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It's Carter vs. Castro

The two leaders argue about Cuba's role in Zaïre

"I don't really desire to get into a public dispute with Mr. Castro through the news media," protested Jimmy Carter at the start of his press conference last week. In fact, however, he was already deeply involved in a shouting match with the Cuban Premier over Havana's involvement in last month's invasion of southern Zaïre.

For the second time in 14 months, Zaïre's Shaba region, once known as Katanga province, had been invaded by Katangese rebels who had fled to neighboring Angola in the mid-1960s and were now trying to regain their homeland. Everybody agreed that the Katangese had once fought for the Portuguese against the Angolan guerrilla armies but switched sides to the strongest of these groups, Agostinho Neto's Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola, which later came to power. Even Castro conceded that throughout this period and until some time in early 1976, the Cubans in Angola had helped train and arm the Katangese because they were fighting with the Popular Movement against two rival liberation groups.

Carter's argument last week seemed to be that Castro, who has admitted knowing of the invasion plan in advance, should have taken decisive action to stop it. Of Castro's 20,000 troops in Angola, Carter charged, 4,000 were located in the north-eastern region of the country where the Katangese were based. At the very least, Carter implied, Castro could have notified neighboring countries, or the Organization of African Unity, or the "world at large," of impending trouble.

Some of Carter's details were a bit fuzzy. He alluded to "a story published, I think, in TIME magazine the last week in May" and recalled that "later Castro informed one of our own diplomats that he knew about the impending invasion ahead of time and that he attempted to notify President Neto of Angola and was unsuccessful." TIME's cover story on Africa reported that Castro had called in Lyle Lane, the ranking U.S. diplomat in Havana, and told him he knew of the invasion in advance and had tried unsuccessfully to head it off. Castro told Lane he had indeed notified Neto, who was unable to deter the Katangese.

Two days before Carter's press conference, Castro told his side of the story to a group of visiting American Congressmen and journalists; his account clashed with Carter's on a number of key points. Castro insisted that after the Popular Movement triumphed over its rivals in early 1976, the Cubans stopped helping the Katangese. He maintained that there had been no contact between them and his military or civilian personnel since that time.

Castro singled out Carter's National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski as the villain in the Administration who prevailed on the President to "perpetrate this absolute lie" about the Cuban involvement. Gesturing with one of his long Cohiba cigars, Castro said: "We have never lied, either to our friends or to our enemies. We may keep some things private, and we may be discreet, but we have never used lies as an instrument of politics."

Later, in an interview with TIME Diplomatic Correspondent Strobe Talbott, Castro insisted that Cuba's goals in Africa were peaceful ones. "We are not a military power," he said. "We have no nuclear weapons, no navy, no strategic forces. We are just a small country whose most important raw material is its spirit, the willingness of our people to sacrifice and demonstrate solidarity with other peoples. In the current cases mentioned most often, Angola and Ethiopia, we have prevented two historic crimes: the occupation of Angola by South Africa and the disintegration of the Ethiopian state as a result of foreign aggression." At week's end, Castro took the offensive: He told American TV interviewers that the CIA recently offered UNITA, a rebel group inside Angola, support in its fight against the Popular Movement's Neto. Responded a White House aide: "That is absurd."

Meanwhile, the Carter Administration was trying hard to convince Congress that it "had the goods" on Castro, as one White House official put it. CIA Director Stansfield Turner was dispatched to Capitol Hill with what he called "35 pieces of disparate evidence." In addition to charts, maps and accounts furnished by captured Katangese soldiers, the evidence included a letter sent by the Katangese rebel leader Nathaniel Mbumba to President Kenneth Kaunda requesting permission for the rebels to cross Zambian territory on their way to Shaba. The letter, which was not shown to Congress, supposedly said that Cuba had been "helpful" in planning the attack.

Congressmen were not altogether impressed. "That letter reminded me," said one, "of a politician soliciting aid by saying, 'Support me because I've got so-and-so backing me up.'" Remarketed Congressman Charles Diggs, chairman of the House Subcommittee on Africa: "I don't think there was a soul in that room who came away convinced." But on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, New York Republican Jacob Javits concluded that the Administration was correct in its assessment of Cuban activity, although others were not so sure. Many felt the Administration's concern about the Communists was getting in the way of the main goal of U.S. African policy—namely, bringing an end to white minority rule.

At week's end the White House seemed to be trying to downplay the controversy, if only because it realized that without documentation the dispute might never be resolved. Nonetheless, the Administration was sticking to the main conclusions of its intelligence reports: that the Cuban presence in Angola is all-pervasive today; that Cuban assistance to the Katangese insurgents has never stopped; and that last month's Shaba invasion took place with the cooperation of both the Cubans and the Angolan government.

Whatever the truth about the degree of Cuban involvement, it seemed clear that both Washington and Havana were seeking to exploit the issue for their own purposes. The Carter Administration was trying to demonstrate that the Cubans had broken one of black Africa's most sacred political principles: respect for the sanctity of existing national boundaries. In a larger sense, Washington was emphasizing to both Moscow and Havana that the buildup of Soviet-Cuban influence throughout Africa must be ended if East-West détente is to be strengthened. Castro's motives in denying any involvement with the Katangese might be defensive ones: to dissociate his regime from a dubious, and worse, a failed venture.

While the debate continued, eight Western governments (plus Japan and Iran) met in Brussels and agreed to put up at least \$70 million to rescue the Zaïrian government of President Mobutu Sese Seko from bankruptcy during the next three months under a stringent formula that British Foreign Secretary David Owen called "a monitorable plan for economic assistance." After some earlier protest, Mobutu now seemed ready to accept a few restrictive conditions on how he spends Zaïre's money. Mobutu is also expected to seek increased military assistance from the West. At week's end, Zaïrian intelligence sources claimed that Katangese rebels have again begun massing, threatening to renew the insurgency. ■