


1980

# History of TransAfrica

TransAfrica

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Lary

## HISTORY OF TRANSAFRICA

The idea for a foreign policy lobby germinated at the Black Leadership Conference convened by the Congressional Black Caucus on September 25-26, 1976. Because of the conspicuous absence of Afro-Americans in high-level international affairs positions and the general subordination, if not, neglect of African/Caribbean priorities, a private advocacy organization was envisioned as a counterbalance by the 130 leaders present hailing from public office, the civil rights movement, business, labor, religion, civic associations, and educational institutions.

An ad hoc committee consisting of Herschelle Challenor, Willard Johnson, and Randall Robinson formulated an organizational design and investigated funding possibilities. On July 1, 1977 TransAfrica was incorporated and period of fund-raising followed. Two start-up grants one each from the National Council of Churches and the Board of Global Ministries/United Methodist Church were immediately forthcoming. From September 1977 to the following May, a series of cocktail receptions sponsored by prominent figures took place in several cities across the country: Washington, Detroit, Atlanta, Los Angeles, New Orleans, and New York. In May 1978 the first annual dinner attended by 500 people was held at the Shoreham Americana hotel. With the cumulative proceeds TransAfrica opened offices in June with a staff of two: Dolores Clemons and Randall Robinson.

During the first two years of operation, the maintenance of economic sanctions against Rhodesia was the main substantive issue. Robinson testified on Capitol Hill several times on this issue. Drs. Willard Johnson and Hilbourne Watson also made presentations on economic assistance and Caribbean Development, respectively on the behalf of TransAfrica. During this time Robinson and other representatives met with President Carter, the Secretary of State, and other high-level policymakers on a frequent basis.

In 1979, TransAfrica was successful not only with the retention of the sanctions against Rhodesia but also with securing lower tariffs on imported Jamaican rum. The second annual dinner attracted even more people, 900, and provided a large proportion of the funds for another year of operation. Later in November of that year, the letter-writing system known as Action Alert was formed. The ability to generate a large volume of mail in a selected Congressperson's district on short notice was felt to be integral to the effectiveness of the lobby. Such a capability would give the lobby some degree of real power.

In 1980, Rhodesia-Zimbabwe gained independence after a protracted seven year guerilla war and the United Nations mandated economic sanctions. It was great cause for celebration. A TransAfrica observer, Cynthia Cannaday, had reported on the transition of power. Robinson attended the April 18th Independence Day celebrations as an honored guest. During the summer TransAfrica was part of an independent commission to investigate charges of U.S. destabilization against the Manley regime. In the fall the issue of the day became the retention of the Clark amendment, the restriction on U.S. covert aid to anti-government forces in Angola. TransAfrica in conjunction with other like-minded groups and liberal Congressmen was able to prevent outright repeal, settling for weakened language.

In 1981 the organization continued to mature. The Action Alert System was expanded and revitalized, a church anti-apartheid campaign started, and ten support committees were formed. The Clark amendment continued to be a contentious piece of legislation but more alarming, the Reagan administration reversed previous policies and took steps to initiate a strategic alliance with South Africa. TransAfrica leaked top secret

## HISTROY OF TRANSAFRICA (cont.)

State Department memoranda corroborating the charge to the press and the African diplomatic community in May. At the fourth annual dinner, over 1100 people listened to a touching recorded message by Bishop Desmond Tutu, the leading anti-apartheid critic in South Africa whose passport had been revoked for his outspokenness. At the Organization for African Unity (OAU) conference in Nairobi, Kenya the executive director addressed a plenary session for the third consecutive year indicating broad respect for the efforts of the lobby by the African community. Around that time as well TransAfrica hosted a Southern Africa conference featuring Oliver Tambo, the President of African National Congress, the oldest nationalist organization in South Africa, and Moses Garoeb of South West African Peoples' Organization (SWAPO). Gathered at the conference were over 80 activists leaders, elected officials, intellectuals, and diplomats. In the fall the South African rugby team, the Springboks, toured the country. TransAfrica as a member of a broad coalition of anti-apartheid groups worked first to revoke the visas of the team and then to mobilize opposition to the games. There were several changes of venue and a very large protest at Albany that captured national attention. Later in November, the organization moved to larger quarters and expanded. A research/publishing affiliate was added with four new staff members. The research arm called TransAfrica Forum is a non-profit, tax-empt body that will be writing and publishing quarterly journals and monthly issue briefs on foreign affairs topics.

In an overview, the history of TransAfrica can be summarized as a struggle against enormous odds. What has been achieved is mostly due to the unflinching dedication, sacrifice, and hard work of countless volunteers and supporters. Some gave of their time doing the most tedious jobs, others donated money, and still others provided leaks. The existence of the organization is a testament to their faith and active support of the endeavor.