

September 6, 1985

**Letter from US President Reagan to South African
President P.W. Botha**

Citation:

"Letter from US President Reagan to South African President P.W. Botha", September 6, 1985, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Available via margarettthatcher.org/archive. Included in "Southern Africa in the Cold War, Post-1974," edited by Sue Onslow and Anna-Mark Van Wyk. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/118366>

Summary:

Letter from Ronald Reagan to South African State President P. W. Botha, urging Botha to take action to bring peace to South Africa, so that the United States may more effectively assist South Africa in the region. Asserts that talks about race and leadership in South Africa need to be conducted with figures currently imprisoned. Reagan writes that he will veto most of the legislation currently moving through Congress.

Credits:

This document was made possible with support from Leon Levy Foundation

Original Language:

English

Contents:

Original Scan
Transcript - English

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

September 6, 1985

Dear Mr. President:

I have asked Ambassador Herman Nickel to return to South Africa to convey to you the deep concern and the compassion with which I have been following the difficult times the people of South Africa and your government are experiencing. The international repercussions of events in South Africa, including the financial effects, trouble me greatly; I have been briefed fully on the visit to Washington of the Governor of your Reserve Bank, Dr. de Kock. Within our own country, the problems of South Africa have occupied the attention of the American public as never before, arousing deep emotions on issues that touch the most sensitive nerves in our body politic.

Let me assure you that, along with an overwhelming majority of Americans, my Administration would like to see, and is prepared to encourage those working for a stable, prosperous, and democratic South Africa. This can only mean a South Africa that is at peace with itself. I am reminded of the warning of Abraham Lincoln, that "a house divided against itself cannot stand." Therefore, there is no question in my mind that the conflict your beautiful and promising country faces will have to be solved politically by South Africans of all races. Given our profound concerns and important interest in your country's future, I want you to know that I and my Administration are determined to conduct a responsible policy toward your government and country, mindful of the dangers that all South Africans face at this moment in your history.

With this in mind, I have decided to oppose legislation being considered by the United States Senate and which has already passed our House of Representatives. I do not want my Administration to be party to measures which further disrupt

South Africa's economy and undermine the prospects of its people. At the same time and with a view to building support in the United States for a constructive approach to help end apartheid and contribute to a new political future for South Africa, I have decided to accept certain features of current legislation which signal the deep distress Americans share about the need for an end of repression and injustice in your country. My decision will not be a popular one but I have taken it after great reflection. I can only hope that decisions you take in the days and weeks ahead will make it possible for me to maintain the course I have chosen.

I must be frank. It is clear to me that the troubles which your country now faces, both internally and internationally, require you to take bold initiatives if the current debilitating impasse in South Africa's affairs is to be broken and the negotiations to which you committed your government on August 15 are to start. Without such initiatives, our Congress, the international banking community and governments in the West more broadly, will not be able to play a constructive role in South Africa's future. The time has come for all South Africans to reach out to one another, end the violence and begin to build a peaceful society. Your government has a special responsibility to open the way.

The initiatives you take must be ones that will bring representative black leaders to the table for open-ended talks on the elimination of racial discrimination and political participation by all groups, in a manner that protects the rights and interests of everyone. For such talks to begin and be successful, I believe that even key leaders now in jail or detention must participate. There must also be a return to normal conditions in communities subject to the State of Emergency. While I accept that South Africans alone can negotiate their political future, such a negotiation will only take shape if you and your government are clear about your intention to end

3

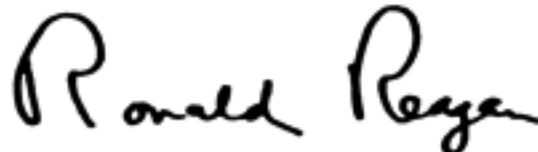
inequality between South Africa's racial groups and to define the extent to which power will be shared and the steps required to reach that goal.

Concrete movement by your government on the Namibia and Angola negotiation would go far to quell the stormy international atmosphere. Our synthesis paper is a fair and workable proposal. I urge that you respond positively to our efforts in the region which continue to promote the objective of regional peace and the reduction of foreign intervention.

Creative action on both domestic and regional issues would receive the support of my Administration and, I believe, of Western political and financial leadership on both sides of the Atlantic. I have instructed Ambassador Nickel to explain my decisions and explore your own thinking and that of your government on the initiatives you plan to take. I will give your views my most careful and immediate attention and they will influence the future of our relationship and the role which my country will play in your region. I repeat, we want to help and the thoughts contained in this letter are my best judgment of what is required for South Africa to secure domestic tranquility and regional security. But I must emphasize time is of the essence. The moment has come to move forward decisively.

Mr. President, I believe that we now stand at a crossroads. Let history record that, with God's help, we took the right turn, for the sake of our peoples and their relationship with each other.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Ronald Reagan". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large, prominent "R" at the beginning.

His Excellency
Pieter Willem Botha
State President of the Republic of South Africa
Pretoria

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON
September 6, 1985

Dear Mr. President:

I have asked Ambassador Herman Nickel to return to South Africa to convey to you the deep concern and compassion with which I have been following the difficult times the people of South Africa and your government are experiencing. The international repercussions of events in South Africa, including the financial effects, trouble me greatly; I have briefed fully on the visit to Washington of the Governor of your Reserve Bank, Dr. de Kock. Within our own country, the problems of South Africa have occupied the attention of the American public as never before, arousing deep emotions on issues that touch the most sensitive nerves in our body politic.

Let me assure you that, along with an overwhelming majority of Americans, my Administration would like to see, and is prepared to encourage those working for a stable, prosperous, and democratic South Africa. This can only mean a South Africa that is at peace with itself. I am reminded of the warning of Abraham Lincoln, that "a house divided against itself cannot stand." Therefore, there is no question in my mind that the conflict your beautiful and promising country faces will have to be solved politically by South Africans of all races. Given our profound concerns and important interest in your country's future, I want you to know that I and my Administration are determined to conduct a responsible policy toward your government and country, mindful of the dangers that all South Africans face at this moment in your history.

With this in mind, I have decided to oppose legislation being considered by the United States Senate and which has already passed our House of Representatives. I do not want my Administration to be party to measures which further disrupt South Africa's economy and undermine the prospects of its people. At the same time and with a view to building support in the United States for a constructive approach to help end apartheid and contribute to a new political future for South Africa, I have decided to accept certain features of current legislation which signal the deep distress Americans share about the need for an end of repression and injustice in your country. My decision will not be a popular one but I have taken it after great reflection. I can only hope that decisions you take in the days and weeks ahead will make it possible for me to maintain the course I have chosen.

I must be frank. It is clear to me that the troubles which your country now faces, both internally and internationally, require you to take bold initiatives if the current debilitating impasse in South Africa's affairs is to be broken and the negotiations to which you committed your government on August 15 are to start. Without such initiatives, our Congress, the international banking community and governments in the West more broadly, will not be able to play a constructive role in South Africa's future. The time has come for all South Africans to reach out to one another, end the violence and begin to build a peaceful society. Your government has a special responsibility to open the way.

The initiatives you take must be ones that will bring representative black leader to the table for open-ended talks on the elimination of racial discrimination and political participation by all groups, in a manner that protects the rights and interests of everyone. For such talks to begin and be successful, I believe that even key leaders now in jail or detention must participate. There must also be a return to normal conditions in communities subject to the State of Emergency. While I accept that South Africans alone can negotiate their political future, such a negotiation will only take shape if you and your government are clear about your intention to end inequality between South Africa's racial groups and to define the extent to which power will be shared and the steps required to reach that goal.

Concrete movement by your government on the Namibia and Angola negotiation would go far to quell the stormy international atmosphere. Our synthesis paper is a fair and workable proposal. I urge that you respond positively to our efforts in the region which continue to promote the objective of regional peace and the reduction of foreign intervention.

Creative action on both domestic and regional issues would receive the support of my Administration and, I believe, the Western political and financial leadership on both sides of the Atlantic. I have instructed Ambassador Nickel to explain my decisions and explore your own thinking and that of your government on the initiatives you plan to take. I will give your views my most careful and immediate attention and they will influence the future of our relationship and the role which my country will play in your region. I repeat, we want to help and the thoughts contained in this letter are my best judgment of what is required for South Africa to secure domestic tranquility and regional security. But I must emphasize time is of the essence. The moment has come to move forward decisively.

Mr. President, I believe that we now stand at a crossroads. Let history record that, with God's help, we took the right turn, for the sake of our peoples and their relationship with each other.

Sincerely,
Ronald Regan [signature]

His Excellency
Pieter Willem Botha
State President of the Republic of South Africa
Pretoria