

“The most patient of animals, next to the ass:” Jan Smuts, Howard University, and African American Leadership, 1930

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ABSTRACT

Former South African Prime Minister Jan Smuts’s 1930 European and North American tour included a series of interactions with diasporic African and African American activists and intelligentsia. Among Smuts’s many remarks stands a particular speech he delivered in New York City, when he called Africans “the most patient of all animals, next to the ass.” Naturally, this and other comments touched off a firestorm of controversy surrounding Smuts, his visit, and segregationist South Africa’s laws. Utilizing news coverage, correspondence, and recollections of the trip, this article uses his visit as a lens into both African American relations with Africa and white American foundation work toward the continent and, especially, South Africa. It argues that the 1930 visit represents an early example of black internationalism and solidarity, reflecting a shift from sociocultural connections between Africa and the diaspora to creating political movements on behalf of African people. To contextualize this visit, we assess events surrounding a meeting that the Phelps-Stokes Fund organized for Smuts at Howard University, using this as a lens into the two disparate, yet interlocked, communities.

KEYWORDS

South Africa; United States; Jan Smuts; Phelps-Stokes Fund; W.E.B. Du Bois; Howard University

Introduction

In early 1930, Jan Christian Smuts took a 17-day tour of the United States and Canada. His itinerary included a January 9 speech on race relations in South Africa at the Civic Forum Town Hall in New York City. In the audience of 1500 that night sat 30 to 40 invited African American leaders. Nonetheless, Smuts assumed that an American audience, however, it was composed, would uncritically swallow his description of conditions in segregationist South Africa. He launched into a history of “sleeping Africa” and warned against allowing European civilization to be forced upon African cultures, because it would “bolshelize the most docile being on the face of the earth” and “make him a menace to the rest of the world.” What one would end up with, he argued, was an “inferior” European who had lost touch with his own culture, so the solution was to keep Africans in their rural homes.

After concluding his speech, Smuts took a question from a person in the audience about the state of American race relations. In answering, he called on African Americans to

demonstrate patience with their own country's Jim Crow laws. Then, he spoke about the slave trade and the "tales of travelers who had seen hundreds of black men chained together, singing as they were marched to the sea." That confirmed to him that their kindred continental Africans were "docile animals, the most patient of animals, next to the ass." Why, he wondered, could their American brethren not be the same?¹ While Smuts's visit aimed to promote the British Commonwealth and the League of Nations, these comments, naturally, touched off a firestorm of controversy and threatened to disrupt a meeting arranged for him six days later with African American leaders sponsored by the Phelps-Stokes Fund at Howard University in Washington, DC. In the decades following Du Bois's pronouncement that the global color line would emerge as the twentieth century's greatest problem, the meeting made clear the degree to which Smuts and contemporary white leaders projected, protected, and politically deployed "whiteness" as an international norm.²

This article uses Smut's visit, remarks, and ensuing controversy as a lens into early US–South Africa perceptions within two very different – and yet interlocked – communities. First, we examine the motivation of Phelps-Stokes Fund officials for sponsoring the Howard conference, their belief that Smuts could become more progressive on race issues, and their attempt to convince him that the black experience and achievements in America, particularly those led by whites, were a model for race relations in South Africa, and across the continent, that he should emulate and perhaps even seek Phelps-Stokes assistance for. In doing so, we interrogate the tactics that white, often paternalistic, American foundations used, in their view, to further race relations and their own expansive missions during the early twentieth century.

Additionally, we analyze how Smuts's New York speech and the Howard meeting galvanized African American opposition to white rule in South Africa and built upon a previous, yet increasing, interest in African issues over both the short and long terms, arguing that this little-considered incident played a significant role in directing African American attention toward South Africa. As Brenda Gayle Plummer, Penny von Eschen and James Meriwether have demonstrated, America's black press and middle-class African Americans increasingly engaged with international issues and debates during the first half of the twentieth century. These scholars point to Italy's 1935 invasion of Ethiopia as the watershed event that catalyzed African American involvement in African affairs. Indeed, Plummer goes so far as to claim, "The Italo-Ethiopian War of 1935–1936 was the first great manifestation of African American interest in foreign affairs."³ We argue that Smuts's visit was an important, earlier example of the emergence of black internationalism. This falls in line with scholarship that identifies Ethiopia's late-nineteenth century repulsion of Italy in 1896, Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War of 1905, and the Communist International's founding of the League Against Imperialism in 1927 as significant developments for both African Americans and whites thinking about color consciousness.⁴

African American leaders and political intellectuals had taken an interest in African issues such as political milieus in Ethiopia, Liberia, and the Congo in the nineteenth century.⁵ And

¹*Time Magazine*, January 20, 1930. When Smuts's comment was reported in some of South Africa's white press, it was toned down to the "Negro" being "the most patient of creatures" (*Natal Mercury*, January 11, 1930).

²Lake and Reynolds, eds. *Drawing the Global Color Line*, 1.

³Plummer, *Rising Wind*, 36; von Eschen, *Race Against Empire*; and Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be Africans*.

⁴For example, Margaret Macmillan and Richard Holbrooke write in *Paris, 1919* that white imperialist concerns played a large role in brokering treaties to end World War I. These leaders themselves well understood the implication of their language on self-determination and were aware of the gap between their own rhetoric and intentions.

⁵Skinner, *African Americans and US Policy Toward Africa*; Adi, *Pan-Africanism and Communism*; Guridy, *Forging Diaspora*; and Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom*.

they had an ongoing involvement in South Africa dating from the late nineteenth century. Robert Trent Vinson's *The Americans Are Coming!*,⁶ for instance, provides an overview of the longstanding cultural, educational, and religious connections between African Americans and South Africa, investigating South African views of African American celebrities such as boxer Jack Johnson and Orpheus McAdoo's Jubilee Singers as well as the more politicized Garveyite connections between the Americas and southern Africa. Additionally, scholars such as Charles Denton Johnson and David Anthony have studied the life of African American YMCA missionary Max Yergan, who served in South Africa for 15 years during the 1920s and 1930s and who became a leading figure in founding the Council on African Affairs.⁷ In South Africa, the United States, and the rest of the world, these strands had coalesced into creating intellectual anti-colonial arguments that increasingly made their way into dominant political discussions. The Smuts visit served as another catalyst for those trends.

Dueling internationalisms

Smuts's encounter with African American leaders reflected two contrasting perspectives of internationalism. On the one hand, Smuts understood the profound changes taking place in the post-World War 1 global order, and he argued for an imperial internationalism that sought to sustain the life of the British Empire and the British Commonwealth, especially white-led Dominions, through promoting international bodies such as the League of Nations and bolstering the Anglo-American alliance. To Mark Mazower and John Darwin, Smuts saw the League of Nations as a logical extension of the Commonwealth and a body for overseeing a fluid world order in "an age of great uncertainty."⁸

On the other hand, those African Americans who challenged Smuts represented a very different strand of internationalism, a counter-imperial internationalism based on evolving transnational networks between African Americans, black South Africans and diasporan Africans living in the United States who saw the similarities and connections between white domination and black oppression in their countries and who were contesting white domination.⁹ Until recently scholars have focused largely on governmental structures and the elites working within them when constructing international history narratives, but David Featherstone has noted that global subaltern solidarity systems were largely formed from below by people through their struggles rather than at the direction of elite actors.¹⁰ This solidarity from below resulted from the dissemination of information by newspaper reporters and members of subaltern groups who found ways to listen to and analyze official discourse.

Smuts's Rhodes lectures

Over the course of the twentieth century, South Africa produced two celebrated international figures. Nelson Mandela achieved an iconic status in the second half of the 1900s, while Jan Smuts was South Africa's pre-eminent international statesman during the first. A Cambridge-educated lawyer and a leader of Afrikaner resistance to the British during the

⁶Vinson, *The Americans are Coming!*

⁷Anthony, *Max Yergan*; and Johnson, "Re-thinking the Emergence."

⁸Darwin, *The Empire Project*, 405. See also Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace*, 36.

⁹For a broad survey of black internationalism historically, see West and Martin, "Contours of the Black International," 1–44.

¹⁰Featherstone, *Solidarity and Resistance, Space and Political Identities*.

South African War, he helped draft the country's constitution creating the Union of South Africa in 1910, and served as Deputy Prime Minister under Louis Botha. During World War I, he commanded Imperial forces in Tanganyika. He was a member of the Imperial War cabinet in Great Britain from 1917 to 1919. At the Versailles Peace Conference, he helped draft the charter of the League of Nations and design the mandate system for Germany's former African colonies.¹¹ And in the 1920s, he was a passionate advocate of the British Commonwealth.

Although he is best known for his involvement in political affairs, he also was intellectually curious, following scholarly trends in botany, anthropology, archeology, and geology and propounding his own philosophy, Holism, trying to make sense of a haphazard world.

While his international stature ascended in the post-World War 1 era, his political career in South Africa hit a dead end. Following Louis Botha's death, he served as Prime Minister between 1919 and 1924, but his party lost to J.B.M. Hertzog's National Party in 1924 and then again in the "Black Peril" election of June 1929. Despite a campaign in which Smuts's South Africa Party endorsed white domination and segregation, Hertzog reached white voters by spinning Smuts's advocacy of a British confederation of states stretching from the northern to southern reaches of Africa to mean that he wanted white South Africa to be swallowed up in the rest of Africa.

In the election's aftermath, Smuts decided to accept invitations to make speeches in the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States. On the November 1929 first leg, he presented three Rhodes Memorial Lectures at Oxford University, spelling out his views on white settlement in Africa and "native policy" and lending support to the British "civilizing mission" from a first-hand perspective. Not surprisingly, he took an unabashedly racist view of "natives," caricaturing them as "happy-go-lucky," "child-like with a child psychology," "good-tempered," and "care-free" people who loved "wine and song" and who had no original religious beliefs, literature or art, or desire to improve themselves.¹²

Smuts then endorsed Cecil Rhodes's vision of expanding the European presence in tropical Africa.¹³ European settlers, he argued, were not "harmful," but rather beneficial to Africans through stimulating economic development and providing jobs. Indeed, because Africans were used to receiving orders without question from their chiefs, he asserted, they could easily be trained for routinized work. To Smuts, the best way to "civilize the African native is to give him decent white employment ... the gospel of labor is the most salutary gospel for him." He believed that Africa contained more than enough land for Europeans and Africans to live side by side in segregated areas and prosper.

He asked how peoples at different evolutionary development levels could live in the same nation. Although he acknowledged that in South Africa, whites had erred by not setting aside enough land for a growing African population following the 1913 Natives' Land Act that restricted black land ownership, he still believed that segregation with separate institutions for blacks and whites in their own separate living areas in both rural reserves and urban centers was the best possible arrangement. Blacks should build up their own institutions in their own areas so that they were not "de-Africanized" or turned into "pseudo-Europeans."

¹¹Scholarly assessments of Smuts's views on race include Garson, "Smuts and the Idea of Race"; Marks, "White Masculinity"; and Hyam, "Smuts in Context."

¹²Smuts, *Africa and Some World Problems*, 47 and 74–6.

¹³*Ibid.*, 63–7.

While sticking to these beliefs about the majority of Africans, Smuts understood that his views would be “resented by a small educated [African] minority who claim ‘equal rights’ with the [European] people.”¹⁴ This represented his typical rhetoric, and his lectures received little criticism in Great Britain.

The field marshal on US soil

Following the Oxford lectures, Smuts journeyed on to his second leg in North America, where he delivered dozens of speeches in Ottawa, New York City, Cincinnati, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, DC, New Haven, Cambridge, and Boston.¹⁵ In Canada, he trumpeted the importance of the British Empire, which then encompassed a quarter of the world’s population, and marveled at how it was redefining itself through the creation of dominion status and an emerging British Commonwealth. In the United States, a decade after the League of Nations’ founding, Smuts promoted the organization’s contributions to world peace.¹⁶ This was particularly important in the US because the nation of the League’s co-founder Woodrow Wilson had refused to join it. The US Senate, led by Henry Cabot Lodge, refused to ratify the League treaty and join the group in 1920, and the nearly complete breakdown between the country’s executive and legislative branches thwarted the internationalist Wilson. His successors, Warren G. Harding and Calvin Coolidge, moved the country toward an increasingly isolationist foreign policy.

Smuts’s visit aimed in part to redeem the League through lobbying for US involvement and to dispel the idea prevalent in the US Congress that the League would use force to preserve peace in the world. Smuts pointed out that the League preferred to resolve disputes through round table conferences featuring arbitration and legal settlement.¹⁷

Excited American reporters praised his visit, with many writing about the Afrikaner who fought the British during the South African War, then joined them to establish a Union of South Africa and fight as an ally in World War I. He thereby embodied white racial – and in their minds universal – reconciliation.¹⁸ The decorated general now served as a man of peace, reporters intoned, representing an organization dedicated to building international justice and unity. *African World*, a weekly magazine published in London, lauded him as “an apostle of Peace and as a missionary of Empire.”¹⁹

Thus, it was not surprising that Smuts was lionized wherever he went. He received honorary degrees at the University of Toronto, Columbia University, and Johns Hopkins University. In Washington, DC, the prime minister’s itinerary had been meticulously planned. He laid a wreath on the tomb of old friend and ally Woodrow Wilson and met with US President Herbert Hoover, with whom he had served on the Supreme Economic Council following

¹⁴Ibid., 93.

¹⁵“Gen. Smuts Visits Boston on Jan. 6: Ex South African Premier to Speak Here,” *Daily Boston Globe*, December 29, 1929, 5.

¹⁶Smuts speech to the Empire Parliamentary Association in London on January 28, 1930 provides his own assessment of his speeches in the US on the Commonwealth and the League of Nations. van der Poel, *Selections from the Smuts Papers*, vol. 7, 439–52.

¹⁷“Smuts, In Farewell, Sees a New Era: Looks for United World, With Disputes Settled Around the Conference Table,” *The New York Times*, January 18, 1930, 3.

¹⁸For example, Richard M. Donovan, “Jan Smuts: Afrikaner and World Statesman,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, January 6, 1930, 18. Not all the American press welcomed Smuts. Because of its opposition to the League of Nations, the Hearst newspaper syndicate attacked him for “violating the hospitality of the United States” and called on President Hoover to send him home (*African World*, January 18, 1930, 3).

¹⁹*African World*, January 11, 1930, 525.

World War I. He appeared at both the US House of Representatives and the Senate, which briefly recessed to pay tribute to him.

On January 15, his schedule included attending a conference sponsored by the Phelps-Stokes Fund at Howard University in Washington, DC.²⁰ The discussion on the black condition in the United States intended to bring together both black and white leaders in a search for collaboration and common ground. But Smuts's planned Howard visit took on a different character and tone after his remarks at the aforementioned New York City Civic Forum.

A week before the town hall talk, John Harding, a *New York Times* correspondent reporting on Smuts's visit for several South African newspapers, approached him for a private interview. Harding, who had spoken to W.E.B. Du Bois and other officials of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) who aired their strong views of Smuts, offered to tell him "the gist of Negro preconceived opinion of the General, which he may like to see before meeting their leaders."²¹ According to Harding, one of those opinions was that

General Smuts was born and trained in the ingrained prejudice of white South Africans against the black folk. His whole conception is of a world, not necessarily composed entirely of white people, but certainly organized, directed and established for white people.

Although black leaders found Smuts less "provincial" than J.B.M. Hertzog, his successor as South African Prime Minister, they felt Hertzog "wanted to accomplish exactly the same thing as General Smuts – put the black man in his place and keep him there." Harding also noted that many African American leaders remained swayed by the Garveyite slogan "Africa for the Africans." To this Smuts, who believed the slogan conveyed the idea that white and African interests were incompatible, fervently asserted: "But ... I am an African. Have I no right to a place in Africa's sun?"²²

It was not surprising that Du Bois expressed a strong opinion about Smuts, for he had a long-standing interest in South Africa. While teaching at Wilberforce University in Ohio during the mid-1890s, he had been initially exposed to conditions in South Africa through a group of black South African students, and he had kept up on South Africa in subsequent decades.²³ In a 1925 essay that appeared in Alain Locke's *The New Negro*, he lambasted Smuts for serving as a tool of British imperialism:

Liberal England, wanting world peace and fearing French militarism, backed by the English thrift that is interested in the restored economic equilibrium, found as one of its most prominent spokesmen Jan Smuts of South Africa, and Jan Smuts stands for the suppressing of the blacks. Jan Smuts is to-day, in his world aspects the greatest protagonist of the white race ... he is fighting to insure the continued and eternal subordination of black to white in Africa.²⁴

Other African Americans had had a long-standing interest in developments in South Africa. Beginning in the 1890s, missionaries from the Negro Baptist Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Church established their presence in churches and schools throughout South Africa, and South African students who came to the US for higher education frequently gave talks about conditions back home. Following World War I, Marcus Garvey's

²⁰ "Gen. Smuts Visits Boston on Jan. 6: Ex South African Premier to Speak Here," *Daily Boston Globe*, December 29, 1929, 5.

²¹ John Harding to Miss Richardson (secretary to Smuts), January 2, 1930 (Jan Smuts Papers, National Archives of South Africa (NASA), Pretoria, vol. 44, 5).

²² *Ibid.*; *Cape Times*, January 6, 1930.

²³ The students had been members of a choir group who had been stranded in Ohio after their tour manager ran out of money. The African Methodist Episcopal Church sponsored them at Wilberforce.

²⁴ Du Bois, "Worlds of Color," 401–2.

Universal Negro Improvement Association attracted a passionate following in South Africa, and its newspaper, the *Negro World*, gave regular coverage to Smuts and his segregationist policies. Garvey said of Smuts that he stood “not only for a white South Africa, but a white world.”²⁵

Another figure who pilloried Smuts was Harry Dean, who was not an influential black leader but the recent author of an autobiographical account of his adventures as a sea-captain in southern Africa in the early years of the twentieth century.²⁶ Speaking to black journalists at the offices of the *Amsterdam News*, he claimed to have met Smuts in South Africa and took a highly critical view of him. He charged that the former prime minister knew

more than he cares to tell about the (influenza) epidemic in 1918 which took the lives of a half-million natives; that under his rule in South Africa natives were denied every human right and that Smuts’ [*sic*] native policy calls for the complete extermination of the South African black man.²⁷

Dean accused him of being “the greatest oppressor” in a country that included white supremacists and fascist sympathizers such as Hertzog, Oswald Pirow, and a growing radical white right.

Despite being forewarned by Harding and foreshadowed by Dean, Smuts’s words at the Civic Forum soon became a lightning rod. His incendiary “Negro has the patience of an ass” comment immediately aroused great attention and revulsion from blacks in the audience. Tuskegee Institute Principal Dr. Robert R. Moton, who was taken aback that someone he considered to be “one of the most progressive of Boers on the race question” could have made such a hurtful statement labeling “us docile animals.”

It cut like a two-edged sword through the heart of every Negro in the audience and also through some of the white people. General Smuts, you are a cultured and refined gentleman, but I would like to ask you about those words.²⁸

Smuts quickly responded that he had not meant to demean anyone. “Far from wanting to insult the natives of Africa or any negroes ... I was expressing my admiration for the natives.”

Another audience member directed a barbed question at the Field Marshal. “Can the negro continue to sing and dance while the white man gathers diamonds, copper, and rubber?” “Yes,” replied Smuts. “It is wrong ... to make an inferior European of the native, who is justly proud to be an African. Leave them to their villages, their dancing, and their songs.”²⁹

²⁵Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois*, 426. See also Vinson, *The Americans are Coming*; Campbell, *Songs of Zion*; and Skinner, “Rescuing Black South Africans,” *African Americans and United States Policies*, 181–214.

²⁶Dean, *The Pedro Gorino*.

²⁷“Gen. Jan Smuts Pictured as Greatest Oppressor of Native South African,” *New York Amsterdam Daily News*, January 8, 1930, 1.

²⁸“Negro Rebukes General Smuts,” *New York Sun*, January 10, 1930, 7; *New York Age*, January 18, 1930. Rev. James Henderson, principal of Lovedale Institution in the eastern Cape, had invited Moton for a visit in March 1924. Although Smuts and other government officials initially endorsed his trip, Hertzog, Smuts’s successor as Prime Minister in June 1924, turned him down. The Secretary of Native Affairs informed Henderson that “such a visit ... would hardly commend itself to public opinion at the present time, and might indeed give rise to misunderstandings amongst certain section both of Europeans and Native” (Secretary of Native Affairs to Rev. James Henderson, July 15, 1924. NASA, Pretoria, Native Affairs (NTS) 7602 19/328). Moton was invited again in mid-1930, but there is no record of what the government decided in the end.

²⁹“Smuts’ Tour of America Inspires Disclosure of South Africa’s Situation,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, January 25, 1930, 9. Smuts’s speech on “Africa and the United States” at the Foreign Policy Association the same day was in keeping with his Town Hall remarks. He characterized “the negroes of Africa as ‘child peoples.’ They are happy, he said, and do not feel the burden of life like the white man; neither do they brood over their grievances. They live their immemorial lives, whereas we continue our discontented and forward looking march,” *New York Times*, January 11, 1930; *Cape Times*, January 11, 1930.

Following the forum, Walter White, acting secretary of the NAACP, immediately wired Smuts, inviting him to debate Du Bois on South African race relations and the future of Africa's relations with European nations and the world.³⁰ In the month before Smuts's visit to the US, Du Bois had acknowledged that while he did not think that Smuts was as bad as Hertzog, his "program of disfranchisement and discrimination against Negroes, tempered though it is with humanism and some chances of education, is far behind anything we could accept."³¹ After learning about Smuts's "patience of an ass" comment, Du Bois told Harding:

You can't come before an audience containing several of our people and expect to get away with such a comparison as that ... It's no use telling us to go on dancing and singing. We have no idea of doing anything of the kind. The question is, how far are the negroes in the Union of South Africa to become free men?³²

In declining a debate with Du Bois because of a full schedule, Smuts only raised more justifiable ire, commenting that:

I shall most certainly ignore it. Why, I am not here to advertise Mr. Du Bois. Life is too short. What I said in my address was entirely misunderstood by those who are complaining. I was complimenting the negroes, the natives of Africa, and praising their faculty for happiness and their contented outlook on life.³³

Another NAACP official, field secretary William Pickens, wrote of "the amazing philosophy of general Smuts."³⁴ He went on to say that Smuts spoke "like a representative from some travel agency bidding for American tourists" and compared him to similarly dense American politicians, noting that he sounded "about as logical and impressive as the average politician from Mississippi would be if he were talking to an audience in Harlem on the political and social privileges of American negroes." He questioned how one could

Industrialise the African and at the same time preserve his tribal culture? The negroes who slave long hours in the white man's mines cannot do much singing and dancing in the intervals. There cannot be much native happiness if the woman and children are shut up in compounds while the father is far away in industrial captivity in the white world. Even the black natives' reputed ass-like patience might ultimately break under that burden.

Notably, Pickens concluded, Smuts's particular form of condescension was not unique or alien, but part and parcel of the larger, systematic problem of white supremacy:

When General Smuts speaks on the League of Nations or some other non-provincial question, his logic is sound and his language lucid. But on such general topics he is a man of the world, while on the topic of the negro he is a man of South Africa. While General Smuts represents the best that is in the South African system, his social mind shows very plainly that no man can rise above the system in which he was born and nurtured and in which he continues to live. He may rise to the top of his system; he cannot get above it. The system of South Africa is a system of the exploitation of black uncivilized or civilized natives in the interests of the whites of European extraction. Mr. Smuts is the most "benevolent" and humane exponent of this terribly cruel system.

³⁰"Smuts's Talk Stirs Anger of Negroes," *New York Times*, January 11, 1930, 10.

³¹Walter White, telegram, to Jan Smuts, January 10, 1930 (NAACP Papers, Box C406, folder 17, Library of Congress, Washington, DC); W.E.B. Du Bois to Fred Moore, December 23, 1929 (W.E.B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312), Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts, Amherst).

³²*Cape Times*, January 10, 1930.

³³"Smuts's Talk Stirs Anger of Negroes," *New York Times*, January 11, 1930, 10.

³⁴*ibid.*

The Phelps-Stokes Fund, Smuts and the Howard University Conference

Smuts's racist comments in New York threatened to overshadow his planned meeting with African American leaders at Howard University a few days later. The Phelps-Stokes Fund had invited Smuts to the Howard forum in November 1929 after learning of his US visit. The organization's founder, Anson Phelps-Stokes, hoped that the Smuts visit would "do much to awaken a deeper interest in the problems of South Africa, especially in the very difficult Racial problem with which you are confronted."³⁵ He specifically encouraged Smuts to visit the American South to "study at first hand the conditions of the Colored people there and in our great Northern cities" and visit a black educational institution such as Hampton Institute in Virginia, a model of industrial education. As he saw it,

It seems most important as the South African race question is perhaps more acute than any other place in the world that he should see something of our Negro problem in this country and the constructive efforts that are being made to meet it.³⁶

To Phelps-Stokes, the American South was a laboratory for studying race relations that could be exported elsewhere. But once Philip Kerr explained to Phelps-Stokes that Smuts's time in the US was limited and his schedule packed, Phelps-Stokes still wanted him to be exposed to "opinion regarding the progress and condition of the Negro and of inter-racial problems in this country."³⁷ Hence, he invited Smuts to meet a cross-section of black leadership at Howard University on January 15.

Phelps-Stokes, the secretary of Yale University, had chartered the fund in 1911 with a mission to improve race relations in the United States and Africa.³⁸ The following year he hired Thomas Jesse Jones, a Welshman who had come to the US for higher education and who had spent the previous eight years at Hampton. Jones remained at the fund for the next 32 years and played an outsized role in influencing higher education policy for blacks in the US and Africa. In 1919 he, Phelps-Stokes, J.H. Oldham, a leading figure in missionary circles, and Robert Moton planned a survey of African education that Jones and J.E.K. Aggrey carried out in western and southern Africa in 1920 and 1921 and in eastern, central, and southern Africa in 1923. Jones believed that the Tuskegee and Hampton model of industrial and agricultural education could be transplanted to Africa. The Fund also promoted interracial commissions in the American South, stressing the need to bring together white and black leaders.³⁹

Fund officials firmly believed in the concept of a "global South," thinking that their experience with black education and interracial dialogue in the American South could be applied to South Africa, which they viewed as a microcosm of the United States.⁴⁰ As Jones put it, "... the two USA's, The Union of South Africa and the United States of America, are remarkably parallel in social conditions and educational policies."⁴¹ Among its initiatives in

³⁵Anson Phelps-Stokes to J.C. Smuts, November 27, 1929 (Anson Phelps-Stokes Papers (APS) (MSS 299), Yale University Library, New Haven, Connecticut, Series III, Box 179, Folder 121).

³⁶Phelps-Stokes to Jones, December 11, 1929 (APS, Series 1, Box 28, Folder 448).

³⁷Ibid; Phelps-Stokes to James Weldon Johnson, January 3, 1930 (Ibid.).

³⁸A reason why Phelps-Stokes took such an interest in South Africa was because one of his wife's grandfather, Daniel Lindley, had been an early American Board of Foreign Missions missionary to both the Voortrekkers and Zulus in the nineteenth century and had played a role in the founding of the Inanda Girls' School. Her sister had married Charles Molteno, the son of the first prime minister of the Cape Colony.

³⁹See King, *Pan-Africanism and Education* and Berman, "Education in Africa," 230–60.

⁴⁰See Andrew Zimmerman's study, *Alabama in Africa*, on Booker T. Washington's attempt to export the Tuskegee model to Togoland.

⁴¹Jones to J.H. Oldham, January 17, 1930 (APS, Box 22, Folder 2).

South Africa in the early 1920s was establishing Joint Councils patterned after the interracial councils. In all its ventures, the Fund relied heavily on whites. In South Africa, Charles Loram served as its key adviser. This led its critics such as Du Bois to charge that its programs reinforced, rather than challenged, white domination as Jones and others emphasized industrial education above liberal arts, believing African Americans incapable of higher thought.

What motivated Phelps-Stokes and Jones to set up the Smuts meeting? Writing Oldham, who had criticized Smuts's Rhodes lectures, Jones revealed that they wanted to "stimulate him to further consideration of the potentialities of Negroes in America and especially in Africa."⁴² They were aware of Smuts's views on race and the fact that he had a dual mind, one attuned to addressing international issues and one that remained "provincial and limited in many respects" when it came to racial issues. They held no hope that his views on segregation in rural areas would change, but they detected more flexibility in his views on urban Africans. The Fund was committed to fostering inter-racial bridges because the "American experience strongly supports the advantages to the colored people of contacts with the white people, despite all the difficulties that have attended such contacts." The Fund's leaders presumed what they accepted as black inferiority could best be overcome through personal contacts with whites. Indeed, Jones and Smuts were advocates of trusteeship in which whites had a duty and responsibility for uplifting blacks in both the American South and South Africa. Hence, Jones did not think combative criticism of Smuts was justified at that moment. Rather, they should educate people like him through "sympathetic interpretation and instruction ..."⁴³

Howard University was an understandable choice for the conference. Founded in 1867 and chartered by an act of the US Congress with a special mission of training ministers and teachers and serving the needs of freed slaves, its campus sat on the site of the Freedmen's Bureau, whose head, General Oliver Otis Howard, lent his name to the institution. Over time it had become a national university for African Americans and deserved its reputation as the "capstone of Negro education." In 1930, Howard boasted 150 faculty and roughly 2500 students, about one-sixth of all black students attending college in the US; they hailed from almost forty states and a dozen nations.⁴⁴

Howard was larger and produced more law, medicine, and liberal arts graduates than other chronically under-resourced black colleges, but what made it distinctive was that it had received grants from the US Congress since 1879. In 1928, it received an important boost when Congress passed Public Law No. 634, providing a basis for an annual appropriation to the university.⁴⁵

Up until World War I, the primary financial mainstay for black colleges had been missionary societies, which founded over 30 of them. Howard was established with the support of the American Missionary Society. Following the war, philanthropic foundations such as the John F. Slater Fund, the Julius Rosenwald Fund, the Anna T. Jeanes Fund, the Peabody Educational Fund, the Carnegie Corporation, the General Education Board, the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial Fund, and the Phelps-Stokes Fund began pouring money into black colleges to buy land, pay for faculty and administrative salaries, upgrade

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid. In a short book Oldham was about to publish, he took issue with Smuts's contention that Africans lived a child-like existence and that their health and welfare benefitted wherever whites settled in Africa. See Oldham, *White and Black in Africa* and Clements, *Faith on the Frontier*, 247–9.

⁴⁴Wolters, *New Negro on Campus*, 70.

⁴⁵In 1929, Congress appropriated Howard \$600,000 and, in 1930, \$1,249,000.

laboratories and equipment, and fund new buildings and bolster libraries. In the late 1920s, the General Education Board in particular targeted schools such as Clark Atlanta, Fisk, and Howard with financial support.

In addition, white philanthropists served on the boards of trustees of many black colleges and openly desired to produce a conservative black professional class. Because Howard received the federal subvention, it paid more attention to Congress than the foundations, but foundation representatives still maintained an outsized influence with its administration. They were ambassadors for Howard, which profited from their “ability to influence government officials, organizations and prominent individuals to assist the university.”⁴⁶ Jones, who had been on Howard’s Board of Trustees since 1915, Phelps-Stokes, and Julius Rosenwald were well known advocates for Howard in Congress.⁴⁷

Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, a Baptist preacher from West Virginia, had been selected as Howard’s first black president in 1926 and stood at its helm during Smuts’s visit. Educated at Morehouse College, the University of Chicago, and Harvard University, he held a national reputation as an orator. He also had a special knack for courting foundations and, eventually, Congress to support Howard. As the Great Depression deepened, he understood the importance of placating the Phelps-Stokes Fund over the short run. There was a struggle on Howard’s Board between those such as Phelps-Stokes officials who believed that the university should serve as a vocational college and those such as Johnson who wanted Howard to aspire to offering a professional education in many fields. Although his political leanings were left-of-center, even if he had privately held misgivings about hosting Smuts, he would never have expressed them openly.⁴⁸

Johnson worked out the invitation list, but Phelps-Stokes set the protocol for the meeting, insisting that it be off limits to everyone except invitees. The Fund also stipulated that it retained full control over any information released about the conference.

Phelps-Stokes hoped that true inter-racial cooperation would take place at the conference. Writing Jones, he said:

You know the South African situation very much better than I do. I am inclined to think, however, that we might work out some arrangement by which I would preside during the first half [of] the meeting and President Johnson during the remaining half. I would like to indicate to General Smuts in some way the fact that in our interracial work White and Colored cooperate on an equal basis.⁴⁹

According to Howard’s press statements, the institution welcomed Smuts as a visiting dignitary. But Howard and Phelps-Stokes officials agreed to exclude black reporters from the meeting, while three white reporters accompanying Smuts were admitted “only as a courtesy to the visitor.”⁵⁰ A *Baltimore Afro-American* editorial lamented that Howard could not “afford a Jim Crow spirit.” It went on to advise: “Views and opinions are to be given affecting the race relations of two continents IN A CORNER” and challenged “the wisdom of any such cubby hole deliberations.”⁵¹

⁴⁶Holloway, *Confronting the Veil*, 48.

⁴⁷Muse, Jr., “Howard University and the Federal Government during the Presidential Administrations of Herbert Hoover and Franklin Delano Roosevelt,” 1 and 11.

⁴⁸On Johnson’s Howard years, see Williams, *In Search of the Talented Tenth*, 40–79.

⁴⁹Phelps-Stokes to Jones, December 26, 1929 (Mordecai Johnson Papers (MJP), Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University).

⁵⁰“Howard’s Explanation,” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, February 15, 1930, 6.

⁵¹*Ibid.* The newspaper noted that perhaps one reason Howard students were not allowed in was because they had recently grilled a former white southern land overseer when he spoke on campus, *Baltimore Afro-American*, February 1, 1930.

The decision to bar black reporters, of course, reflected trends beyond Smuts's visit to Howard. For at least a year prior, Hoover's White House had banned them from press conferences.⁵² Phelps-Stokes and Johnson continued to maintain that the white reporters would attend the conference only during Smuts's speech and only as a sign of respect to the visiting dignitary. And even they, they argued, had not been originally allowed, as the university had hoped to avoid hosting press representatives altogether.⁵³ Not only did black reporters find themselves unable to gain access to Smuts but, rather uncharacteristically, organizers also denied the Howard student body and most faculty an opportunity to be addressed by the statesman.⁵⁴

The meeting took place in the Moorland Room of the Carnegie Library from 2:30 to 5:00 pm. The 25 invitees in attendance included philanthropist George Foster Peabody; Philip Kerr, director of the Rhodes Scholarship; Philip Nash, executive director of the League of Nations Foundation; Eric Louw; Walter White; James Dillard, president of the Jeanes and Slater Fund; John Hope, president of Atlanta University; and Alain Locke, a Howard philosophy professor. After Phelps-Stokes opened the proceeding, eight African American speakers spoke for 5–10 min on selected topics – Johnson on religion, J.M. Gandy on education, Franklin Nicholson on health, Nannie Helen Burroughs on black women, Eugene Jones on industrial relations, T.M. Campbell on agricultural development, Kelly Miller on the political status of blacks, and Robert Moton on race relations. Organizers explicitly stipulated that the forum was an opportunity to discuss American – and not African – race relations. Jones had pre-circulated a copy of Smuts's October 1929 Rhodes Memorial Lectures on the “Native Question” to attendees.⁵⁵

Following the presentations, Smuts's 30-min response touched on his takeaways and compared the state of race relations in the United States and South Africa.⁵⁶ Smuts attempted to ingratiate himself to the audience, saying that he now had gained a “new view of the American race question, his admiration for the sanity and balance and public concern of the Negro leaders and their co-workers in race adjustment.”⁵⁷ The United States, he believed, seemed to be showing great progress in the area of race relations, and any solutions could perhaps show South Africa how to make “adjustment of the race problems of colonial imperialism, especially those of the Union of South Africa.”⁵⁸ He observed the efficacy of round-table conferences of leaders held by the League of Nations and interracial councils in the United States and argued that Joint Councils were making progress in South Africa. He drew some distinctions, though, between the United States and South Africa. One was that “the American Negro” was in the process of being Americanized. As in his Town Hall speech, Smuts expressed his “admiration of the endurance and patience of the colored race, which in the long run, would result in bringing about justice and amity.”⁵⁹ At least this time he did not compare black patience with that of an ass.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³“Negro Press is Barred at Smuts Conference: Twenty-Five Race Leaders Attend Meeting at Howard; Only White Press Admitted,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, January 30, 1930.

⁵⁴“Shoosh Black Press at Howard Meeting,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 8, 1930, 3.

⁵⁵Jones to Phelps-Stokes, December 23, 1929 (MJP).

⁵⁶The most complete account of the conference and Smuts's response appeared in Alain Locke's piece, “A Notable Conference,” published four months later based on notes that Thomas Jesse Jones provided. Locke, “A Notable Conference,” 137–40. See also Kelly Miller, “As To General Smuts,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, January 29, 1930, 20.

⁵⁷Locke, “A Notable Conference,” 139–40.

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹“Gen. Smuts Heard at Howard,” *The Chicago Defender*, January 25, 1930, 15; *Amsterdam News*, January 22, 1930.

In the meeting's aftermath, Jones and Phelps-Stokes asserted that they had made a real breakthrough with Smuts. Writing Phelps-Stokes, Jones claimed that "General Smuts' summary at the end of the meeting reflected a change of attitude that amounted to conversion as to the potentialities of the Native Africans."⁶⁰ A few weeks later, Phelps-Stokes corresponded with Charles Loram, who served as the American foundations' "native" expert in South Africa. Phelps-Stokes counseled that Prime Minister Hertzog would not be in his position permanently and, in the event that Smuts replaced him, his experience at Howard had shifted his thinking:

In his speech at the close he said that the thing that most impressed him, indeed, that almost dumbfounded him, was the extraordinary progress made by the transplanted African. He noted that three or four of the people at the conference, namely, Miss Burroughs, Moton, Campbell and Kelly Miller had apparently no trace of white blood and yet, as he said, their whole point of view was that of American citizens. He also seemed to be impressed with the fact that the American Negro wanted to be an American and to stress the points of similarity between the black man and the white man, while he stated definitely – although I think he overestimated this point – that the African wanted to be an African and not a European. If General Smuts gets back into power his experience in this country should prove a great force for good.⁶¹

However, after reaching London, Smuts made some public comments about African Americans and Africans that did not follow the Jones and Phelps-Stokes line. According to a person who heard him speak at a South African banquet, he shared "his conviction that the American Negro was unfortunately not blessed with the sense of humor which our South African natives were."⁶² Smuts made much more detailed comments to a group of reporters. However much he was impressed with the progress African Americans had made over the span of several generations since the end of slavery, he made it clear that the African American experience – going through the crucible of American westernization – did not apply to blacks in South Africa.⁶³ What distinguished African Americans from Africans in South Africa was that in America, "the African has been divorced from his natural environment and forced forward like a hothouse plant. In South Africa, the development will be decades slower because the native is still in his natural surroundings."⁶⁴ If Smuts had truly bought into the Jones/Phelps-Stokes line, he would have had to alter his view that black South Africans could only develop in a segregated environment with minimal contact with western culture.

Smuts also showed his superficial understanding of the state of racial progress in the US. He noted that discrimination remained in voting rights in the American South and observed a trend to prevent blacks from getting jobs or consigning them to lower paid work, "but as there is plenty of work in America, there is no need for the color bar existing in South Africa and the discriminations are gradually disappearing."

Smuts was pleased to report that he had not found any Garveyite sentiment supporting the idea to create a black republic in Africa. Instead,

⁶⁰Jones to Phelps-Stokes, January 16, 1930 (APS, Series 1, Box 2, Folder 449).

⁶¹Phelps-Stokes to Charles Loram, January 27, 1930 (APS, Series 1, Box 31, Folder 512).

⁶²Editor, *African World and Cape Cairo Express*, London to Jones, January 20, 1930 (Phelps-Stokes Fund Papers (PSFP), Manuscript Collections, Schomburg Library, Box 22, Folder 2).

⁶³*Cape Times*, January 27, 1930; *Sunday Times*, January 26, 1930.

⁶⁴*ibid.*

the United States negro regards himself as 100 percent American. He does not want to leave America, and would regard a trip to South Africa exactly as a white American going to see an interesting native race emerging from barbarism.

He went on to argue that there was

little sign of an international color consciousness among the American negroes. They might have a vague sympathy with non-European populations elsewhere, but primarily they were citizens of America, with no African ambitions and only an academic interest in happenings there.⁶⁵

Reactions to the Howard conference

Smuts's Civic Forum speech and his appearance at Howard elicited a range of sympathetic and critical comments. The most sympathetic assessment of his comments on race came from a British-born South African, Ethelreda Lewis, whose name was getting known in the US for recording and promoting the story of Aloysius Smith, popularly known as Trader Horn.⁶⁶ In her essay in the Urban League's periodical *Opportunity*, she said she understood why American "Negroes" would have been "offended" by Smuts's remarks in New York, but she advised them to put these in the context of his South African upbringing, where "Dutchmen" like him had taken on the responsibility for keeping the peace between warring black tribes and provided a safe space in which "simple savages" could maintain their cultures and advance from their primitive state in the face of an advanced civilization and an industrializing economy based on gold and diamond production.

Like Smuts, Lewis drew a contrast between African Americans who had been assimilated into western culture and their African kinfolk, who she argued were more akin to Native Americans than African Americans. Smuts's view of African Americans was based on the stereotypical view of them as docile slaves, so he needed to be exposed to their considerable accomplishments since the end of slavery.

She believed that Smuts had the capacity for growth, citing the example of how he had overcome the enmity that Afrikaners historically held toward the English. As a result, he had become despised by most Afrikaners in the same way that the Old Testament's "Joseph was hated by his brothers who had no vision."⁶⁷ Given how he had become an idealist on the world stage, if he were given a chance, she was confident he could become a promoter of black people. "General Smuts, philosopher, farmer and statesman may yet be the savior of the exploited black man." He had the potential to be "the Lincoln of South Africa fighting for the just development of his native countrymen."⁶⁸

Most commentary following the Howard conference came from African Americans who were not of one mind about Smuts. Two Howard faculty who participated in the conference

⁶⁵Smuts to Jones, January 20, 1930 (PSFP).

⁶⁶Lewis, "General Smuts and the Negro," 141–2. On Lewis and Horn see Couzens, *Tramp Royal*. In the late 1920s, she also became a confidant of the trade union leader Clements Kadalie and advised him to break from communist influences. Her views on black people were not that different than Smuts. Writing Winifred Holtby on the capacity of black leadership in trade unions, she questioned whether one could "systematically apply himself to a cause ... for more than a few years because they are still, despite the opinion of many who know the Native intimately, children; easily wearied, easily led astray, easily depraved by civilization" (Ethelreda Lewis to Winifred Holtby, June 22, 1931 (Industrial and Commercial Worker's Union, Historical Papers Research Center, Witwatersrand University)). On Lewis, see also Tim Couzens' introduction to a 1984 edition of Lewis's *Wild Deer*.

⁶⁷Lewis, "General Smuts," 142.

⁶⁸*ibid.*

published favorable comments on Smuts and his experience there. Kelly Miller, whose columns regularly appeared in over one hundred black and mainstream newspapers, contrasted his critical view of Smuts before the conference with his feelings afterward. Miller, a mathematician by training, founded and headed Howard's sociology department, believing that education and vocational training would provide upward mobility better than what he viewed as the growing radicalism of many African American political leaders. Touching on Smuts's long-standing reputation for his paternalistic views of Africans, Miller wondered why Smuts was now putting out a different image of himself. His answer was that it was because the challenges to British rule in India and Egypt had undercut Britain's position as the dominant overlord. Because "Russia makes the working world uneasy," the British Empire now had to make peace with "the darker and weaker breeds of men as well as with the strong and mighty overlords of the earth." Hence Smuts's role had become salvaging the Empire.

But Miller went on to contend that Smuts's comments at Howard conveyed a very different image. His 30-min talk "convinced all that they were listening to a master mind." He did not repeat the offensive remarks he made in New York. "He showed a courtesy, a gentleness of temper, a sincere desire to seek a way out of the racial labyrinth whence all are still groping in darkness." Miller thought his engagement with African American leaders had provided him with a "liberal education." Those who had attended the conference were of the mind that Smuts was a statesman sincerely committed to "trying the best way he knows how to promote peace on earth and good-will among men."⁶⁹

At Thomas Jones' request, Alain Locke also penned an article for *Opportunity* that provided the most complete record of the presentations at the conference.⁷⁰ Locke lamented the fact that journalists had made much of Smuts's "infelicitous remark" in New York. "It is one of the tragedies of modern journalism, and consequently of modern life, that a controversy commands headlines whereas an understanding receives a footnote."⁷¹ Jones provided Locke with a set of talking points that favored the Phelps-Stokes approach. According to Locke, Smuts said he supported the idea of round table conferences internationally and now he was favorably inclined toward similar conferences on race issues in South Africa.⁷² Jones also advised Locke to include a comment on Smuts's support of scientific studies of racial issues in Africa based on the American experience. In his piece, Locke charitably noted that Phelps-Stokes Commissions led by Jones in East and West Africa had laid the basis for "a steady but slowly increasing body of opinion that the educational and social techniques resulting from the best experience of American race adjustment are relevant, with certain modifications, to Africa's racial situations and problems." This fit with his late-1920s philosophy of attempting diplomacy with foundations which, though he was aware of their bias against liberal and professional education for blacks, he hoped could become educational allies. Locke ended his piece by saying that Smuts's visit to Howard and the commentary it provoked was "a constructive contribution, however, potential, to a distant racial situation

⁶⁹Kelly Miller, "Thinking," *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 30, 1930.

⁷⁰The Carnegie Corporation considered sponsoring Locke on a trip to visit South Africa in 1929, but nixed the idea after hearing from C.T. Loram that "anti-Native feeling" in the South African government "is strong at present and it would be difficult to persuade people that Locke was not a propagandist." Heyman, "C.T. Loram," 44.

⁷¹Locke, "A Notable Conference," 137.

⁷²Locke to Jones, March 11, 1930; Jones to Locke, March 13, 1930 (Alain Locke Papers, Moorland Spingarn Collection, Howard University, Box 164-42, Folder 2).

which is at an acutely critical stage” and that it was necessary to look at these issues on an international level.⁷³

The Locke and Miller pieces stand out because, by and large, the black reaction to Smuts was highly critical. For example, the Native African Union of America, founded in 1927 to represent Africans living in the United States, objected vociferously to the “compliments.” In Harlem, it organized a meeting billed as a “monster mass” rally at 254 W. 135th to make African immigrant indignation known. A handbill advertising the meeting sarcastically announced, “You and friends are invited to hear alleged ‘ASSES’ BRAY!”⁷⁴

Eli B’usabe Nyombolo, an Mpondo from South Africa who had come to the US in 1924 under A.M.E. sponsorship to study for a degree in theological training at Wilberforce University, led the Union.⁷⁵ At the rally, Nyombolo acknowledged that: “We are so dormant here in America that the rest of the world can call us anything they want to if we remain in that state.” But he added that was deceptive:

The natives of Africa ... are awake despite the statements made by Smuts and others. They claim that the native African is happy and contented is a joke. A white man goes to Africa and sees a native sitting calmly before his hut. He goes home, and writes a book saying the African is contented. What he does not know is that same African is joining with many others in secret meetings at night.⁷⁶

Rev. Johnson Asapansa, a New York-based Sierra Leonean who had studied at Durham University in England, declared at the rally:

Everything that General Smuts said was aimed as an insult at the American negro ... He was simply using psychology. He wants you to believe that your racial heritage is nothing and because of this you can never hope to be anything. I would not be surprised if General Smuts was paid by white races here in America to say what he did about the native African.⁷⁷

At the meeting’s conclusion, the group issued a set of resolutions:

Be it further resolved that the allegation by General Smuts that the Africans are contented and happy animals is an untruth, demonstrated by recent press reports on uprisings published a day after his remarks;

Be it further resolved that all African peoples throughout the world shall be united in condemnation of both General Jan Christian Smuts’ [*sic*] remarks and his policy and shall take the necessary steps to render a repetition of such remarks impracticable in the future ...⁷⁸

Smuts’s visit aroused not only ire, but heightened interest in the black South African plight. Several black newspapers ran stories outlining the country’s racial laws and arguing that the general’s comment had represented the mere tip of an iceberg.

The Howard conference also created tensions between several actors instrumental in its planning and coordination. A day after the Smuts visit Walter White, for instance,

⁷³Locke, “A Notable Conference,” 140.

⁷⁴Handbill (Robert Moton Papers, Tuskegee University Archives, Box 146, File 1156). Although we have found documentation about the activities of the Native African Union of America in the Moton and NAACP papers, we do not have any direct evidence of communications between them.

⁷⁵A, Keers. CID, Western Division (Cape) to CID, Cape Town, March 31, 1924 (NTS 2,709 79/301). The brother of I.B. Nyombolo, editor of the *African Voice*, Eli had been a school teacher at Burghersdorp, Eastern Cape, before leaving for the US.

⁷⁶“Smuts Branded as ‘Greatest Enemy,’” *Amsterdam News*, January 22, 1930, 9.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*

⁷⁸“Smuts Insult Rapped by Native Africans,” *Chicago Defender*, January 25, 1930, 12. A fuller account of the rally is contained in “Reported by Samuel Bess” (Robert Moton Papers, Box 146, file 1156).

reprimanded Moton for failing to mention NAACP efforts while discussing Interracial Relations.⁷⁹ He additionally wrote to Phelps-Stokes that he felt organizers had not made the most of their time as they failed to link or compare American and South African race relations.⁸⁰ Finally, he complimented Mordecai Johnson on his remarks and expressed gratitude that “General Smuts felt that he profited” from the meeting, but chastised the forum, arguing that “He could have profited a good deal more had some of the speakers been more out-spoken.”⁸¹

In February, Moton wrote to White, assuring him that he had not meant to slight the NAACP and mentioning that Phelps-Stokes would soon send Smuts a transcript of the event along with “any literature which those present at the conference think General Smuts should have.”⁸² White responded that he did not intend to suggest any slight but was still disappointed that the visit had not done Smuts more good.⁸³

This correspondence perhaps proved a moot point, as Smuts had already received the materials upon departure from the US and responded to Jones, Moton, and Phelps-Stokes from London. Writing to Jones, the field marshal’s complimentary tone again turned paternalistic:

I have to thank you for one of the most interesting experiences of my life, in the conference at Howard University. The conference proved an eye-opener to me. I was deeply moved to see the sanity and balance and serenity of the Negroes and coloured people. Surely there is something good in store for them and their people.⁸⁴

To Moton, Smuts wrote in a similar tone:

I was deeply impressed by the calmness, impartiality and sanity with which the whole Negro position in the States was put before me. Surely such quiet strength and balance must have its reward in the end!⁸⁵

A reward would not be immediately in store, particularly in South Africa where the eye-opening meeting ultimately failed to change significantly Smuts’s mindset or racial policies during his second stint as prime minister from 1939 to 1948. The visit’s most public post-mortem took place in the February issue of *The Crisis*, where Du Bois demonstrated his depth of knowledge of the South African situation and urged readers to make their thoughts known in a more forthright way than the Howard forum had. In characteristic Du Boisian fashion, he lamented black South Africans’ high illiteracy rate and limited access to education. He compared Smuts to Hertzog, arguing that they worked toward similar ends, though the humanitarian face Smuts presented to the world appeared kinder, despite the fact that it did not jibe with his actual beliefs. Du Bois wrote that:

He is a man whom many regard as a great international statesman, but for us American Negroes, he has one intolerable defect which we see more clearly than other peoples can see will forever keep him from true greatness. He was born and trained into the ingrained prejudice of the white South African against black folk.⁸⁶

⁷⁹White to Moton, January 16, 1930 (NAACP Papers, Box C406, folder 17).

⁸⁰White to Phelps-Stokes, January 23, 1930 (Ibid.).

⁸¹White to Johnson, January 27, 1930 (Ibid.).

⁸²Moton to White, February 6, 1930 (Ibid.).

⁸³White to Moton, February 21, 1930 (Ibid.).

⁸⁴Smuts to Jones, January 23, 1930 (APS, Series 1, Box 179, Folder 123).

⁸⁵Smuts to Moton, January 23, 1930 (Ibid.).

⁸⁶Du Bois, “Smuts,” 63.

A month later, Du Bois penned more observations. He mentioned that African American leaders had been lobbied “to sign a laudatory address and thank Jans [*sic*] Smuts for his South African Negro program.” He chided those blacks who attended Smut’s New York speech and sat on the platform with him or who (he excepted Moton) did not raise any objections to what he said. He lambasted participants at the Howard conference for not including any black person who had knowledge of the South African situation or who had visited there and for not calling out Smuts on his “lies” about conditions for black people in South Africa and his role in conceiving government policies. “How humiliating,” he said, “to see prominent American Negro leaders put themselves in a position to appear as catspaws against the plain wishes and interests of their blood brothers in Africa.”⁸⁷

A year-and-a-half year later, *The Crisis* again addressed the “next to the ass” debacle as a black South African Jacob Motsi wrote about Smuts’s return to South Africa. Motsi vividly narrated how black Capetonians responded to Smuts’s remarks by burning both him and Hertzog in effigy. He reported:

Smuts’ [*sic*] slighting reference to the men of African blood had traveled home from America, and his remarks in England to the effect that the English had made a mistake in calling black people of America *Negroes* inasmuch as some of them “are just as white as I.”⁸⁸

For their part, Jones and Phelps-Stokes remained wedded to the African American model of gradual improvement, and when they visited South Africa in 1931 and 1932, respectively, both made speeches touting African American progress. Phelps-Stokes, on his first visit to South Africa, brought along lantern slides that showed their progress on many fronts. It was an advance, he claimed, that “has not been equaled by any other large group in the world.” Showing this achievement was necessary because Africans are “far more backward than the American negroes ...” and needed an inspirational model they could emulate.⁸⁹

However, a little more than several years after the Howard conference, he did not remain so optimistic about Smuts’s conversion to a different vision of improving race relations. He admitted that even if Smuts came into office again, race relations might see “a slight improvement,” but “conditions would not, I fear, be really satisfactory ... Both he and Hertzog are charming and able men, but a really enlightened policy in reference to the Natives has yet to be worked out.”⁹⁰

Conclusion

Before he began his North American tour, Smuts wrote his wife: “I am afraid the Americans are going to be very troublesome and I shall have a hard time. But perhaps I can do good there.”⁹¹ His efforts at promoting the Commonwealth, strengthening trans-Atlantic relationships, and, most importantly, supporting the League of Nations, were generally warmly received. Ironically, however, in New York City and Washington, DC, the general

⁸⁷Du Bois, “Patient Asses,” 101.

⁸⁸Motsi, “General Smuts’ Return,” 379. Similar to Nyombolo Motsi had entered the US in August 1930 under AME auspices to do a missionary course at Wilberforce University. Eventually he completed a MA in Social Work at Atlanta University. (NTS 2709 78/301).

⁸⁹Phelps-Stokes letter to friends and family in the United States, September 13, 1932 (PSFP, Box 34, Folder 20). See the laudatory coverage of Phelps-Stokes visit in the *Bantu World*, September 10 and 17, 1932. African American visitors to South Africa also felt the need to tout African American achievement to inspire black audiences. See Campbell, *Songs of Zion*, 157 and 328–9 and Edgar, *An African American in South Africa*, 23–5.

⁹⁰*Ibid.*

⁹¹Jan Smuts to S.M. Smuts, November 18, 1929, vol. 7, 424.

strengthened a far different trans-Atlantic partnership than the one he had intended. For many black American leaders, his racist comments reinforced their perceptions of South Africa's racial policies and galvanized a process of questioning and fighting against the South African system, often linking it to oppression within the United States. Phelps-Stokes proved prophetic when, in his initial invitation to Smuts, he wrote that "I feel sure that your visit will do much to awaken a deeper interest in the problems of South Africa, especially in the very difficult Racial problem with which you are confronted."⁹² But it was not the kind of deeper interest that Phelps-Stokes hoped for or anticipated.

Although some called Smuts's racist comments in New York a "gaffe" or, as Locke generously put it, an "infelicitous remark," his incendiary comments contributed to a burgeoning black internationalism that tied together the exploitative conditions black people were experiencing both domestically and globally. The day after the Howard meeting, Walter White prognosticated that:

It is futile to attempt to solve the race question by ignoring the existence of a militant and uncompromising point of view which all Negroes in America hold and which, as time goes on and education of the Negroes and exploitation based upon color increase, is going to spread to Negroes throughout the world.⁹³

Contrary to Smuts's observation that African Americans were exhibiting "little sign of an international color consciousness," he inadvertently contributed to collaborative anti-racist movements, often conducted by African Americans who had never ventured to South Africa but were well studied in the country's racist policies. This anger crystallized in the 1937 formation of the International Committee on African Affairs, later the Council on African Affairs, which criticized American business and government support to the South African regime and, by the late 1940s, laid the foundation for a nascent anti-apartheid movement.

In 1945, a group of delegates gathered in San Francisco, California, to create a successor to the League. They tasked Smuts, the venerable elder statesman who was the only delegate present at both Versailles and the United Nations' (UN) founding conferences, with drafting the preamble to the new UN charter and contributing heavily to its Universal Declaration of Human Rights. While he had continued to espouse self-determination and freedom abroad, an increasing number of opponents domestically and internationally saw the gap between Smuts's rosy rhetoric and his actions at home, particularly as he worked to entrench segregation, strip Indian South Africans of rights to land ownership, and fully incorporate the mandate territory of South West Africa into South Africa. Ultimately, the firestorm that Du Bois, A.B. Xuma, the African National Congress (ANC) president; Tshekedi Khama, the Bamangwato regent in Bechuanaland; India's delegation, the Council on African Affairs, and other activists touched off resulted in the beginning of the UN's efforts to legitimize itself through critiquing South Africa's racist laws.⁹⁴ Du Bois famously castigated a body that held little authoritative power and based its structure upon nation-statehood, lamenting that "the only way to human equality is through the philanthropy of the masters."⁹⁵

⁹²Phelps-Stokes to Smuts, November 27, 1929 (APS, Series 1, Box 179, Folder 119).

⁹³White to Jones, January 16, 1930 (NAACP Papers, Box C406, folder 17). Mordecai Johnson, for instance, became a staunch opponent of Smuts and later the apartheid regime. In the late 1930s he lent support to the Council of African Affairs and, in 1952, he was a leading figure in the formation of Americans for South African Resistance which raised funds for victims of South African repression during the Defiance Campaign. See Meriwether, *Proudly We Can be Africans*, 112 and 191.

⁹⁴For a discussion of the relations between Africans and African Americans at the San Francisco conference, see Sherwood, "There is No Deal."

⁹⁵Quoted in Anderson, *Eyes Off the Prize*, 38.

Smuts certainly understood how race had become such a complicating factor for South Africa in international relations. Writing to a friend in late 1946 about his confrontation with the Indian delegate at the UN, he drew on a cricket analogy: “Color queers my pitch everywhere.”⁹⁶ In his work treating the 1946 United Nations controversy, Mazower argues that

Smuts, exponent of racial superiority, believer in white rule over the African continent, casts an enigmatic shadow over the founding of the new United Nations . . . Yet it was not a shadow many people at the time gave any sign of noticing.⁹⁷

As the 1930 Smuts incident makes clear, however, black South African and African American leaders had closely monitored Smuts in the years leading up to the 1946 event. In 1945, Du Bois took on Smuts at the founding meetings of the UN in San Francisco.⁹⁸ As Saul Dubow points out, South Africa, and particularly apartheid, soon came to occupy more UN time than nearly any other twentieth century issue – a fact perhaps best exemplified in the organization’s fiftieth anniversary commemoration and address by the iconic South African of the late twentieth century – Nelson Mandela.⁹⁹

During the 1940s, Smuts was beginning to question whether rigid segregation was workable and was receptive to consulting the views of moderate Africans on policy issues affecting them. His thinking was reflected in the March 1948 government-commissioned Fagan Report that acknowledged that Africans were a permanent presence in the urban areas and recommended some relaxation of pass laws and the controls on Africans seeking employment. But we cannot predict whether Smuts would have actually carried out these policy changes because the National Party defeated his United Party a few months later in a national election and began implementing the apartheid system.

Regardless of Smuts’s rethinking of racial issues, they did not carry weight with many blacks. His “patience of an ass” remarks in 1930 certainly contributed to cementing a perception of white South Africans that endured in the popular memory of both African Americans and black South Africans for a number of decades. Columns in the African American press show that Smut’s comments still shaped black views about him and South Africa a decade and a half later. In a piece on Smuts’s advocacy of a trusteeship system for the UN to replace the mandate system of the League of Nations, S.A. Haynes said of him: “He is the exact prototype of Bilbo, Rankin, Ellender and the Grand Imperial Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan who prefer to see the world drenched in blood rather than discard the unholy creed of white supremacy.” He cited Smuts’s 1930 Civic Forum speech, where he “implied that the natives of Africa and all colored peoples need not be feared by the ‘white supremacy’ crowd because they are as patient as an ass.”¹⁰⁰

Another voice emanated from Rayford Logan, a historian who joined the Howard faculty in 1938 and who regularly commented on international affairs in the *Pittsburgh Courier*. He wrote an opinion piece criticizing President Harry Truman’s invitation to Smuts to visit the US in late 1946. “It was different in 1930 when even Howard University, ‘The Capstone of Negro Education,’ allowed Smuts to be palmed off on it as one of the ‘world’s great liberals.’” Responding to a South African friend who referred to Smuts as “a great Christian

⁹⁶Hancock, *Smuts: The Fields of Force*, 473.

⁹⁷Mazower, *The End of Empire*, 19.

⁹⁸Sherwood, “There is No Deal.”

⁹⁹Dubow, “Smuts, the United Nations.”

¹⁰⁰S.A. Haynes, “Smuts Racial Segregation Formula May be Accepted,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, May 19, 1945.

gentleman,” Logan said, “This defense is the best evidence that Smuts is not the son of God. After all, the lynching belt in the United States is the Bible belt.”¹⁰¹

Finally, in 1950s South Africa, Smuts’s speech continued to serve as a rallying cry during the anti-apartheid struggle, as African National Congress (ANC) president and future Nobel Peace Prize winner Albert Luthuli, in his 1956 Natal ANC Presidential address, remembered Smuts’s 1930 speech and commented that:

To this day some white citizens including some Ministers of the Crown still openly tell the world that Africans are primitive and savage; many despise you and call your grown ups “boys,” make your men do domestic work and make them wear real boys’ kitchen suits. It seems the whole underlying purpose in all this is to emasculate the men and make them lose their dignity and personality. They think of us as being so docile that the late General Smuts speaking at one time in the United States of America said that we were “as patient as an ass.”¹⁰²

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¹⁰¹Rayford Logan, “Smuts Invited to U.S., Move Called ‘Blunder,’” *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 10, 1946. Logan had been chronicling Smut’s pronouncements. See his “Smuts Speaks of Africa, 1917–1942” that appeared in *The Crisis* (September 1942), 264–267 and 278. Logan was one of a group of Howard faculty who in the 1930s and 1940s were critically examining how racism sustained imperialism. See Vitalis, *White World Order*.

¹⁰²Pillay, *Albert Luthuli*, 96.

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