

# South Africa's propaganda war: the information campaign to influence the United States of America, 1972-1978

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## Abstract

In an effort to counter anti-apartheid forces, the Department of Information, with the approval of Prime Minister Balthazar Johannes (B.J.) Vorster, initiated

a global unconventional propaganda offensive, at astronomical cost. The Department of Information considered the United States of America (USA) a significant target, and therefore implemented a series of projects to increase Western support for Pretoria. This article endeavours to review the overall goals and effectiveness of campaigns conducted in America from 1972 to 1978. Hence, it will focus on campaigns undertaken by the Department of Information that influenced the 'hearts and minds' of American decision makers and opinion formers, as well as the public regarding South Africa's 'realities'.

**Keywords:** South Africa, Apartheid, Department of Information, Propaganda; Media, Diplomacy, Public relations, B.J. Vorster, United States of America (USA), Cold War

## Opsomming

Met die goedkeuring van eerste minister Balthazar Johannes (B.J.) Vorster, het die Departement van Inligting 'n globale onkonvensionele propagandaveldtog, teen astronomiese koste, geloods in 'n poging om anti-apartheidsmagte teen te staan. Die Departement van Inligting het die Verenigde State van Amerika (VSA) as 'n belangrike teiken beskou en verskeie projekte is geïmplementeer om ondersteuning vanuit die Weste vir Pretoria te bevorder. Hierdie artikel poog om die algehele doelwitte van die veldtogte in Amerika (1972-1978) in oënskou te bring en die effektiwiteit daarvan. Daarom fokus dit op die Departement van Inligting se veldtogte wat probeer het om die 'hart en menings' van Amerikaanse besluitnemers en meningsvormers, asook die publiek, rakende Suid-Afrika se 'realiteite', te beïnvloed.

**Sleutelwoorde:** Suid-Afrika, Apartheid, Departement van Inligting, Propaganda, Media, Diplomatie, Openbare betrekkinge, B.J. Vorster, Verenigde State van Amerika (VSA), Koue Oorlog

## Introduction

The United States of America's ideology and culture emphasise personal liberty and equality. These principles are embedded in American foreign and domestic policies. Apartheid South Africa's segregation and oppressive laws against so-called non-whites, during the Cold War period, denied the Republic economic and alliance securities within the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). The USA itself was struggling with complex race relations and had to cater for African-Americans fighting for civil rights. Pressure from the United Nations (UN) and newly-independent countries prevented a close-knit

alliance between South Africa and the USA. Openly supporting a racist regime, particularly in view of the emergence of newly-independent countries in Africa and Asia, would jeopardise and invite criticism for the USA's foreign policy, resulting in the decline of international influence.[\[2\]](#)

Despite this, the emergence of the Cold War triggered a unique and complicated relationship between apartheid South Africa and Western anti-communist allies. Although apartheid was condemned by the West, South Africa remained a crucial strategic and economic associate, and proved to be the most 'stable' country in Africa in so far as Western priorities were at stake. The African National Congress' (ANC) association with Moscow resulted in Washington's preference for the white minority to remain in control. International affairs were also crucial for the South African Government, especially as its global image was deteriorating. Positive interaction on foreign stages was essential for not only economic reasons but also security from the Western powers was imperative to fend off the perceived communist threat. Particularly as the end of colonialism was leaving the white minority isolated in a black continent.[\[3\]](#) The problem faced by South Africa was: how to sway public opinion in the USA, in its favour — with the stench of apartheid following it? Traditional methods of influence would not suffice. Pretoria would need to target America by unconventional means.

The article focusses specifically on how Pretoria targeted the United States. The apartheid state and its relations, including propaganda and lobbying endeavors, regarding the United States was fluid as the system became increasingly more infamous. An extensive analysis thereof falls outside the ambit of a short article. This article presents a unique aspect of South African history that remains, to a large extent, unrevealed. It serves to digest an otherwise convoluted piece of history. It speaks directly to the angst of an undemocratic system: how to change outside views without relinquishing internal matrices of power.

In 1968, Vorster appointed the Minister of Bantu Administration (later renamed Plural Relations), Cornelius (Connie) Petrus Mulder as Minister of Information.[\[4\]](#) Three years after his appointment, Mulder sallied forth on an excursion to witness international opinion concerning South Africa. Displeased with the unfavourable attitude of international newspapers, political debates, and calls for sanctions against South Africa, he was eager to recruit a crew to combat these views. The book entitled *The Paper Curtain* by Dr Eschel Mostert Rhodie fascinated Mulder. In the book, Rhodie argued that South Africa was not involved in a direct war, but rather in a 'Battle of Words'. Attacks by the international media, Western churches, and third-world countries in an effort

to isolate and boycott Pretoria, prevented South Africa from reaching its maximum potential in trade, technological advances and, ultimately, its 'rightful' place on the continent. Rhoades suggested that, instead of responding to opponents' attacks, South Africa should retaliate with a counter-propaganda offensive.[\[5\]](#)

## **The need for a propaganda war**

Disputes over South Africa's human-rights violations started in 1946. Pretoria's treatment of Indians resulted in a complaint to the UN in its first General Assembly. The Defiance Campaign in 1952 prompted thirteen Arab and Asian countries to instigate a new resolution against apartheid. The USA succeeded in protecting Pretoria from UN scrutiny but by the late 1950s, the USA was obligated to approach South Africa more critically due to the civil-rights movements at home, and African countries gaining independence.[\[6\]](#) South Africa received a great deal of unfavourable global attention following the Sharpeville Massacre that occurred on 21 March 1960. On 1 April 1960, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 134, which denounced apartheid policies and requested the termination of apartheid. For the first time, the General Assembly favoured action against South Africa. Even Pretoria's strongest ally, the USA, approved the resolution. Even though the USA's rhetoric changed in regard to apartheid, economic and strategic cooperation between Pretoria and the USA continued. The General Assembly considered South Africa a threat to international peace in 1962, and encouraged optional sanctions. In order to compensate for the requests by civil-rights movements and African and Asian countries, the John F. Kennedy Administration decided to impose an arms embargo against Pretoria. On 7 August 1963, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 181, prohibiting states from providing South Africa with military equipment. The USA's embargo only applied to weaponry that was used to impose apartheid.[\[7\]](#)

Apart from international politics, another thorn in the side of the National Party (NP) was the Anti-Apartheid Movements (AAM) from the USA, United Kingdom (UK), Scandinavian countries, and Holland. The AAM worked with organisations, such as the exiled ANC, the UN, and sympathetic governments. The goal was to create a worldwide consciousness of apartheid and, through unified campaigns, crush South Africa's economy by means of sanctions, boycotts, disinvestment and propaganda. On 2 December 1968, the General Assembly called for governments and associations to break off cultural, sporting, and educational exchanges with South Africa. For example, South Africa was banned from the 1963 Tokyo and 1968 Mexican Olympic Games.[\[8\]](#)

In 1969, South Africa gained an important ally in the White House. President Richard Nixon instated a policy towards South Africa that invited negotiation and collaboration as a means of transformation. While the Nixon Administration publicly condemned apartheid, in reality, it relaxed economic restrictions and political isolation. The phrase 'the whites are here to stay' from a leaked document in 1969 created the impression that the USA was in favour of the apartheid regime. This document drew strong criticism both domestically and internationally.[\[9\]](#)

However, AAM activities intensified in the 1970s. In 1972, the American Committee on Africa set up office in Washington DC, which enabled the committee to have institutional power in the capital. In the same year, the Interfaith Committee on Corporate Responsibility was established to target American businesses interacting with South Africa. Another threat to Pretoria was the rise in black representatives in the US Congress. Nine black congress members joined to form the Congressional Black Caucus in 1971 to put pressure on Pretoria. The most prominent black man in Congress to put pressure on South Africa was Charles Diggs, who was selected as Chairman of the House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee. Diggs raised the issue of American investments in South Africa during various public hearings. Despite the actions of the Congressional Black Caucus, the US Senate remained reluctant to take any legislative action. Nonetheless, AAMs were a factor in the removal of South African representation from the UN in 1974.[\[10\]](#) Against this backdrop, Mulder, Rhodie and Vorster convened on an approach to deter negative views and alter international politics through propaganda and persuasion.

## **Approach to a propaganda war**

Although *The Paper Curtain* made an undeniable impression on Mulder, the question remains as to how the author intended to win the propaganda war. Rhodie's time as an Information Officer abroad in Australia, Holland, and the USA afforded him the expertise to wage an unorthodox propaganda war. Rhodie accused the Department of Information of being ill-equipped to deal with the psychological and propaganda warfare of the Cold War. For instance, the Arab States funded R20 million for public relations campaigns in the USA. He noticed that the Department of Foreign Affairs stagnated and mainly clung to official diplomacy with governments and avoided other duties such as addressing the foreign media, churches, students, politicians, and AAMs. For the Department of Information to be effective, it had to create a clandestine capability for which it required millions. [\[11\]](#)

The strategy that Rhoodie had in mind for altering global attitudes towards South Africa was the utilisation of overt and covert propaganda. South Africa was struggling to use official and diplomatic communication channels. Therefore, Rhoodie's objective was to reach opinion formers and decision makers across the world, induce their standpoint on South Africa, and establish a communication network through which South Africa could convey its messages and arguments. Rhoodie would hide the true nature of the source and information from the recipients, and the messages would be disseminated by targeted politicians, senators, businessmen, religious leaders, newspapers, labour unions, and anti-apartheid organisations. People were more likely to believe and trust a source that had no apparent direct involvement with South Africa. Rhoodie also advised befriending potential leaders early in their careers in order to secure allies who could later exert influence. The media is often unforgiving towards a country and it is a compelling task to escape the 'brutal-highlight syndrome'. The best ways to ensure influence in the media included having friends within the media, buying goodwill or simply owning the media source.[\[12\]](#)

Rhodie declared that all possible methods would be used to transfer massive volumes of positive information to those living abroad. Propaganda methods included distributing books, magazines, and pamphlets to important individuals; press conferences, seminars, official and ministerial speeches, talks and interviews specifically aimed at politicians and businessmen; advertisements through front organisations; purchasing foreign journalists; buying space to counter-argue in newspapers; lobbying and public relations initiatives; buying goodwill, bribing or encouraging or discouraging people from doing something; external censorship through pressure groups; and paying for visits from foreign VIPs to South Africa. Influential foreign visitors to South Africa would be transformed into an 'informed corps' that would persuade their governments not to abstain from supporting punitive actions against Pretoria.[\[13\]](#)

Mulder believed that the first line of defence was the propaganda line, and the second, the military line. Therefore, it was more cost-effective to obtain positive reporting than to buy tanks and aircraft. Mulder valued Rhoodie's understanding of Cold War mechanics and appointed him as Secretary of Information at the age of 38 in September 1972.[\[14\]](#)

## **Early information efforts**

In a short period of time, between 1972 and 1974, Rhodie established a vast network throughout the globe. The Department of Information's initial thrust into the USA was achieved by hiring the lobbying firms, Rotary and Lions International, as well as Collier, Shannon, Rill and Edwards. Rotary and Lions International were provided with funds and speakers, with lobbying efforts largely engaging America's southern universities and small black businesses. For example, Ronald Farrar, the head of the Journalism Department at the University of Mississippi, was sent on a tour to South Africa. Farrar wrote pro-South African letters which he sent back home, stating, among others, that black people had not been restricted by pass laws.[\[15\]](#)

In January 1974, Rhodie contracted the renowned Washington lobbying organisation Collier, Shannon, Rill and Edwards. The organisation selected the American lawyer and lobbyist, Donald E. deKieffer, to represent the South African Government in the USA. He had strong ties with the American Republican Party. According to the organisation's registration statement to the Justice Department, the mandate received by the firm from the Department of Information stipulates contacting publicists, media representation and educational groups concerning the "reassessment" of current American foreign policy towards the Republic of South Africa.[\[16\]](#) Politically and economically, the "Registrant intends to contact appropriate government officials in the USA concerning American policies with regard to energy, mutual security, and investment within the Republic of South Africa."[\[17\]](#) DeKieffer regularly sent publications, telegrams, and press releases to the US State Department, Defence Department, Treasury and Interior Departments, and the Commerce Department. For example, in 1974, DeKieffer distributed booklets to offices of Congress concerning the importance and security of the Cape sea route. DeKieffer also targeted the US Congress. He used his 'personal' capital to contribute financially to the campaigns of US legislatures and senators. He also arranged social excursions for members of congress, and fact-finding visits to South Africa for Congress representatives. Official members visiting South Africa rose from 11 in 1973 to 56 in 1974.[\[18\]](#) Additionally, DeKieffer assisted in arranging top-level visits to American executives by South African government officials. Contact with top-level American government representatives offered South Africa more diplomatic opportunities. On 12 January 1974, Mulder left for America where he conveyed the importance of Pretoria's minerals and military cooperation and, in exchange, bargained for the abolishment of the arms embargo. Mulder met with various senators and congressmen, such as Governor Ronald Reagan; the black Mayor of Los Angeles, Tom Bradley; Republican Senate Leader, Hugh Scott; Democratic House Leader, Tip O'Neil; Congressman Andrew Young; and Thomas Morgan. He also re-opened correspondence with the *New York*

*Times* and managed to establish a *New York Times* bureau in South Africa. On 22 January, Mulder discussed issues with Vice-president Gerald Ford surrounding the ties between South Africa and the USA. Ford arranged for Mulder to meet with a Navy Vice Admiral, Raymond Peet, at the Pentagon. In August 1974, Ford took office as President of the USA and maintained good relations with South Africa.[\[19\]](#)

In one case, DeKieffer managed to cause a stir after the State Department's Bureau of African Affairs denied Admiral Hugo Biermann a visa to visit the USA in May 1974. As part of the arms embargo policy, military personnel were prevented from making official contact. DeKieffer showed his remarkable lobbying skills by attracting congressional support for Biermann's visa application. Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, personally granted Biermann a visa. Thereafter, Biermann visited US Admiral Thomas Moorer and the secretary of the navy designate, William Middendorf.[\[20\]](#)

In a short span of time — from 1972 to early 1974 — and with a conservative preliminary budget,[\[21\]](#) the Department of Information was able to influence top-level decision makers and newspaper owners in the USA. On 6 February 1974, Rhodie was called upon to deliver a presentation to Vorster and the Minister of Finance, Nico Diederichs, on the clandestine propaganda campaign. He explained that South Africa's most imminent threat was not the Soviet Union, but rather Western democracy through their newspapers, politicians, and business communities. Both Vorster and Diederichs supported Rhodie's initiative to start a propaganda offensive.[\[22\]](#)

## **The grand information campaign**

From 1974 onwards, the Department of Information increased the scale and scope of its propaganda offensive in the USA. Millions of rands were invested into propaganda operations aimed specifically at US Congressmen and the media. The Department of Information enlisted John McGoff, a conservative businessman from Michigan. McGoff was the founder of the Panax Corporation that possessed several radio stations and forty small daily and weekly newspapers scattered throughout the American Midwest. He also had ties with Republican officials and was a personal friend of Vice-president Ford. Already in 1968, McGoff was invited to South Africa as part of the foreign visit strategy. During McGoff's visits to South Africa, he befriended Mulder and Rhodie, and returned to the USA with a positive attitude towards South Africa. Previous executives claim that McGoff occasionally ordered them to distribute stories regarding South Africa. By 1974, McGoff increased the amount of content to be



published regarding the importance of South Africa.[\[23\]](#)

In 1974, McGoff proposed a mutually-beneficial business offer to the Department of Information. *The Washington Star* experienced financial difficulties and planned on selling off its shares. McGoff needed the financial backing of the South African Government to purchase *The Washington Star*. The South African Government would benefit by acquiring a new tool in their arsenal to distribute pro-South African propaganda and, hopefully, alter the perception of US Congressmen in the capital of the USA. *The Washington Star* would also be able to counteract inimical views represented by *The Washington Post* and the *New York Times*. McGoff required \$10 million from the Department of Information and was willing to contribute even more of his own capital to acquire *The Washington Star*.[\[24\]](#)

However, the acquisition of *The Washington Star* never materialised. Sources vary in terms of explaining why the bid failed. According to the Securities and Exchange Commission, McGoff used the \$10 million to seize more shares in the Panax Corporation. In a timespan of five years, starting in 1973, McGoff's shares in Panax increased from 43 126 to 460 000. Karen Rotmeyer asserts that McGoff was unable to raise sufficient funds to purchase the newspaper. The representative of *The Washington Star*'s titleholders, Godfrey Kauffmann, recalls that after looking over Panax's balance sheet, he discovered that the company did not have the financial capacity to buy the newspaper. Kaufmann added that McGoff never submitted a solid proposal. McGoff's presence in the bid for *The Washington Star* concerned its executives, who believed that it had some connection to his newly-found South African relationship.[\[25\]](#)

In late 1974, McGoff instead bought the Californian newspaper *Sacramento Union* for more than \$5 million. While bidding for *The Washington Star*, McGoff requested to use a portion of the \$10 million and the interest generated by the money to purchase the *Sacramento Union*. Initially, Rhodie agreed to the conditions after McGoff had convinced him that it was a leading newspaper in California, which was home to Governor Reagan. In 1976, Rhodie became aware of the fact that McGoff had used the original capital to buy the Californian newspaper and attempted to buy some other smaller newspapers such as the ephemeral *New York Trib*. Rhodie did not have the authority to allow the transaction of the original funds for purchasing the *Sacramento Union*. The subsequent Erasmus Commission[\[26\]](#) concluded that a large amount of money had been placed in the hands of McGoff without proper regulation and the Department of Information was unsure as to whether South Africa had any entitlement to these properties.[\[27\]](#)

In 1975, the Department of Information channelled roughly \$1 000 000 to McGoff in order to secure shares in the United Press International and Television Network (UPITN). Second to Visnews, UPITN was the largest international television agency with more than 100 clients around the globe, and a major provider of news content for the American television network, ABC, and various third-world countries. McGoff bought 50% of the shares from Paramount for Panax, while the other shareholders, with 25% shares each, were United Press International and Independent Television News (ITN), based in Britain. Rhodie was pleased with the fact that South African propaganda could be viewed from different media outlets worldwide. With the intention of influencing editorial control over content concerning the presentation of South Africa, McGoff managed to acquire the UPITN Chairman position in London for his right-hand man, Vice-president Clarence Rhodes. In February 1976, Rhodes staged an interview with Vorster for international television. Rhodie orchestrated the set-up of answers and questions for Vorster, clearly conveying the propagandist intentions of UPITN. Eight out of 300 documentaries produced by UPITN covered South Africa. The editor of ITN, Hugh Whitcomb, gave the assurance that McGoff did not possess the power to prescribe editorial policy and never tried. However, Rhodie was aware that one-sided programmes may have injured the project and therefore endorsed the production of programmes that were critical to the NP. [28] Chris Paterson and Vanessa Malila conducted a study to determine the coverage of the UPITN during and after McGoff's shareholding in the company. The study found that during the McGoff era, most of the content had focussed on South Africa's relations with countries not adjacent to its borders, such as the UK and the USA. After the McGoff period, stories began focussing on South Africa's affiliation with bordering countries. Before and after, Caucasians, specifically politicians, were more likely to be aired than any other race. The researchers concluded that the editorial policies were intended to shift the limelight away from South Africa's real news by focussing on its relationships with other countries. [29]

The Department of Information was extremely diligent in its attempts throughout the USA to modify the American public's attitude towards the white South African government. Endeavours to distribute propaganda ranged from newspapers, books, and magazines to brochures, advertisements, personal contact, television, radio, and other methods of cleverly disguised propaganda. The main overseer of propaganda operations in the USA was the Information Service of South Africa's (ISSA) office in New York. The ISSA circulated numerous South African publications in the USA, such as the *South African Scope*, *South African Panorama*, and the *South African Digest*, which

numbered 35 000 in circulation. These magazines with pro-South African investment advertisements were sent to libraries, educational facilities, organisations, legislators, newspapers, executives, and bureaucrats. South African investment advertisements appeared in several prestigious newspapers and magazines, for example in the *Wall Street Journal*, reading: “South Africa. There’s something in it for you”, and in the *New York Times*: “If you buy or invest, South Africa makes all the difference in the world.” In the *Business Week*, a special advertisement of 32 pages with the title “Grow in South Africa”, emerged. The advertisement scheme was a joint venture of government departments, South African corporations, and bodies that benefited from USA commercial investments. Advertising was an appropriate means of stabilising the import of foreign capital and contributed to business relationships with American investors.[\[30\]](#)

In the 1970s, television became an important source of information and entertainment for most Americans. The department was well aware of television as an effective medium to expose American audiences to propaganda. Propaganda films were specially modified to appeal to American viewers. An estimated 32 million Americans viewed ten South African propaganda films on television in 1974. The ISSA also commercially distributed 1 160 copies of 53 television documentary films. The cinema film distributor, Association-Sterling films, showed ISSA films such as *Floodlift to Lesotho* in 1974, which was believed to be a success after two million people had viewed it. Films generally contained footage of indigenous African animals, traditional cultures, and smiling white and black children. Moving pictures also highlighted South Africa’s strategically important natural resources.[\[31\]](#) Radio was utilised as a tool to reach audiences in rural areas. These marginalised rural regions were only subjected to one point of view. The Department of Information sent 6 000 copies of the radio programme *South African Magazine* to 125 American radio stations in 1974. Listeners of small radio stations were frequently exposed to radio tapes, unaware that they were actually listening to propaganda provided by the ISSA.[\[32\]](#)

Rhodie believed that personal contact was a suitable method of influencing officials and citizens. Except for retaining offices and information staff in locations, such as New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, and Houston, information staff were instructed to initiate ‘contact tours.’ These tours included giving speeches, meeting people, and corresponding with local television, press, and radio. Visits to towns and cities increased from 1974 to 1975, totalling 118 cities visited by only six information officials. Contact tours were paramount for publishing constructive reports in the American press and served to recruit visitors for the South African foreign visit programme.[\[33\]](#)

Additionally, the Department of Information targeted the American education sector. Foreign universities were provided with books worth R50 000, annually. Since most universities abroad only had books that shared 'unbalanced' views, the department saw it fit to sponsor these institutions with books containing a more 'unbiased' interpretation. The material conveyed progress made in race relationships over the past seven years, but oddly, the material made little reference to the Soweto Uprising or civil unrest experienced in the country. The Department of Information also went as far as influencing school children. The ISSA recruited the services of Image Industries, a company that markets and disseminates educational material. The ISSA ordered Image Industries to produce glossy brochures and a multimedia kit equipped with a sound filmstrip, wall map, South African flag, and a teacher's guide. These kits were sent to junior and high school pupils free of charge. The regime distributed tens of thousands of dollars for the manufacturing of 10 466 kits and the printing of 50 000 brochures.<sup>[34]</sup> John Laurence voiced his concern regarding this malpractice: "By this means children outside South Africa are indoctrinated with tacit and often quite false racial or even anti-black propaganda, carrying the objective imprint of the innocent publisher."<sup>[35]</sup>

The South African Government's principal method of influencing senators and legislators involved the use of lobbying groups.<sup>[36]</sup> Lobbying groups came in the forms of public relationship agencies, front organisations and corporations with an interest in South Africa. Galen Hull is cautious of the power that lobbying groups wield, "The strength of lobbyists in Washington, both domestic and foreign, is reflected in their ability to influence legislation that would bring tighter regulation of their activities."<sup>[37]</sup> South Africa acquired lobbying allies through business interests or visits to South Africa. Major corporations, such as the Ford Motor Company and Gulf Oil, utilised their permanent lobbying groups in the American capital to further their own needs and those of Pretoria. Corporations avoided the US State Department and, instead, influenced the Commerce and Treasury Department to diminish trade and arms embargoes. In 1976, pro-South African lobbying groups were on the brink of eradicating import-export limits on Pretoria, but were stopped by Members of Congress who opposed the involvement of the USA in Angola and doubted financial commitment to apartheid. An example of a lobbying ally gained through visits to South Africa was the American Legion, an organisation of conservative USA veterans who have influence over American business and politics. In 1978, the American Legion declared that it would boost South Africa's image nationwide through the mass media as well as its journal *Legionnaire*, and encourage investments.<sup>[38]</sup>

Public relations agencies appointed to advance South Africa's case most notably included Collier, Shannon, Rill and Edwards, as well as Sydney S. Baron. Donald deKieffer continued to provide his services to the Department of Information. He also worked to influence Congress campaigns and update the Department of Information on reports that might have had an effect on Pretoria. In 1976, he also arranged fact-finding trips to South Africa for American delegates, such as John Dent, Philip Cane, and Richard Ichord. Furthermore, DeKieffer provided congressmen with fact sheets regarding critical issues surrounding South Africa. In a case concerning voting for a resolution of not acknowledging the homeland of Transkei in September 1976, both Representatives Philip Cane and John Dent voted in opposition to the resolution, using the fact sheet provided by DeKieffer to support their decision. In the end, the resolution was not approved because it failed to gain a two-thirds majority vote. By the end of 1977, DeKieffer contributed "his own capital" towards the campaigns of 15 senators who had been in favour of building a naval base in the Indian Ocean and who preferred African self-rule. DeKieffer's services were used even during the Muldergate Scandal, costing the government a million rand per year up until March 1979.[\[39\]](#)

Conversely, the Department of Information's most prominent public relations consultant was Sydney S. Baron. This company was the fourteenth biggest in the USA and New York's topmost public relations company, with well-established connections in American politics. Sydney S. Baron was an expensive agency, handling significant corporations, such as The Aluminium Company of America and Japanese Electrical Industry. The contract signed with Sydney S. Baron avows that they would directly report to the Secretary of Information and act as a public relations officer for South Africa; evaluate South African and American political, economic, strategic, and social attitudes towards South Africa; nurture objective and balanced treatment of South Africa in the American media by accurately conveying the meaning of South African policies; promote economic opportunities in South Africa for American business and financial communities; and encourage a better understanding between the two nations, including ordinary citizens and government officials.[\[40\]](#)

The contract signed with Baron on 17 March 1976 could not have come at a better time. Only a few months later, the Soweto Uprising erupted, causing massive damage to South Africa's international image. When faced with criticism, the owner, Sydney Baron, replied: "Every client can't be Disneyworld."[\[41\]](#) From 1976 to 1977, the payment received by Baron increased to nearly half a million dollars per annum. The English press was

rather critical of the increased payment, and the *Daily News* argued that “No amount of money will rehabilitate this country’s image if the Government persists in its disastrous handling of affairs as was demonstrated in the case of the Biko scandal.” [42] Eschel Rhoodie responded by affirming that “the annual amount South Africa spends on public relations firms in America to help advance its image, is completely justifiable since we are in a struggle to survive.” [43]

Baron assigned the African-American, Andrew Hatcher, Vice-president International of Baron, to work on South Africa’s contention. Hatcher was the Deputy Press Secretary in the White House during the Kennedy Administration. South Africa was delighted to acquire a black American to justify its cause by distorting the view that South Africans are racist, and a frontrunner of progress in race relations. Not only did Hatcher encourage black business investment in South Africa, but he also organised visits for African-American legislators and journalists to South Africa. Daily and weekly newspapers received feature stories from Hatcher, depicting Pretoria in a favourable light. On 23 June 1976, Hatcher and the white anti-apartheid activist and executive director of the American Committee on Africa, George Houser, debated on NBC TV’s *Today Show*. Hatcher argued that South Africa was, indeed, changing and that the government allowed non-white participation in state affairs. Hatcher also placed advertisements supporting the independence of Transkei from South Africa in the *Ebony* and *Wall Street Journal* magazines. Furthermore, Hatcher and DeKieffer worked together in public relations campaigns on television. [44]

As part of the agreement with the Department of Information, Baron organised two seminars for wealthy American businessmen to invest in South Africa. Sponsored by the government body, the South African Trade Organisation (SAFTO), the first seminar took place in June 1977, with 300 corporate executives gathered at the Hilton Hotel in Rye, New York. Mulder was present at the seminar to explain the benefits of investing in South Africa, and William Simon, Secretary of the USA Treasury, was paid thousands of dollars to be a guest speaker. The next seminar was held in Houston in 1978, where former President Ford was said to have been paid \$10 000 to convince businessmen of the advantages of investing with Pretoria. McGoff was also a guest speaker at the discussion. [45]

Multiple times Rhoodie asserted that South Africa did not interfere with the political affairs of other countries; however, the Department of Information was trying to affect the discourse of American politics. Less documented cases of South African involvement in American politics were the financial

contributions to unseat US senators who were antagonistic towards apartheid. Rhodie claims that \$120 000 were provided for the defeat of Senator John Tunney in 1976. In 1978, the Democrat and Chairman of the Senate's Foreign Relations subcommittee on Africa, Senator Dick Clark, was targeted. Clark was keen on emphasising racial issues in South Africa. He was defeated by the conservative Republican, Roger Jepsen, with an alleged astronomical donation from the Department of Information for his election campaign. While Jepsen denied South African involvement in his campaign, Hatcher admitted involvement to British journalist, Anthony Sampson. He recalled that, while visiting Pretoria, he had promised Mulder that Clark's defeat was imminent. Other evidence suggesting South African interference was the circulation of pamphlets accusing Clark of being lenient on communism, during the election campaign. Through Baron, the Department of Information sent a donation to Jimmy Carter's presidential campaign in 1975. Rhodie's judgement of reaching leaders before they became president backfired when it turned out that Carter was opposed to the minority rule in South Africa. During the Carter Administration, the relationship between the United States of America and South Africa would deteriorate.[\[46\]](#)

## Waning of the projects

Confident in his Department of Information, Mulder guaranteed that 1976 would be the most fruitful year. The Soweto Uprising on 16 June 1976 dealt a massive blow to the propaganda effort. Black people received instant solidarity from the international community. The global media quickly focused on the shootings, which reflected the true nature of discontent under the black majority. As a result, the Carter Administration was pushed for arms and trade embargoes by AAMs and black leaders. Although Carter voted at the UN for an arms embargo, Kissinger advised him not to implement a trade embargo against South Africa. Nevertheless, the Soweto Uprising resulted in limited disinvestment of foreign capital.[\[47\]](#)

The following year, South Africa was in the limelight once again for the murder of Steve Biko while in police custody. Resentment from the international media, who had adopted an extremely negative attitude towards South Africa as a result of the Biko affair, increased.[\[48\]](#) Rhodie was convinced that the damage was irreversible and declared in the Department of Information's Annual Report of 1977:

*“When the General Assembly of the United Nations proclaimed on December 14 last that 1978 was going to be the International Anti-Apartheid Year, it brought to a*

*climax the worst period of anti-South African publicity and hostility in the country's history ... It received the most in-depth coverage of any South African news story since the first heart transplant and was extremely damaging.”*[\[49\]](#)

In 1977, circumstances were dreary for the Department of Information and it became apparent that it had a mole leaking sensitive information to the South African English press. In addition, the department was struggling to safeguard disorderly propaganda campaigns. South African reporters sensed something devious and began searching for the truth. On 19 February 1978, the *Sunday Express* published evidence from the Barrie investigative report concerning irregularities in the Department of Information. This provided the opposition press with ammunition to confront the government about being responsible for deceit, bribery, and maladministration. Throughout 1978, the press continued to release damning reports, and several inquiries were established to investigate any misconduct within the Department of Information. These investigations and revelations resulted in internal turmoil within the NP that would eventually escalate to the Muldergate Scandal. On 16 July 1978, Rhodie was dismissed and the Department of Information was replaced by the Bureau of National and International Communication. Afterwards, the State Security Council decided to continue with 68 of the secret projects.[\[50\]](#)

## **Reflecting on the operations' effectiveness**

Before reaching a conclusion, it is important to review the overall effectiveness of the campaign from the perspective of authors, experts, and individuals who, in some way, formed part of the information war. John Laurence was impressed with the extensive operations of the Department of Information by infiltrating numerous nations and disseminating propaganda on a grand scale. He also takes into consideration the effect of a small population of whites in Africa on worldwide masses, by commenting on the department's activities: “maybe without parallel in its size and scope in human history.”[\[51\]](#) Carl Nöffke, Director of Information at the South African Embassy in Washington DC in 1975, emphasised Rhodie's propaganda prowess: “[Eschel Rhodie] was probably the most brilliant propagandist of the century — I think he was better than Goebbels.”[\[52\]](#) Geldenhuys describes Rhodie as the “innovative architect of foreign policy” initiatives which downplayed the Department of Foreign Affairs and gave credit to Vorster's statesman image. Political scientist, Deon Geldenhuys, describes the Department of Information's successful diplomacy and propagandist style as follows: “Information's often grandiose conception of international politics consisted of a strange compound of wishful thinking, naiveté, and hardheaded realpolitik.”[\[53\]](#) Ron



Nixon asserts that the Department of Information's propaganda strategy was clearly damaging the counter-propaganda initiatives of AAM groups: "the anti-apartheid movement in America and Europe had limited success in keeping the South African situation at the political forefront of public attention ... efforts to persuade the various presidential administrations to impose sanctions had largely fallen on deaf ears and the grassroots movements pushing for sanctions and divestment had stalled." [54]

On the contrary, authors like James Sanders point out that the Soweto Riots had a severe impact on the operations of the Department of Information: "the Department of Information discovered that it was impossible to control its extraordinary level of operations and provide an effective voice for the beleaguered South African government." [55] He also mentions that counting against the Department of Information was its inability to sell the acknowledgement of independent black states, such as the Transkei, to foreign presses and governments, which was a humiliating setback. Rhodie admitted to having made some blunders that contributed to his downfall by "putting too much on his fork," meaning that he had tried to operate secret propaganda projects all over the world and worked overtime in order to do so. [56] Journalists Mervyn Rees and Chris Day believe some campaigns to have been ill-conceived and poorly executed. Rees considered Rhodie to be his own worst enemy because his lifestyle and abuses attracted unnecessary attention to himself and the clandestine programmes. Elaine Windrich asserts that the propaganda campaign may not have been that effective since dealing with South Africa might have been detrimental to the image of a business. For example, the law firm, Covington and Burling, ceased contact with South Africa after they were boycotted by law students. [57]

## Conclusion

In order to determine the overall impact of the campaigns, the objectives of the Department of Information with regard to the USA need to be outlined first. An analysis of the projects reveals that the main objectives were to reach and secure influential individuals; to shift the limelight away from actual news; and to encourage investment and reinforce constructive notions about South Africa. Considering these objectives, Rhodie's ultimate approach was to strengthen the image of South Africa by identifying and targeting high-level decision makers and opinion formers.

The information shared confirms that Rhodie successfully made contact with top-level and well-connected individuals and converted a portion of them to

embrace a pro-South African stance. Undeniably, the most efficient methods of influencing figures, such as Farrar, President Ford, President Reagan, Kissinger, McGoff, Dent and Cane, were through lobbying, public relations firms and fact-finding trips. This aligned favourably with Rhodie's grand blueprint of casting a web of trustworthy top-level sources to disseminate South African propaganda from the top-down to grassroots level of American society. Other forms of multimedia merely served as overt and covert stratagems to reinforce or bolster antecedents or constructive images of South Africa. Three examples of documented cases that support the effectiveness of the campaigns were the vote for the Transkei in September 1976; Kissinger voiding arms embargoes in 1976; and the defeat of Clark in 1978.

Albeit, the Soweto Uprising and death of Biko caused irreparable damage to the projects. It may be concluded that the Department of Information cemented indispensable underground diplomatic channels that benefitted the survival of apartheid during the 1970s and supported the prolonged existence of apartheid during the 1980s.

However, the Information Scandal proved to an antagonistic global community that the minority regime could not be trusted. In the eyes of the world, the apartheid state was an inherently immoral den of liars, befitting the leadership of an immoral system of government. Muldergate finally convinced Vorster's successor, P.W. Botha, that it was futile to try and convince a hostile outside world of the merit of the National Party ideology through gimmicks. The Botha Administration would try to control news about South Africa by means of censorship and would eventually try and annex the very flow of information.

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## Endnotes

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- [56] Rees and Day, *The story of the Information Scandal*, p 186.
- [57] Windrich, "South Africa's propaganda war", p 59; Sanders, *South Africa and the international media 1972-1979*, pp 61-70; Rees and Day, *The story of the Information Scandal*, p 187.