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Review by **James H. Meriwether**, California State University Channel Islands

The crumbling of South Africa's apartheid laws is now just some twenty years past, and yet even in that relatively short period of time memories certainly can fade. So it is good to have the struggle to end apartheid explored on the pages of *Diplomatic History* (the November 2012 issue)¹ in a variety of ways: in Eric Morgan's article, through the roundtable on Connie Fields' documentary film, *Have You Heard from Johannesburg*, and in Simon Steven's work on the Carter Administration and apartheid. Morgan's article on Arthur Ashe and apartheid specifically offers much to those interested in a range of issues, be they international movements for freedom and justice, the history of African-Americans and Africa, the history of sport, or the anti-apartheid movement itself.

Ashe was one of the leading tennis players of the late 1960s and 1970s, but beyond that, even as he played his sport at the highest level, he was a thinker and activist in a way that others of that bygone era were, but that now seems much less common. And as Morgan points out, more than most sports of the era, tennis was transnational in its composition and competition. As Ashe's tennis career gained traction, so did his role as a 'citizen activist' who, international in his thinking and actions, in the early 1970s made apartheid in South Africa a personal as well as political issue.

Effectively using materials gathered from archives in South Africa and the United States, Morgan argues on the broad level that "Ashe's confrontation with apartheid illustrates the growing importance of citizen activism in American foreign relations and international affairs in the postwar years" (817). More directly to the specific case at hand, Ashe

¹ See the Table of Contents for the November 2012 issue at <http://dh.oxfordjournals.org/content/36/5.toc>

“offered an alternative to the predominant position of South Africa’s isolation and the global cultural boycott” (817).

In 1970, while the relatively weak international anti-apartheid movement advocated boycotts of South Africa, Ashe sought a visa to play in the South African Open. Highlighting the debate over engagement (later to be called ‘constructive engagement’) or isolation, dialogue or boycott, Ashe soon found his visa request denied and his case elevated to one of international interest. President Richard Nixon, the international ruling body of tennis, anti-apartheid activists, and of course South Africans themselves took a close interest in the case.

With sport holding a place of high privilege among many white South Africans, the threat of expulsion from the Davis Cup and the potential for other sporting boycotts (South Africa had already been banned from the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City), along with boycotts by artists and entertainers, was of deep concern to the South African government. The Ashe visa controversy threatened further condemnation and sanctions, and as such the decision to deny the visa was made at the Prime Ministerial and Cabinet level.

The denial of the visa came at a point where both the internal and international fights against apartheid were at low ebbs, and when the United States was not actively confronting the South African government about apartheid. While it does not appear that Ashe’s actions changed much when it came to White House thinking or U.S. government policy, outrage over the visa denial raised attention and caused changes in thinking in other realms as people and organizations looked at South Africa anew.

Morgan argues that while Ashe himself was willing to engage South Africa, his case actually led to greater isolation of the country and its people. The denial of the visa helped prompt the international governing body for tennis to ban South Africa from the 1970 Davis Cup. Yet this troubled Ashe. When U.S. Representative Charles Diggs (a Democrat representing Michigan) called for hearings by the House subcommittee on Africa in the aftermath of the visa denial, Ashe was asked to testify. The tennis player found himself in a predicament: on a very personal level, he was good friends with white South African tennis players such as Cliff Drysdale, but on the broader level he sought to oppose apartheid. Engage or isolate? Dialogue or boycott? Ashe believed it was better to engage, to travel to South Africa, and to play -- and hopefully win -- the tennis tournament in the midst of apartheid, and thereby did not support isolating South Africa or banning South African athletes from competing in the United States.

With South Africa increasingly isolated, local authorities sought to push back the tide by allowing Ashe into the country the following year. In a somewhat paradoxical manner, the effort of Ashe to engage South Africa led to the country’s increasing isolation; conversely, one result of the isolation was the South African government’s decision to

counter that isolation by finally allowing Ashe into the country, convincing Ashe anew of the need to engage even as the power of isolation brought the change.

Thus, as Ashe continued to apply for a visa, and with political calculations weighing heavily on the South African government, the next year Ashe was allowed into the country. The South African government cared little for Ashe's presence; it simply did not want boycotts and bans, in this case the ban from Davis Cup competition, to be extended. Indeed, the Davis Cup ban was reversed after Ashe received his visa.

Ashe solicited the views of others about his decision to visit South Africa. This is one of the more interesting moments, for Morgan brings to light the voices of African-Americans such as the poet Nikki Giovanni and the politician Barbara Jordan, South African anti-apartheid activists such as Dennis Brutus, and relatively non-political voices such as UCLA Athletic Director J.D. Morgan.

Yet even as this article delivers so much, one wishes for more development of the divided opinion over Ashe's decision to visit South Africa and play in its premier tennis tournament. This might help reveal more of the divided and difficult nature of anti-apartheid efforts as well as highlighting the broader efforts to promote international social movements. One also is left wishing for further analysis as to why after traveling to South Africa again in 1974, 1975, and 1977, Ashe then vowed not to play tennis in South Africa until apartheid restrictions were lifted in the sporting community -- even as he argued against isolating and boycotting South Africa (838). As the 1970s progressed, just what his position meant to him as an individual might offer further insight into the debates over anti-apartheid efforts.

In the end, that Ashe raised the profile of the issue of South Africa's discrimination in sport is clear; the effects on the specific debate over anti-apartheid efforts remain somewhat less clear. Morgan thus leaves us a conundrum: to what extent can we attribute large-scale divestment campaigns to the actions of a man who seemingly acted and spoke for engagement (841)?

The tensions over confronting apartheid manifest themselves through Ashe in fascinating and not always predictable ways, and it is a revealing window that Morgan opens onto both the person and the movement in this well-written and thoughtful article. That window can now be opened further as we continue to learn more about one of the past century's most significant manifestations of white supremacy and the transnational struggles against it.

Jim Meriwether received his Ph.D. from UCLA and is professor of history at California State University Channel Islands. His work on intersections between the United States and Africa has twice led to his being a Fulbright lecturer, first at the University of Zimbabwe and then at the University of Nairobi. He is the author of "Worth a Lot of Negro Votes": Black Voters, Africa, and the 1960

Presidential Campaign” in the *Journal of American History* (December 2008), and *Proudly We Can Be Africans: Black Americans and Africa, 1935-1961* (University of North Carolina Press, 2002). His current research project is on the United States and the decolonization of Africa.

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