
The Rivonia trial of Nelson Mandela, violent resistance to the apartheid regime, U.S. relations with South Africa, South Africa’s image and relations with the world, and much more.

This edition of Confidential U.S. State Department Central Files for South Africa resumes where the files for 1960 through January 1963 ended, with unparalleled coverage of another tumultuous four-year period in South African history. Four of the most well-documented topics in these files are the 1964 Rivonia trial, violent protest against the white supremacist South African state coupled with police crackdowns on this resistance, the troubled relationship between the U.S. and the apartheid regime, and South Africa’s relations with other nations.

From October 1963 through June 1964, Nelson Mandela and seven other leaders of the African National Congress—Denis Goldberg, Ahmed Kathrada, Govan Mbeki, Raymond Mhlaba, Andrew Mlangeni, Elias Motsoaledi, and Walter Sisulu, went on trial in Pretoria. Known as the Rivonia trial (named for the Johannesburg suburb where the arrests took place), the court charged Nelson Mandela and the others with “222 acts of sabotage in preparation for guerrilla warfare and armed invasion of South Africa.” The court alleged that these acts occurred between August 10, 1961 and August 5, 1963 and included the bombing of the offices of Die Nataller, a nationalist newspaper based in Johannesburg. In June 1964, all eight were convicted and given life sentences. Mandela remained in jail until 1990.

The files in this edition contain eyewitness accounts from State Department officials about the progress of the trial, debates among U.S. personnel about the proper U.S. response to the verdicts, and other international reaction to the trial. A report from April 23, 1964, includes Nelson Mandela’s speech in court when he explained his role in the African National Congress and the ANC transition from nonviolence to violence. On June 25, the American Embassy in Pretoria noted that it thought the verdict “stiff but justified” and it relayed how South Africans viewed the verdict.
The Rivonia trial is just one episode in a broader anti-apartheid movement chronicled in these files. This movement contained both violent and nonviolent wings. Just two days after the announcement of the verdict, a post office near Johannesburg was bombed. During the trial, however, eleven religious leaders held a meeting at the Johannesburg City Hall to protest a section of the General Law Amendment Act of 1963 that allowed police to hold suspects for ninety days without going to trial. The files contain frequent reports of police making arrests of persons protesting the apartheid regime. A February 4, 1964, airgram from the American Embassy in Cape Town to Washington, for example, noted that for the year 1963, 1,267 people were detained under the Suppression of Communism Act, 594 held under the General Law Amendment Act, 543 arrested under the Unlawful Organizations Act, and 9 arrested under the Riotous Assemblies Act. Two years later, in July 1966, police arrested two religious leaders for distributing a record of speeches by Martin Luther King Jr. The files also contain the Snyman Commission report of 1963. The report was the result of a government investigation into riots in the Paarl area in November 1962. During the riot, two whites and five Africans were killed.

The United States faced a dilemma in its relations with South Africa during these years. South Africa remained an important trading partner, but the United States did not support the South African government’s apartheid policies. In May 1966, for example, Lockheed Corporation informed the government that they planned to repair four South African Air Force jets at their plant in Marietta, Georgia. Lockheed had sold the jets to South Africa prior to the implementation of a United Nations arms embargo. The State Department debated whether these repairs would violate the embargo agreement. Later that year, the State Department commented on the navy’s request that the carrier F.D. Roosevelt refuel in Cape Town. In 1965 the South African government declared that the carrier Independence could visit only if “no racially mixed aircrews” were on board the ship. In arguing against the visit, the State Department said that it would compromise the “widely publicized U.S. policy of refusing to compromise our principles by conforming to apartheid.” In June 1966, Robert Kennedy visited South Africa. According to the State Department, the visit was very popular with the South African people, but high-level government officials refused to meet with him. The files also contain a paper from August 1966 by State Department Policy Planning Council member William R. Duggan called “South Africa in the Next Decade: A Case for Constructive Involvement” in which he discussed the problems involved in relations with South Africa and the future of those relations over the next ten years.

South Africa’s image in the world is a major concern of the government in these years. In a November 16, 1964, telegram, for example, the South African government announced that it would be starting a campaign to improve its image around the world. In a May 1965 airgram, the State Department reported that the government of South Africa would begin using “Madison Avenue techniques to burnish its image.”