United States Options in Angola

Ten years after a brief and ill-fated involvement in the civil war that followed the collapse of Portugal’s colonial rule, the United States is considering a new attempt to shape the outcome of continuing internal conflict in Angola. The 1976 Clark Amendment prohibiting any military assistance to groups in Angola “unless and until the Congress expressly authorizes such assistance by law” has been repealed by Congress; action is pending on several pieces of legislation that would authorize humanitarian and/or military aid to the União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola, (UNITA), led by Jonas Savimbi; and there is open discussion in Washington (including extensive press coverage) of the possibility of “covert” military assistance carried out under executive branch authority.

Those who view foreign policy issues primarily in globalist East-West terms are tantalized by the notion of a second Angolan venture as a revanchist opportunity to roll back one of the more dramatic projections of Soviet power into the Third World. They also see in Angola an opportunity to act upon an intensified ideological commitment to what they portray as a “revolutionary tradition” of U.S. support for people struggling for democracy.

The case for U.S. intervention is grounded in a set of specific assumptions — that the Soviets and Cubans illegitimately imposed their dominant presence in the country, have perpetuated it by force, and through it threaten the security of neighboring states; and that their dominance might be reversed by means of low-cost, low-risk U.S. assistance to anticommunist, democratically-inclined insurgents, specifically those of UNITA. Inviting U.S. intervention on the basis of these same assumptions, Savimbi argues that President Reagan’s often expressed desire “to stop Soviet expansionism in the world” can indeed be realized in Angola. American hesitation in the face of such opportunity could mean “handing over all of southern Africa to the Soviet empire.”

How justified are the assumptions underlying the proposal to intervene again in Angola? Would military support for Angolan “contras” lead to a reduced Soviet and Cuban presence? Does the choice to be made lie starkly between acceptance of a Soviet fait accompli and assistance to armed insurgents? Or is there a third option?

The Historical Backdrop

The United States seemed relatively unmoved by a “revolutionary tradition” of support for people struggling for democracy during the course of Angola’s anticolonial insurgency (1961-1974). In deference to a NATO ally valued for the Azores bases that it contributed to Western defense, a succession of U.S. administrations counseled but did not press strongly for timely Portuguese colonial reform. What modest American succor was extended to Angolan nationalists took the form of a trickle of covert aid to the northern Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola (FNLA) led by Holden Roberto, an anticommunist Bakongo émigré based in Zaire.

Unencumbered by ties to colonial authority, the Soviets championed Angolan independence in diplomatic forums throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. They also proselytized and assisted Angolan nationalists, channeling some $60 million of financial, material, and instructional aid through the Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA). The MPLA’s urban, class-oriented, multiracial leadership was notably receptive to Marxist perspectives.

By April 1974, however, when Portuguese military officers weary of more than a decade of fighting insurgency in Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, and Angola overthrew the authoritarian government of Marcello Caetano in Lisbon, the Soviets had cut back on assistance to the MPLA. The movement had fallen victim to political divisions and its military activities had largely lapsed. Appreciable Soviet assistance resumed only when it became apparent after the Lisbon coup that Chinese and...
forces of the FNLA might result in the annihilation of a long-term Soviet protégé.

As most of the 350,000 Portuguese residents fled and the Portuguese army faded, Western powers failed to intercede in support of an uneasy coalition (MPLA, FNLA, UNITA) government that the Portuguese, with the blessings of the Organization of African Unity, had established in Luanda. Instead of throwing its weight behind efforts to shore up and promote collaboration within this coalition government, the United States joined the Soviet Union and other external powers in a zero-sum game of fueling frenetic military bids for exclusive political power. The foreign intervention and factional fighting that ensued in 1975 proved so chaotic and opportunistic that its exact sequence may remain forever arguable. Several insights relevant to the policy debate of 1985, however, may be drawn from the confusion.

U.S. policy as much as Soviet audacity assured an outcome that, in the short term, benefited the Soviet Union. Washington's rebuffs to repeated appeals from concerned parties such as Portugal and Zambia for decisive action to save both the coalition government and scheduled elections doomed UNITA's hopes for a strong electoral bid for power. These hopes, never to be tested, were based on its political following within the populous (30 to 40 percent of Angola's approximately 7 million people) Ovimbundu Community. By deciding instead to choose sides and channel covert support through Zaire to the FNLA, the movement most reliant on a military as distinct from a political strategy, Washington helped to ensure that the competition for political power in Angola would be decided militarily.

The Soviet Union (and Cuba, a more consistent supporter of the MPLA since the mid-1960s) responded by markedly increasing assistance to the MPLA. The latter, in turn, countered FNLA military occupation of northern Angola by imposing its own military rule over Luanda and its Mbundu hinterland, the traditional center of MPLA political support. UNITA, with the least developed army, tried to stave off its eclipse by turning to South Africa. In so doing, it unwittingly provided the Soviets and Cubans with an internationally acceptable rationale for massive intervention. As evidence of secretive intervention by mobile units from South Africa surfaced in November 1975, potentially strong OAU and other international opposition to the simultaneous arrival of a Soviet-supplied Cuban expeditionary force crumbled.

Upon meeting the first units of Cuban combat troops near Luanda, an FNLA army column of several thousand troops assisted by a South African artillery unit also crumbled, and then fell back chaotically toward the Zairian border leaving abandoned U.S. military equipment strewn across the countryside. A U.S. Congress, wary of post-Vietnam adventures, voted to cut off further funding for covert operations in Angola — operations that by mid-1975 included assistance for UNITA. The South African Defense Force (SADF), which had earlier provided air and logistical support to Portuguese forces (1968-1974), entered the civil war in support of UNITA (and, to a lesser extent, the FNLA) in 1975 — with the full encouragement, its leaders intimated, of U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.

But South Africa was not prepared to confront Soviet and Cuban military power alone. When it became clear that Washington would not or could not provide the backup Pretoria felt had been implicitly pledged, SADF forces withdrew southward into Namibia, and UNITA guerrillas retreated into the vast forest and savannah of Angola's southeast. The MPLA proclaimed a People's Republic of Angola (PRA), embarked upon the creation of a socialist state, and requested that Cuban forces (now swollen to some 25,000) remain in order to assure the authority and security of that state from renewed military assault.

With a startling projection of air and sea power, the Soviets, prodded by their Cuban allies, had saved their longtime MPLA beneficiaries from near-certain extinction. They did so by capitalizing opportunistically on the improvidence of others, including the United States. The result was a politically privileged presence in Angola that, in the eyes of most of the world, was regrettable but not illegitimate.

Limits on Soviet/Cuban Leverage
According to PRA officials, a phased withdrawal of Cuban forces began as early as April 1976 and their numbers declined by over a third in the following months. The withdrawal was halted and reversed, however, as overflights by South African aircraft and guerrilla raids by UNITA military units, partly reconstructed and retrained at SADF facilities in Namibia, signaled a new threat.

As it materialized over time, this threat took the form of (1) SADF attacks on logistical bases and supply lines of insurgent South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) forces operating from Angola into South African-held Namibia, attacks that laid waste to a broad swath of southern Angola; and (2) extension northward of the range and scope of UNITA insurgency financed at a level of $60 million to $70 million annually (notably by Saudi Arabian and other Gulf sources), enhanced by Moroccan military training and supplied through South Africa. Despite increasingly successful efforts to build up its own armed forces, the PRA became even more dependent on Soviet arms and Cuban soldiers. The ranks of the latter (including technicians) rose as high as 30,000 at times of maximum pressure from UNITA and South Africa.

To what extent does this dependency also derive from a dominant presence of Soviet and Cuban "advisors" and technicians who prevent the Luanda government from negotiating settlements with its adversaries? Under a policy of "national reconciliation" inaugurated by the PRA's founding president, Agostinho Neto, a considerable number of former adversaries, notably ex-officials of the FNLA, have been brought into the government. And though the Soviet Union's and Cuba's counsel is valued and their role in military and security affairs (along with that of East Germany) is of potentially decisive political importance, they do not have their way on all matters.
When one of Moscow's more avid supporters, Nito Alves, attempted a coup in 1977, the Soviet and Cuban ambassadors were sent packing because they had failed to give warning. The Luanda government has seized opportunities to reach border pacification agreements with Zaire and even South Africa without apparent hindrance from its communist benefactors. Shortly before he was felled by cancer in 1979, President Neto engaged in promising diplomatic conversations with the United States aimed at coupling an expanded program of internal political reconciliation with long-awaited U.S. diplomatic recognition. His death dealt the cause of peace a harsh blow.

The contrastingly "hard line" of some MPLA leaders, notably those scarred by the bitter exile years (1960-1974) marked by perceived American hostility, may be externally encouraged but is not externally imposed. MPLA senior leadership includes persons whose Marxist persuasion, Soviet mentoring, and experience of anticolonial insurgency have rendered them enthusiastic partisans of "scientific socialism." But even they have not blocked the development of mutually advantageous economic ties with Western oil companies, banks, and manufacturers.

In sum, it is the persistence of a serious internal (UNITA) and external (South Africa) armed threat that assures the Soviet Union and Cuba a continuation of their militarily-forged influence in Angola. In the words of PRA President José Eduardo dos Santos, the government does not have the "organized manpower with the required educational level, or the available material and financial resources to wage a war against UNITA...and simultaneously to replace Cuban troops and armaments at strategic points in the south, center, and north of the country." To agree to a precipitous departure of Cuban forces, he argues, would be "suicidal."

Relations with Neighboring States
As an avowedly Marxist-Leninist state dependent on the military support of ideologically kindred powers, does the PRA threaten the security of and provoke conflict with neighboring states? Have its Soviet-supported counterinsurgency efforts to pulverize, marginalize, and fragment UNITA spilled across its boundaries?

It is an open secret that UNITA (with or without Kinshasa's assent) has been using Zairian territory to supply its forces in eastern Angola (especially the Cazombo salient lost to the government in September 1985). UNITA also exercises de facto control over border access regions of western Zambia. Most important, it receives major support through adjacent Namibia. UNITA's administrative center of Jamba is situated just north (25 miles by some reports) of the Caprivi Strip. Journalists who fly from Windhoek or other South African airfields to UNITA's military supply base at Licua, then travel another five hours of rough-track road to Jamba, may have the impression of going deep into Angola. They are actually returning toward Caprivi from where UNITA receives, among other things, all the fuel that keeps its fleet of 200 to 300 trucks and its power plants operating. This assistance is freely acknowledged by UNITA. Nevertheless, Angola has limited its reactions to diplomatic demarches in the cases of Zaire and Zambia and to public denunciations of South Africa. No Angolan (let alone Soviet) aircraft have attempted to retaliate against South African facilities used to supply UNITA's military.

The PRA does, however, make its territory available to SWAPO insurgents. Though the UN General Assembly "terminated" South Africa's mandate over Namibia in 1966 and the International Court of Justice has held its continued occupation of the territory to be "illegal," South Africa has evaded international pressure as formulated in Security Council Resolution 435 (1978) to withdraw its army and agree to externally monitored elections leading to independence. Accordingly, the Angolan government cites South African stonewalling, exemplified by the mid-1985 decision to grant internal autonomy to an anti-SWAP government of its own fashioning, as justification for continued support for the Namibian nationalists.

For its part, the South African government promises to continue to retaliate swiftly against all SWAPO incursions into Namibia and blames Angola for the failure of U.S. diplomatic efforts to produce a Namibian settlement. If the MPLA would only negotiate the entry of Jonas Savimbi and UNITA into the Luanda government, Pretoria argues, Cuban troops, no longer needed, could depart and the way would be open to internationally supervised elections and independence as demanded by the United Nations, the OAU, and SWAPO. Contrastingly, from Luanda's perspective, it is South African
assistance alone that enables UNITA to pursue its insurgency. Thus, to bring UNITA into the government would be to capitulate to South Africa.

It may not have escaped South Africa’s notice that in the process of nourishing a UNITA insurgency that prolongs a Cuban presence that, in turn, preoccupies the United States, it diverts attention away from Namibia (and its own internal “state of emergency”). Expanded UNITA insurgency also serves to divert much of SWAPO’s guerrilla army into combat alongside UNITA forces.

Although Soviet air and naval craft that reconnoiter the South Atlantic from Angolan facilities made available under terms of a 1976 Soviet-Angolan “Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation” have not violated South African air or sea space, Pretoria’s publicists capture U.S. attention by depicting them as threatening. And though Luanda has proposed phased, multyear withdrawal of Cuban forces in return for implementation of Security Council Resolution 435 in Namibia, South Africa counters with the assertion that nothing less than total, rapid withdrawal will satisfactorily reduce the threat to South African security.

If, in fact, it is not South Africa’s dual policy of support for UNITA insurgency and resistance to an internationally-sanctioned settlement in Namibia that creates the need and rationale for an intimidating Soviet and Cuban presence in Angola, there is an obvious way to demonstrate this. It is for South Africa to accept the U.S. diplomatic lead in negotiations with Angola. It is for South Africa to agree that if U.S. negotiators are able to extract what they judge to be a reasonable timetable for a phased withdrawal of most Cuban forces, South Africa will accept the constraints of a good neighbor policy and Security Council Resolution 435 (or a mutually agreed upon equivalent).

Soviet/Cuban Motives and Behavior
That the United States is still brooding over its 1975 humiliation in Angola is evidenced by its lonely, persistent refusal “to reward” Soviet and Cuban expansionism by recognizing and establishing diplomatic relations with the PRA. A punitive, “get even” mindset encourages the notion that the Soviets can be made to pay dearly for their Angolan advantage and that such a cost-benefit shift will ultimately cause them to give in and leave.

Several probabilities concerning Soviet motives and behavior argue against such reasoning. Having failed to provide the Marxist-Leninist government of Mozambique with either the economic or military wherewithal to secure its authority in the face of a partially self-inflicted economic disaster, a devastating drought, and a South African-supported antigovernment insurgency, the Soviet Union suffered a severe political embarrassment in 1984. In March of that year, Mozambique “sued for peace” and signed the Nkomati agreement with South Africa. Under the terms of that accord, Mozambique cut off assistance to the would-be insurgent African National Congress (ANC) of South Africa. It also opened its doors to economic and technological relations with South Africa and Western countries.

Sensitive to this blow, a rejuvenated Soviet leadership under Mikhail Gorbachev should not be expected to tolerate a dramatic, “under the gun” reversal in Angola, where the Soviets (along with Cuba) have far more at stake than was the case in Mozambique. Indeed, the increased magnitude and effectiveness of the Soviet military role as evidenced in sophisticated equipment and reported behind-the-lines command roles during the Angolan government’s August-September 1985 offensive against UNITA strongholds reflect long-term planning and commitment.

Presumably as determined as his predecessors to assert the Soviet Union’s status as a fully global power, Gorbachev may be expected to strive for selective Third World successes. At the very least, he will need to phase, delimit, and rationalize any losses (see “New Trends in Soviet Policy Toward Africa” by David E. Albright in CSIS Africa Notes no. 27, April 29, 1984). In Angola that would include stressing South African concessions (Namibia) while dissimulating his own (Cuban withdrawals). Put another way, it would be unproductive for the United States to try to force a Soviet leader into the humiliation of being perceived as having “lost” Angola to South African-backed insurgents.

Might U.S.-assisted escalation of UNITA insurgency, however, raise the cost to Moscow of Soviet and Cuban intervention to an intolerable level? In fact, it is Angola, not the Soviet Union, which pays the devastating human and material price of continuing war. Angola pays for the Soviet weaponry, the MiG-21s and -23s, the Mi-24 helicopter gunships, the tanks, trucks, and artillery. It uses upward from 50 percent of its oil revenues of over $2 billion annually to purchase Soviet arms and to maintain Cuban troops and technicians (25,000 to 30,000). The resources thus diverted from the urgent needs of reconstruction and development provide the Soviets with significant arms sales which they would not be discommoded to increase. Herein lies a Soviet-Angola conflict of interests that U.S. diplomacy should indeed exploit by helping the Angolans find an “honorable” way out of the cycle of endless, resource-consuming violence.

Gains and Risks of U.S. Intervention
For the Soviets and Cubans, the benefits of remaining (prestige, arms sales, ideological impact, regional presence, limitation of Western influence) outweigh the costs (modest Cuban casualties, damage to U.S.-Soviet relations, Angolan resentment of dependency). What might be the gains and losses or risks for the United States should it join UNITA/South African efforts to alter the Soviet/Cuban cost-benefit ratio and force the MPLA government to its knees? They would likely be simultaneously economic, diplomatic, political, and military.

ECONOMIC. U.S. oil companies in partnership with Angola’s state oil corporation, SONANGOL, are exploring and pumping from what are estimated to be reserves of 1.7 billion barrels of high-grade petroleum. Chevron (Cabinda Gulf), Texaco, and Conoco, along with Elf Aquitaine of France and other Western firms, have invested millions of dollars in profitable operations.
American private banks, such as Chase Manhattan, and the U.S. Export-Import Bank have together lent in the neighborhood of half a billion dollars. Boeing, General Tire, and other U.S. companies have profitably joined in investing in Angola and selling to the tough-bargaining MPLA government, which all of them praise for honesty, reliability, and pragmatism. The United States has become Angola’s number one trading partner with annual two-way trade totalling over $1 billion.

To put this economic involvement in jeopardy and to boycott the products of Chevron or other investors in Angola, as some conservative zealots propose, would be to signal to the world that U.S. enterprise may become hostage to erratic fluctuations in American politics. The result could be to disadvantage American business in its competition with Western Europeans, the Japanese, and others, who would be only too happy, for example, to assume a larger role in Angola’s oil production, or to replace “unreliable” U.S. enterprise elsewhere. Nor should the potential damage to American lenders to Angola, vulnerable to retaliation and heavy losses, be underestimated.

The opportunity costs of an Angolan adventure would assuredly include the loss of ideological or political spinoffs that might otherwise be anticipated from Angola’s steadily increasing reliance on U.S. capital and technology. Even confirmed Luanda Marxists have come to respect American know-how and business practices.

American economic influence may not offer the instant gratification of a battlefield victory, but it does offer grounds for optimism on the part of those who would change Angola by example rather than by force. For instance, a Louisiana sugar company has been hired to run an aging sugarcane mill, replacing Cuban technicians unable to operate it effectively. Arthur D. Little serves as a financial consultant to the Angolan government and runs training courses for its technocrats.

Only able or willing to deliver in the military field, the Soviets would be cheered by a Washington policy shift that undercut the United States’ growing economic influence. It is this penetrating influence that renders plausible Western hopes that a young, emerging technocratic elite exposed to Western values and practices may gradually gain ascendancy over doctrinaire party veterans and bring about political liberalization. A predictably unifying, rigidifying reaction to an American decision to join South Africa in support of antigovernment insurgency, however, could severely damage these hopes.

DIPLOMATIC. Diplomatic costs would derive from perceptions that the United States had entered into an alliance with South Africa. It is virtually impossible to determine to what extent UNITA’s military successes of recent years are due to UNITA’s own or South African prowess. A South African commando team apprehended while moving in to sabotage U.S. oil installations in Cabinda in May 1985 was carrying UNITA leaflets which, according to the unit’s captured commander, were to be left behind. This incident raised questions about who may have been responsible for earlier sabotage of railroads, power pylons, dams, and factories previously ascribed to and claimed by UNITA. Indeed, UNITA may have been responsible. But the pervasive secrecy and dissimulation that have surrounded UNITA’s relations with South Africa since 1975 have made it impossible to distinguish clearly between the actions of the two parties. Protest as UNITA must that Angolan issues should be viewed totally apart from those of South Africa, whose racial practices it deplores, UNITA’s image has become merged with the country whose patronage it finds at once an enormous asset and a liability.

Is the United States to become caught up in this same kind of association? Western European economic interests might welcome the competitive advantage that would befall them in the event of such an American predicament. But the governments of Western Europe should be expected to respond with anxiety to such perceived impetuosity. American leadership in the Western community depends in great measure on confidence in U.S. judgment, on an understanding that Americans will use force only as a last resort.

At their 1985 annual summit meeting, African heads of state declared that any U.S. financial, logistical, or military support for UNITA, private or public, direct or through third parties, would constitute a “hostile act against the Organization of African Unity.” But it is not only European allies and African states whose confidence in Washington’s sense and purpose would be shaken. A major U.S. plunge into the Angolan conflict (and it would have to be major) to have any hope of success) would risk damage to the United States’ stature in the world at large.

POLITICAL. Under pressure from local and state governments, churches, labor, students, businesses—a broad spectrum of U.S. institutions — the U.S. government has been endeavoring to distance itself from association with the apartheid system of South Africa. Intensified racial violence and repression in that country reported in galvanizing detail by the American press and displayed vividly on television has rendered apartheid a household word. Black Americans, in particular, have been motivated to mobilize in TransAfrica and the Free South Africa Movement the politically potent foreign policy lobby long expected of them.

For the U.S. government to choose this time to ally itself with South Africa would be gratuitously to invite racial discord. It would endanger domestic peace and diminish the country’s collective sense of self-respect. The damage to the U.S. polity could be enormous.

MILITARY. Might an infusion of U.S. finance and weaponry enable UNITA to hold its fixed bases in Cuando Cubango province in the southeast against future government offensives? Though UNITA denies it, most battle reportage suggests that it took direct South African participation to turn back the August-September 1985 assault on UNITA’s strongholds. Required, according to these reports, was intervention by the 32 Battalion (crack “foreign legion” troops, mostly ex-FNLA), the South African air force (principally night raids), and heavy artillery (against Soviet tanks).

Pretoria also felt a need to reassure Savimbi publicly that he would not be abandoned. At the time of the battle for Mavinga, South African political and military leaders issued their first official acknowledgment of longtime

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assistance and warned that they would not sit by and allow UNITA to be crushed. Simultaneously, they brought pressure on Washington to join in stemming the advance of allegedly Soviet-directed PRA forces toward the Caprivi/Namibia border.

The PRA sees extension of the range of its air power (some 80 percent of which is reportedly piloted by Angolans, up from 40 percent three years ago) as the key to future success. The dos Santos government has set as a top priority the southeastward extension of military communications and infrastructure, including the forward placement of mobile radar units. For the time being, Angolan air force commander Colonel Iko Carreira acknowledges, the South Africans enjoy a tactical advantage in southeast Angola because of “ultramodern” bases in the Caprivi Strip. The nearest Angolan air base is at Menongue, about 500 kilometers from Jamba. South African aircraft are able to intervene rapidly and to time their actions so as to catch Angolan aircraft just as they prepare to return to base. “The reinforcement of our air force,” Carreira is quoted as saying in the October 21 issue of Afrique-Asie, “is essential.”

The Soviets will presumably work with the PRA during the December-April rainy season to prepare for this extension of air power. It seems probable, therefore, that the next battle for Mavinga and Jamba will require greater air protection for UNITA ground forces. The alternative is for UNITA to abandon conventional, fixed-position warfare and return to guerrilla-style insurgency.

Will the South African air force take on MiG-21s and -23s with its own aging and (because of the international arms embargo against Pretoria) largely irreplaceable Impalas and Mirage F-1s? Or will the United States, as the October 30 issue of Africa Confidential acidly suggests, provide air defense systems that might or might not prove sufficient “to preserve Jamba, complete with candelabras and butlers”? The risk is that an involved United States could find itself, as in 1975, confronted with a crisis choice of either providing massive support to besieged UNITA and South African forces or accepting a humiliating retreat.

The military realities of Angola will not be altered by a few tens of millions of dollars, let alone a humanitarian aid. In response to the challenge it faces, the PRA has expanded its armed forces to some 75,000 men (excluding foreign personnel that include, in addition to some 30,000 Cubans, up to 3,000 Eastern bloc and Yugoslav advisors and technicians). Portuguese counterinsurgency specialists have helped to improve the combat effectiveness of PRA ground forces. Soviet and Yugoslav arms deliveries have risen.

There has reportedly been much wastage of equipment due to Soviet efforts to impose a costly European technology and style of warfare on a Third World state. Nonetheless, the military sector is the Soviet Union’s strong card. If the United States chooses to play to it, Washington must be prepared to pay a heavy price for success. Prospects for an intensified offensive against UNITA and even a direct clash between Angolan and South African forces will mount with the end of the rainy season in April 1986. What price the United States might have to pay to determine the outcome of such encounters seems unclear but daunting.

Were UNITA to give up its pretensions to being a state within a state, however, it might avoid a crushing showdown. It could redeploy its 15,000 to 20,000 soldiers (plus a like number of local militia) into diffused, shifting, unconventional guerrilla units against which air power and tanks would be relatively ineffective. By encouraging UNITA to parade the fixed trappings of statehood before the world press, however, UNITA’s external backers may be rendering it more susceptible to annihilation by the bombers, helicopters, tanks, and missiles provided by the Soviet Union. Should U.S. assistance further encourage this propensity for high-stakes conventional warfare, it might also unintentionally contribute to UNITA’s demise.

Why Ideology Is Not the Issue

As a movement fighting for democracy, does UNITA not deserve U.S. support as a matter of basic principle, whatever the odds or cost? Even its enemies grant that UNITA enjoys a following among the rural populace of central Angola, among traditional chiefs (sobas), among Estates alienated by the government’s heavy-handed antireligious bias (“believers” may not be members of the MPLA), and among some dislocated and impoverished town dwellers. And it may be argued that those of UNITA’s leadership, including Savimbi, who were educated in missionary schools and were to some extent socialized into the nonhierarchical collegiality of American Congregational and United Church of Canada Protestantism acquired a lasting commitment to democratic values. It is even sometimes suggested that a traditional stress on consensus decision-making within Ovimbundu culture predisposes some top UNITA leaders to value democratic process.

UNITA, on the other hand, is firmly led by one internally and externally lionized man (see “The Politics of Survival: UNITA in Angola” by John A. Marcum in CSIS Africa Notes no. 8, February 18, 1983). As an insurgent movement engaged in a merciless civil war, it can scarcely be expected to function democratically. And there are persistent reports of dissension within its ranks about Savimbi’s leadership (reports given credibility by the recent defection of a ranking Ovambo leader, Antonio Vakulukuta) and ethnic disagreement on the part of Chokwes and other non-oVimbundu. Relevant to all this, Harvard political scientist Samuel P. Huntington observed in the Political Science Quarterly (Summer 1984) that while “all revolutionary opponents of authoritarian regimes claim to be democratic,” once they achieve power “almost all turn out to be authoritarian.” “Guerrilla insurgencies,” he concludes, “do not inaugurate democratic regimes.”

Given the enthusiasm of American conservatives and neoconservatives, it might be assumed that UNITA is at least an avid backer of free enterprise. Not if the resolutions of UNITA conferences or the logo on its official seal are to be believed. The logo reads: “Socialism,
Negritude, Democracy, Nonalignment." This is not to argue that UNITA's ranks do not include persons committed to pragmatic economics. MPLA ranks also include such persons, however. Ideological professions and strategic alliances aside and the war over, either the MPLA or UNITA in power might be expected to adopt essentially pragmatic, nationalist policies and to govern in an initially largely authoritarian manner. There would be differences. But the choice is not between good and evil, democratic and totalitarian.

The Case for Prudence
Though there may be special circumstances in which U.S. assistance to antigovernment insurgents can be justified, it should never become a cathartic substitute for patient and imaginative diplomacy. It should never be seen as a substitute for or become a block to instructive and constructive economic and cultural relations in serving the enlightened long-term interests of the United States.

In Africa, as the Defense Department's Noel C. Koch has observed, the Soviets have generally behaved so badly that the "last residue" of their influence may well disappear by the end of this century without our having to do much of anything. He cites their behavior in Angola as a case in point. The Soviets sell expensive, complicated military equipment to Angola but do not provide adequate training for its maintenance. This leaves Angolans dependent on the continuing presence of a large number of Soviet and East bloc technicians. The Soviets also profit exorbitantly from a fishing agreement under which they have again provided little training for Angolans and under which their trawlers vacuum Angolan waters of fish, "scrape the seabed and take everything on which fish and seafood depend to survive and regenerate themselves." (See "Some Observations on U.S. Security Interests in Africa" by Noel C. Koch, in CSIS Africa Notes no. 49, November 19, 1985.)

Angolans are not unobservant, nor are they immune to yearnings for peace after a quarter century of war. Though it may be frustratingly slow, it is steady, insistent, reasoned diplomacy aimed at encouraging negotiated, noncoercive solutions to internal and cross-boundary conflict and not military intervention that still represents the most promising and prudent course for U.S. policy. Angola poses a test of our maturity. The United States should face this test with confidence in the persuasive power of its economic, cultural, and political example.

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