

UF's divestment merely a quick fix

For a brief moment, the attention of the world was focused on the plight of blacks in South Africa. That country's morally and philosophically bankrupt policy of subjugating its majority through violence and economic measures correctly engendered a rash of protests and angry condemnations.

Well-meaning activists called for divestment, the practice of selling off stocks in companies that continue to have dealings with South Africa. But by asking for too little too soon, they have squandered their moment in the spotlight. They have opted for an empty, symbolic gesture instead of striving for the slow and difficult process of meaningful and non-violent change.

■ **Divestment as moral absolution** — Divestment is nothing more than closing your eyes and saying, "It's not my fault." When UF — or any organization — divests, all it does is make available on the open market their stocks in companies doing business in South Africa, stocks which are then purchased by private investors, portfolio managers, etc. South Africa is not affected, the companies are not affected and UF is not affected.

■ **The corporation as horny teen-ager** — When a company says it will pull out of South Africa, it's about as trustworthy as a high school boy in the back seat of a car on a hot summer night. Usually, all a company does is transfer power to managers already in place and take its name off the front door.

■ **The city mouse and the country mouse** — The people in power most open to change are the businessmen who work with blacks on a day-to-day basis. They are also the people who would take the brunt of any effective economic measures.

The ones least open to change are the Afrikaner farmers — generally rigid, narrow-minded people who live on isolated farms far from the cities. They are self-sufficient and most economic measures would

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cause them little or no discomfort.

■ **That's what friends are for** — By cutting ourselves off from South Africa, we've lost what little influence we may have had. People with a strong economic stake in a country have a lot more sway with a government than people who don't.

Activists argue that any contact with the country is morally tainted and that they have been unable to get corporations to follow the Sullivan principles, a set of moral guidelines that promotes integration for companies based in South Africa. Now they want to arrange for an economic boycott, a boycott which would of necessity involve dozens of countries and hundreds of corporations.

Saying, "We can't get them to follow these guidelines, so we're going to coordinate a worldwide economic boycott," is akin to someone attempting to drain Lake Okeechobee and, after failing, deciding to have a go at the Atlantic Ocean.

We all want to end apartheid. But too often activists look for the quick fix. Easy gestures and violent upheaval are more visceral and satisfying than slow, tedious and non-violent change, but few would argue over which is better. They also tend to ignore the history of Africa, a continent plagued by despotic governments and bitter tribal warfare.

Still, none of this may matter. The apartheid issue is back-page news, and the restless eye of the media has moved on. Today, it focuses on the Palestinian unrest; tomorrow it will be something else. But in South Africa, the struggle continues.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Anti-divestment columnist correct

Editor: Congratulations to Michael Giltz for being able to criticize South Africa's racial policies without blindly moralizing himself into a divestment-or-else frenzy. Giltz correctly observed in his March 9 column that divestment is precisely the opposite of the way to attempt to have any influence in South Africa for the betterment of the blacks. He also correctly observed that the selling of stocks simply transfers ownership of those stocks — and consequently the influence on the company — to other investors who may or may not care what South Africa does

about apartheid.

The failure of the protesters to realize this illustrates the tunnel vision they created for themselves which resulted in divestment becoming the *end* rather than the *means*. They continued to blind themselves to these simple facts until they finally started to believe their own false rhetoric. They were so convinced that they were so “morally right” about the issue that they shut themselves off from any reasoned, objective analysis of the situation. No matter how repugnant you considered apartheid to be, if you were against divestment as a means of doing something about it, you were automatically labeled as a “racist” or a “fascist.”

It is just this sort of phenomenon that is so characteristic of protests like the ones about divestment. The protesters, no matter how ill-informed, will convince themselves they are right about the issue by simply repeating the same rhetoric to themselves over and over again, until they are completely immune to any even slightly differing ideas.

I do not fault them for wanting to speak their minds because they felt strongly about an issue, I just wish they would not have been so obstinate about shutting themselves off from any rational discussion of it.

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