On the morning of 8 June 1988 dozens of children from Washington DC schools arrived at the United States Capitol, carrying a small black doll to deliver to the lawmakers. Each doll represented a child who would be harmed by the sanctions Congress had recently imposed on South Africa. This event was organised by a group calling itself the Wake Up America Coalition, headed by the Reverend Kenneth A. Frazier, a black American. Years later the event would be revealed as part of an elaborate campaign aimed at turning the American public against further sanctions on South Africa. It was one of many in a nearly 50-year lobbying and propaganda campaign by the apartheid government to improve its image in the United States and other countries. Official estimates put annual spending on the campaign at about $100-million a year, though the true amount might never be known.

This book tells the story of the South African propaganda campaign, run with military precision, which involved a worldwide network of supporters, including global corporations with business operations in South Africa, conservative religious organisations and an unlikely coalition of liberal US black clergy and anti-communist black conservatives aligned with right-wing Cold War politicians. A large focus of the campaign was put on the United States because as its one-time coordinator, Eschel Rhoodie, wrote: “America dominates Western thought as far as Africa is concerned.” Not even the exposure of the programme by South African journalists in the late 1970s, which would bring down a president and send Rhoodie on the run, would stop the worldwide campaign. In fact, it would expand and morph into a much larger and subtler operation. It would end in the early 1990s, only after domestic problems caused the government to focus its energies on issues at home.
Selling Apartheid will tell the story of this global apartheid campaign. Interviews with many of the players, South African government ministers and civil servants, corporate leaders, anti-apartheid leaders and others, provide a behind-the-scenes look at the attempt to sell apartheid abroad. In addition, thousands of previously unreleased records from both the South African and the United States archives will help shed light on the scope of the campaign and reveal an astonishing story.

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