

OPINION COLUMNS

Local View: Trump's America feeling more like apartheid South Africa

From the column: "Can there be any doubt about the motive behind the (executive) orders by Trump, who infamously said, "There are good people on both sides," when referring to white supremacists?"



Opinion by David McGrath/August 11, 2025

When I graduated with a bachelor's degree in English at age 21, I had no money in the bank, bleak job prospects, and an aging Oldsmobile Super 88 that was leaking oil and was not so "super" anymore.

After answering a want-ad in the newspaper for a writer — flexible hours, competitive salary — I put on my Montgomery Ward graduation suit and drove to an office building downtown for an interview.

The president of Term Papers Inc., hired me on the spot after declining to review the stack of writing samples I brought. Instead, he handed me an initial assignment to write a research paper about Bantu education in South Africa for a client who was an anonymous graduate student.

When the president assured me the work was as legitimate as what speechwriters did all the time for politicians (his company would eventually be shut down by federal marshal for copyright violation) and that this first paper would pay \$45 upon completion, equivalent to \$357 today, I headed to the library to get started.

I had never heard of the Bantu Tribe and didn't know a heck of a lot about South Africa. But what I learned in an afternoon of researching was jarring. Though slavery and then Jim Crow laws had long been abolished, Bantustans still lived under apartheid, a governmentally sanctioned system of discrimination based on race.

The South African government, derived from Dutch and British colonizers, implemented laws under the 1950 Population Registration Act that classified citizens according to race for the next 40 years: White people were listed at the top, followed by Asians, then mixed-race people who were called Coloured, and Bantu or Black Africans at the very bottom.

Accordingly, separate schools were designated for the non-whites, offering only subjects that would train them for manual or subservient labor, such as woodworking and gardening. No science or math for the lowest class. And the schools had to be funded locally, so they lacked books, teachers, and other resources enjoyed in white communities.

Furthermore, non-whites could not vote, have access to health care, or own property. And if they assembled to protest apartheid, they were crushed by government forces, beaten, arrested, and tortured, all without receiving due process or a trial. Many were forcibly moved to impoverished areas designated as "homelands," separated from families, their traditional homes, and their very way of life.

If any of that sounds familiar, it's because some executive orders President Donald Trump has signed since his January inauguration have been shockingly similar to those passed by the National Party of South Africa to establish the system of apartheid.

Trump's executive order, "Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing," for example, was for eliminating diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives that provided rights and opportunities for Black Americans in education and the workplace that previously were limited or denied. Instead of making America great, this order may bring us closer to South Africa's nation of hate.

Another of Trump's orders, "Protecting the American People from Invasion," unleashed thousands of ICE agents to descend upon Hispanic neighborhoods and worksites to seize and imprison immigrants without due process, many of whom have been children and American citizens. Even Trump supporters have complained about masked ICE agents going too far, drawing comparisons to the Security Branch, South Africa's secret police, who routinely rounded up non-whites and assaulted and tortured activists.

Trump's order, "Preserving and Protecting the Integrity of American Elections," potentially may disenfranchise people of color, again as was the case under apartheid. Because the honesty and integrity of U.S. elections has been widely documented, Trump's advocating that driver's licenses, passports, or birth certificates be required at the polls, and his latest push urging Texas and other states to gerrymander districts in order to gain more Republican seats in Congress,

could deprive or severely reduce suffrage and democratic representation for people of color.

Finally, Executive Order No. 14190, “Ending Radical Indoctrination in K-12 Schooling,” seemed intent on erasing curricular subject matter that casts blame on white people for the plight of African Americans in the United States. This dictate emulates the South African government’s Orwellian erasure or sanitization of historical records detailing racial oppression. The impact of No. 14190, coupled with the Trump administration’s apparent goal of eliminating the U.S. Department of Education and its continuing imposition of the voucher system, widely known to segregate and concentrate non-whites in the poorest schools, is reshaping American education in the image of South Africa’s racially tiered abomination.

Can there be any doubt about the motive behind the orders by Trump, who infamously said, “There are good people on both sides,” when referring to white supremacists in Charlottesville, Virginia? Or his very un-ironic welcoming embrace of 59 South African whites last May after choking off nearly all other migrant admissions for people of color.

What actually is ironic is that Trump and his party, having objected to the teaching of critical race theory, the notion that racism was built into our system of government, now seem to be working crazy hard to construct such a system today — a system that is doomed, just as South Africa's was, having been abolished in 1990 and its leaders held accountable by Truth and Reconciliation Commissions.

While judges and the courts can slow the process, it's up to American voters to halt Trump's war on people of color.

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