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Oral History Interview with Princeton Lyman

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Summary:

Former US Ambassador to South Africa.

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Princeton Lyman

Former US Ambassador to South Africa

Oral history interview conducted by Michal Onderco in person, in Washington, DC on 24 March 2017

Michal Onderco:
I would like to start with a very general question about the relations between post-apartheid South Africa and the United States. What was the general tendency in the relationship, what were the general trends?

Princeton Lyman:
I would describe it as ambivalent if you will. On the one hand, President Mandela was very anxious to establish a strong relationship with the United States, as were we. But, the South Africans, in particular President Mandela, were extremely disappointed with the aid that was offered after the transition. He had thought it would be like Camp David, and there were people whispering in his ear to say that that would be the case, even though I publicly had warned people that wasn't the case. So, he was shocked and angry, and called it "peanuts" when we announced basically a technical assistance program. But what he was also reflecting was that a large part of the ANC cadres had been trained in the Soviet Union, had grown up thinking of the United States as an imperialist country and he was very anxious to change that, but he said it was up to us to make it clear we were different. On the other hand, we had cooperated very, very closely during the final negotiations and I had done a lot in public and private, to make that go smoothly., So that was very much appreciated. On the American side, President Clinton was very anxious to establish a strong relationship. And the two really bonded when Mandela made his state visit in the fall of 1994. So, in some ways it was very good, in some ways there were disappointments.

The U.S. also moved to establish a binational commission under Al Gore and that too was ambitious. It had cabinet members from both sides, it developed a large program, and it was out of that that the discussions of the NPT renewal came up.

Michal Onderco:
So, how did these discussions come up? Around what time, and what were the initial discussions about?

Princeton Lyman:
At the outset, South Africa was in the camp opposing the permanent renewal of the NPT. The binational commission met alternatively in Pretoria and Washington. It was during such a meeting in Washington and I guess it was either in the fall of 1994 or early 19'95 that the issue was raised. President Clinton met with Thabo Mbeki, and he said to him, "Permanent renewal of the NPT is my top foreign policy priority, and I need your help."

□□□Michal Onderco:
[affirmative] □□

Princeton Lyman:
Thabo Mbeki made the calculation that this was an area in which the two countries could cooperate and work together and he could see it mattered a great deal, obviously, to the Clinton Administration. Thabo Mbeki, in effect, went back and reversed South African policy.

Michal Onderco:

Was there something that was offered to South Africans in exchange for the reversal of the policy? Sort of, either a financial aid package or something like that?

Princeton Lyman:

No, no, it was different than that. I think Thabo Mbeki made the decision in the context of the overall relationship, the promises of the binational commission, and other forms of cooperation.. But then South Africa said, look, if we're going to do this we're going to need some things from the United States on the nuclear field. Those involved further commitments from the nuclear powers to eventual nuclear disarmament and more transparency.

□□□Michal Onderco:

Yes. Okay. □□

Princeton Lyman:

That was the exchange.

□□□Michal Onderco:

Yes. □□

□□□Princeton Lyman:

That was the context where the bargaining took place. □□

Michal Onderco:

And did you at the time discuss in any way the relations with the South Africa's nuclear program that it had before and that it dismantled?

Princeton Lyman:

The fact that South Africa had given up its nuclear weapons program gave South Africa special cachet on this matter. Mandela had gone on record against the nuclear program, so the country was committed to that decision. We had a big problem when we discovered that the chemical and biological program had continued under de Klerk, and that became an issue. If you look at my book I go into that in some detail. But on nuclear -- Mandela pronounced himself. So, it was not irrational for South Africa to be in the lead on NPT, but they had to build consensus in Africa, and when they started it was South Africa and Benin versus everybody else.

Michal Onderco:

Yeah. Did they -- how was -- was Mbeki easily able to persuade people within South Africa to go along with this?

Princeton Lyman:

No, no, and that's the other thing. First of all, his primary negotiator …

□□□Michal Onderco:

Abdul Minty? □□ □□□ □□

Princeton Lyman:

Yeah, yes, you're right, who I've known and like. But Minty was very much opposed, so Minty had to be turned around and was not happy. But he did it .He later was, I think, South Africa's permanent representative to the UN in Geneva. But the sentiment in South Africa was that, as some begin to call it, the NPT was an apartheid treaty.

□□□Michal Onderco:

[affirmative] □□

Princeton Lyman:

This was because under the NPT the five countries which already had nuclear weapons got to keep them while everybody else pledged not to develop them. To some this seemed unfair and prejudicial This was the sentiment that you read in the papers and in various commentary.

Now, when this controversy had started, I wasn't involved in the details of the negotiations. It was in the hands of the people in Washington and at the UN who managed NPT policy. But I got very frustrated with the tone in the press. So I wrote a piece that was published in the paper saying [that] calling it an apartheid treaty is ridiculous., What we are talking about here is protecting everybody from the spread of nuclear weapons. I was chastised for that by the people working on these issues. They said, "we didn't authorize you to write about this." But it was very helpful. It helped turn around opinion in South Africa. And the NPT folks later acknowledged that.

Michal Onderco:

Was the establishment of the Foreign Ministry, which was, at that time, still strong on the former apartheid regime officers, what were their feelings about the NPT?

Princeton Lyman:

I think, you know, like Minty, they had started out opposed, so they were asked to turn around and change it, but you know, Thabo Mbeki was really in charge of foreign affairs.

□□□Michal Onderco:

Yeah. □□

Princeton Lyman:

And the deputy, Aziz

□□□Michal Onderco:

Pahad? □□

Princeton Lyman:

Aziz Pahad was Mbeki's man in the foreign ministry. So policy was in the hands of Thabo Mbeki, and once he made that decision people pretty much got in line, and they had to do a lot of diplomacy in Africa.

□□□Michal Onderco:

How was that seen among the African countries? □□

Princeton Lyman:

Because I wasn't involved from South Africa in the negotiations, I couldn't follow that closely, but I think the feeling was that by being able to extract commitments from the United States that perhaps could not have been done otherwise, it gave Africa a very prominent role in an issue in which they were really not players.

And I think that overcame a lot of the initial opposition. It was Africa showing its hand. South Africa was now a leading country. South Africa would later have problems trying to lead Africa, but on that occasion, I think they were demonstrating that Africa could play with the big guys, and get concessions on an issue that, otherwise, Africa was almost irrelevant except for the number of votes.

□□□So, I think that helped turn around the African position. □□

Michal Onderco:

I heard from Ambassador Graham that Colin Powell sent a letter to Nelson Mandela on the issue.

□□□Princeton Lyman:

Yeah, that's true. I remember that now. □□

□□□Michal Onderco:

How was that letter received? □□

□□□Princeton Lyman:

It seemed okay because the real conversation had taken place between Clinton and Mbeki. □□

I mean, when Clinton said, "This is my top foreign policy priority, I need your help," and Mbeki calculated, look if we're going to have a good relationship with the United States, let's do this one. There will be a lot of matters later where we would clash, but on that one Mbeki made the calculation to work with the US. And I think it wasn't as big a turnaround if you think about it. If Nelson Mandela is saying, "We're not going to be a nuclear weapons nation, we're rejecting it," it wasn't a big turnaround for South Africa to support the permanent renewal of the NPT.

Michal Onderco:

Was there a strategy from the United States that singled out South Africa as a particularly crucially important country?

Princeton Lyman:

Yes, because the African votes were critical. And getting that vote bloc, and you know, in the end they got the whole African bloc, was very important in securing renewal. There were other countries that were important in different ways, but when it comes to getting votes, you need a strong leader. And South Africa, having just emerged as the great new democratic force and Mandela an international hero, was the most logical country to play that role..

Michal Onderco:

Was South Africa able to find -- to put together that bloc before the conference, or were they building it before the conference?

Princeton Lyman:

I think they started before. I think they started well before. I don't know when, because I wasn't directly involved, when the negotiations took place with the Clinton Administration about the concessions. I don't know when that took place, beforehand or after, but they were critical. Without those, South Africa would not have been able to bring everybody around.

□□□Michal Onderco:

Who was involved on the White House side in these negotiations? □□

Princeton Lyman:

I don't know. I really -- once the policy is made, I was not in. Back to I what I said - I got chastised for even writing about it - it was really in the hands of other people.

□□□Michal Onderco:

Okay. Did that translate into better relations immediately after? □□

Princeton Lyman:

It did. It got us off to a much better start and the binational commission continued. It's unfortunate because later the relations became very different. Thabo Mbeki, particularly once he became president, but even before, shifted the nature of South African foreign policy from champion of human rights, nuclear nonproliferation, et cetera, to arguing that "we have to democratize the international system", which has dominated South African policy in international bodies like the UN for much of the time since. And that put us on a different course, and relations became more brittle.

Mandela, too, did some things that went against the grain of US opinion. "Don't tell me I can't be friends with Kaddafi," Mandela would say. But at the time of the NPT negotiations, this was kind of a honeymoon period, even though they were still upset about the foreign aid issue.

Michal Onderco:

Was there also any, sort of, expectation that South Africans had about how the future relation would look like? Because you said there was a sort of honeymoon, but were there any expectations about a sort of future partnership, maybe?

□□□Princeton Lyman:

I think that both sides became disappointed. The U.S. became disappointed because South Africa in this role of democratizing international institutions took positions that U.S. never expected. They were not consistent champions of human rights, e.g., they were willing to vote against human rights resolutions in the UN Security Council, like on Burma, just to show that South Africa was not going to g accept the West's agenda. Then there was Thabo Mbeki's response to the AIDS pandemic, which became very sour. There was the anti-discrimination conference in Durban where there was resolution against Israel. Colin Powell walked out as you recall. So things took a very different turn from the U.S. point of view. From the South Africans point of view, it was that, first of all, the U.S. had not been very generous in reconstruction of South Africa, and then the U.S. was, you know, on the other side of all of these issues. Although, I have to say that South African opinion is quite divided on this foreign policy. I mean, when they voted against this Burma resolution, Archbishop Tutu said it was a disgrace. □□

□□□Michal Onderco:

Yeah. □□

Princeton Lyman:

So there's not unanimity on it. Nevertheless, both sides became disappointed. Less so while Mandela was president because he had this affinity for Clinton. He developed a very warm relationship with Clinton. He had a very warm relationship with George H. W. Bush as well. When I arrived in South Africa, Mandela made a point to me that he would call President Bush whenever he needed him and Bush would calls him whenever he was going to take a decision affecting South Africa. Whenever Mandela would go to the United States, well after Clinton was elected, he would call Bush. But Thabo Mbeki's presidency was different.

Michal Onderco:

There are other observers also in South Africa who also know this sort of turn in the relationship with Mbeki. Were you able to observe the beginnings of that already in ‘95?

Princeton Lyman:

Not really very much. We were still operating on hopes and expectations that the relationship was special. I'll give you an example. Al Gore, when he led the delegation to the inauguration, advised Nelson Mandela and others, "Don't get sucked into too many things. Everybody is going to come to you and ask you to do this, and ask you to do that. Be careful of not spreading yourselves too thin when you have so much to do at home." But then, of course the U.S. turned around and asked South Africa to take the lead on the NPT, and we asked South Africa to send police to Haiti, which they did. So, at the beginning, it was, you know, we sought and found areas where we could cooperate, and it was a desire on both sides to make the relationship work. By the time I left, at the end of 1995, it was still in that mode. I think the problems that still lingered then was more in that we were not going to be playing the role in economic development that Mandela and others had anticipated.

□□□Michal Onderco:

When did the binational commission stop meeting? □□

Princeton Lyman:

It went on until the end of the Clinton Administration. It lost a lot of steam over time, however. I'll tell you why those commissions do that. You have all these U.S. departments, like Interior, and Energy, and Transportation participating. But then, when it came to the programs [they developed with their South African counterparts], they turned to USAID and said "Can't you pay for this? We don't have money for this." That's our system. They had little money for international cooperative programs. So the programs were dependent on the aid program, which was already not that large, and USAID had its own priorities as well. So there were some good things done, a lot of technical cooperation, working on the issues of conservation and energy, et cetera, but it began to lose force. And when Al Gore started running for president -- he was a driving force inside the administration --, without Al Gore driving it, it started to lose it's potential.

Michal Onderco:

Yeah. Is there something related to the 1995 NPT conference that I should have asked about and I didn't? About the bilateral relations?

Princeton Lyman:

No, I think you've got it. I mean, as I said, I wasn't so directly involved and a lot of the negotiations went on outside South Africa, but it was very clear, that when President Clinton made this a priority, how Thabo Mbeki made this a priority, and made the decision to shift South Africa's position and moreover, to play a leadership role. It gave South Africa quite soon after democratization a prominent role on the international scene. South Africa moreover showed it could deliver, and it helped in establishing its leadership role in Africa. Mbeki, and I'm just speculating, made all those calculations when deciding to change South Africa's position, and because he was really in charge of foreign policy he could do it. But then, he had to turn around people like Minty and others, and turn around the Africans. It wasn't the biggest issue inside South Africa. There were so many other post-apartheid issues. But the debate got to be kind of nasty in the press, and that's why I wrote my piece. And later, Washington was happy I'd done it.

□□□Michal Onderco:

[laughs] Thank you very much for your time. □□

Princeton Lyman:

I hope it's helpful.

[end of transcript]