

A Clandestine Civil War: How the secret U.S. involvement in the Angolan Civil War had a hidden agenda

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When we think of the Cold War, we think of Vietnam, nuclear tests, Berlin, the Red Scare, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and many more such pivotal events. Rarely do we hear about the more minor proxy wars and the aftermath of decolonization. Rarely do we hear about Africa's political and diplomatic history post-transatlantic slave trade. Again and again, we see U.S. interference in foreign affairs and politics in other, more vulnerable and high profile regions. This research paper is about hidden agendas and foreign power influence in a place history tends to ignore. It would not seem like the west coast of Africa in 1975 would be a Cold War hotspot; however, the influence of communism and the U.S. mission of promoting democracy expands further across the globe than previously thought. Indeed, it is true that the U.S. got involved in Angola because of the Soviet Union, but there was substantial effort to conceal the mission in Angola. Congress, Secretaries of State, the CIA, and presidential administrations disagree on the extent of U.S. intervention and the goals of that interference. Most historians now agree that the U.S. had interests in Angola far beyond resisting the Soviet sphere of influence. For one thing, Angola is home to the second-largest oil reserve in Africa that at the time was untapped. Oil equals money, and money equals power. Angola also represented political leverage that the U.S. could wield against small and relatively low-threat adversaries like Portugal and South Africa. The U.S. did not publicly get involved in the Angolan Civil War because the Soviet Union backed the left-wing People's Movement for Liberation in Angola (MPLA) and would have easily defeated the U.S./center-right National Liberation Front of Angola (FNLA) in a not-so-proxy war similar to the one in Vietnam where 500,000 troops were sent. Instead, the U.S. continued heavy covert CIA support for the FNLA in an attempt to gather a bargaining chip with the Soviet Union for political influence over Angola.¹ After multiple brutal proxy wars in Africa and a devastating outcome in Vietnam, Congress and the public were not enthusiastic about the possibility of another bloody political conflict.

Contrary to Popular Belief, the U.S. Had No Direct Presence or Involvement in Angola

Political pressure from the Soviet Union was not a big enough reason for the U.S. to get involved directly in the Angolan war. The situation in the region was complicated for American interests. For one, the U.S. was “de facto” allied with the controversial apartheid state of South Africa.² The U.S. and South Africa did not have reason to engage against each other. But South Africa was accused by the United Nations of illegally occupying the country of Namibia.³ This posed a diplomatic problem for the U.S.. Promoting democracy and supporting the rights of (certain) countries to be independent was the foundation of American foreign policy, outside of the periods of isolationism. As a result, it was not in the interest of the U.S. to support South Africa and their occupation of Namibia, and South Africa’s possible advance into Angola added another layer of complexity to U.S. policy there. Actually, when Angola became a Cold War hotspot--after the 1974 coup in Portugal caused it to lose its territories--South Africa, Portugal, Cuba and the Soviet Union all saw an opportunity for influence and control there. Portugal had left colonial Angola without any political infrastructure, which laid the foundation for the brutal

war and unrest that would follow. The U.S. Congress and the Ford administration had no interest in directly participating in the dire situation there.⁴ With so many countries involved at such a pivotal time in world history, the U.S. made the intelligent decision not to overcomplicate their alliance with UN members. The U.S. understood how ugly it could get, especially if South Africa decided to invade Angola again as it had done when conspiring with Portugal in the past. As a result, the U.S. tried peaceful diplomacy as an exit strategy from conflict in Angola to avoid straining any diplomatic relationships. This policy meant that they would always negotiate over conflicts and retract any current military involvement in an area without stepping on any other countries' toes. In this case, the U.S. removed themselves from the capital where they were lightly supporting the FNLA.

Additionally, it turned out that not everyone in the U.S. government agreed on the military intervention in Angola and the reasons behind it. At the time, President Gerald Ford supported aiding Angola in the name of democracy; however, the Senate decided to prevent U.S. intervention. President Ford argued that "The Senate decision to cut off additional funds for Angola is a deep tragedy for all countries whose security depends upon the United States. Ultimately, it will profoundly affect the security of our country as well."⁵ President Ford cited and leveraged a distrust of the Soviets and the fear of communism to make his case. The Senate generally believed that Soviet involvement in Angola was not reason enough--that it didn't pose enough of a danger--for the U.S. to get involved or engage directly. President Ford was worried that the lack of intervention would hurt the U.S. in the future, arguing that "responsibilities abandoned today will return as more acute crises tomorrow."⁶ The concern about the future liability in Angola and elsewhere must have generated substantial debate in the Senate, maybe even enough to get them to reconsider their decision. Within Washington at the time, there was substantial disagreement about the extent of Soviet intervention as well as the logic behind any potential U.S. involvement.

Finally, historians assert that the CIA sent soldiers to Angola, when in reality they trained FNLA volunteers so they would have a fair chance at winning the war.⁷ Since the U.S. had previously given money to Holden Roberto, founder of the FNLA, and the CIA only trained Angolan FNLA soldiers, the U.S., technically, was the least involved in the war. To the public, the U.S. was solely concerned with a possible Soviet threat in Angola, and had no other interests or hidden agenda there.

Angola As A Gold Mine

Angola's location is ideal. It is on the southwest coast of Africa, which means any exports do not need to pass through the Suez Canal to get to Europe. The Suez Canal controls 13% of global trade, and most of the oil supplied to Great Britain and Europe passes through there, coming originally from the Middle East. A steady supply of oil and uranium that avoids the Suez Canal only makes that export more independent and strategic if something goes wrong in the Suez Canal. Angola's strategic location also allows for more discreet trade, particularly of arms. The Suez Canal is monitored closely, which makes sense considering the investment in the canal and the impact the canal has on world trade. In the 1970s, the Suez Canal was controlled by Egypt with the constant threat of invasion by Israel. In preparation for the Cold War to turn hot, France, Great Britain, and the U.S. wanted oil and uranium for the Cold War, arms initiatives and

infrastructure. To avoid direct conflict and war between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, Angola, an unstable, resource-rich country, was the perfect battleground. Angola was just one of the African countries used as a proxy war and pawn between the never-ending conflict between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, capitalism vs. communism, and a fight over power and influence.

The economic potential of Angola was an opportunity both the U.S. and the Soviet Union sought to exploit.⁸ Both countries wanted to expand their political influence and allies worldwide, especially in relatively uncharted territory. At the same time, the interest in newly liberated resource-rich African countries had very little to do with the people living there. A history of exploitation and oppression was not going to change overnight. African people themselves were just pawns in the real world Cold War game. The interests of foreign powers were wide-ranging in Angola, from political to economic. The intersectional aspects of the Angolan Civil War show just how complicated the goals, interests and motivations from different countries led to a brutal conflict with little regard to the people who called Angola home.

Oil is critical to any economy in the modern era, and access to and control of it has been a cornerstone of foreign policy, starting with the internal combustion engine in the 1860s and then with clean fuel for homes beginning in the 1920s. Oil is a world currency that all countries depend on. Countries like the U.S., Saudi Arabia, and Iran all compete for the number one spot in the global oil economy. Recoverable oil is found in many places of the world, and those reserves are precious. Angola was home to the second-largest untapped oil reserves in Africa. Added to this is the fact that Africa as a continent has a long history of colonialism and exploitation and a more recent experience of decolonization, in which a “national liberation movement [developed] throughout the length and breadth of Africa.”⁹ While African nations felt it was their turn for freedom, the U.S., Great Britain, Portugal, and France wanted to hold on to the last bit of colonial and exploitative power they had. Not only were African oil reserves some of the last untapped and exploitable natural resources, but they were also the last to be “industrialized” to eurocentric standards.

Africa’s veins run with oil, gold, salt, natural gas, uranium, and diamonds, to name a few key commodities.¹⁰ For materialistic, industrialized, and militaristic countries like the Soviet Union and the U.S., uranium, oil, and natural gas were enormously valuable and strategic prizes worth fighting for in Angola. In 1973 the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) quadrupled the price of Middle Eastern oil, making Angola’s reserves much more valuable in 1974. Conveniently, around the time the U.S. started to secretly become heavily involved with them. The U.S. saw tremendous potential benefits in exploring Angola’s oil and uranium resources, which made the Soviet presence in Angola an almost perfect cover for American resource exploitation and foreign policy interests.

Oil is a nonrenewable energy with an enormous impact on our society. It comes from deep within the earth taking millions of years to form. Eventually, the oil deposits will run out. Scientists in 2020 predict the U.S. only has approximately seventy years left of oil if extracted at the current rate. The oil economy and its energy until very recently powered everything - only recently have other energy sources started to reduce our dependence on oil. Oil is necessary for all forms of transportation thus necessary for trade. When looking at economic statistics over the years, the data can predict when there would be a recession based on gas prices. Higher gas prices have a

cooling effect on the economy as everything costs relatively more to produce and transport.

The role uranium reserves play, however, is more political than economic. While uranium is relatively common, dense composites with enough uranium concentration to make mining it a good economic investment are rare. Purifying and preparing uranium for weapons takes time, but once a country has the ability to enrich uranium they are halfway to a nuclear weapon. This is what worried the U.S. as post-Cold-War South Africa and Portugal were both beginning the search for uranium. News of developing nuclear programs around the world was catching the attention of many policy experts.¹¹ As an apartheid state with an authoritarian regime, South Africa was already a problem. Such a regime with nuclear capability was an even greater potential threat.

Angola is a Cold War Crown Jewel

The decision for the U.S. to enter the Angolan war was not a public one. Indeed, “as far as the public and most of Congress was concerned — [it was] a secret war run by the CIA.”¹³ Back in the early 1960s, it was reported that the U.S. was minimally supporting Holden Roberto, leader of the FNLA. It was Ford's administration (1974-1977) that decided to increase funds and support. This was not the first time the CIA has invested money into Africa, most notably in Zaire in the 1960s. The CIA policy had been to invest in anyone fighting against the Soviet Union.¹⁴ But the Soviet Union did not have a substantial military presence in Angola or elsewhere in Africa. There was a related concern at the center of this decision: the number of relatively unstable governments resulting from decolonization concerned the U.S., and threatened its ability to impose and spread democracy. There was a fear during the Cold War that communism could take hold in places like Africa and threaten American values.

For all the reasons discussed above, Angola was seen by the Ford administration as a source of political leverage against the Soviet Union and South Africa in the 1970s. It turns out that Portugal was another important factor as well. It was the first country to recognize the United States after the American Revolution, and was thus one of its oldest allies.¹² Even today, the U.S. has a very productive relationship with Portugal and bilateral trade policies.

It was the legacy of Portugal's connection with Angola that played the biggest part in the calculus of American involvement in Angola. Portuguese politics always carried over into its colonies, including Angola, from the earliest days of imperialism. By the time of the 20th century, ideologies originating in Europe spread quickly around the colonial world. Of particular concern, of course, was communism. Starting in 1949, there was a rise in communist activity in Angola as the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) became more high profile.¹⁵ The fear was that communism would spread to other African countries like wildfire. This was just one reason why Angola was a perfect storm for a proxy war. Not only was the U.S. getting involved in Angola, so was the Soviet Union, Cuba, Portugal, South Africa, China, and Zaire, not to mention the domestic sides FNLA, MPLA, and UNITA. All of these foreign and domestic groups were fighting for the political and economic power that came with control over Angola.¹⁶ More specifically, Angola was a gateway into Southern Africa, a more diplomatically isolated area

which also has one of the biggest oil reserves in Africa, and a seemingly endless supply of untapped natural resources that could be used to produce nuclear weapons.

For their part, the USSR was reportedly willing to go to great lengths to support an MPLA victory, despite saying their support would not interfere with the new U.S.-brokered policy of détente.¹⁷ The Soviet Union's actions seemed to show complete disregard for their communist agenda as they did not seem to care about the political ideology of the MPLA. Instead, they pushed the agenda that their role in Angola was as a legitimate world power in a post-war period. At this time they were unresponsive to the U.S. appeals to bring about détente, or a thaw in the Cold War, complicating relations between the two.¹⁸ As hostilities between the superpowers were arguably coming to an end in the mid 1970s, the Soviet Union needed to demonstrate they were still powerful and wanted to signal that they were not surrendering to the West. Angola was the perfect place to give a last little push for a Soviet victory. However, this Soviet involvement in Angola did not come until 1975, when Portugal's government was beginning to waver.¹⁹

U.S. involvement in Angola predates significant Soviet presence suggesting that the U. S. had other goals for Angola besides preventing communism; they had strategic objectives like oil and trade. While the U.S. had already been sending aid to the FNLA, the Ford administration suddenly increased the budget in 1975 by \$300,000 (which is about \$1.5m in today's dollars), two months before the Soviet Union started sending war materials and money to Angola.²⁰ Publicly, the Ford administration used the Soviet build-up to justify sending aid to Angola; however, internally, officials were questioning the seemingly premature clandestine aid to Angola because the Soviet build-up was a response to the U.S., not the other way around. This is clear evidence that the U.S. had other strategic objectives in Angola other than the Soviet activity. CIA operations in Angola predate significant Soviet influence, which means there must have been some other diplomatic, political or economic reason for the United States to pursue their hidden agenda.

There was another complication in this story: in 1972, the Nixon Administration had signed a détente agreement with the Soviet Union, agreeing not to raise tensions anywhere in the world. Only a few years later, the Soviet activity in Angola caused journalists to raise an eyebrow as to whether or not the agreement was still being upheld. The Ford administration held the view that they were upholding the détente agreement, as President Ford reported that, "Secretary Kissinger and I have spoken out very strongly against the Soviet activity in Angola, and I reaffirm it today."²¹ However, it should also be noted that Kissinger exposed CIA activity in Angola to the public as well.²² This effectively exposed a hidden agenda, and that the agreement to détente could have just been for a public show. The way in which both the President and Secretary of State knew the true intentions in Angola but also exposed the CIA shows how they were effectively able to shift blame for involvement away from the government and on to the CIA, which is somewhat detached from the government as they deal with international affairs. Kissinger's expose made it possible for the public to still think there was minimal U.S. involvement in Angola.

In November of 1975, the coup in Portugal shifted politics dramatically. The new government failed miserably at handling the internal economy and managing multiple territories at once. The territory of Angola was a major casualty of their incompetence. The decision to grant

independence to Angola, on the one hand, made it seem as though Portugal was playing its part in decolonization and appealing to its semi-fractured alliance with the U.S. But in reality, it would have been in Portugal's best interest to keep Angola. Instead, they set it up for a picture-perfect proxy war by not appointing a new government out of FNLA, MPLA, and UNITA.²³ Once Portugal pulled out its troops, the guerrilla wars continued over control of the capital and the countryside. South Africa's apartheid government sent aid to the FNLA which were not socialist, their exegence entirely political and certainly hypocritical considering its own government system, and China and Cuba came to the financial and military aid of the MPLA and sent troops.²⁴ Since so many U.S. adversaries were involved, the economic and political power that came with Angola was at risk of falling into multiple enemy hands, contributing to the idea that there were more than just diplomatic or economic U.S. interests in Angola. In reality, it was a collection of interests — both political and economic — and the historical pattern of proxy wars that led to the civil war, and ultimately the United States' involvement.

Coda: the legacy of Angola

The war in Angola is essential to understand because it sheds light on the capitalist motives behind proxy wars and their aftermath. Here in the U.S., we often employ terms “developed” and “developing” nations. Most countries in the West are the “developed” countries, and large regions in Africa, South America, and Southeast Asia are framed as the “developing” nations. The U.S. has a habit of interfering in developing nations, collapsing their stable governments and imposing their own ideas of what these countries should look like. While Angola may seem like a “developing” nation by many standards, what we forget is that not every government wants to lead with a eurocentric vision. A “developing” nation can be one that has been simply ravaged by a “developed” one, and does not need the participation of the West in order to operate.

While the Cold War is covered in the chapters of history books, the collapse of the Soviet Union left a vacuum for a new idealistic powerhouse to take its place. China is the new Soviet Union. In our imminent power struggle with China, it should be interesting to see if history repeats itself in patterns of U.S. intervention and diplomacy. Will the U.S. take any lessons from its history with places like Angola? Similar to the fighting in Angola, guerilla fighting seems to be on the rise, as we see it with ISIS, Al-Qaeda, extremists in Somalia and many other cases. It seems the civilian collateral damage will be something the international community will have to grapple with as battlegrounds are creating more and more refugees, and leaving states hollowed out by today's proxy wars.

Endnotes

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2. Henry Kissinger, "CIA's Secret War in Angola" *Intelligence Report* 1, no. 1(1975), p. 1.
3. General CIA Records, "Infiltration of Communist Agents Into Portugal" (April 1949), p. 8.
4. Ibid., 9.
5. Gerald R. Ford, Remarks on Senate Action To Prohibit United States Assistance to Angola, Washington, DC, December 19, 1975.
6. Ibid.
7. Seymour Hersh, "Early Angola Aid by U.S. Reported," General CIA Records, (December 1975), p. 1.
8. T. B. Mukherjee, "Africa in World Affairs," *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 22, no. 4 (1961), p. 362.
9. W. R. Moore, "What Magic in the Belgian Congo," *National Geographic Magazine* 10 (1952), p. 321.
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11. Ibid.
12. Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, "U.S. Relations With Portugal," *U.S. Department of State* (2020).
13. Kissinger, "CIA's Secret War," p. 2.
14. Ibid.
15. "Infiltration of Communist Agents Into Portugal," p. 1.
16. Kissinger, "CIA's Secret War," p. 1.
17. Brent Scowcroft "CIA Assessment -- Future of Soviet Commitment in Angola," (1975) p. 1.
18. Scowcroft, "CIA Assessment," p. 2.; "Infiltration of Communist Agents Into Portugal," p. 1.

19. Hersh, "Early Angola Aid," p. 1.
20. Gerald R. Ford, Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session With Reporters, Washington, DC, December 31, 1975.
21. Hersh, "Early Angola Aid," p. 1.
22. Kissinger, "CIA's Secret War," p. 4.
23. Hersh, "Early Angola Aid," p. 1.; Ray Caldwell, State Department "Portugal: The Economic Impact of Losing Angola, Mozambique, and Portuguese Guinea", General CIA Records (September 1974), p. 3.
24. Kissinger, "CIA's Secret War," p. 1.

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