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14 August 1986**OPINION****Covert aid to Angola?**By Charles McC. Mathias Jr.
and Patrick J. Leahy

COVERT action, a handy and inoffensive term for a dark and sometimes dangerous business, has a proper role as an instrument of American foreign policy. But that role is — or, at least, should be — sharply limited.

Covert activities should pass a number of tests before they go forward. The severity of the standards are bound to be related to the scope of the activity and its goals. Nevertheless, all decisions to engage in covert action must at least satisfy several basic criteria.

The most obvious and least contestable are that they not violate our laws and that they be undertaken in full compliance with statutory requirements to keep Congress fully and currently informed. Equally apparent, but more arguable, is the determination that the activities form part of a coherent policy that contributes to our foreign policy objectives and national interests. Finally, all open, aboveboard options should have been exhausted or found ineffective.

Covert aid to UNITA, a guerrilla faction in Angola, in southern Africa, fails to meet these requirements.

The Reagan administration's argument for covert assistance in Angola falls on its face from the start. Covert aid must, at a minimum, be "covert." Yet leading members of the administration, including President Reagan himself, have not only publicly indicated their support for such assistance, but also received UNITA leadership in the White House.

The real effect of continuing to label this program "covert" when it was never intended to remain secret has been to exclude Congress from any direct role on this important foreign policy decision.

Under the Constitution, Congress has the power to declare war and appropriate funds for defense and foreign policy. The supply of military assistance in Angola, which is reported to include Stinger missiles, amounts to a major shift in American foreign policy in a region, southern Africa, of paramount interest.

The intelligence oversight committees of the Congress review covert actions, but they have very restricted power, which does not match the kind of full congressional review and legislative power that is essential for developing a credible policy over the long run.

On these grounds alone, the provision of covert aid to UNITA deserves serious consideration and discussion in Congress, in secret session if necessary. The principal objective of legislation that we have introduced is to ensure that such serious consideration occurs by requiring that assistance to UNITA or other factions in Angola be openly acknowledged through a request for funds, be fully debated, and be put to a vote.

Approval of this legislation, which is identical to that approved by the Intelligence and Foreign Affairs Committees of the House of Representatives, is made all the more urgent by the many disturbing foreign policy questions raised by this new direction in US policy.

The previous failure of covert aid to UNITA and another faction in the mid-1970s should alert us to the complexities of the situation. That policy turned out to be disastrous, and it ought to remind us of the dangers of labeling dubious, short-term programs "covert" to avoid a clear-eyed assessment of longer-term implications.

A variety of other questions deserve full examination to make sure that our approach toward Angola is in line with our regional policies and national interests. For example, does material assistance for resistance forces in Angola help or hinder our efforts to bring stability to the region? Does it help or hurt efforts to negotiate a settlement between the government of Angola and South Africa over the independence of Namibia? Does such aid enhance or erode our ability to reduce Angolan dependence on Cuban and Soviet support?

To date, covert aid to UNITA has led the government of Angola to refuse to continue to talk to us at all. It has increased, not lessened, Angolan reliance on the Cubans.

Perhaps the most critical question of all is whether aid to UNITA will strengthen or weaken our leverage with South Africa to dismantle apartheid and take steps that could lead to a peaceful settlement there. Our new policy could align us with South Africa at a most inopportune time and threaten to alienate black Africa.

One last question. Is Angola yet another trouble spot where the US response must be military? Or are there political and economic factors in the Angolan equation which can be exploited by our most potent, and enduring, assets — our diplomatic credibility as a democratic superpower and our economic and social capacities?

We believe the answer to that last question is obvious. But whatever the answer to that and the other questions, they are indeed important questions and should be discussed widely and especially by Congress.

One of the principal objections raised by some to a full debate on this subject is that it would undercut the President's ability to conduct foreign policy. We believe, however, that the administration's foreign policy can be truly effective only when it gains broad support, including bipartisan support in Congress.

A dramatic shift in policy toward Angola, in a country embroiled in conflict with South Africa, may or may not have broad, bipartisan support. We'll never know unless it is discussed fully.

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