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CONTAINING THE RIPPLE OF HOPE: APARTHEID, THE AFRIKAANS PRESS AND ROBERT F. KENNEDY'S VISIT TO SOUTH AFRICA, JUNE 1966

ABSTRACT

*The reportage of Robert Kennedy's visit to South Africa in 1966 by the Afrikaans press reflected the incipient fractures within Afrikaner identity even as apartheid was at its zenith. This paper focuses on how Kennedy was portrayed in the Afrikaans press during the course of four days in South Africa, as both a potentially constructive as well as a destructive force for social and political change. It argues that the more conservative Afrikaans newspapers allied themselves with the state in their unequivocal hostility to the senator. Yet, newspapers such as *Die Burger* and *Die Beeld*, and Afrikaner journalists such as Piet Cillié and Schalk Pienaar, were influenced by the spirit of change that permeated the latter part of the decade in South Africa and abroad. Kennedy's visit became a means by which to engage with the idealistic senator and the aspirations of liberal and black South Africans in an attempt to adapt and reform an increasingly insular and outdated Afrikaner nationalism.*

Keywords: Robert Kennedy, apartheid, South Africa, NUSAS, Schalk Pienaar, Piet Cillié, Verwoerd



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**1. INTRODUCTION**

In 1966 in the wake of Robert Kennedy's four-day visit to South Africa, the South African newspaper, *The Cape Argus* assessed the impact of Kennedy on the country: "Like a meteor, Mr Kennedy has flashed across the South African sky, and has

gone...South Africa remains as it was".¹ However, Robert Francis Kennedy's visit provoked unparalleled enthusiasm amongst those who opposed the draconian measures of the Verwoerdian state.² And, just as significantly, the importance of the visit was acknowledged by the Afrikaner press. Even as Kennedy's visit had the potential to inspire the opponents of apartheid, it also provided the opportunity for Afrikaners to reassess the ideology of separate development.

Robert Kennedy served as Attorney General in his brother John F. Kennedy's administration from 1961 to 1963. In the years following his brother's assassination, Robert Kennedy had come to exemplify the spirit of change and the aspirations of a new generation eager for social, economic and political transformation. His identification with the civil rights movement, the anti-war demonstrations and the plight of migrant workers had marked Kennedy as a potential candidate for the United States presidency in the election of 1968. Kennedy's association with social and political struggles for equality inspired the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) to invite him to South Africa in 1966. Ian Robertson would later recall, "Robert Kennedy had been forceful with the civil rights legislation and fighting racial segregation in America...He came to represent that passion for human rights, which you do not find very much in many politicians. He was immensely inspiring".³

Despite the revolutionary fervour that permeated the late 1960s, the apartheid state had maintained its stranglehold and was arguably at the height of its economic and political power. The cracks in the façade would appear a decade later with the economic crisis of the 1970s and the internal turmoil personified by the Soweto uprising but, for now, the apartheid state seemed unassailable. The African National Congress (ANC) and Pan African Congress (PAC) had been banned in the wake of the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960, their members imprisoned or forced into exile. The National Party (NP)-controlled state had also portrayed itself as an ally in the fight against Communism, thus significantly reducing the censure of western democratic states. The country was economically stable, with white South Africans enjoying an unparalleled level of prosperity.

1 AM Schlesinger Jr, *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1978), p. 749.

2 Hendrik Verwoerd had served as Minister for Native Affairs before becoming Prime Minister of South Africa, a position he held until his assassination in 1966. Described as the "architect of apartheid", Verwoerd was responsible for the harsh measures of the apartheid state with his vision of separate development that culminated in the creation of the Bantustans.

3 *The Mercury*, 8 June 2016, <https://www.pressreader.com/>, accessed 18 December 2018.

South Africa and the United States had an ambivalent political relationship for much of the decade. South Africa was a significant economic power on the African continent, and a valuable Cold War ally as decolonisation movements and unrest throughout the continent provided fertile ground for the spread of Communism. On a more practical level, the country was a source of valuable minerals for its American allies. It permitted United States naval ships access to its harbours, and it also allowed the placement of missile tracking stations in South African territory. Yet its racial policies were unsavoury, and events in Sharpeville had compounded this.⁴

The Kennedy administration had considered and subsequently discarded the implementation of economic sanctions, fearing the possible adverse effects on the black population and the likelihood that the measure would only increase the repressive control of the apartheid state in its bid to maintain power. The move to armed struggle within the country by the ANC and PAC also once again raised the spectre of growing Communist influence. President Kennedy was therefore forced to walk a fine line when it came to dealing with the apartheid state, so much so that Martin Luther King described the Kennedy administration's policy as little more than "wordy condemnation".⁵ In 1963, Secretary of State Dean Rusk prioritised United States' interests and the Cold War over the possible unsavoury domestic policies of American allies:

"The President has reminded us that we are not interested in a Pax Americana...we are not the self-elected gendarmes for the political and social problems of other states", and, with regards to the possible implementation of sanctions against South Africa, this had to be considered in relation to, "where the interests of the American people lie". Apartheid was less of a threat to the United States than the spectre of Communism: "I will admit that apartheid presents a case of unusual difficulty, but I would not put it ahead of the violations of human rights within the Communist bloc...".⁶ The response to Rusk's memorandum by Undersecretary G. Mennen Williams highlighted the unenviable position of the United States. Williams proposed a ban on the sale of weapons to South Africa as a means of appeasing the African states, "In my mind, a complete arms ban is the least the United States can do to maintain our position of influence with the Africans and our ability to prevent more radical and violent action on their part", and any lack of action on the part of the United States would only serve to alienate the African states, leaving

4 TJ Noer, *Cold War and Black Liberation: The United States and White Rule in Africa, 1948-1968* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985), p.127.

5 Noer, *Cold War and Black Liberation*, pp. 127, 137, 139.

6 D Rusk, "Memorandum for Averell Harriman et al 15 June 1963". In: K Mokoena (ed.), *South Africa and the United States: The Declassified History* (New York: The New Press, 1993), pp. 56-58.

them open to Communist influence.⁷ In addition to American “self-interest” as well, the matter was also one of “right”: “Apartheid is obnoxious not only to all coloured people who are the majority of the world’s population but to all civilised people as well...If we refused an arms embargo, and another Sharpeville massacre occurred, we would stand condemned in the eyes of most in the world”.⁸ Robert McNamara, the Secretary for Defense, attempted a middle ground with, unsurprisingly, an emphasis on American defence interests in both South Africa and Portugal – the latter also facing possible sanctions by the United Nations. McNamara detailed the various military and strategic advantages of the African continent, concluding that “it should be our fundamental objective, to the extent that it is possible to avoid prejudicing our relationship with either side in this dispute”.⁹ All three men would also serve under Lyndon Johnson.

Faced with the Civil Rights movement and the escalating conflict in Vietnam, the Johnson administration was just as cautious in dealing with the apartheid state. Not even the Treason Trial in 1964 and the subsequent imprisonment of Nelson Mandela provoked official condemnation from the United States. President Johnson believed that maintaining normal diplomatic and economic relations with South Africa rather than isolating the country through the implementation of sanctions would ultimately result in the easing of the system of racial segregation and repression.¹⁰ Under Johnson, there was no outright condemnation of apartheid policies but instead, an attempt to improve them through “quiet diplomacy”. At the same time, there were some efforts to prohibit the sale of weapons to South Africa and, in McNamara’s view, while the apartheid state was a valuable ally in the Cold War, it was by no means an “essential” one.¹¹ Simultaneously, civil groups in the United States increased their protests. This was particularly evident among the youth – a key demographic group supporting Kennedy – the National Students’ Association and the Students for a Democratic Society, which staged demonstrations against apartheid.¹²

7 GM Williams, “Memorandum for Secretary Dean Rusk: Arms Policy and South Africa 12 July 1963”. In: K Mokoena (ed.), *South Africa and the United States: The Declassified History* (New York: The New Press, 1993), pp. 59-61.

8 Williams, Memorandum for Secretary Dean Rusk, pp.59-61.

9 R McNamara, “Letter to Secretary Dean Rusk, 11 July 1963”. In: K Mokoena (ed.), *South Africa and the United States: The Declassified History* (New York: The New Press, 1993), pp.62-63.

10 Noer, *Cold War and Black Liberation*, pp.155, 166.

11 A Thomson, *US Foreign Policy towards Apartheid South Africa, 1948 – 1994* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp.53-55.

12 Noer, *Cold War and Black Liberation*, p.170.

On the part of the apartheid state, both the decolonisation of the African continent and the domestic turmoil epitomised by Sharpeville led to increasing militarisation and a sense of isolation in South Africa. This resulted in the state increasing its stranglehold on power. Integration accompanied by unrest in the southern United States merely confirmed to the South African state the need for control to avert disorder, chaos and violence.¹³ By 1966, the state became particularly assertive and recalcitrant. Upon receiving Kennedy's request to enter the country, the state vacillated for five months before finally granting him a visa. If there was any sense of ambiguity on the position of the South African government, this was made explicit by the South African ambassador who, in no uncertain terms informed Kennedy that they opposed the visit, condemned NUSAS and would not meet with him.¹⁴

Faced with the overt hostility of Hendrik Verwoerd's government, Robert Kennedy also had to contend with the resentment of Johnson. The president was suspicious of Kennedy's motive in visiting South Africa, believing that it was a possible criticism of his administration's anti-apartheid stance as well as a political ploy, allowing Kennedy to increase his support among black voters in the United States. His administration emphasised that Kennedy's visit was not officially sanctioned. Moreover, the United States Information Agency was ordered to pay attention to Kennedy's public utterances and to look at the response that his visit would provoke in the press.¹⁵

In South Africa and internationally, the controversy was apparent even before Kennedy's plane landed. Two weeks earlier, the state denied visas to the foreign press hoping to accompany the senator on his trip.¹⁶ The former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Eric Louw, articulated the view of those opposed to the visit (which would be repeated in *Die Burger*), when he described the impending visit as "a publicity stunt" for a future bid for the American presidency with Kennedy as "tremendously ambitious and opportunistic" and "no friend of South Africa".¹⁷

While *The Washington Post* highlighted the unwelcome nature of Kennedy's visit and predicted his ostracism by apartheid supporters with only the "tersest mention" in radio broadcasts the same cannot be said for the Afrikaans press with newspapers such as *Die Burger* extensively covering all aspects of the senator's trip.¹⁸ Meetings with the media were an essential part of Kennedy's exhaustive itinerary during his brief visit. His first meeting

13 Noer, *Cold War and Black Liberation*, pp.130, 140.

14 Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, pp. 743-744.

15 Noer, *Cold War and Black Liberation*, pp. 174-176.

16 *Rand Daily Mail*, 26 May 1966.

17 *Rand Daily Mail*, 26 May 1966.

18 *Rand Daily Mail*, 26 May 1966.

was scheduled with the Afrikaans press for 5 June from 15:00 to 16:30. This was followed by a 45-minute session with the English-medium news. The following morning saw the senator breakfast with “Bantu” journalists or the representatives of the African press.¹⁹ This paper, however, focuses on the Afrikaans press, with a particular emphasis on *Die Burger*, which in the absence of official meetings with the South African government, is a means of assessing the state’s perception of and response to Robert Kennedy’s visit. Some comparisons will also be made with the English-medium newspaper *The Rand Daily Mail* as this was one of the papers forming the English press contingent that met with the senator and a journalist associated with the publication, Lawrence Mayekiso, was also one of the black journalists who had a separate breakfast meeting with Kennedy. By 1966, the *Rand Daily Mail* became an increasingly radical newspaper with Alistair Sparks (who accompanied Kennedy) as one of its editors and more “integrated” news reportage with the employment of black journalists as well as a broad black readership.²⁰

2. THE AFRIKAANS PRESS

As Keyan Tomaselli *et al* points out, journalism reporting during apartheid was imbued with ideology and ideological discourse that shifted over time as racial identities in South Africa were constructed and reconstructed. At the same time, ideology has the appearance of truth and, while journalists may report “truth”, they may be unaware of their ideological influences while simultaneously criticising the political views that differ from their own. Ultimately, it is an ideology that shapes what is considered “news” as well as how this news is reported.²¹ In addition to the political, economic and social context that shapes newspaper writing is the individual concerns of the journalist as well as the editor with the latter providing the vision or political standpoint adopted by the newspaper to which journalists are to a large extent expected to conform.²² While these broad points may apply to reportage in general, news under the apartheid state was further constrained by censorship and the collusion of sectors of the media with the state. This is particularly evident in the Afrikaans press.

19 *Die Burger*, 4 June 1966.

20 WA Hachten and CA Giffard, *The Press and Apartheid: Repression and Propaganda in South Africa* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), pp.132-133.

21 K Tomaselli *et al* “The Construction of News in the South African Media”. In: K Tomaselli *et al* (eds.), *Addressing the Nation: Narrating the Crisis – Hegemony and the South African Press* (Johannesburg: Richard Lyon and Co, 1987), pp. 22-24.

22 Tomaselli, *et al*, “The Construction of News in the South African Media”, pp. 28-29.

The role of the Afrikaans press in the apartheid state is a complex one that defies easy categorisation. Initially, when the NP came to power in 1948, these newspapers served as little more than support structures for the Party. Unlike English newspapers, Afrikaans newspapers had not been established to turn a profit but to enhance the cause of Afrikaner nationalism, promoting language, culture and religion. Journalism often played a secondary role to political ambition, and the Afrikaans press provided an essential stepping stone to a political career. For instance, both Daniel François Malan and Verwoerd served a political apprenticeship as editors of Afrikaans newspapers. The newspapers themselves – whether they were part of the southern-based *Nasionale Pers* or the more northern-focused *Afrikaanse Pers Beperk* – were owned by members of the NP with prominent NP leaders forming part of their management board.²³

From its inception, *Die Burger* was associated with the NP. The newspaper (initially called *De Burger* with the name changed in 1922 to signify the importance of Afrikaans) began in Cape Town in 1915, just a year after the founding of the NP under James Barry Munnik Hertzog. Taking a stance against Jan Smuts's South Africa Party, *Die Burger* was hostile to the forces of mining capitalism and imperialism with an evident empathy for poor whites believed to be the victims of this oppressive system.²⁴ Its first editor was Malan whose inaugural editorial demonstrated a sense of pessimism based on the social and economic divisions that had rent Afrikaner society, as evident in the rebellion of the Boer generals during the First World War.²⁵ The newspaper came out in active support of the rebels through fund-raising (and nation-building) efforts to address the legal costs and demands for compensation provoked by the rebellion, boosting the status of both the NP and *Die Burger* among many Afrikaners.²⁶

Nevertheless, even as *Die Burger* would represent Afrikaner aspiration and unity, its nationalism was somewhat lessened by its origins in Cape Town. This city had seen close co-operation between English and Afrikaner with less of a sense of enmity and hostility that characterised the north in the wake of the South African War. The inland provinces had also experienced the excesses of mining capitalism and were confronted with a growing urbanised African population that threatened the already vulnerable Afrikaner working class. This was the context of the formation of *Die Transvaler* with Verwoerd as its first

23 *Nasionale Pers* means National Press; *Afrikaanse Pers Beperk* means Afrikaans Press Limited. For more see, Hachten and Giffard, *The Press and Apartheid*, pp.179-180.

24 H Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People* (Cape Town: Tafelberg Publishers Limited, 2003), p. 331.

25 Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, p. 374.

26 Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, p. 386.

editor. The man who later came to be known as the “architect of apartheid” was explicit about his role and that of *Die Transvaler*. According to Verwoerd, his was a calling to assert the unique cultural and historical identity of the Afrikaners.²⁷ By the outbreak of the Second World War, the newspaper had come to represent northern interests. At the same time, *Die Burger* adopted a more tolerant attitude reflective of the more liberal and capitalist south.²⁸

Ons Vaderland was established in 1915, the same year as *Die Burger*, under the guardianship of Hertzog, who led the official opposition to Smuts’ South African Party and developed a reputation for promoting the interests of the Afrikaner working class. A year later, *Ons Vaderland* was the official publication of Hertzog’s NP in the Transvaal and became part of the Afrikaanse Pers Beperk formed at the end of December 1931. From here on *Ons Vaderland* came to be known as *Die Vaderland* and remained loyal to the political stance of its founder, later taking on an increasingly conservative position.²⁹

But the Afrikaans press did not merely function as the medium of state propaganda. In 1924, editor of *Die Burger*, Albertus Lourens Geyer believed that the newspaper had the right to criticise government policy, prompting a complaint by Hertzog. However, it was in the late 1950s that the Afrikaans press began challenging their hitherto acquiescent role. With the almost unassailable power of the NP, there existed a growing self-assurance that prompted the press to acknowledge differences within Afrikanerdom.³⁰ This increasing assertion of journalistic freedom, however, would still prioritise group solidarity and strength. The Afrikaans media did not see itself as challenging the authority of the state but as having a more equitable rather than a servile relationship with the apartheid state. During the years leading up to the creation of the republic, dissent was evident in the press regarding the form of the republic, its relationship to the Commonwealth and the role of the president. With the formation of the Republic of South Africa, Afrikaner dominance seemed even more assured, and the press was free to show differences over political issues such as the political status of coloureds, with the south (evident in *Die Burger*) conventionally adopting more liberal views than the north.³¹

27 Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, p. 419.

28 J Muller, “Press Houses at War: A Brief History of Nasionale Pers and Perskor”. In: K. Tomaselli *et al* (eds.), *Addressing the Nation: Narrating the Crisis – Hegemony and the South African Press* (Johannesburg: Richard Lyon and Co, 1987), pp. 125-126.

29 Muller, “Press Houses at War”, p.122.

30 Afrikanerdom refers to Afrikaner nationalism, predicated on a distinct Afrikaner identity.

31 Hachten and Giffard, *The Press and Apartheid*, pp. 180-183.

By the time of Kennedy's visit, the political might of *Die Burger* had continued unabated under the leadership of Cillié and his deputy editor, Pienaar, who were able to articulate their political views in their editorials such as the column "Dawie".³² Both men came to represent the *verligtes* or the "enlightened" ones. A growing split had been evident within Afrikaner nationalism. Although united in their view of white dominance, the *verligtes* were willing to consider some measure of reform of strict apartheid policies to ensure Afrikaner political, economic and social survival in a changing world. This was in contrast to their "traditional" *verkrampste* counterparts, ultra-conservatives who viewed themselves as apartheid purists with any change considered the first step down a slippery slope.³³

Ironically, then, it was during the height of apartheid when the Verwoerdian state had laid the groundwork for repressive racial discriminatory policy and when much of the opposition had been silenced – albeit temporarily – that the split in Afrikanerdom began to appear. And this was embodied in the Afrikaans press – and evident in its reaction to the Kennedy visit. The *verligte-verkrampste* division that became even more pronounced after Kennedy's departure and Verwoerd's assassination was due, in part, to a new generation of Afrikaners. This generation was not unaffected by the cultural and social change that defined the decade. Apartheid policies had also allowed the growth and flourishing of an Afrikaans middle class who, more confident in their position, challenged their more conservative predecessors. The emphasis on *volk* and *kerk* of the latter appeared anachronistic in an increasingly global and postmodern world.³⁴ Just before Kennedy's visit, on the occasion of the fifth-anniversary celebration of the Republic of South Africa, Nicolaas Petrus Van Wyk Louw's play, *Die Pluimsdaad Waai Ver*, depicted the Anglo-Boer War in all its complexity – loyalty, heroism, cravenness and duplicity in contrast to the idealised heroic nation-building epic of Afrikaner nationalism. Verwoerd subsequently criticised him for failing to validate a hagiographic past. A group of writers, known as *Die Sestigters*, and encompassing figures such as Andre Brink and Breyten Breytenbach also rebelled against the confines of Afrikaner cultural and social "traditions".³⁵ At the forefront of the *verligte* challenge were Pienaar and Cillié.

Before Kennedy's visit, Cillié demonstrated a willingness to engage with the senator, with *Die Burger* one of ten newspapers chosen to give Kennedy

32 Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, p. 548.

33 Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, pp. 548-549.

34 *Volk* means nation; *Kerk* means church – in this case it refers to the Dutch Reformed Church. See, D Welsh, *The Rise and Fall of Apartheid* (Johannesburg and Cape Town: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2009), p. 83.

35 Welsh, *The Rise and Fall of Apartheid*, pp. 175-176.

a “complete picture” of the South African situation, “if he sincerely wishes to”. Also, all comments in the newspaper regarding the visit would be translated and sent to Kennedy to assist him with obtaining this “complete picture”.³⁶ Two points are important to note here. The first is that the subsequent reportage on the visit in *Die Burger* had the ulterior aim of putting forth to Kennedy the particular political stance of the newspaper. The other is Cillie’s use of the qualifier “sincerely” which would be significant when Cillie and Pienaar assessed Kennedy himself finding, to their disappointment, that his preconceptions left him little disposed to understanding the nuances of the Afrikaner nationalist perspective.

The more conservative *Die Vaderland*, on the other hand, seemed to display a sense of apprehension towards the visit, believing that Kennedy would be predisposed to condemn apartheid. An article appearing in the newspaper drew upon the experiences of a South African visiting the United States a few months earlier who had come across an article in a Houston newspaper. The South African visitor, Mr Breeze, sent a photocopy of the article to *The Star* that claimed that Kennedy was a ruthless and power-hungry politician who would not be deterred in his aim of achieving black political equality. He would bring this same confrontational mindset to South Africa to put the South African government “on the spot”.³⁷

Die Transvaler pre-empted the questioning of apartheid policy and planned to give Robert Kennedy a copy of the just-published *The Principle of Apartheid* by Harold F. Sampson – a defence of apartheid.³⁸ Written by the Professor Emeritus at Rhodes University, the volume’s slim size belied its explosive nature. In defence of apartheid, Sampson addressed “freedom of dissociation” where people find their security in groups of like-minded individuals, and it is considered an infringement of their rights for them to be forced to associate with those who are not part of the group or “nation”.³⁹ He drew upon social Darwinism to argue for racial distinctions, seeing contemporary views of equality as a product of Jews, Communists and liberals.⁴⁰ Colonialism was defended as a means of imparting “civilisation”, and civil rights struggles in the United States were considered to contribute to “racial disorder” due to “Negro” criminality, propensity for violence and the inevitable “demoralisation” that would result from integration.⁴¹ *The Principle of Apartheid* is ultimately an ideologue, drawing upon a theoretical foundation

36 *Rand Daily Mail*, 26 May 1966.

37 *Die Vaderland*, 2 June 1966.

38 *Rand Daily Mail*, 3 June 1966.

39 HF Sampson, *The Principle of Apartheid* (Johannesburg: Voortrekkerpers, 1966), p.10.

40 Sampson, *The Principle of Apartheid*, p.20.

41 Sampson, *The Principle of Apartheid*, pp.23, 35, 36, 61.

that was already out of date and making use of conjecture, rhetoric and selective use of statistics to bolster the case for apartheid. It could have done little to persuade Kennedy but certainly illuminated the conservative stance of *Die Transvaler*.

3. MEETING THE AFRIKAANS PRESS

Before Kenedy departed from South Africa, he thanked several people for giving him insight into the South African condition. Together with Albert Luthuli, Alan Paton, Robertson and Helen Suzman, were members of the Afrikaans press - Pienaar, Cillié, Dirk Richard and Adriaan Mynhardt Van Schoor.⁴² AM Van Schoor first worked as a “cadet” journalist at *Die Burger*. He subsequently went to work for *Die Vaderland*, another Afrikaans-medium newspaper that was initially based in Pretoria but moved to Johannesburg in 1936, where it was the first Afrikaans newspaper to be published daily.⁴³ He also served as the Director of the South Africa Foundation, an organisation dedicated to the sustainability of the independent homeland system with the maintenance of *Baasskap* or white superiority.⁴⁴

By 1966, Van Schoor was the Editor-in-Chief of *Die Vaderland*.⁴⁵ He was one of the contingent of five Afrikaans newspaper editors invited by Kennedy to a private meeting. At the same time, even as he was denied a meeting with representatives of the apartheid state, Kennedy had created this opportunity to understand the mindset of the “other” side. Comfortable, in their role as interviewers, these newspapermen found themselves in the novel position of having questions fired at them in the style that Kennedy had employed in his prosecution of organised crime earlier in his career, “All he intended doing was to ask us some straightforward questions to which he expected plain, forthright replies but – no discussions, no arguments”.⁴⁶

Kennedy’s questions drew upon a combination of religious morality and empathy, focusing on whether they believed that heaven was segregated or whether God was white and, if so, if He was an Afrikaner. The final question, “Would you mind being a Black man in South Africa?” provoked a negative response from Van Schoor that surprised Kennedy. For Van Schoor, however, his willingness to be a black man in South Africa came from the conviction that, while blacks were not citizens of South Africa and could thus never achieve political equality, they were free to realise their aspirations in the

42 *Die Burger*, 10 June 1966.

43 AM Van Schoor, *Notes from My Diary* (Pretoria: Makro Books, 1979), pp. 2, 7, 35.

44 Van Schoor, *Notes from My Diary*, p.146.

45 Van Schoor, *Notes from My Diary*, p.144.

46 Van Schoor, *Notes from My Diary*, p.133.

independent homelands or Bantustans created to enforce racial segregation. As Van Schoor emphasised if he were a black man he would go to the Transkei and “become a Senator”.⁴⁷

Kennedy’s reaction was a smile that Van Schoor viewed as the only moment he appeared “human”. Unsurprisingly, Van Schoor’s description of the encounter was contextualised by a defence of apartheid that was portrayed as being neither as oppressive nor as brutal as had been depicted internationally.⁴⁸ Van Schoor was also taken aback by Kennedy’s use of religion with the implication that apartheid and Afrikaners, in general, did not follow Christian morality. On the contrary, the editor of *Die Vaderland* viewed Afrikaners as the exemplars of Christian morality who were unequivocal in the espousal of their principles – however unpopular. In terms of racial segregation, there was little distinction between apartheid and the ghettos of urban America, save for American hypocrisy which used idioms to couch the nature of discrimination.⁴⁹

In contrast to Van Schoor’s description of the events, Pienaar of *Die Beeld* focused his attention instead on the figure of Kennedy. Both Pienaar and Cillié had been childhood friends. They came from a conservative background and were imbued with the ideology of the NP yet, at the same time, they distinguished themselves from their more orthodox peers at the University of Stellenbosch.⁵⁰ Pienaar had an accessible writing style and both his talent and that of Cillié were recognised and promoted by the editor of the newspaper, Phil Weber.⁵¹ Initially enthusiastic about apartheid policy, both Pienaar and Cillié were subsequently more sceptical after the NP’s rise to power in 1948 and, in particular, the oppression of the “non-white” races which seemed to them to be antithetical to the spirit of independence and self-determination exemplified by the Afrikaner rejection of British hegemony. While acknowledging the necessity of white political dominance, Pienaar and Cillié were perturbed by the blatantly discriminatory policies evident in forced removals, the Immorality Act and the wilful neglect of the constitution when coloured voters were put on a separate voters’ roll. Concerning the latter, they concurred with the notion of the separate voters’ role but not the unconstitutional means by which this was achieved.⁵²

Both Pienaar and Cillié thus embodied a sense of dissent within what was perceived by outsiders to be the monolithic edifice of Afrikaner

47 Van Schoor, *Notes from My Diary*, pp. 133-134.

48 Van Schoor, *Notes from My Diary*, p. 134.

49 Van Schoor, *Notes from My Diary*, pp. 15-16.

50 A Mouton, “Reform from Within”: Schalk Pienaar, the Afrikaans Press and Apartheid”, *Historia* 45 (1), 2000, pp. 149-150.

51 Mouton, “Reform from Within”, pp.150-151.

52 Mouton, “Reform from Within”, pp. 151-152.

nationalism. Both men believed that NP policy could not be based simply on racial oppression. To this end, while clashing with the intractable Verwoerd, Pienaar supported the incipient independent homelands system evident in the Promotion of Bantu Self-Government Act, the brainchild of Verwoerd in 1959.⁵³ For Pienaar, this was how the African majority would be able to exercise their political rights and attain a measure of independence that would not threaten the autonomy of white South Africa. This was “grand apartheid”, a more noble enterprise than the simplistic discrimination and oppression of “petty apartheid”.⁵⁴ In 1965, Pienaar became the editor of the newspaper *Die Beeld* and used the platform to articulate his hostility to the ruthless oppression of the apartheid state under the leadership of Verwoerd, arousing the hatred of right-wing Afrikaners while simultaneously appealing to a new modern, urbanised generation.⁵⁵ It was in light of this complex understanding of apartheid policy and ideology that Pienaar found himself disenchanted with Kennedy.

Pienaar’s assessment of Kennedy was based on contradiction. Meeting him in person, Pienaar was struck by the politician’s youthful appearance – his engaging smile, athletic frame and easy accessibility. Refusing to stand on ceremony, Kennedy welcomed his visitors and handed out sandwiches. This affable informality, however, marked a discerning individual who took the measure of these men. Kennedy’s mood changed in an instant when discussing the government’s refusal to meet with him. It was the only slight of this nature that Kennedy had experienced on his travels and one he was not likely to forgive. For Pienaar, Kennedy’s appearance and bonhomie belied a steely resolve – he was a man that should be taken seriously. But, it was also this sense of resolution that limited Kennedy. He had come to South Africa with preconceptions regarding integration and showed no comprehension of – or desire to comprehend – the unique nature of South African society. Just as Kennedy had initially assessed Pienaar, the journalist concluded with the same – Kennedy’s mind was “closed”, his visit could last for four days or four weeks, and it would do nothing to enhance his understanding.⁵⁶ Kennedy would himself describe the visit as a meeting with “the editors of the newspapers who supported the government”, suggesting little distinction between Pienaar, Cillié and Van Schoor.⁵⁷

53 Bantu Self-Government Act allowed the creation of the “independent” Bantustans or homelands, allocated to each African ethnic or “tribal” group which were seen as distinct from “white” South Africa.

54 Mouton, “Reform from Within”, pp. 153-154.

55 Mouton, “Reform from Within”, p. 156.

56 *Die Burger*, 6 June 1966.

57 JC Bohrer, *The Revolution of Robert Kennedy: From Power to Protest after JFK* (New York and London: Bloomsbury Press, 2017), p. 294.

4. A MAN OF THE PEOPLE

Even as he adopted a prosecutorial mode in his engagement with the Afrikaans press, images of Robert Kennedy in the mid-1960s invariably portray him surrounded by adoring crowds reaching out to touch a man who had come to exemplify the spirit of the idealism of the era and who embodied the Kennedy mystique. South Africa was no exception. Kennedy's personable nature was emphasised throughout his visit in both the Afrikaans and English-medium press – his eagerness to shake hands and chat with the people waiting for him. The media also focused on Kennedy's interaction with ordinary black South Africans and their responses to him.

No greater contrast can be found between the English and Afrikaans press than in the description of Kennedy's visit to a Soweto home. The usual frenzied adulation marked Kennedy's arrival in Soweto as he met hundreds of school children, shook hands and was ultimately forced to sit on the roof of his car as the crowds made it impossible to open the doors.⁵⁸ The enthusiastic cries of "Baas" with which Kennedy was greeted, were met with a frustrated response, "Please don't use that word".⁵⁹ It was, however, on a visit to the Soweto home of Mrs Judith Zondi that the differences in reportage are telling. For *Die Burger*, little attention was paid to Kennedy's visit other than to briefly relate that he asked her about her monthly income and her children.⁶⁰ In the *Rand Daily Mail*, on the other hand, Zondi's life was described in detail – she was the mother of five children who had lived in Johannesburg for 12 years and spoke "impeccable English". Her husband was a hawker, and she was a dressmaker who had a monthly income of R20. Two of her children lived in Natal with her mother, and she saw them only on holidays. Kennedy's affable nature is also emphasised as he hugged her and gave her a medal and silver half dollar depicting his brother.⁶¹ The article in the *Rand Daily Mail* highlighted the social and economic conditions of urbanised black workers in South Africa and Kennedy's response to her question as to whether he liked the country was reported as, "I like the people, not the country".⁶² In *Die Burger*, in contrast, his response was published as, "Yes, we like South Africa very much, its people and you".⁶³ Both articles, through the means of detail and silence, articulated a particular political view and used Kennedy as a means of voicing this.

58 *Die Burger*, 9 June, 1966.

59 Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, p. 747.

60 *Die Burger*, 9 June, 1966.

61 *Rand Daily Mail*, 9 June 1966.

62 *Rand Daily Mail*, 9 June 1966.

63 *Die Burger*, 9 June, 1966.

Yet, even as Kennedy was personable, he was also portrayed as a naïve figure, out of sync with South African societal norms. A small excerpt in *Die Burger* described a minor incident when Kennedy approached a black man, identified only as “Paulus”, with arms outstretched preparatory to an affectionate greeting. Paulus’ reaction was that he believed “...the white boss wants to hit me”.⁶⁴ The incident is a less than subtle allusion to the absurdity and superficiality of Kennedy’s gestures of equality (and integration). On a darker note and one perhaps unintended by *Die Burger* – it suggests the climate of fear, violence and oppression that belied the rhetoric of separate but equal. On the part of Kennedy, the attempt to reach out may have been influenced by *New York Times* journalist Joseph Lelyveld’s memo sent to Kennedy where the reporter emphasised, “Merely shaking hands with a black man in South Africa is a fantastic gesture”. Nonetheless, *Die Burger* was able to interpret the incident as a failure of bridging the racial divide, symbolic of the shortcomings of the civil rights movement in the United States. Their view was bolstered by the shooting of civil rights activist James Meredith which occurred on the day of Kennedy’s speech at the University of Cape Town (UCT) and was reported extensively in both *Die Burger* and *Die Vaderland*. Meredith had been promoting black voter registration in Mississippi when the incident occurred and sustained wounds to his lower body.⁶⁵

Paulus’ reaction was then humorously portrayed in *Die Burger* as a panic response to learning that Kennedy was from the United States – where they shot black men.⁶⁶ *Die Vaderland* had a less subtle cartoon of Kennedy being shot in the rear by the state of Mississippi with South African writer Sarah Gertrude Millin commenting, “No, thank you, Senator Kennedy, and we choose apartheid over Mississippi”.⁶⁷ The newspaper also drew particular attention to how the international press focused on the Meredith shooting at the expense of Kennedy’s address at UCT, suggesting instead the failure of civil rights rather than the aspirational message promoted by Kennedy.⁶⁸ The *Rand Daily Mail* had paid little attention to Paulus.⁶⁹ The Meredith incident, however, was given a particular focus in an editorial where – rather

64 *Die Burger*, 7 June, 1966.

65 *Rand Daily Mail*, 7 June 1966, p. 1; Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, pp. 317-325. The admission of Meredith to Mississippi University had arguably been one of the most prominent features of the civil rights movement during the Kennedy administration. Four years earlier, in his capacity as Attorney General, Robert Kennedy had been instrumental in getting James Meredith admitted to the University of Mississippi – a situation fraught with violence, the recalcitrance of the state governor and necessitating the use of federal marshals to protect Meredith.

66 *Die Burger*, 11 June 1966.

67 *Die Vaderland*, 8 June 1966.

68 *Die Vaderland*, 7 June 1966.

69 *Rand Daily Mail*, 6 June 1966.

than being seen as a cautionary tale regarding integration – it was instead portrayed as part of the arduous struggle to achieve racial equality, which was by no means over. At the same time, it offered a glimmer of hope – in just two years since the passing of the Civil Rights Act, the wounding of Meredith had received national attention from political leaders and a wave of publicity suggesting that there was a mind shift in the United States regarding issues of social justice and equality: “Today the conscience of the nation needs no prodding. It is instantly aroused. This is the clearest proof that the goal of social justice for all is drawing steadily closer in the United States”.⁷⁰

Die Vaderland – in contrast to Lelyveld’s observation – downplayed the political aspect of Kennedy’s encounters with black South Africans. In a similar vein to the hapless Paulus, a photo depicting Kennedy meeting black men in the Waterkloof suburb of Pretoria was captioned “Hi! I am Robert Kennedy from the United States of America”. The caption continued, “The Bantoes did not know what was going on or who the man was but simply greeted him”.⁷¹ Kennedy’s efforts were therefore portrayed as wasted on people who lacked political awareness. However, not all were unaware of the political significance of the senator’s presence.

5. THE LIBERALS

Kennedy’s presence in South Africa was due to Robertson, president of NUSAS who, at a conference in 1965, decided to invite him to come to South Africa to address the organisation. A letter of invitation was subsequently sent to Kennedy and, to the surprise of Robertson, the senator accepted. There were, however, repercussions and just a month before Kennedy’s scheduled arrival, the state issued a banning order against Robertson.⁷²

When Kennedy eventually met Robertson, they engaged in a discussion that covered a range of topics from Robertson’s banning to Vietnam and conditions in South Africa.⁷³ The press was excluded from the meeting, which may explain the lack of coverage of the meeting evident in *Die Burger*.⁷⁴ Yet Robertson’s banning was symbolic of apartheid oppression, and NUSAS was a particular target of the conservative Afrikaans press. A cartoon in *Die Vaderland* entitled “NUSAS Loves Bobby” depicted two matrons watching a crowd of scantily clad, dancing youngsters mobbing Kennedy’s plane with the accompanying caption, “No, this isn’t one of the Rolling Stones; it’s the

70 *Rand Daily Mail*, 8 June 1966.

71 *Die Vaderland*, 6 June 1966.

72 *The Mercury*, 8 June 2016.

73 *The Mercury*, 8 June 2016.

74 *Die Burger*, 7 June 1966.

Flying Kennedy".⁷⁵ The portrayal of Kennedy and the student activists in the vein of a frenzied celebrity encounter had the effect of depoliticising the visit. At the same time, in a more sinister vein, an article appearing on the same page addressed Communist infiltration among American students that created dissent and unrest: "Of the thousands of students in the United States who are opposing American involvement in Vietnam and agitating for the rights of Negroes, ten per cent will become permanently affiliated to the communist movement".⁷⁶ The message was clear – student activism was how the forces of Communism could undermine the state.

In contrast to the Afrikaans press, the *Rand Daily Mail* highlighted the importance of Kennedy's visit for liberals. It contradicted the view that Kennedy was dogmatic in his refusal to understand the uniquely South African situation. For Marais Steyn of the United Party in the Transvaal, Kennedy's questions were probing and intelligent, and Suzman concurred, highlighting Kennedy's existing knowledge of the South African situation and his "moderate" stance where he merely sought understanding rather than simple condemnation of the apartheid state.⁷⁷ As Suzman would later recall, the great benefit of Kennedy's visit was the attention brought to state oppression and the feeling that South African liberals were not isolated, "...for once, we felt that we were on the side of the angels".⁷⁸ Kennedy's arrival had ended their isolation and brought them into the revolutionary world of the 1960s. Yet, for *Die Vaderland*, Kennedy's meetings with liberals served merely to portray a one-sided vision of South Africa. A cartoon depicted Suzman leading Kennedy by the hand on a meandering route through a wasteland, with prominent clouds.⁷⁹ It was a pessimistic and gloomy vision of apartheid South Africa but, perhaps, one that could not be quickly challenged due to the state's deafening silence.

6. ENGAGING WITH THE YOUTH: THE UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN AND STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY

Arguably, the defining moment of Kennedy's visit was the speech delivered at UCT at the Jameson Hall on 6 June 1966. *Die Burger* described the preparations for the address with provision made for an estimated 8 000-strong crowd, including the setting up of loudspeakers to broadcast the speech to those unable to obtain tickets. An empty seat would also be evident

75 *Die Vaderland*, 6 June 1966.

76 *Die Vaderland*, 6 June 1966.

77 *Rand Daily Mail*, 6 June 1966.

78 H Suzman, *In No Uncertain Terms: Memoirs* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 1993), p.120.

79 *Die Vaderland*, 7 June 1966.

to signify the absence of Robertson.⁸⁰ Before the speech itself, Kennedy briefly addressed the waiting crowd. The event itself was accompanied by what *Die Burger* described as a slight commotion as the loudspeakers were not working, leading the group to jostle for a better position to hear Kennedy speak.⁸¹ What *Die Burger* failed to mention and what the *Rand Daily Mail* highlighted was the belief that the loudspeakers had been deliberately sabotaged.⁸²

The speech exemplified the idealism of Kennedy with the words:

Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centres of energy and daring those ripples to build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.⁸³

As Kennedy concluded, he was met with a silence which highlighted his vulnerability and trepidation as remembered by Margaret Marshall, the twenty-year-old vice-president of NUSAS who served as Kennedy's escort during the trip, "Like a child", Marshall recalled, he looked around him, "as if to say, was the speech okay?" The subsequent ovation, however, served to "exhilarate" him.⁸⁴ The reaction by *Die Burger*, on the other hand, was less than complimentary.

In an article focusing solely on the speech and the response of the audience, *Die Burger* bluntly proclaimed that there was little in the speech that was memorable. It was instead a combination of the Kennedy name and the controversy aroused by Kennedy's visit that evoked the enthusiastic response of the audience. The speech was itself the polished work of a speechwriter, containing little that was novel. It was an idealistic call to action, urging the youth to work towards social and political change. That was a common refrain, and the speech was slated for its lack of acknowledgement of the South African context. The protection of the rights of minorities in the United States could not be easily applied to South Africa, where the extension of political rights to a black majority represented a political threat to the white minority.⁸⁵ An editorial suggested that Kennedy's acknowledgement of the differences between the United States and South Africa was cursory, making the plea, "Is it too much to ask for Americans to try and understand that our multiracial problems are not amenable to the same solution?" However, Kennedy's

80 *Die Burger*, 4 June 1966.

81 *Die Burger*, 7 June 1966.

82 *Rand Daily Mail*, 7 June 1966.

83 <http://www.rfksafilm.org/html/speeches/unicape.php>, accessed 10 December 2018.

84 E Thomas, *Robert Kennedy: His Life* (New York: Touchstone, 2002), pp.321-322.

85 *Die Burger*, 7 June 1966.

words resonated with the vision of NUSAS and the Progressive Party, a view considered romanticised rather than practical.⁸⁶

Compounded by the mediocre content was Kennedy's delivery and, once again, the article adopted a no-holds-barred approach. Kennedy was criticised for reading out the speech with only the occasional interjection, and his oration was described as "mechanical" and dispassionate, lacking the nuance and animation necessary to inspire. Clearly, for *Die Burger*, he was no "orator" despite the acclaim from the crowd.⁸⁷

In contrast to *Die Burger's* criticism of both style and content, an editorial in the *Rand Daily Mail* described the speech as an example of the "authentic Kennedy touch" in the vein of John F. Kennedy, with its aspirational message of hope and idealism and a corresponding disavowal of "cynicism, expediency and materialism" – the very features which were considered hallmarks of the Kennedy "political machine" by *Die Burger*. Robert Kennedy's emphasis on individual liberty and ability to create positive change was further contrasted with Communism and, with it, the "authoritarian" state that suppressed the freedoms of the individual – a less than subtle allusion to the apartheid state and its arbitrary banning of Robertson, "...the way to oppose Communism is not to imitate its authoritarianism but to extend the frontiers of freedom and improve its quality, for reform is the antithesis of Communism, whereas there are many who confuse the two".⁸⁸

Kennedy's meeting with students at Stellenbosch University, a bastion of Afrikaner nationalism, was in stark contrast to that at UCT. The university had produced NP leaders for generations. The probing questions of the Stellenbosch students would be viewed with some approval by *Die Burger*. Yet, the *Rand Daily Mail* emphasised that these students – from whom overt hostility was expected – were not immune to the "Kennedy touch" with Kennedy shaking hands and signing autographs.⁸⁹ Although closed to the press, the meeting received extensive coverage in *Die Burger*. In contrast to the perception of Kennedy's "mechanical" delivery at UCT, he was described here as sometimes acerbic as he questioned students on issues related to segregation such as the exclusion of blacks from the franchise and the church as well as the lesser provision made for their education than had been the case five years previously. This alluded to the system of Bantu Education and Verwoerd's belief that mission education created unrealistic expectations of African political equality in the tradition of Western liberalism. The Bantu Education Act would be the means by which education would enforce African

86 *Die Burger*, 7 June 1966.

87 *Die Burger*, 7 June 1966.

88 *Rand Daily Mail*, 7 June 1966.

89 *Rand Daily Mail*, 8 June 1966.

servility and separate development.⁹⁰ Kennedy repeated the question he had asked members of the Afrikaans press, “What the hell will you do if you discover that God is black?”⁹¹

For his part, Kennedy found himself on the receiving end of a deluge of questions, much of which mirrored those already raised in *Die Burger*. When asked if it was possible to gain insight into the South African situation in only four days, Kennedy responded that “it was not necessary to visit China or Russia to understand what Communism was, but knowledge could be acquired through learning and speaking with people”.⁹² A question on the preservation of the rights of a white minority was met with the response that, even in a democratic state with majority rule, safeguards were implemented to protect minorities.⁹³ The pressing concern was the possibility of international intervention. According to the United Nations, it was only when domestic policies constituted a “threat to world peace” that direct intervention – either military or economic – could be undertaken.⁹⁴ Kennedy reassured the audience that South Africa was not expected to simply emulate the United States, although he would like to see the country move towards greater humanity. The goal of world freedom was not a pretext to intervene in the domestic affairs of sovereign states, and South Africa did not present a threat to international stability. He did warn, however, that the current situation had the potential to create a crisis.⁹⁵

It was Kennedy’s appeal to Stellenbosch students to abandon the outdated slogans and dogma of the past that formed the basis for the editorial appearing in *Die Burger*. For the editor, this was the most profound statement made by the senator that far outweighed his words at UCT – even if Kennedy and his supporters did not agree. It was, in fact, those who invited Kennedy to South Africa who were holding on to myths and dogma of their own – the ideals of Western liberalism that could not be simply applied to the South African context, “Intellectual honesty obligated the people of South Africa in the realisation of freedom – and other ideals, to not just seek other methods than those of the United States, but also a completely different starting point”.⁹⁶

90 The state assumed control over African education, marginalising the mission schools that had previously provided African education. Under the new system, education was segregated and aimed at training Africans to fulfil the labour requirements of “white” South Africa. For more see, D Posel, “The Apartheid Project, 148-1970”. In: C Hamilton *et al* (eds.), *The Cambridge History of South Africa*, Volume 1: *From Early Times to 1885* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 339-340.

91 *Die Burger*, 8 June 1966.

92 *Die Burger*, 8 June 1966.

93 *Die Burger*, 8 June 1966.

94 Noer, *Cold War and Black Liberation*, p. 127.

95 *Die Burger*, 8 June 1966.

96 *Die Burger*, 8 June 1966.

If they were intellectually honest, they needed to realise that differences in South Africa were not merely a matter of pigmentation. The country was composed of various nations that no amount of goodwill could forge into a single entity, a unified nation. Kennedy's words were used to contradict his vision. Although he did not claim to have a solution for South Africa, he did envision an endpoint with the breaking down of boundaries of race, religion and class. But the concept of different nations – which underpinned apartheid ideology – did not make this feasible.⁹⁷

7. A FINAL ASSESSMENT

Editorials appearing as Kennedy's visit drew to a close, highlighted the political nature of the visit. For *Die Burger* it had provided significant insight into the American political machine – what begun as a simple visit and an address to a largely academic audience at UCT had metamorphosed into what appeared to be an election campaign, complete with fiery and polished speeches – the product of professional speechwriters – that espoused high-sounding ideas about unity and equality. These were hopelessly outdated in relation to both the United States' internal and foreign affairs and reduced the complexity of racial issues in South Africa to a child-like level. Kennedy's "ecstatic vision" of a world that could be changed in a single lifetime was an idealistic escape, offering the youth nothing more than an opiate, "This is dagga [marijuana] for the youth in particular".⁹⁸ *Die Vaderland* echoed the sentiment expressed in *Die Burger* describing Kennedy as a product of "image-builders" and a "brainstrust" using the glamour associated with the Kennedy name and making appeals to emotion rather than intellect. With little real understanding of the South African context, Kennedy's visit had not been about acquiring real insight but a means of finding answers that already fitted his preconceptions. The visit had offered insight into the working of international liberalism that prioritised the ideal over the pragmatic and provided little of relevance to South Africa.⁹⁹

Another editorial appearing two days later in *Die Burger* was even more scathing in its assessment. In a description of the differences between South African and American politics, Kennedy's youthful appearance and appeal – which had been highlighted throughout – was a sign of his inexperience. In South Africa, his age would have made him only suitable for a deputy ministerial position, rather than his overt campaigning for the

97 *Die Burger*, 8 June 1966.

98 *Die Burger*, 9 June 1966.

99 *Die Vaderland*, 9 June 1966.

highest executive office. Again, the image of the political machine was raised where it was difficult to get a sense of Kennedy as an individual, masked as he was by speechwriters, advisors and advertising experts. According to the editorial, the only point at which the man emerged from the machine was in his question posed to the Stellenbosch students asking them what they would do if they discovered that God was black. But, at the same time, the question was naïve, at the simplistic level of understanding of a school-going child and the editor could only imagine the political machinations that came into play to ensure that the incident was not repeated.¹⁰⁰ Yet the *Rand Daily Mail* portrayed Kennedy's questions as an attempt to evoke empathy on the part of these students, quoting Kennedy's explanation to the press, "I tried to point out to students that they couldn't expect people of other races or other skin colours to be any less unhappy than we would be if we were in an inferior position".¹⁰¹ *Die Burger's* more cynical emphasis on political machinery, however, also implied that Kennedy's idealist image was less a matter of political belief than a case of political expedience – with its ultimate goal being the American presidency.¹⁰²

An article appearing in the *Rand Daily Mail* by Sparks, a journalist who travelled with Kennedy throughout the country, challenged the criticisms made by *Die Burger*. In response to the negative portrayal of his youthful inexperience, Sparks highlighted Kennedy's role in managing his brother's senatorial and presidential campaigns and the integral part he played in political crises during the Kennedy administration as well as his persecution of organised crime whilst an Attorney General. The editorial further accentuated the contradictory portrayal of Kennedy in the Afrikaans press as both naively idealistic and a cynical political campaigner. While not necessarily a speaker of the highest order, Kennedy was nonetheless "professional" in his manner of speaking with the added common touch, allowing him to communicate with the youth in an intellectual but accessible way. Most prominent for Sparks, however, was Kennedy's "sincerity" – he truly believed what he said. His idealism struck a chord with the young, liberals and black South Africans as he "made idealism respectable again", placing it within a Western tradition of freedom and liberty in contrast to the isolated authoritarianism of apartheid ideology.¹⁰³

100 *Die Burger*, 11 June 1966.

101 *Rand Daily Mail*, 8 June 1966

102 *Die Burger*, 11 June 1966.

103 *Rand Daily Mail*, 11 June 1966. Sparks had also been studying in the United States during the Kennedy administration, arriving just after the admission of James Meredith to the University of Mississippi and experiencing the tensions during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. His autobiography, however, does not address Robert Kennedy's South African trip.

The enthusiastic response to Robert Kennedy's visit belied the criticism evident in the Afrikaans press. The elephant in the room was, of course, the silence on the part of the government and *Die Burger* made subtle allusions to this. A letter from a reader describing himself as a "nationalist" criticised the government's refusal to meet with Kennedy, which accorded the visit greater importance than it deserved. If given the opportunity, the reader would have preferred to engage with "the enemy" and defend his views.¹⁰⁴ An editorial made a veiled allusion to the state's response to the visit, describing the attitude of some Afrikaner nationalists as fearful and defensive, "within their shells". This was in contrast to the burning questions from the Afrikaner youth in Stellenbosch who challenged Kennedy. If Afrikaner nationalists believed that their ideology offered the best solution to South Africa's racial problems, then they should not be afraid to test their ideology against criticism and, by so doing, refine and strengthen it. While the editorial acknowledged that the Afrikaners were a people under siege – a reference to the international condemnation of apartheid and the country's increasing isolation – if the opportunity presented itself, they needed to assert and defend their position – and be more inclusive.¹⁰⁵

Demonstrating a *verligte bent*, *Die Burger* suggesting the incorporation of Progressives, liberals and English-speaking students through a process of guidance. The belief was that the natural progression of the thinking youth was from the more liberal political parties such as the Progressive Party to the NP. Some consideration, too, was accorded to black South Africans. While Kennedy had been exposed to the negative, the editorial regretted that he had not had the opportunity to meet those Afrikaners who were working for the "upliftment" and "development" of "non-Europeans" through mission work and the departments of Bantu, Indian and Coloured Affairs. These were people dedicated to improving the lot of those who were considered most unpromising. The editorial, while paternalistic in tone, had a cautiously optimistic note where these small changes would, in time, have much more significant repercussions.¹⁰⁶ In a sense, the *verligtes* represent a more reflective Afrikaner identity that sought to account for differences within Afrikanerdom as well as the position within the nation of white and black South Africans who were not considered Afrikaners. This would be given greater impetus under Vorster's leadership, which sought to incorporate

A Sparks, *The Sword and the Pen: Six Decades on the Political Frontier* (Jeppestown: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2016), pp. 186-190.

104 *Die Burger*, 9 June 1966.

105 *Die Burger*, 11 June 1966.

106 *Die Burger*, 11 June 1966.

English-speaking white South Africans within the government and made tentative diplomatic overtures towards African states.¹⁰⁷

While *Die Burger* had seen some benefit – albeit of a limited nature – derived from Kennedy’s visit, the same cannot be said for the more conservative publications, *Die Vaderland* and, in particular, *Die Transvaler*. Overt hostility was evident on the part of the latter’s political columnist, Neels Natte, who cautioned NUSAS for its role in inviting Kennedy to South Africa and, in a somewhat juvenile manner, was prepared to pay R1 to the reader who sent in the “best anti-Kennedy joke”.¹⁰⁸ The newspaper was particularly incensed by the possibility of Kennedy returning to South Africa in response to an invitation by the South African Foundation, “One American circus performance on South African soil was more than enough. A second is certainly not wanted”.¹⁰⁹ The *Rand Daily Mail* emphasised the contradictory nature of reportage in the Afrikaans press, which, on the one hand, portrayed Kennedy’s visit as lacklustre and hackneyed (as evident in *Die Burger*) yet simultaneously vehemently opposed a return visit.¹¹⁰ This contradiction can, however, be attributed to the political nuances within Afrikaner nationalism, as evident in the Afrikaans press. Even more intriguing was an allusion to the effects of Kennedy’s visit on not just liberals and black South Africans but on Afrikaner nationalists as well. *Dagbreek* editor Dirk Richard (later to become editor of *Die Vaderland*) – who had been a member of the Afrikaans press to meet personally with Kennedy – suggested that Afrikaners may have declined similar opportunities to engage with the senator for fear of being censured by the state. While Richard was careful to point out that this would not be the case, the perception of state authoritarianism nevertheless presented a threat to Afrikaner ideology creating “a dangerous position of static conformity”.¹¹¹

8. CONCLUSION

Ironically, in the years immediately following Kennedy’s visit, increasingly radical black students perceived NUSAS and its white-dominated leadership to be inadequate in representing their political interests. Contextualised by the growth of Black Consciousness and, with it, the belief that white liberalism was insufficient to achieve black equality, black students left NUSAS to form the South African Students’ Organisation (SASO) in 1969, with its first

107 D O’Meara, *Forty Lost Years: The Apartheid State and the Politics of the National Party, 1948-1994* (Randburg: Ravan Press, 1996), pp.157-158.

108 *Rand Daily Mail*, 11 June 1966.

109 *Rand Daily Mail*, 11 June 1966.

110 *Rand Daily Mail*, 14 June 1966.

111 *Rand Daily Mail*, 17 June 1966.

president the charismatic Steve Biko. SASO would play a significant role in black protest politics in the ensuing decade that culminated in the Soweto uprising of 1976.¹¹² Interestingly, both Cillié and Pienaar displayed a strong sense of empathy for the disaffected black youth of 1976 with Cillié, in his capacity as editor of *Die Burger* pointing out, “...we rejected domination of ourselves, but we do not find domination of other people by ourselves as objectionable”.¹¹³ As David Welsh argues, it would be the growing influence of the *verligtes* and the lack of resolutions towards the maintenance of apartheid that would contribute to its eventual demise.¹¹⁴

Robert Kennedy saw the apartheid state as monolithic and the Afrikaans press as its undifferentiated representatives. But the different ways in which the Kennedy visit was portrayed in the media indicated nuanced perceptions of Afrikaner nationalism. While the English press could easily endorse Kennedy – along with overt hostility to the apartheid state – within the Afrikaans press as well, there were distinctions between the condemnatory attitude of the conservative *Die Vaderland* and *Die Burger*. The latter, in particular, represented mitigation of the ultra-conservative Afrikaner nationalism that characterised Verwoerd’s government, which, confident in its dominance, had become increasingly insular as evident in its refusal to engage with – or even acknowledge – the senator. For *Die Burger*, on the other hand – no less nationalist or critical of Kennedy – the visit presented an opportunity for the assessment of apartheid policy and ideology that could only be affirmed through engagement with its critics. In the ensuing decades, the *verligte* Afrikaans press would continue to confront the conservatism of the *verkrampes* yet this would occur within the limits of the Afrikaner establishment. For Pienaar, the sweeping, revolutionary change associated with Kennedy in the late 1960s would serve little but disempower the press if it adopted open hostility to the state.¹¹⁵

Kennedy’s four-day whirlwind visit to South Africa, while short, nevertheless made a significant impact, raising both the hopes and hackles of South Africans. For the more conservative elements, Kennedy’s very presence and the accompanying adulation provoked a defensive and insular response. However, for others, chafing at South Africa’s isolation, the visit occurred as the gap between the *verkrampes* and *verligtes* widened. While a claim can not be made for the Kennedy visit in promoting this split in the edifice of Afrikanerdom, the *verkrampste-verligte* divide took on a new impetus

112 T Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1983), pp.322-323.

113 Welsh, *The Rise and Fall of Apartheid*, pp.102-103.

114 Welsh, *The Rise and Fall of Apartheid*, p.172.

115 Welsh, *The Rise and Fall of Apartheid*, p.174.

in the ensuing years. And the growing distinction between the two was also evident in the way in which Kennedy's visit was reported in the Afrikaans press. The *verligtes*, in particular, were in an unenviable position – seen as part of the oppressive regime and condemned for it, they were not unaffected by the “winds of change” sweeping through Africa and the world and embodied in the idealised image of Robert Francis Kennedy.

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