

The Angolan civil war and US foreign policy

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Africa's longest running war was formally brought to an end on April 4 when the two sides in Angola's civil war signed a peace deal after a 26-year conflict that began when the country was declared independent in 1975.

The death of the leader of the Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), Jonas Savimbi, at the hands of government forces on February 22, paved the way for the present settlement. Since then the war, which has left the country devastated and killed half a million people, has been presented by the US media as the unfortunate result of the Cold War rivalry between two super powers, or as an expression of fundamentally African problems.

In burying an old ally the US media clearly hope to bury the record of many of the far right elements who were instrumental in driving forward the Angolan war and who are now in the present US administration.

For the *New York Times* the Angolan war was "a three way tribally based struggle", in which the contenders "became enmeshed in global politics as the rival superpowers and their proxies rushed to sponsor their chosen factions."

For the *Washington Post* the US government and the CIA were the innocent parties, embroiled in a war of others making. Angola, writes columnist Jim Hoagland, stands as a warning that in the present war against terrorism, "Washington must resist shelling out resources to unsavoury characters and regimes that may be intent on dragging the United States into their own conflicts for their own profit."

These leading international opinion formers are seeking to wash their hands of the Angolan tragedy. But they cannot so easily distance themselves from the criminality of the brutal Jonas Savimbi. His character reflects the circles in which he moved. Close to the Congo dictator Sese Seko Mubutu, who was in turn an intimate of the Bush family, Savimbi learned his methods from his US sponsors.

Rather than being a tragic reminder of past Cold War conflicts, confined to a remote and barbarous country, Angola's present condition is an example of the handiwork of men like Secretary of Defence Rumsfeld, who strenuously lobbied for the removal of Congressional barriers on arming anti-government forces in the mid-1970s, Dick Cheney, a tireless supporter of UNITA, and George Bush senior, who both as president and head of the CIA prosecuted the war.

Angola—where 3.5 million people, a third of the population, have fled from their homes, where there are 86,000 disabled land mine victims and where a child dies of a preventable disease every three minutes—is the shape of things to come in many other countries if the right wing clique that currently dominates US politics has its way.

In claiming that the Angolan war was the result of super-power rivalry, the US press is echoing the words of Henry Kissinger. As Secretary of State he repeatedly claimed that the US was forced to intervene in Angola because the Soviet Union was already providing military aid to the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) in the form of Cuban troops. Recently released documents demonstrate that this was untrue and that Kissinger lied to Congress in order to justify US intervention.

Far from the war in Angola being the result of efforts to curtail Soviet

ambitions, the new documents released by the National Security archive reveal that the Kremlin was reluctant to become involved in Angola. [1] The Stalinist bureaucracy had no desire to encourage popular revolutionary movements that might threaten their own hold on power. It did not initiate a proxy war, but rather responded to US moves.

It was the US administration, still stinging from the defeat in Vietnam, that started a quarter of century of war in Angola when it backed a two-pronged invasion by Holden Roberto's Front for the National Liberation of Angola (FNLA) from the Congo/Zaire and from South Africa in support of Savimbi's UNITA.

Kissinger afterwards claimed that the US knew nothing about the South African invasion. The documents reveal that not only were the US authorities forewarned, but they helped airlift men and materiel up to the front line. Their intention was to seize the capital, Luanda, before the MPLA could establish itself as Angola's first independent government.

Cuban troops, which Kissinger had claimed were already in place, did not begin to arrive until November after the South African invasion began. A CIA operation had been in place since July 1975. The Soviet contribution by contrast was reluctant. Moscow did not provide planes for the Cubans until the deployment had already been under way for two months.

The Ford administration's aggressive attitude over Angola was consistent with that of successive post-war US administrations, who were concerned to extend American political influence and control over Africa's strategic resources. Their involvement in Angola followed previous intervention in the Congo/Zaire, where the CIA organised the murder of Patrice Lumumba and installed Mobutu Sese Seko, Holden Roberto's brother-in-law, as president.

In 1950 a joint US-Belgian military mission visited the Belgian Congo, which supplied two-thirds of the US demand for uranium. Their intention was to assess the security situation in a colony that was, according to George Marshall, "the primary source of danger" to US strategic interests in Africa.

Marshall, best known as the author of the post-war Marshall Plan, was concerned about Soviet intentions in Africa. But he recognised that the most serious threat would be "a large scale uprising of the natives in the area or considerable disaffection of the natives employed in the mines." [2]

This fear of a mass uprising involving the African working class has guided US foreign policy in Africa ever since. Even when the Cold War ended and the Soviet Union was dissolved, the CIA continued to finance UNITA because their real concern had always been with a popular movement rather than Soviet penetration.

Kissinger and other US leaders repeatedly claimed that they were concerned about the spread of Soviet influence in Africa. Ironically, their own policies contributed more to the growth of Soviet influence than the policies of the Soviet bureaucracy.

Imperialist politicians of Kissinger's experience were well aware that the Kremlin bureaucracy was not interested in exporting revolution. Stalin and his supporters had wiped out a generation of revolutionary leaders in the Moscow trials and hunted down Trotskyists all over the world. After

the Second World War they had suppressed revolutionary movements in Europe, Asia and Africa.

The hatred that Western leaders expressed for the Soviet Union was nonetheless real. Its source lay, not in Soviet global ambitions, but in the fact that the 1917 October revolution had deprived the capitalists of the ability to exploit the territories that made up the USSR and offered an example, however distorted, of an alternative to the profit system.

The Stalinist bureaucracy strangled revolutions wherever they could, but they had to maintain the nationalised property relations in the Soviet Union on which their own power depended and which prevented capitalist exploitation.

In Africa and elsewhere the most right-wing sections of the Western ruling class looked for ways in which to attack the Soviet Union indirectly. They tried to wear down its resources in prolonged wars, in the hope of ultimately regaining what they had lost in 1917. Afghanistan was to prove to be the final straw for the Soviet bureaucracy, but the most extreme right-wing faction of the US ruling class, who were most aggressive in their attitude toward the Soviet Union, had tried the same thing in Angola. By financing the most degenerate and reactionary of the nationalist forces that emerged in opposition to Portuguese rule, they had deliberately attempted to draw the Soviet Union into a quagmire. In the process they destroyed a country and deprived an entire continent of some of its richest resources.

Even after the Soviet Union was out of the picture, the destruction continued. The most savage phase of the Angolan war, known as “the war of the cities” from 1992-4, began after the dissolution of the USSR under Boris Yeltsin when any prospect of Soviet intervention in Africa had been definitely removed. All Cuban troops were withdrawn under the New York Accords between 1988 and mid-1991.

US support for Savimbi reached a record \$50 million in 1989, the year that George Bush senior came to power. Two military supply flights a day maintained a UNITA campaign that became increasingly brutal and destructive. While in his early days Savimbi had enjoyed some support among his own Ovimbundu people, by this time he was reduced to naked coercion. Men were forced to fight for his army, women were dragooned into sexual slavery and peasant farmers had their food seized. Those who challenged his authority would be accused of witchcraft and burnt alive along with their families.

After he failed to win the 1992 elections, Savimbi attacked all the provincial capitals. The siege of Huambo went on for 55 days. Bombarded with heavy artillery, Cuito was besieged for eight months with 50,000 civilians trapped in the town. By mid-1993 1,000 people a day were dying in Angola. The section of the US ruling class that has coalesced around the Bush family was prepared to see a nation destroyed rather than give up support for UNITA.

It now seems that the present Bush administration is willing to see an end to the war. Peace in Angola would allow the Benguela railway to be brought back into use and would fit into US plans for the whole of central Africa.

A US backed settlement has recently been imposed in the former French colony of Congo/Brazzaville, with the help of the Angolan government. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the US is sponsoring a peace accord to end the civil war that followed the fall of Mobutu.

The prospects for the Angolan deal succeeding are not favourable, however. Three previous peace deals—in 1975, 1991 and 1994—all collapsed as UNITA resumed fighting. US ambassador Christopher Dell nevertheless assured reporters that the deal would succeed this time.

Despite their intentions, the US administration’s plans may be hindered by the situation that their own foreign policy has created in Africa. The social and economic conditions in this region are not conducive to peace. Elite groups are engaged in an internecine struggle for control of the continent’s strategic resources. This struggle may be carried on by

political or military means. Currently UNITA have opted for a political route following a serious defeat. But this may not continue for long.

UNITA forces under General Lukamba Gato, who signed the deal, may continue to abide by it if they are suitably rewarded. But there will inevitably be those who feel they have not got their fair share of the spoils. Even as negotiations were taking place, a dissident UNITA faction killed seven people in an ambush near Huambo.

Whatever the outcome of the latest peace accord, no one has any plan to overcome the appalling social disaster that has engulfed the people of Angola. The coda to the Angolan tragedy is the subsequent evolution of the MPLA. In the early 1970s Eduardo dos Santos could be found administering medical programmes in the jungle. He now presides over a state in which 76 percent of the population has no access to basic health care. The MPLA elite are busy enriching themselves out of Angola’s \$20 million a day oil income.

Throughout the war major US companies such as Gulf Oil, Chase Manhattan Bank and General Tire retained their interests in Angola. The only time they were forced to suspend their operations was under pressure from the US government. The MPLA, despite their pseudo-Marxist rhetoric, always welcomed investment by the transnational companies and never broke from the economic domination of the West.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union the MPLA gave up any pretensions to be socialist and abandoned the social welfare measures they had begun after taking power. A recent investigation by Global Witness suggests that the MPLA regime has been responsible for systematically looting the national economy. [3]

Pierre Falcone, the arms dealer jailed on corruption charges in France, was a pivotal figure. He worked closely with President Mitterrand’s son and the Russian Mafia figure Arkadi Gaidamac to supply arms to Angola. Frequently these shipments were worth only a fraction of the stated value, allowing all those involved to cream-off a substantial share for themselves.

Falcone also maintained close relations with the ruling elite in the US, particularly the Bush family. His wife is said to be a friend of Laura Bush. He contributed \$100,000 to the Bush election campaign; the same amount as Kenneth Lay of ENRON gave. Bush was obliged to return Falcone’s money when the scandal of Angolagate broke in France, but the contribution shows that businessmen associated with the MPLA are deeply involved in buying influence with the criminal clique around Bush. Vice-President Dick Cheney has been linked to Falcone through his oil services company, Halliburton. Cheney has been a longstanding supporter of UNITA and an opponent of the MPLA, but Falcone may have played a part in winning Angolan contracts for Halliburton.

These close links with the same right-wing forces that have destroyed the Angolan economy and left its people in poverty is a measure of the MPLA’s degeneration. Liberal and left-wing supporters once saw the MPLA as the saviour of Angola and an example to the rest of Africa. They reviled UNITA and Savimbi, while they eulogised the MPLA. But the removal of Savimbi has not solved Angola’s problems. Instead the MPLA has established relations with exactly the same forces that backed him.

While the primary responsibility for what is happening in Angola lies with the right-wing clique around Bush, the nationalists who claimed to be liberating their country from imperialism but have merely handed it over to a criminal conspiracy must share the blame. The MPLA can offer no alternative to the depredations of the oil companies and no longer even pretend that the effects of neo-colonialism can be ameliorated by social welfare measures.

Notes:

[1] www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB67/index2.html

[2] *The Destruction of a Nation, United States’ Policy toward Angola*

since 1945, George Wright, Pluto Press 1997, p19.

[3] <http://www.fatbeehive.com/globalwitness/>



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