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**ABSTRACT**

Since South Africa declared the first "State of Emergency" in July 1985, the issue of South African apartheid has sparked direct and sustained debates between Jerry Falwell and Jesse Jackson at Lynchburg, Virginia, as well as on ABC's "Nightline." On "Nightline," while Falwell's position on disinvestment (after a visit to South Africa) centered on "argument from circumstance," Jackson focused on "argument from definition." However, neither Rev. Falwell nor Rev. Jackson represented the realistic policy alternatives which might have found some emergent political consensus. In fact, the position Rev. Falwell advocated created a paradox for him (for he began his remarks with the statement that morally wrong), and in addition, those whose impression of Falwell was contaminated by his association with the Moral Majority were unlikely to be converted to his position because of who he is. As for Jackson, his departure from his initially stated reliance on argument from definition (i.e., principle) to argument from circumstance (i.e., expediency) during the course of the debate signals both a substantive as well as symbolic shift. Although the selection of controversial personalities and issues clearly enhances viewership even for "Nightline," in the debate on South African apartheid, neither of the positions advocated by Falwell or Jackson represented the middle range of alternatives actively considered by the Reagan administration or by the Democratic Party. (Sixteen references and ten footnotes are attached.) (JK)

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The Jackson-Falwell Apartheid Debate

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## Argument of the Excluded Middle: The Jackson-Falwell Apartheid Debate

The issue of South African apartheid is one of those which is usually in the periphery of the American political conscience, but which periodically explodes to the forefront of our attention sparked by the most recent of a continuing cycle of repression and reaction. Such was the case in late summer of 1985 when the Rev. Jerry Falwell spent five days in South Africa. Upon his return he urged "reinvestment" in South Africa while opposing economic sanctions, depicted Nobel laureate Bishop Desmond Tutu as a "phony," and otherwise portrayed South African president P.W. Botha as a reformer. (Spring 1985, 52-53).

The response to Falwell came from many sources, including other fundamentalist Christians (Spring, 53). Nevertheless, the most publicized response came from the Rev. Jesse Jackson, who "debated" Falwell in the media. The most direct and sustained exchange between the Revs. Falwell and Jackson occurred on ABC's "Nightline" on the evening of September 4, 1985.

While the audience for this exchange was limited and self-selected, the debate between Falwell and Jackson served to frame arguments respectively for the anti- and pro-divestment positions regarding South Africa. Unfortunately, while the debate featured two largely incommensurable positions which insured that fundamental disagreement would be featured; the agenda of the respective disputants as well as the format of the program also excluded the possibility of resolution. In effect, Falwell and

Jackson, exaggerated by their role in the debate, directed the public debate on US policy for South Africa towards comparatively extreme and opposite positions while pre-empting the emergence of more consensual "centrist" alternatives.

The thesis of this analysis is that Falwell and Jackson exclude the "Middle Ground." An analysis of their positions drawn from a textual evaluation of the debate<sup>2</sup> and a contextual interpretation of their motives suggests that for neither Falwell nor Jackson was the agenda purely South Africa. The position for each must be understood in a broader frame of reference. The exclusion of the middle, however, was also facilitated by the selection of Falwell and Jackson by "Nightline" which by its format tended to exaggerate differences and reduce the discussion of more "centrist" alternatives.

This paper will briefly examine the immediate background to the debate, evaluate the respective positions of Revs. Falwell and Jackson, and propose a context for understanding their motives as well as that for "Nightline." The discussion will conclude with suggestions for reformating such debates.

#### Background to the Falwell-Jackson Debate

In July 1985, South Africa declared the first "State of Emergency." This declaration followed eighteen months of scattered student boycotts which progressively became more generalized within the adult population including protests and marches, stone throwing and blockades, and eventually boycotts and general strikes. (Greenberg 1987, 177) By the South African

government's own estimates, at least 8,000 Africans were arrested and over 2,000 were killed during the first "State of Emergency" measure which lasted from July 13, 1985 through March 7 of the following year. (179)

The events in South Africa, accentuated by increasing restrictions on media coverage by the national and the international press, fed a growing political movement in the United States for the re-evaluation of policy towards South Africa. The symbolic and substantive centerpiece for a change in policy with South Africa was economic disinvestment<sup>3</sup>. While limited in popular appeal in the United States, several highly publicized non-violent protests at the South African Consulate and calls by college campuses for divestment of their endowment funds in corporations doing business in South Africa signalled a growing awareness and disapproval of South African racial policy. (U.S. News, 11)

It was into this setting in mid-August 1985 that the Rev. Jerry Falwell entered the picture. In a five-day visit to South Africa, Jerry Falwell met with South African president P.W. Botha, foreign minister Roelof F. (Pik) Botha, and various "moderate" African leaders including Zulu-chief and Inkatha leader Gatsha Buthelezi. Absent from his meetings were Rev. Dr. Allan Boesak, minister and member of the United Democratic Front (UDF), as well as Anglican Bishop Desmond Tutu. Falwell labelled the UDF to be as radical as the African National Congress (ANC) while referring to Bishop Tutu as a "phony as far as representing

the Black people of South Africa." (Cheers, 8) In the case of Bishop Tutu, Falwell had sought a meeting but was rebuffed. (Spring, 154)

Upon his return to the United States, Falwell began airing the "untold story" through a press conference in Washington<sup>4</sup>, comments on his "Old Time Gospel Hour" broadcast, and most extensively through "Jerry Falwell Live" which is broadcast over WTBS (Turner Broadcast System) through cable. Coverage of Falwell's charges and some nominal analysis of South African events were provided in U.S. News & World Report and Time magazine in late August<sup>5</sup>.

It was in late August that Jesse Jackson entered the debate. He charged that "Mr. Falwell has finally found a minority he can support" (U.S. News, 11). At the end of August he accepted both Falwell's invitation to meet with him at the Thomas Road Baptist Church, Jerry Falwell's home church in Lynchburg, VA, as well as ABC's "Nightline" invitation for a special format debate on the evening of September 4.

The meeting in Lynchburg occurred on August 30-31. Rev. Jackson both addressed the congregation of the Thomas Road Baptist Church during a worship service, as well as met privately with Rev. Falwell in the latter's study for a thirty-minute private debate. (Cheers, 6-7) Media coverage of the Lynchburg meeting appears to have been very limited by the national media with the most extensive coverage occurring in the Black Press<sup>6</sup>. During this thirty-minute session, it appears that the major

topoi Falwell and Jackson would use later in the ABC "Nightline" debate were developed.

ABC's "Nightline," September 4, 1985, The Falwell-Jackson Debate

The debate on ABC's "Nightline" varied somewhat from the program's regular format. The length of the broadcast was doubled to an hour. For this broadcast, both Revs. Falwell and Jackson appeared in the studio with host Ted Koppel, whereas normally the guests are broadcast from remote locations. The use of background "fillers" for this broadcast were interspersed periodically through the program, rather than preceding the discussion of the guests as is typically the format. Except for a brief segment taken from an earlier exchange on ABC's "Good Morning America" a few days earlier, there was little background referencing used. Ted Koppel, the program's regular host, began the broadcast with a brief overview of the ground rules both parties had agreed upon and then gave each guest a few minutes to present his opening position. For the course of the broadcast, in roughly alternating sequence, Koppel posed questions to the two guests who both responded to and posed their own questions to each other.

As the debate covered an hour, I have chosen to identify primary lines of argument used by each advocate after which I move to the analysis of content and context. The lines of argument when illustrated by text of statements appear in "quotations." The Outline structure is my superimposition, and does not necessarily follow the sequence in the exchange:

1. Rev. Jerry Falwell's Position

- A. Apartheid is morally wrong, however,  
"(A)partheid" is "reprehensible, abhorrent, and must be discontinued."
- B. Undermining the current regime (P.W. Botha) would result in even worse alternatives. Scenario #1, Marxist takeover--
  - 1. South Africa is the target of Marxist takeover,  
I have been "studying the red river of communism as it has poured down on the continent of Africa for a number of years." "South Africa is the plum of the continent."
  - 2. Loss of South Africa would be disastrous,
    - a. Strategic minerals would be denied, and
    - b. The Cape of Good Hope controls the strategic sea lanes around the southern tip of Africa.
  - 3. Critics of South Africa are hypocritical in their failure to criticize human rights violations on the rest of the continent.  
"What about Ethiopia, Reverend Jackson?" Why do you never complain when "Cuban soldiers fight for a Marxist government in Ethiopia or Angola?"
- C. Undermining the current regime would result in a more repressive government. Scenario #2, White Backlash--
  - 1. P.W. Botha is committed to gradual reform,  
"President Botha's statement to the EEC [European Economic Community] is the first official distancing of government policy from apartheid."
  - 2. Undermining Botha will result in "a more draconian white regime."
  - 3. Rather than divestment, we should pursue a policy of "reinvestment" in South Africa.
- D. Media Coverage misrepresents events in South Africa.
  - 1. "(Botha's) initiative to the EEC was unreported in the media."
  - 2. The Black leadership receiving media coverage (Bishop Tutu and Rev. Allan Boesak) are not representative of the Black South Africans.  
"I think he's [Bishop Tutu] a phony, period, as far as representing the black people of South Africa."



2. Rev. Jesse Jackson's Position

- A. Apartheid is morally wrong and inconsistent with continued economic investment.  
"That's like being against prostitution but investing in a whore house, like being against liquor and investing in a distillery, like being against smoking and investing in a tobacco company."
- B. Reform in South Africa won't occur without disinvestment.  
"(We must) take the profit out of apartheid. . . .The use of economic sanctions to get the attention of the government is where you can get the cancer out of apartheid and reserve an industrial democracy which is appealing."
  - 1. Botha's plan for gradual reform is unacceptable  
"Botha does not have the power morally or divinely to determine the timetable for other people's freedom."
- C. Rejecting Bishop Tutu and other Black leaders as nonrepresentative misplaces legitimacy.  
"Anyone who would choose Botha over Tutu would choose Bull Connor over Martin Luther King; would choose Hitler over the Jews; would choose Herod over Jesus and would choose Pharaoh over Moses."
- D. The Marxist threat is overstated.
  - 1. It ignores the reality of the oppression blacks suffer at the hands of the white minority.  
"It matters little who's the oppressor."
  - 2. Conditions in Marxist countries are better than South Africa.  
"If the average South African black were to wake up in Cuba, he would think he had gone to heaven."
  - 3. U.S. support for pre-Marxist regimes in African states were worse than current Marxist regimes.  
"Well, what about Ethiopia, Reverend Falwell? Let's talk about conditions in Ethiopia when the U.S. supported Haile Selassie there? Let's talk about Uganda after your friends in Israel had installed Idi Amin. Let's talk about Zaire, shall we, Reverend Falwell?"

While the preceding topical outline cannot do justice to the complete positions or support offered by either disputant, it summarizes the primary lines of argument taken by each. Jerry

Falwell's opposition to disinvestment centers on "argument from circumstance<sup>7</sup>." That is, having conceded the essential characteristic of apartheid as "morally reprehensible," Rev. Falwell proceeds to shift the issue to the expedient consequences of opposing apartheid--at least as he frames them.

Jesse Jackson, on the other hand, focuses more on "argument from definition<sup>8</sup>." While Rev. Jackson resorts to the use of expedience in refuting several of Falwell's allegations (i.e. when responding to the means of expediting reform or in disputing the causes of suffering in Marxist-ruled African states), he consistently returns to his premise that because apartheid is morally indefensible, it should be resisted. The most rhetorically potent expression of this thesis--"That's like being against prostitution and investing in a whore house . . .--" is saved for his closing remarks.

### The Excluded Middle

In alleging that neither Rev. Falwell nor Rev. Jackson represented the realistic policy alternatives which might have found some emergent political consensus, one could begin with the "default" notion that neither of their respective positions has come to pass. This is simplistic. But in fact, politically principled choices are frequently leavened with expedience. In this concluding discussion I wish to address each of the three actor's contribution to the dynamic of excluding middle ground. These three actors respectively are the Rev. Falwell, the Rev. Jackson, and the format of "Nightline."

1. Jerry Falwell - "The Moral Majorities Last Hurrah"

The thesis of my claim is that Falwell's position on South African apartheid cannot be divorced from the image he has developed as the leader of the Moral Majority. The position he advocates, however, created a paradox for him. On the one hand, those whose impression of Falwell (and all he stands for) is contaminated by his association with Moral Majority are unlikely to be converted to his position because of who he is. On the other hand, the fundamentalist and evangelical legions who would be expected to find common cause with Falwell on moral/religious grounds would likely be antagonized by several of his positions which violate principle in favor of expedience. Both ends of the paradox work against acceptance of his claims.

The clearest indication that most Americans disagreed with major elements of Falwell's perspective can be inferred from poll data. A Harris survey following the debate reported "that 76 per cent of those surveyed felt that Moral Majority leader Falwell was wrong for making the statement [that Bishop Desmond Tutu was a 'phony'.]" Additionally, 67 percent felt it was wrong to encourage Americans to "reinvest" in South Africa. (Jet, 9/30/85, 37). It also did not enhance Falwell's credibility when the Sunday Times of London reported that "77 percent of South Africa's Blacks were in favor of sanctions despite fears they would suffer from such measures." (Jet, 9/9/85, 16)

But if the rejection of Falwell's position by non-Fundamentalists is to be expected, the criticism he generated

from Evangelicals is more harmful. David McKenna, Asbury Seminary president expressed the criticism most succinctly: "Mr. Falwell is over his head in international affairs, out of bounds when he presumes to speak for evangelical Christians, and far from the pulpit which he claims to be his primary calling."

Robert P. Dugan, Jr., director of the National Association of Evangelicals' Washington office, suggests that Falwell:

may have diminished his influence on other important issues for some years to come. The opposition will be quick to use this to characterize him as a racist, unfairly to be sure, and thus dismiss him as a national influence. (Spring, 53)

The problem for Fundamentalists and Evangelicals was the incongruency between the "moral" postulates of their beliefs with the types of behavior Falwell's position would tacitly condone. The larger issue of where the demarcation was set between moral action consistent with religious belief separated from secular activities (ie., what is rendered to Caesar versus what is rendered to God) is one which divides the fundamentalist-evangelical religious community.

In his early ministry, Jerry Falwell had fallen on the side of those believing there was a clear demarcation between the secular and spiritual<sup>9</sup>. But after the 1973 Supreme Court decision on abortion (Roe v. Wade), Falwell progressively moved towards direct action in the political realm until the formation of the "Moral Majority" in 1979 completed the transformation. (D'Souza, 194-205).

The expansion of the definition of what constitutes a "moral" issue into the political domain is explained by Falwell:

The Bible says that a husband and a father who does not protect his household is worse than an infidel. I'd like to extend that and say that a government which does not protect its citizens is worse than an infidel. (D'Souza, 176)

Political expedience has been subsumed as a category of moral argument by Falwell. Yet, this subversion of issue status does not compel its acceptance--certainly not by the "non-believer" of Falwell's orthodoxy. For those to the left of Falwell, his claim is viewed in the context of a political agenda represented as moral issue. But for those to the right of Falwell, the violation is more severe because it demonstrates a lack of faith in the divine. As D'Souza summarizes the criticism from the fundamentalist right, "political action reflects a lack of faith in the imminent Second Coming." (177)

## 2. Jesse Jackson - "Redefining the Rainbow"

Just as Jerry Falwell could be separated from his association with the Moral Majority, Jesse Jackson carried the baggage of his image. For Jackson the paradox is a little more subtle, but no less perplexing. On the one hand, having run for the Democratic nomination in 1984 and with an unknown (in 1985) intention for 1988, it was difficult interpret Jesse Jackson as anything other than politically-motivated. On the other hand, given that Jackson's Rainbow was largely viewed as "monochromatic" (as recently as early in the 1988 primary season), his

## Argument of the Excluded Middle, 12

positions were frequently dismissed by the conventional political wisdom. Additionally, Jackson had also associated himself with issues and persons which contaminated him in the eyes of many.

Perhaps the greatest impediment to taking Jackson seriously was a persistent question regarding his true motives and a view of him as a manipulator. The origin of this perception is often traced to Dr. Martin Luther King's assassination in 1968 when Jackson appeared on national television wearing a shirt "reportedly" stained with blood from King. Jackson's manipulation of the myth he had cradled Dr. King's head alienated him from much of the Black leadership. (Faw & Skelton, 234-235) As his biographers portray him, Jesse Jackson's political instincts lent themselves to a tendency to see events expediently:

(E)verybody, everything, had its place; all things could be used: the congregations, the agents working the crowds, the bloodstained shirt he said he'd been wearing the day Dr. King was shot, Vernon Jordan's surgeon, Lt. Robert Goodman's captivity in Syria--each could be a backdrop, a setting: from Damascus to Harlem, from bayou parish to the embassy of South Africa, the world was his stage, and at any point he could give a performance, commanded only by himself. (Faw & Skelton, 243)

While it can be doubted that the full spectrum of the political electorate either knew of this representation or shared in its detail, there was, nevertheless, ample evidence that Rev. Jackson was not taken seriously by large elements of the polity (Reed, 106-112).

That Jesse Jackson had not made substantial inroads into the white electorate in the 1984 Democratic Presidential primaries is

reflected in the Joint Center for Political Studies assessment: "Jackson never received more than 9 percent of white votes in any state for which exit polls were available. If anything, he may have mobilized more of a white backlash vote because of his candidacy according to a July 1984 Gallup survey. (Faw & Skelton, 219).

If it may be presumed that the largest rejection of Jesse Jackson came from the political conservatives, the more troublesome criticisms of his debate performance came from the pens of political liberals. Commonweal's David Carlin found it necessary to respond to Falwell's attack of how totalitarianism was tolerated in Marxist African States while South Africa's apartheid was the target of such sustained attack. (518-519) An even more critical review was provided by The Nation's Alexander Cockburn who flatly labelled Jackson's performance in the debate a "defeat . . . at the hands of Jerry Falwell." As with Carlin, the issue Jackson was seen to have lost was on Falwell's communist threat: "Every time Falwell invoked the Communist menace and asked the audience if it would care to see the red flag flying over Cape Town, Jackson ran for cover." (231)

While Rev. Jackson clearly suffered from an image problem from whites and conservatives, and criticism from the liberals for his failure to take issue with the "communist threat" issue, one may, nevertheless, view his position in the debate as an attempt to broaden his electoral appeal beyond the Black electorate. The reliance on argument from definition (principle)



as a primary characteristic of his topoi signals both a substantive as well as symbolic shift. If the criticism directed at Jackson as manipulative is grounded in the frequency with which he used expedience to justify his positions, then the shift to "more principled" premises would signal greater consistency in positions.

3. "Nightline" - "Would Consensus Attract Viewership?"

Since Falwell and Jackson are confronted with their own paradoxes, equity requires the same consideration for the third actor. The underlying questions for broadcast journalism is where the fulcrum is set between the pragmatic interest of selling the audience (which attracts the advertisers, who pay for the production, etc.) without selling out the integrity of the product. Clearly, the selection of controversial personalities or issues enhances viewership<sup>10</sup> even for "Nightline."

The question of how "public issues" should be presented is neither recent nor resolvable. But in the Debate on South African apartheid, it would appear that neither the positions advocated by either Revs. Falwell or Jackson represented the middle range of alternatives actively considered by either the current administration or the Democratic Party. Despite Falwell call for the "reinvestment" in South Africa, President Reagan executed a ban on the sale of Krugerrands through an executive order. (Spring, 52) Similarly, Jackson's call for divestment has received only sporadic support, and to date, no systematic endorsement by the Democratic Party. If the real range of feas-



ible options (i.e., those which are politically expedient within a foreseeable time frame) are excluded from active discussion in preference of comparatively more extreme alternatives, the consequences it can generate include the following:

1. Tacit legitimization of extreme options and subsequent polarization created by disjunctive choice.
2. Misinformation of the general public about the direction and impact of government policy.

While I seriously doubt most informed viewers of the Falwell-Jackson "Nightline" debate on apartheid would have considered the positions represented as the only alternatives available for public policy, I do believe that the public education of the rationale for both the Reagan administration's policy or the Democratic Party's alternative were minimal, if even present. While the commonplace notion persists that to every position there is a counter-position, its restatement might better acknowledge that there may be multiple counter-positions. It would serve a better public interest to insure that "middle ground" positions also receive their hearing.

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1. Newsweek on Campus in Fall of 1985 estimated that "Nightline" regularly attracts viewership of 7 million which generally reflects a highly-educated audience of opinion-leaders.

Argument of the Excluded Middle, 17

2. Primary source for transcript is taken from personal video-taped recording of the broadcast, aired on September 4, 1985.
3. Disinvestment and "Divestment" are used interchangeably.
4. The coverage of the news conference by media appears to have have been limited. New York Times and Washington Post stories are minor. Time magazine's Sept. 2, 1985 edition is only to report the occurrence of the event, but to give no substantive report of its content.
5. Both U.S. News & World Report and Time have a cover date of September 2, 1985. This would have placed them on the news-stands a week earlier on August 26, 1985. U.S. News devoted the first five paragraphs of a full page story to the South African story. The larger context of its article is reflected in the title "Circuit Rider to Controversy."

Similarly, Time devoted about six paragraphs to the South African story in a substantial (6-page) feature on Jerry Falwell and the Fundamentalist movement. Much of the article delineated differences between fundamentalists and evangelicals, history of the movement, and political agenda issues.

6. Jet magazine, a national Black weekly, is the only national media outlet to provide consistent coverage of the events preceding the Sept. 4 debate, as well as provide follow-up. By contrast, none of the three national newsweekly magazines (Time, Newsweek, and U.S. News & World Report) reported on the event.
7. I use Richard Weaver's distinction drawn from The Ethics of Rhetoric, 55-74. The terms "circumstance" and "expedience" are used interchangeably within the text of my essay.
8. Again, "argument from definition" is taken from Weaver's usage (85-114). I use the expression "argument from definition" interchangeably with "argument from essence."
9. An intriguing example of the youthful Falwell's position against ministers becoming involved in secular politics may be found in his March 21, 1965 sermon, "Ministers and Marches" reproduced in Perry Young's God's Bullies, 310-317. This sermon rejected ministerial involvement in the Civil Rights Movement.
10. For "Nightline" the two most watched broadcasts during the last year involved Jim and Tammi Baker in one program and Gary Hart in another.