou's description of cotton workers returning home from a day's labor, their early morning dreams and fantasies shattered by the reality of their toil and their position in life. But this was even worse. It was a deeply unsettling experience.

My next visit occurred in 1984. I was then deputy assistant secretary of state for African affairs and was accompanying Senator John Danforth on a trip across the continent to investigate the effects of drought. It was an exhausting trip and we had had an exceptionally emotional experience in Mozambique. South Africa was supposed to be only a transit stop for our flight home. But the embassy prevailed upon the senator to have at least one meeting with the South African government. Danforth was uneasy; he did not want to make an official visit to South Africa. Finally he agreed, but only if talk was confined to the drought. We went to meet with officials of the Ministry of Agriculture. Two of them lectured us on the many programs the government had instituted to help its farmers. Danforth, increasingly uneasy, finally said, "All the programs you are describing are for the white farmers. But it doesn't matter. As long as you confine 87 percent of your population on 13 percent of the land, you will always have an agricultural problem." One of the officials drew himself up and replied, "Senator, we have built this country on white brains and black brawn, and we will continue to do so." At that Danforth stood up and said, "This meeting is over."

As we left, I asked our deputy chief of mission, Walt Stadtler, "What was that all about?" "Well," he replied, "we always take visitors to the Foreign Ministry. They know just how to talk to foreigners, how to put a softer touch on apartheid. I thought you ought to see what the real bureaucracy is like." I had always feared that, if stationed in South Africa, an embassy officer, caught up inevitably in the privileges of living within South Africa's white society, would become slightly co-opted. Walt Stadtler taught me that was not necessarily so. Still, I did not relish an assignment there.

In 1989, however, as I was finishing my three years as ambassador to Nigeria, it was clear that changes were in the air in South Africa. I wrestled with the thought of whether this might be just the time to be there, to play a role in this unfolding drama of transformation, to help rid this beautiful country of its curse.

But I hesitated too long. When I finally made my call to Washington, I was told the department had already made the selection of my friend and colleague William Swing. I said they could not have made a better choice. And I was right.

In 1992, however, I had no hesitation. Nelson Mandela had been released from prison, negotiations were under way, there was excitement—and indeed danger—in the air. I made my move early this time. And I was gratified that Assistant Secretary Herman Cohen, Secretary James Baker, and finally President George Bush supported me for the position. My wife and I arrived in South Africa in August 1992. It would prove to be the most rewarding period of our lives.

Acknowledgments

I WAS INTRODUCED TO AFRICAN AFFAIRS BY SAMUEL ADAMS, assistant administrator for Africa in AID in the 1970s, a truly remarkable man of letters and insight. He imparted a love for and fascination with the peoples of that continent that has stayed with me ever since. I was fortunate later to work under four extraordinary assistant secretaries of state for African affairs: Richard Moose, Chester Crocker, Herman Cohen, and George Moose. Each demonstrated a deep commitment to Africa, incredible dedication, and skills that they tried their best to pass on to me. While I was ambassador to South Africa, Herman Cohen and George Moose not only provided official guidance and direct participation but also never failed to call regularly, no matter what other crisis occupied them, in order to offer help and to ask what further support we needed. James Bishop, my colleague as fellow deputy assistant secretary for five years, taught me much that I know about political-military affairs and how to address them with both intelligence and principle.

As I hope is made clear in this book, I owe tremendous gratitude and appreciation to all those Americans and South Africans, truly an exceptional assemblage, who served in the U.S. government mission in South Africa during my time there. Any success we achieved, and certainly whatever I accomplished during this period, was because of them. There is not room enough to mention them all here, but at least some can be thanked by name: my deputies, Marshall McCallie and Priscilla Clapp; political counselors Mark Bellamy and John Campbell; economic counselors Donald Steinberg and Michael Cleverly; political officers Bill Pope, Robin Hinson-Jones, Terry Pflaumer, George Southern, Lois Cescarini, and Gary Robbins; consul generals Alan McKee, Pamela Bridgewater, Bismarck Myrick, David Halsted, and David Pierce; public affairs directors John Burns and Robert LaGamma; media specialist James Callahan; cultural affairs officer Rosemary Crockett; education experts Gill Jacot-Guillarmod and Frank Sassman;

USAID director Leslie "Cap" Dean and his deputy Bill Ford; defense attaché Kim Henningsen; labor attaché Thomas Shannon; minister-counselor for commerce Millard Arnold; my secretary and indispensable source of support, Barbara Beckwith; and my driver, who took us where others may not have gone, Edison Mmusa. We were backed by a tremendous team of supporters in Washington: Ambassador April Glaspie, director of the Office of Southern Africa Affairs at State; the South Africa desk officer Dan Mozena; Leon Fuerth in the Vice President's office; Lauri Fitz-Pegado in Commerce; John Hicks and Keith Brown in AID—and many others too numerous to mention but who have my deep appreciation and respect.

Nongovernmental representatives in South Africa were equally important in making the United States relevant to and supportive of the transition to democracy. Among them were John Gerhard, the distinguished leader of the Ford Foundation office; Lois Hobson, who opened the Africare program in the country and led it into new and innovative arenas of diversity training; and Frank Ferrari, advancing on the ground the long dedication of the Africa-America Institute to a free South Africa.

I am indebted to the United States Institute of Peace for a Jennings Randolph fellowship in 1999–2000 that supported my work on this book. Joe Klaits and John Crist at the Institute were warmly encouraging and constant sources of intelligent advice. The Institute's Daniel Snodderly and Nigel Quinney provided important editorial guidance. Nigel guided the editorial process to completion with great professional skill, not to mention patience and encouragement in the face of my sometimes intemperate responses to perfectly valid requests. The prize for Institute support, however, must go to my research assistant, Sara Rogge. Truly the book could not have been completed without her. Her ability to run down even the most obscure sources, her careful reading of drafts and valued suggestions, her help in arranging and later transcribing interviews, her assistance in compiling sources and references, and her general support were absolutely indispensable.

The Department of State generously made available for my review the telegraphic records of this period, which served to refresh my memory of events, and declassified several telegrams at my request. Connie Cook in the department's Office of Programs and Services devoted countless hours to identifying and locating the relevant documents. The department's Robert H. Melone, George Taft, and others read the entire manuscript and provided valuable recommendations.

Pauline Baker, president of the Fund for Peace, made available the tapes of eight years of South Africa breakfast meetings that she chaired for the Carnegie Endowment in Washington, D.C. These were a treasure trove of evolving views of both South Africans and Americans as the South Africa drama unfolded. The

Rockefeller Foundation kindly opened its archives on foundation activity in South Africa, and the Institute of International Education similarly provided archive material that greatly enriched the discussion of nongovernmental activity in chapter 3.

Many people who were actors in this story consented to interviews for the book, which served to check my interpretations against theirs as well as to provide insights that enriched the story tremendously. They were F. W. de Klerk, David Steward, Kader Asmal, Penuell Maduna, Essop Pahad, Neil van Heerden, Franklin Thomas, Edward Perkins, Herman Cohen, Roelf Meyer, Richard Goldstone, Carl Beck, Arthur Chaskalson, John Ogilvie Thompson, Patricia de Lille, Allister Sparks, Desmond Tutu, Joe Mathews, Richard Steyn, Aubrey Hamersma, Barbara Masikela, Pierre Steyn, Constand Viljoen, Helen Suzman, Colin Eglin, Daniel Knobel, Wayne Fredericks, Donald Steinberg, and John Arbogast.

All that said, this book would not have been written without the encouragement and support of my wife, Helen. She had shared the experience. More, her daily presence in the embassy, as an instructor in information technology, made a tremendous contribution to the morale as well as the operational effectiveness of the staff. She believed in this book, kept it alive in my thoughts for the several years following our time in South Africa, and never let me waver from completing it. She read every chapter and added valuable material. She too had to put up with my intemperate reactions to computer technology that overwhelmed me and soothingly solved each and every such problem. This book is as much hers as mine.

With all this help and support, I remain responsible for whatever errors there are. I hope that, such as they are, they are offset by the value of the story.