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Angola: facing the costs of US involvement

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By David D. Newsom

THE United States is about to involve itself once more in a civil war in Africa.

In his recent speech to the United Nations General Assembly, President Reagan listed Angola as one of the countries in which "freedom fighters" were confronting Soviet surrogates. He clearly had reference to the UNITA movement, led by Jonas Savimbi. Since Angola's independence, this movement has been fighting a guerrilla war against the Marxist-oriented central government in Luanda, a government supported by several thousand Cuban troops and Soviet-bloc advisers.

Shortly after Angolan independence in 1974, the United States began covert help to Mr. Savimbi. This was halted by the Congress under an amendment sponsored by Sen. Richard Clark of Iowa; a strong factor in support for the amendment was the suspicion of close ties between Savimbi and the government of South Africa and the desire to resolve related regional problems through diplomacy.

Recently, in a different atmosphere and reflecting growing frustration over the failure of diplomatic efforts to secure the removal of the Cuban troops and the independence of Namibia, Congress repealed the Clark amendment. It was inevitable that pressures would start for renewed assistance in some form.

Proponents of aid to Savimbi's UNITA movement (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola) contend that the Angolan government is undemocratic, that it is kept in power by Cuban troops and Soviet-bloc personnel, and that it is, therefore, in the interest of the US to support the "democratic" forces of Savimbi. This basically rhetorical argument sidesteps the true issues.

No one denies the nature of the government in Angola and the presence of the Soviet and Cuban elements. The true issues are the cost and wisdom of United States involvement in a distant conflict and how most effectively, in the long run, to preserve US influence in the region.

In the current debate, few raise the question of what the objectives or expectations might be of any form of US assistance to Savimbi. Are we seeking to put him in power in Luanda? Are we hoping that, if we make him stronger, the government in Luanda will negotiate a settlement of the civil war? Do we hope, by such assistance, to lay the basis for negotiations of this and other regional conflicts with the Soviet Union?

Other questions logically follow. Are the proponents of such aid confident that the requested amount of \$27 million will accomplish either of the first two objectives?

Or, as in other cases in the past, are they hoping to commit the United States so strongly that we will provide whatever is necessary for ultimate success? If this is the case, the argument today should be over the realistic cost of a total effort.

If we intend to negotiate this issue with the Soviets, have the proponents asked how we will respond to possible Soviet requests, in such negotiations, to reduce assistance to our friends? The Soviets seldom give away anything for nothing.

Those opposing aid to Savimbi see the issue in Angola as but one part of a complex set of problems involving South Africa, Namibia, and the "front line" black states of southern Africa. In their view, the United States could pay dearly in resuming such aid, both domestically and abroad. Increased aid known to be from the United States would no doubt bring a greater, not a lesser, Soviet effort on behalf of Angola. Current prospects for a negotiated settlement would recede, not advance. Help to Savimbi will definitely be seen in the region as support for a South African objective. This is not the time for the United States to increase its identification with the regime in Pretoria.

Granted, the efforts to negotiate the complex set of issues in this area of Africa have been long and frustrating. Undoubtedly, those in South Africa resisting a fair settlement in Namibia hope that the United States will ultimately be persuaded to their view that this is essentially an East-West issue to be resolved by force of arms. United States help to Jonas Savimbi can only reinforce that view and make the diplomatic settlement even more difficult.

I have seen the United States government pushed by effective public relations efforts and a simplified ideological approach into other unsuccessful and regionally unsupported efforts in Africa — in Katanga and Biafra. I find it tragic indeed to see the US once more entering an African conflict without clear objectives and without facing up to the true costs and consequences of its actions.

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