Independence, Intervention, and Internationalism

Angola and the International System, 1974–1975

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Mention the Cold War and thoughts instinctively turn to Moscow, Washington, DC, and Beijing. Fewer scholars examine the significant Cold War struggles that took place in the African cities of Luanda, Kinshasa, and Pretoria. Yet in 1975 a protracted war of national liberation on the African continent escalated sharply into a major international crisis. Swept up in the momentum of the Cold War, the fate of the former Portuguese colony of Angola captured the attention of policymakers from the United States to Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), Colombia to Luxembourg. The struggle over Angolan independence from Portugal was many things: the culmination of sixteen years of intense anti-colonial struggle and the launch of 28 years of civil war, a threat to white minority rule in southern Africa, and another battle on the long road to ending empire and colonialism. It was also a struggle to define and create a viable postcolonial state and to carry out a radical transformation of the sociopolitical structure of Angolan society.

Recent scholarship on Angolan independence has provided an impressive chronology of the complicated saga yet has less to say about the wider consequences and ramifications of a crisis that, though located in southern Africa, was international in scope. During the anti-colonial struggle, U.S. support reinforced the Portuguese metropole, contiguous African states harbored competing revolutionaries, and great and medium powers—including Cuba, China, and South Africa—provided weapons, combat troops, and mercenaries to the three main national liberation movements. For Angolan nationalists, the enemy was not simply imperial Portugal but an international cabal of neocolonialists, mercenary capitalists, and racists who supported Lisbon’s occupation of Angolan territory. For those who opposed Angolan nationalism, however, the conflict over Angolan independence represented the opening salvo in a period of renewed global competition, one that would take
advantage of a weakened West to renegotiate the positions of power in the international system.

The dramatic nature of the events of 1974–1975 has ensured that the majority of scholarship on Angolan independence remains focused on this relatively short period of time, from the 1974 Carnation Revolution in Portugal, through competing declarations of Angolan independence, until the crisis reached its Cold War peak with the South African, Cuban, and U.S. interventions in the autumn of 1975. For many, these episodes of exogenous military force defined the externalization of the conflict. However, externalization suggests a dynamic in which Angola was a site inadvertently acted upon by external forces and that Angolans had little, if any, agency. In the words of one scholar of revolutions,

For years, Angola was a sleepy Portuguese colony in Africa where nothing ever seemed to change and about which outside powers did not concern themselves. As a result of the revolution that culminated there in 1975, however, Marxist Cuba and white-ruled South Africa each sent thousands of troops to Angola, which would be an arena of Soviet-American competition for the next fifteen years.  

However, it is perhaps more helpful to think of the escalation of tensions over Angolan independence as a consequence of internationalization or the deliberate and endogenous process of framing the struggle for Angolan independence in global terms. By establishing Angolan independence as part of a worldwide battle against imperialism, racism, and Western hegemony in the early 1960s, raising the issue in international forums, creating transnational support networks, and operating across borders and oceans, the Angolan national liberation movements created the ideological and political preconditions for the military interventions and Cold War political theater of the 1970s. The “sleepy Portuguese colony in Africa where nothing ever seemed to change and about which outside powers did not concern themselves” was in fact the site of fifteen years of agitation, conflict, and struggle between Angolans, the Portuguese state, and international and transnational actors. Angolan national liberation was a truly international process. The rebellious turn of sections of the Portuguese army and the later arrival of foreign militaries in Angola were the apogee of a multifaceted process under way since at least 1961.

Angola demonstrated how national liberation movements, as transnational actors, learned to operate within the international system to gain necessary material and moral support to help achieve their political goals. But in so doing, they provoked the ire of more powerful external actors who had their own political and ideological reasons for opposing Angolan independence. The escalation of tensions in 1975 cast doubts on the resilience of the bipolar Cold War world order and, indeed, on the international system itself. The crisis over Angolan independence raised the specter of Third World nationalism, exacerbated tensions in the Western alliance, and highlighted the ambiguities and frailties of superpower détente.

Decolonization, Cold War, and the Postwar International System

The post–Second World War international system came to be characterized by the Cold War. While the superpowers battled for preeminence, it was assumed that client states were compelled by the exigencies of the Cold War to adhere to the general military, political, and economic currents established by the superpowers.

However, there are alternative ways to think about and describe the postwar international system. Coming after the two world wars and the Great Depression, the Cold War system was also characterized by the ideological and institutional shifts that precipitated and accompanied the disintegration of empires. Thus, a key theme of twentieth-century international history is the demise of formal empires as a model of political and social organization. Empire, broadly defined, is the exertion of formal control of one nation over another. Empire itself was not solely a twentieth-century phenomenon, nor only a Western one, yet the rise and decline of the European-colonial variant had long-term global consequences. Empire and colonization were by definition international political enterprises. Subject territories were often geographically separated from the metropole, and the colonial administration was often located in a space separate from the centers of power. There was often a physical transfer of subject and citizen, both moving across space to destinations and positions determined by the metropole based on demographic

2. In contrast, informal empire is mainly an economic phenomenon and does not necessitate a formal process of decolonization, though economic independence may be a popular goal. See, for example, Gregory A. Barton and Brett M. Bennett, “Forestry as Foreign Policy: Anglo-Siamese Relations and the Origins of Britain’s Informal Empire in the Teak Forests of Northern Siam, 1883–1925,” *Itinerario*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (2010), pp. 65–86.
or economic need. The maintenance of a colonial empire required a level of acceptance and complicity on the part of the wider international community. The colonized did not accept their subjugation, but the other great powers often did, recognizing the right of one state to take possession of territory. A tacit collusion thus existed among multiple imperial powers, first in accepting the idea of empire and colonialism as a legitimate way to organize international relations, and second in accepting the international boundaries of the emerging colonial empires. The prime example is the 1884-1885 Berlin Conference, which permitted European powers to pursue their imperial designs in Africa free from the interference of other claimants.3 Perhaps more than any other continent, Africa was marked by “international action in the form of European colonialism.”4

Decolonization comprised at least two distinct yet mutually reinforcing strands. First was the commitment to formal independence and juridical statehood—legally ending the global colonial project and delegitimizing empire as an acceptable type of political organization. Second, because so much of the colonial political project was intimately bound up with notions of white supremacy and racial hierarchy, another strand was the campaign to end white minority rule and grant non-whites full rights and citizenship in their respective polities. Often sidestepped in the triumphal narrative of the Western victory over the Axis in the Second World War is the fact that the fatally weakened European empires entered directly into another series of long, vicious battles to retain their colonial possessions. After a global offensive countering Nazi racism, Italian fascism, and Japanese imperialism, the European powers were unable to maintain similar discriminatory and divisive polices at home. Two devastating global conflicts in a generation and the rise of Japan had rendered the old justifications for colonial rule untenable; the twin sustaining myths of absolute white supremacy and the mission civilisatrice were permanently shattered. Although the first waves of decolonization crested in the 1950s, reverberations from these foundational changes in the international system were felt for decades. When Cold War tensions were superimposed over civil or anti-colonial conflicts, the results were often devastating.

The linkages between the Cold War international system and processes of decolonization are complex and difficult to disentangle. On the one hand,

3. The fourteen signatories were Austria-Hungary, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Sweden (including Norway), Turkey, and the United States. Not all countries pursued an African empire. The United States chose to concentrate its imperial energies in the Western Hemisphere.
decolonization movements and their intellectual antecedents predate the crystallization of tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union and often proceeded whether or not a particular movement attracted the attention of the superpowers. Neither the United States nor the Soviet Union was a formal colonial power; thus, the primary loci of specific decolonization movements were the colony and the metropole. As scholars and activists reconstructed and recounted the stories of the politically dispossessed, there developed an understandable desire not to have each tale subsumed under the dominant Cold War narrative.

On the other hand, it would be a mistake to diminish the impact of Cold War tensions on decolonization processes. Both the United States and the Soviet Union were keenly interested in the changing global balance of forces. Not only did they directly intervene, as with the U.S. military action in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, but the Soviet Union carefully courted emerging states with promises of military supplies and accelerated socialist development. Even though the United States was not a formal colonial power, postwar U.S. decision-makers were very much caught up in the politics of decolonization, especially as they intersected with the Cold War. With the Soviet Union attempting to seduce the world’s newly independent states with tales of anti-colonialism and progress, the United States had no choice but to offer a counternarrative of liberal democracy and industrial modernization. This dynamic was further complicated by the politics of racial discrimination and African-American civil rights at home, as disenfranchised and angry black Americans found common cause with national liberation movements in Africa and Asia. U.S. decision-makers had to balance these imperatives with maintaining the Western alliance and supporting U.S. allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Struggles against formal empire were the root causes of many twentieth-century clashes, and many of the century’s most high-profile political crises were, at least in part, the result of a decolonization process gone awry. The Cold War was mainly cold only in areas not consumed by the politics and passions of decolonization. In much of the recently decolonized and decolonizing world the Cold War was very hot indeed.

**Angola I: Independence**

The Angolan independence struggle was unusual, as it was characterized by the mutual antagonism of the three strong national liberation movements and a high level of external intervention from regional and extra-continental...
actors. In the period of intense fighting and agitation from 1961 to independence in 1975, the National Front for the Liberation of Angola (Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola, FNLA), Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola, MPLA), and National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola, UNITA) battled the Portuguese and each other for internal legitimacy (from Angolans) and for external recognition (from the international community).

The full trajectory of Portuguese colonialism in southern Africa cannot be addressed in detail here. In brief, the ethnic situation in Angola was complex and stratified along racial and spatial lines. These ethnolinguistic and geographical distinctions were later reflected in the development of the liberation movements. Despite the relatively late formalization of Angola’s colonial status in May 1886, Portuguese officials quickly began to argue for the existence of five centuries of uninterrupted integration of Luanda and Lisbon. Portugal’s colonial territories became sources of resource wealth, coerced labor, and national pride. Arguably, no other European colonizer embraced the notion of the civilizing mission as wholeheartedly, or for as long, as the Portuguese state. In the face of increasing calls for decolonization in the United Nations (UN), Portugal in 1951 officially changed its geographical boundaries to include the African territories of Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde, and São Tomé and Príncipe, replacing the Portuguese empire with the semantic fiction of um nação (one nation) with continental and ultramar (overseas) territories. However, if the nomenclature of Portuguese colonization changed, the substance of it did not. Portugal’s African territories remained racially stratified, repressive police states well into the 1960s, and as late as March 1974 the Portuguese Prime Minister Marcelo Caetano could still exhort the Portuguese National Assembly to “continue to protect populations whose desire is to remain Portuguese. . . . We therefore consider it our duty to defend those who trusting in Portugal are loyal to its flag.”

6. Marcelo Caetano, “Speech to National Assembly (Lisbon: 5 March 1974),” in Gerald J. Bender, ed., Angola under the Portuguese: The Myth and the Reality (Lawrenceville, NJ: Africa World Press, 2004), p. 19. Caetano (whose given name is alternately spelled with two l’s: “Marcello”) held many key posts in the Estado Novo, including chief of the Mocidade Portuguesa (an organization initially inspired by the Hitler Youth), minister of the colonies, and rector of the University of Lisbon, where he resigned in 1962 after students clashed with riot police on campus. In 1926–1927, the twenty-year-old Caetano coedited the short-lived journal Ordem nova (New Order), which described itself as “anti-modern, anti-liberal, anti-democratic, anti-bourgeois, and anti-Bolshevik; counterrevolutionary, reactionary, Catholic, apostolic and Roman; monarchist, intolerant, and intransigent; unsupportive of
Angolan nationalism was linked to older currents of anti-colonialism, pan-Africanism, and black internationalism. Early resistance focused on two long-standing spurs of Angolan nationalism: racial discrimination and economic exploitation. Yet, whereas earlier anti-colonial movements sought a modus vivendi and the gradual replacement of the Portuguese elite with a black or native Angolan elite, the emphasis by the 1960s was on revolution, not evolution. Inspired in part by high-profile events such as Ghanaian independence in 1957 and the debacle of Patrice Émery Lumumba’s murder in the Congo in 1961, MPLA cadres in February 1961 launched an initial round of violent uprisings that eventually swelled into an all-out struggle. Portugal spent the next decade fighting multiple wars on the African continent.

In this period the first of the two main liberation parties, the FNLA and the MPLA, began to shape the goals and terms of the anti-colonial struggle. The FNLA, led from Congo Kinshasa (later Zaire) by an anti-Communist, Holden Roberto, who later cooperated with the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), was the first favorite of the United States and its allies. The MPLA was led by a medical doctor and Communist intellectual, Agostinho Neto, and was situated firmly within the emerging Afro-socialist camp. MPLA intellectuals identified early with the idea of an urban proletariat, not only because they had adopted Marxist ideology but also because many of the MPLA elite were from *assimilado* (“assimilated” to Portuguese culture) or comparatively privileged *mestiço* (mixed-race) backgrounds. The MPLA later received assistance from the Soviet Union, Cuba, and other members of the socialist world.

7. Ibid., p. 38.
8. The independence of Ghana (1957) and Guinea (1958) were equally seminal, but neither had attracted the same level of international attention as Congo in the early 1960s. Léopoldville came to signify the hazards of precipitate decolonization, and the Congo crises reinforced U.S. fears of racial conflict and Communist-led disorder in the Third World. The ensuing disorder gave Portugal powerful ideological and emotional ammunition for its claims that the African overseas provinces could not be independent without leading to chaos on a global scale. Thus, Léopoldville represented the intersection of Cold War and national liberation imperatives. These points of connection between the local, the regional, the national, and the international came to characterize Angolan independence. Léopoldville demonstrated that the terms of independence were not negotiated only between the former colonial power and the dependent territory but played out in full view of the international community.
10. The CIA believed this aid was halted in 1973 when it became apparent that the MPLA had made little progress toward an independent socialist Angola. See CIA, “Soviet and Cuban Aid to the MPLA in Angola from March through December 1975,” Interagency Intelligence Memorandum NIO IIM 76-004, 24 January 1976, in U.S. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Central Intelligence Agency Records Search Tool (CREST), Annex 1.
Finally, in 1966 Jonas Savimbi’s UNITA entered the fray after a disagreement with Roberto prompted Savimbi to quit the FNLA in 1964 and create his own movement. UNITA posed a real challenge to the FNLA and MPLA, as it claimed to represent the largest Angolan ethnolinguistic group, the Ovimbundu. All other voices offering competing visions of a post-Portuguese Angola were hushed in comparison to those of the MPLA, FNLA, and UNITA. Each movement claimed to represent a specific segment of Angolan society and Angola as a whole, both within Angola and to the international community. As was the case with many vanguard parties, and because of their prominence, the liberation movements defined the character of Angolan national liberation: against the Portuguese empire, against each other, and against a Cold War international system that privileged the stability of the bipolar system above all.

The FNLA, MPLA, and UNITA were locked in a destructive three-way battle to dominate the independence struggle and defeat the Portuguese. To achieve this task, the movements actively solicited military aid and moral support from the international community, including international and regional organizations, non-governmental organizations, and other members of civil society. Also, the movements were for long periods of time forced to wage their liberation struggles from outside the country as the Portuguese secret police, the International State Defense Police (Polícia Internacional e de Defesa do Estado, PIDE), cracked down harshly on subversive activities. As Neto himself once noted, “the worst thing the Portuguese did to us was to oblige us to wage a liberation struggle from abroad.”

Roberto, Neto, and Savimbi were in the precarious position of juggling the need for external support with the equally pressing need for wide-scale domestic acceptance. The politics of Angolan nationalism were thus a major determinant of the internationalization of Angolan independence. For example, in February 1969, the Liberation Committee of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) reported that each of

12. Ibid., p. 182.
13. For example, international solidarity groups such as the American Committee on Africa and the Liberation Support Movement could be found in a several countries and engaged in substantive communication with officers of the liberation movements. Angolan independence was the subject of several OAU and UN conferences, and in 1970, at the Rome International Conference in Support of the Peoples of the Portuguese Colonies, Guinean intellectual and revolutionary Amilcar Cabral, Mozambican activist and writer Marcelino dos Santos, and Neto met with Pope Paul VI, much to the irritation of Portuguese officials.
the movements received external aid, creating “some evidence of Sino-Soviet rivalries; GRAE [the FNLA’s political wing] claims that it receives Chinese arms but says nothing about receiving American supplies; China has praised UNITA; and the USSR has supplied aid to MPLA, the movement officially recognized by the OAU.” Each movement, cognizant of its own material limitations and the dynamics of the Cold War international system and constantly jockeying for resources and recognition, sought foreign aid, thereby contributing to the internationalization of the conflict.

By the 1970s Portugal’s simultaneous colonial wars in Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, and Angola were sapping the metropole’s resources and strain ing its social fabric. By this point the liberation movements had also been fighting one another and collecting external support for a decade. On 25 April 1974, a group of disillusioned leftist military officers, the Armed Forces Movement (Movimento das Forças Armadas, MFA), colloquially known as the “Captains of April,” overthrew Caetano’s rightwing Estado Novo government, itself a successor regime to that of dictator António de Oliveira Salazar (who died in 1968). Colonial reform was not the main goal of the MFA revolutionary movement. Initially, the MFA met to protest upcoming changes to the military laws, which proposed, among other indignities, that recent conscripts (milicianos) should accrue the same benefits as long-term enlisted men and the officer corps. Yet, the direct connection between the colonial wars and resentment in the Portuguese armed forces is clear. The opening paragraph of the final MFA program explicitly attributes the revolution to the fighting and to Lisbon’s complete inability to manage or rectify the situation in the territories: “Bearing in mind that, after thirteen years’ struggle in the

15. The story of Angolan nationalism raises many crucial questions about the relationship between non-state actors and the international system. In the early stages of the Angolan armed struggle, two key issues were the extent to which Angola formed a nation that should pursue self-determination and formal independence and how the international community should respond to Angolan national liberation. The question of Angolan nationhood in the pre-independence period is of vital importance, reflecting not only the ideologies and strategies of the liberation movements but also the primary counterargument of the Portuguese state that a group of people who do not constitute a nation have no cause for national liberation and thus should not have any standing in the international sphere. In the perspectives of the Angolan national liberation movements and of the Portuguese government, the international dimension was key. Both sides looked to the wider international community to arbitrate the dispute and to determine what it meant to be a nation.
overseas territories, the ruling political system has proved unable to provide a concrete, objective definition of an overseas policy capable of bringing about peace among the Portuguese of all races and belief.”

The Carnation Revolution ushered in a new provisional government, which moved quickly to end Portuguese colonialism and negotiate settlements with each former territory. UN Security Council Resolution 356 admitting Guinea Bissau to the international body was adopted unanimously on 12 August 1974. UN Security Council Resolution 374 unanimously admitted Mozambique led by Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (Mozambique Liberation Front, FRELIMO) on 18 August 1975. Both São Tomé and Príncipe and Cape Verde were admitted to the UN on 16 September 1975. Formal independence agreements were signed with Guinea Bissau on 26 August in Algiers and with Mozambique on 7 September in Lusaka. After UN Secretary General Kurt Waldheim visited Angola in the late summer of 1974, the Portuguese provisional government issued a statement on 4 August finally recognizing “the right of the people of Angola to self-determination and independence.” But Angolan independence remained fraught and contingent; it was not an inevitable consequence of the April revolution. Instead, it came some twenty months later after intense pressure from the liberation movements and their allies. One did not have to support Angolan independence to agree with contemporary observer Colin Legum’s assertion that “the collapse of Portugal’s centuries of colonialism was brought about by armed struggle.”

Under pressure from the OAU, which had grown tired of the fighting among Angolan independence movements, Roberto, Neto, and Savimbi met in Alvor, Portugal, on 15 January 1975. Ten days later, the signing of the Alvor Agreement created a provisional tripartite government and set a timeline for Angolan independence. The official transfer of power was slated for


18. The story of the Portuguese revolution is one that requires further consideration in the Anglophone literature. The Junta de Salvação Nacional held its first press conference on 29 April 1974, four days after the revolution. Despite Samuel Huntington’s assertion that Portugal was the beginning of a third wave of democratization, the officers of the Carnation Revolution (Revolução dos Cravos) had a revolutionary agenda. The goal of the MFA was not simply to replace one military ruling elite with another, but to remake Portuguese society. The officer corps had been exposed to revolutionary tracts during counterinsurgency training at military school. See Tom Gallagher, Portugal: A Twentieth-Century Interpretation (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1983), p. 185.


11 November 1975, the 400th anniversary of Luanda’s founding. The Alvor Agreement solidified the status of the liberation movements, recognizing all three “as the sole and legitimate representatives of the Angolan people.” Article 9 amnestied combatants from the movements, restyling what was once termed “terrorism” as “the patriotic action carried out in the course of the fight for the liberation of Angola,” and Article 10 granted Angola sovereignty “totally and freely, both internally and on the international plane.” Article 45 reaffirmed a general commitment to “non-discrimination,” specifying that the main “attribute of Angolans is to be defined by being born in Angola or being resident there, so long as those residents in Angola identify themselves with the aspirations of the Angolan nation through a conscious choice.” The agreement stressed,

the atmosphere of perfect co-operation and cordiality in which these negotiations took place, and congratulate themselves on the concerting of this agreement which gives satisfaction to the just aspirations of the Angolan people and fills with pride the Portuguese people who are henceforth joined together by ties of fruitful friendship and intentions of constructive co-operation for the good of Angola, Portugal, Africa and the world.

Despite the lofty words, however, the ceasefire was broken almost immediately, and with it went any hopes for an orderly transition to independence. During several rounds of fighting, military supremacy oscillated between the FNLA and the MPLA. Roberto, Neto, and Savimbi refused to cooperate with one another, leaving open the question of which movement truly represented the Angolan people. Although the date for the transfer of power was fixed, control of independent Angola was not. The matter would be solved
in no small part by which movement claimed the support of the international community.

**Angola II: Intervention**

Although Angolans had been fighting for their independence since 1961, the international response intensified in the period of crisis, 1974–1975. Foreign observers had watched the events in Lisbon and its former African territories warily. The primary concern of the Western allies was the fear that the Captains of April, distinguished by launching one of history’s few leftwing military revolutions, would create a full-fledged Communist government in Portugal. The conflict in Angola was destabilizing southern Africa as combatants from all sides, indifferent to the formal demarcations of sovereign states, crossed contiguous borders with impunity. As November approached, fighting around the capital intensified as each party vied to control Luanda before the official transfer of power on Independence Day.

In an effort to force a decisive end to the conflict, external forces began more aggressive interventions. Under the *Estado Novo*, the Portuguese had had good relations with South Africa, sharing intelligence and permitting South African “search-and-destroy” operations in southeastern Angola.\(^{28}\) Ian Smith’s Rhodesia and the Portuguese territories of Angola and Mozambique formed a cordon sanitaire, protecting South Africa from the black nationalism that surged through the continent. However, Lisbon also acted cautiously vis-à-vis South Africa, fearing that the lusotropical fantasy (which claimed a single non-racial, pluricontinental Portuguese identity) would be irrevocably tainted by Pretoria’s entrenched racism.\(^{29}\) According to Christopher Saunders, South African officials held secret meetings with the Portuguese from 1968 on to discuss logistical and financial assistance.\(^{30}\) These meetings ended when the Carnation Revolution destroyed Pretoria’s

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30. “South African aircraft were stationed at a Joint Air Support Centre at Cuito Cuanavale and the Portuguese military provided the SADF with maps of southern Angola, which no doubt came in useful a few years later when the SADF began to plan attacks in the area.” As Saunders points out, the true extent of this mutual assistance program is unknown. Relevant documents from Portugal and South Africa remain classified. Pretoria and independent Luanda continued secret negotiations, this time antagonistic, until the South African withdrawal. See, Saunders, “The South Africa–Angola Talks,” p. 106.
sense of safety, as the breakdown in central authority in Angola and Mozambique opened the door for African nationalist guerrillas to increase their operations against South Africa and Rhodesia. Without the Portuguese territories as a buffer, the two governments correctly feared that the OAU’s Liberation Committee would turn the resources that had been used against Portugal toward ending the Smith and Vorster regimes and aiding the South West African People’s Organization (SWAPO).\(^{31}\)

The full chronology of the Cuban and South African interventions has been well covered elsewhere in works by historians Piero Gleijeses, Norrie MacQueen, Peter Schraeder, William Minter, Witney Schneidman, and Edward George, among others.\(^{32}\) In brief, as Gleijeses notes, “Pretoria and Washington had been engaged in parallel covert operations in Angola since July 1975, first supplying weapons, and then, in late August, South Africa sent military instructors and the United States sent CIA advisers.”\(^{33}\) This support bolstered the anti-Communist FNLA. On 9 August 1975 a small South African Defense Force (SADF) patrol entered Angola, ostensibly to protect the Ruacana-Calque hydroelectric complex, a joint Pretoria–Estado Novo era project that was important for South Africa’s energy needs. Approximately two weeks later, on 22 August, the SADF launched operation “Sausage II” against SWAPO forces based in southern Angola and soon after established training camps at Silva Porto (now Kuito) and Nova Lisboa (now Huambo). In September, the FNLA and UNITA allied and declared war on the MPLA. On 14 October 1975, the SADF invaded Angola outright in Operation Zulu.\(^{34}\) SADF troops now reinforced UNITA in the east after Savimbi

31. SWAPO was a national liberation movement agitating for independence from South Africa. After World War I, South Africa occupied the former German South West Africa and ruled it as a League of Nations mandate. Claiming that the right to control the territory remained even after the mandate system ended, South Africa annexed South West Africa outright during World War II. Namibia finally achieved its independence from South Africa in 1990. See ACR, 1974–1975, p. A 7.

32. See, for example, Gleijeses, Conflicting Missions; George, Cuban Intervention in Angola; Norrie MacQueen, The Decolonization of Portuguese Africa: Metropolitan Revolution and the Dissolution of Empire (London: Longman, 1997); Peter J. Schraeder, United States Foreign Policy toward Africa: Incrementalism, Crisis, and Change (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1994); William Minter, Apartheid’s Contras: An Inquiry into the Roots of War in Angola and Mozambique (Witwatersrand, South Africa: Witwatersrand University Press, 2008); and Witney Schneidman, Engaging Africa: Washington and the Fall of Portugal’s Colonial Empire (New York: University Press of America, 2004).

33. Piero Gleijeses, “Conflicting Versions: Cuba, the United States and Angola,” in Manuela Franco, ed., Portugal, os Estados Unidos e a África Austral (Lisbon: Instituto Português de Relações Internacionais, 2006), p. 120.

34. Journalists were kept away from the front lines, and the war was rarely discussed. Thus, sources are limited to personal accounts of the military battles. This, combined with the fact that many documents from the South African side are still classified, has made it difficult to know much more about South African involvement in this phase. See, Gleijeses, Conflicting Missions, pp. 301–304.
negotiated a mutual non-confrontation agreement. In hindsight, the inclusion of a regime committed to white supremacy in a struggle for black liberation is somewhat comical. At the time, it was a heavy blow for the MPLA, which on 23 October suffered a serious defeat at the hands of the SADF, reducing MPLA control to three out of sixteen Angolan provinces. With the combined weight of CIA funds and the SADF behind it, the FNLA advanced rapidly.

U.S. goals in Angola were initially limited in scope. The CIA’s covert action in Angola, IAFEATURE, consisted of increasing Roberto’s stipend and routing a limited arsenal of World War II–vintage arms through Kinshasa, where they would be distributed to FNLA troops fighting for Luanda (Zairian dictator Mobutu Sese Seko was a staunch U.S. ally). Even though the proffered U.S. arms shipment did not decisively tip the military balance in favor of Roberto and Savimbi, it would avoid, in the words of former CIA Chief of Station in Angola John Stockwell, “a cheap Neto victory.”

Under intense military pressure, in May the Marxist MPLA had placed a desperate call to Communist powers. According to historian Vladislav Zubok, despite early attempts to support “progressive” regimes in Africa, the Soviet Politburo by 1975 had little desire to get deeply involved in Angola. The Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev initially refused to offer any assistance to the MPLA, having already endured three “visible international setbacks”: the collapse of the socialist government in Chile in 1973, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat’s turn toward the West, and the failure of a Communist government to take root in Portugal. Cuban leader Fidel Castro took more than six months to reply to the MPLA’s plea, ostensibly concentrating on domestic matters such as the first Congress of the Cuban Communist Party, scheduled for December 1975.

When Cuba finally responded, however, the results surprised and bewildered the international community. As the first contingent of Cuban military advisers departed for Angola in September 1975, Castro commended the volunteers for their bravery in undertaking this internationalist mission.
In early October 1975 the advance assault force of the Cuban Military Mission (MMCA), named Operação Carlota, after the African slave who had led an 1843 rebellion in Cuba’s Matanzas Province, confronted a combined SADF/FNLA/mercenary force en route to Luanda. After four months of brutal fighting, the SADF retreated across the South West African border. When the Portuguese flag was lowered from the state building at midnight on 11 November, the MPLA had effectively regained control of Luanda and taken control of the country. In Pretoria, news of the defeat of the whites electrified the townships, shattering the myth of white supremacy and shaking the very foundations of apartheid.

Angola III: Internationalism

In what many contemporaries viewed as a tremendous victory for the progressive, anti-imperialist forces of the world, an independent, MPLA-led Angola was recognized by the OAU on 10 February 1976 and took its seat in the UN General Assembly on 1 December 1976, ending the wars of liberation. The resurgence of Cuban internationalism sent shockwaves through the international community. In Washington, the Ford administration worried that the foundations of global stability were being undermined by the struggles on the African continent. U.S. officials assumed that the Cuban intervention had been ordered by the Soviet Union, a perception that undermined the policy of détente in the United States and put the Ford administration on the defensive. Lisbon’s contemporaries in Pretoria, Salisbury, Washington, and London had for almost a decade based their policies in southern Africa on the assumption that the triumvirate of white minority rule—the Lisbon-Pretoria-Salisbury axis—could not be defeated. As MacQueen and Pedro Oliveira note, pointing


41. A South African commentator noted, “In Angola, Black troops—Cubans and Angolans—have defeated White troops in military exchanges. Whether the bulk of the offensive was by Cubans or Angolans is immaterial in the color-conscious context of this war’s battlefield, for the reality is that they won, are winning, and are not White; and that psychological edge, that advantage the White man has enjoyed and exploited over 300 years of colonialism and empire, is slipping away. White elitism has suffered an irreversible blow in Angola, and Whites who have been there know it.” See Roger Sargent, “Commentary,” Rand Daily Mail (Johannesburg), 17 February 1976, p. 10. Also quoted in Piero Gleijeses, “Moscow’s Proxy? Cuba and Africa 1975–1988,” Journal of Cold War Studies, Vol. 8, No. 2 (Spring 2006), p. 9.

42. The suffering of Angolans did not end with de jure independence. An equally brutal civil war continued between the MPLA and UNITA until Savimbi’s death in a guerrilla battle on 22 February 2002.
to similar omissions in the U.S. State Department’s 1969 National Security Study Memorandum (NSSM) on Southern Africa (NSSM 39), “nowhere in the papers of either the Foreign Office or Downing Street held in the UK National Archives [was] there any sustained discussion of the likelihood of a military coup as an outcome to Portugal’s deepening political crisis at the end of 1973 and the beginning of 1974.”

The 1974 revolution had “introduced a new element of uncertainty but also fluidity into a situation of stubborn rigidity” and forced a rapid reevaluation of policy. The “new element” was the unexpected Cuban intervention.

Why was Cuba’s intervention so surprising? Angola was not Cuba’s first intervention into African politics. Other important interventions included Algeria in 1963 and Ethiopia in 1977. Ernesto “Che” Guevara in his African diary writes extensively about his attempts to spread revolution to the Congo in 1965. However, Angola was the most successful, stabilizing the MPLA until it formed a government in Luanda. Historians now widely accept that Cuban officials independently made the decision to intervene on behalf of the MPLA and were not acting on orders from the Soviet Union. Several theories posit that Cuba had tried to increase its impact in the international system by adding new trading partners, joining the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), and attempting to export the revolution to other Latin American nations in the mid-1960s.

As Jorge Domínguez has argued: “The support of revolutionary movements, in Cuba’s view, was an effective means to combat the United States and its allies throughout the world.”


The perspective offered from the Cuban state, however, was slightly different. Castro and his political vanguard situated post-1959 Cuba as one more stage in the long-standing Cuban anti-imperialist, anti-racist, revolutionary tradition, dating back to the 1890s and José Martí. In this telling, Cuba had always been internationalist, although perhaps not in a strictly Marxist sense, and committed to fostering solidarity among the oppressed and to the principle of mutual assistance.49 As Domínguez notes, “This alternative, national/revolutionary history maintains that the spirit of internationalism has defined Cuba since its inceptions and forms a central part of who Cubans are.”50 Despite the long shadow that South Africa cast over post-1945 African politics, Pretoria’s role in Angolan independence received little attention before the military intervention of 1975. Although Pretoria was seen as embodying the evils of imperialism and racism and, like Salisbury, as part of the larger problem, neither South Africa nor Rhodesia was the direct target of the guerrilla warfare waged by the MPLA, FNLA, and UNITA. In early Angolan liberation movement propaganda, Pretoria was often depicted as a lackey of U.S. imperialism, and South Africa remained diplomatically isolated throughout the 1970s. The Cuban intervention not only was a response to South African aggression, but also reactivated a dormant Cuban commitment to internationalist action in southern Africa. The decision was taken to meet the challenge of global imperialism and the SADF head on and not with rhetoric but with ground troops.

A commitment to internationalism had been a part of Castro’s 26th of July Movement since the beginnings. As former Castro enthusiast Régis Debray suggested in 1967, the Cuban revolution had always presented itself as the “vanguard detachment of Latin American revolution.”51 Domínguez contends that “[n]o master plan has guided Cuba’s leaders, but they have responded effectively to many international opportunities. ‘No master plan,’ of course, does not mean no guiding principles.”52

Thus, the Cuban intervention in Angola was the quintessential revolutionary internationalist solution to what the liberation movements, especially

50. Ibid., pp. 38–39.
52. The quotation continues, “Fidel Castro’s central ideas and attitudes embody a deep hostility toward the U.S. government and toward many U.S. values, a belief that the direction of history can be perceived and that conscious revolutionaries can and ought to accelerate the rate of change and a conviction that revolution in one country is impossible because the ‘imperialist enemy’ is a world system that must be met with global struggle.” Domínguez, To Make a World Safe for Revolution, p. 3.
the MPLA, had always defined as an international problem. As Ali Mazuri argued, “Cuban internationalism, and particularly the intervention in Angola is unique because of the extent of this south-south exchange in relation to other forms of solidarity. As for the active participation of Cuban troops in the struggle to defend Angola’s sovereignty, this marked the strongest level of external support in an African war of liberation.”

In 1976 the NAM unanimously elected Havana as the site of its next summit meeting. Despite being accused of causing rifts in the NAM, in 1976 the NAM unanimously elected Havana as the site of its next summit meeting. Reporting on the UN International Seminar on the Eradication of Apartheid and in Support of the Struggle for Liberation in South Africa, George Houser and Raphael Gould (members of the activist group the American Committee on Africa) explained the logic of hosting this prominent meeting in Havana. A decision to host the meeting in a Latin American nation was taken in September 1975 before the Cuban intervention, “nevertheless it was realized during the course of the Seminar that there was symbolic significance to holding the meetings in Havana and due recognition was given to Cuba for the contribution it had made to the establishment of an MPLA government in Angola.” Because the seminar coincided with the 25 May African Liberation Day celebrations, the meetings were adjourned to allow delegates to participate in the festivities: six solidarity rallies organized by the Cuban government.

Despite the decisiveness of the Cuban intervention, there is little mention of Cuban assistance in the records and statements of the liberation movements. According to anthropologist Marisabel Almer, “in Angola, the MPLA leadership has downplayed the extent and decisive role of Cuban involvement in their ascent to power as a unifying and legitimizing project after decades of civil war.” Gleijeses concurs, recounting this statement from a former Cuban combatant in Angola: “That shows Angola’s true gratitude towards the enormous and selfless Cuban endeavor. In time, this assistance will be erased from

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Angolan memory, since it is in nobody’s interest (except the Cubans) that it be remembered. Was it worth it? Nooo."

The Angolan intervention may not have been “worth it” for the ordinary Cuban who fought in Angola. However, the Cuban state happily used the internationalist mission for political gains. In 2005 the Cuban press published a series of speeches commemorating the 30th anniversary of the MMCA. The speeches, by Fidel Castro, Raúl Castro, and Angolan president José Eduardo dos Santos (who ruled Angola without interruption until 2017 after Neto’s death from cancer in 1979), in 1989-1991, consist largely of the expected propagandistic fêting of the heroism and sacrifice of the Cuban troops, vilification of the United States, references to the Cubans as a “latinoafricano” people (and therefore legitimate participants in an African liberation struggle), and exultation of this victory of the Cuban revolution. A speech by Raúl Castro on 27 May 1991 praised the 377,033 Cubans who had served in Angola over the sixteen-year period and the 2,077 who had died. He described Angola as “a milestone, a landmark in history,” and a “brilliant, clean, honorable, transparent page in the history of solidarity among peoples, in the history of internationalism, in the history of the Cuban contribution to the cause of liberty and the betterment of humanity.” According to Raúl Castro, the sole reason for the Cuban intervention in Angola was anti-racist and anti-imperialist revolutionary solidarity. To “seek reasons in simplistic geopolitical explanation, in the derivations of the Cold War, or the global conflicts between the east and the west” was to “err in good faith,” he claimed. Cuba had been fighting U.S. expansion and neocolonialism since the days of Martí. Portugal is not mentioned in any of the speeches. The entire story of Angolan independence and anti-colonialism revolves, in this retelling, around the Cuban-U.S. feud and the battle between Communist revolution and counterrevolution.

From the perspectives of London and Washington, Angolan independence had other, unexpected consequences. One was increased strain on the Western alliance. Formally, the alliance consisted of the members of NATO

57. Ibid., p. 56. “Ése es el agradecimiento real de Angola al enorme y desinteresado esfuerzo cubano. Con el tiempo esta ayuda será borrada de la memoria Angolana, pues no le conviene a nadie (excepto a los cubanos) recordarla. ¿Valió la pena? Nooo.”


59. Ibid., p. 32.

60. Ibid., p. 33.
and France (which left the integrated military command in 1966). Infor-

mally, it symbolized the cultural affinity that was presumed of the democratic Western world, including Rhodesia and South Africa. For some, such as U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, “the West” was united against not only the Communist bloc but also the proliferation of newly independent and anti-Western Third World states. In 1975 the oldest of the new postwar states, India, had been independent for only 28 years. Most African countries had been independent for less than two decades. The new states were unknown quantities. The complexity of the Angolan case increased tensions among European countries and between the United States and its Western allies.

These adverse effects of the Angola question began to be felt long before the escalation of the crisis in 1975. Portugal’s continued obstinacy over the colonial issue had been a sore spot in the Western alliance since the mid-1960s. The entire southern African cone was problematic. The existence of white minority regimes in Angola, Mozambique, Rhodesia, and South Africa, which clearly contravened several UN resolutions, was becoming a point of tension and the focus of grassroots political movements from Stockholm to Paris. Portugal held the dubious distinction of being Europe’s lone formal colonial power and one of two lingering Ibero-authoritarian governments. Kissinger had declared 1973 the “Year of Europe,” and Euro-American relations were supposed to figure high on the U.S. foreign policy agenda. NATO was crucial to the maintenance of Western security and a bulwark against the spread of international Communism. If the foundation of global stability was predicated on U.S. credibility, then it was imperative that the United States actively defend its interests: limiting nuclear proliferation, pursuing normalization with China, and responding to the presence of Cuban troops on another country’s soil. In Kissinger’s understanding, no other country was sufficiently powerful or had the specific historical mission to create and maintain global equilibrium. However, the United States could not do this alone. NATO allies had their part to play in maintaining the conditions for global equilibrium by resisting Eurocommunism, respecting détente, and supporting U.S. endeavors in the international arena.

A prime example is the October 1973 Arab-Israeli War, which further solidified the Luso-American relationship. During the war, the United States used the Lajes Air Base in the Azores to refuel its planes, which delivered arms to the Israeli military. Portugal took advantage of this situation and used its

61. The original signatories to the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty were the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, France, Denmark, Iceland, Norway, the “Benelux” states (Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg), Italy, and Portugal.
newly acquired leverage to increase its demands on the United States. In 1975 Kissinger recalled the attitudes of the NATO allies during the crisis, accusing them of behaving like “jackals” for refusing to side with the United States, Israel, and Portugal at the UN.62 These types of tensions in international relations caused certain Western leaders, especially Kissinger, to look back with unseemly nostalgia to a time when Western leadership and Western civilization seemed unchallenged. A 1973 conversation between Kissinger and Caetano is illustrative:

Caetano: And yet Uganda has the same voting strength in the United Nations as Great Britain or the United States.

Kissinger: Some members of the U. N. have 50,000 people!

Caetano: How long can the world be run like that?

Kissinger: We probably in the next General Assembly will raise the problems of bloc voting and mini-states. We will lose, but we will have established a position for the future.63

The problem of “mini-states” and “bloc voting” frustrated U.S. policy in the UN for years to come. In August 1975, on the accession of Cape Verde and São Tomé and Príncipe to the UN General Assembly, Kissinger noted,

I think that even though we will probably ultimately vote for it, I think we should start raising some questions about countries of 20,000, 30,000, with no historical tradition, that suddenly declare themselves as states with full membership and equal rights in the Assembly to members of the Security Council. It just doesn’t make any sense.64

Anxieties over the ramifications of Angolan independence and the South African and Cuban interventions were widespread in Europe. British policymakers were irritated when the Federal Republic of Germany broke with “The Nine” and decided to recognize the MPLA, despite the decision of the
Conclusions de la réunion de la groupe Afrique in Rome in December 1975.\textsuperscript{65} Angola was on the agenda of several NATO ministerial meetings in 1975 and 1976, again suggesting that the crisis was viewed as an international issue. One briefing noted that “[t]he major subject at the Ministerial [Meeting] will be the future of East-West relations. Soviet intervention in Angola has posed important questions for the Alliance of emerging global Soviet power.”\textsuperscript{66} A second document exemplifies the difficulties facing the West: “The new key factor in the Angola situation was that Soviet adventurism met no significant Western response. This failure of Western will may have conveyed the wrong signal to the Kremlin.”\textsuperscript{67} NATO governments worried that Angola had set a dangerous precedent in international affairs, permitting Soviet-Cuban adventurism in the Third World.

Discussions on Angola occurred in unlikely places. At a 1975 breakfast meeting, Angola figured high on the agenda. Prime Minister Gaston Thorn of Luxembourg appealed for help in maintaining Western cohesion and U.S. leadership, noting that although some on our side, particularly during the Viet Nam war[,] differed with your position but now people seem to be afraid and they don’t want you to leave us. I think we should take advantage of this move and reaffirm our commitment to Europe’s special relationship with the United States. . . . We are, after all, 2/3 of the democracies left in the world.\textsuperscript{68}

In January 1976 Kissinger explained the rationale of U.S. intervention in Angola to a skeptical Danish prime minister, Anker Jørgensen:

If the MPLA had won and the Soviet Union had sent $5 million or $10 million—something relevant to the African situation—we wouldn’t have gotten involved. What worries us is the massiveness of the Soviet escalation and the Cuban troops. If this is accepted it will have massive consequences. They must be made to pay a price. . . . The place to teach them a lesson is where it’s small.\textsuperscript{69}

\textsuperscript{65} “The Nine” was the colloquial term for the members of the European Economic Community as of 1 January 1973. See “Memorandum,” 29 January 1976, in The National Archives of the United Kingdom (TNAUK), Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), Series 45 (Angola), Folder 1884.
\textsuperscript{66} NATO, “Secretary’s Visit to Oslo [for NATO Ministerial Meeting],” Oslo Ministerial Meeting Agenda, May 1976, in NARA, RG 59, Box 240, Folder 1.
\textsuperscript{68} “Memorandum of Conversation, Breakfast Meeting between Luxembourg and the U.S.,” 29 May 1975, in NARA, RG 59, Records of Henry Kissinger, Box 11, Folder 3.
Angola and the International System, 1974–1975

At times the discussion bordered on the extreme. On an official trip to Latin America, Kissinger encountered sympathetic ears when he met with other leaders of the Western Hemisphere. Costa Rican President Daniel Oduber Quirós insisted that Castro was actually creating a “black power block,” starting in Africa. Castro would then use his Angolan launching pad to “challenge western democracy.”  

Colombian President Alfonso López Michelsen summed up the feelings of paranoia best, claiming that “Hitler in the Sudentenland [was] a boy scout compared to Castro in Africa.”

In little over a year, Angola appeared to go from peripheral concern to foreign policy priority, from limited liberation struggle to key Cold War battlefield. Perhaps no one felt this more acutely than Kissinger. Throughout this period, he was one of the figures most responsible for raising Angola’s profile. Even before Kissinger was appointed secretary of state in 1973 (while simultaneously continuing to serve as national security adviser until 1975), he exerted a formidable influence on the shape and direction of U.S. foreign policy. Works on Kissinger are legion, but few have considered his views of revolution, national liberation, or Africa. Kissinger’s thinking on détente and the role of the West provides an intriguing view of Angolan independence’s effects on the international equilibrium. Although it is possible that Kissinger was unique in his particular understanding of the global balance of power, he most likely influenced the priorities of his administration. With Ford’s quick accession to the presidency and with the roles of national security adviser and secretary of state consolidated in one individual, Kissinger’s foreign policy goals became U.S. foreign policy goals.

From a U.S. perspective, détente was predicated on two seemingly contradictory beliefs. Given the political and economic shocks of the 1970s, Kissinger and Nixon (and later Ford) believed the United States was in decline. Rejecting John F. Kennedy’s inaugural call-to-action, Nixon and Kissinger appeared to acknowledge the limits of U.S. power: seeking accommodation with the Soviet Union, pursuing normalization with China, ending U.S. financial dominance by going off the gold standard, and acknowledging the reality of a multipolar world. The West itself was in decline, losing ground to the undifferentiated, undemocratic non-West. However, the second belief—in U.S. primacy and the historical role of the West as the arbiter of

civilization—proved more potent than the first and arguably had more lasting consequences for the international system. For Kissinger, Cold War competition and détente were not in tension because the informal agreements were predicated on tacitly acknowledged spheres of influence. Although Kissinger spoke repeatedly about the people of Eastern Europe and their Communist subjugation, he was prepared to accept the international status quo in the Eastern bloc, allowing the United States to maintain politically popular rhetorical support for East European liberation while committing few resources to the task. Détente allowed each camp to handle its domestic affairs without forsaking the Cold War façade that had come to symbolize world stability. Communist domination over a good half of the globe was by no means an ideal situation, but the bipolar order provided a measure of stability that Kissinger was unwilling to give up.

The standard explanation for Kissinger’s sudden fixation on Angola is that he naturally sought to prevent Communist infiltration into Africa. Yet until Angola, Kissinger did not believe in an orchestrated, controlled Soviet takeover of the world, an idea that had been circulating in the West since 1917 and was widely accepted during the post–Second World War highcontainment period. In the absence of formal procedures for leadership succession the Soviet political system was prone to instability, and the top brass were as easily threatened by violent purges and bureaucratic stagnation as they were by the United States. Similarly, despite achieving military parity, the Soviet economy was weak and would never be able to compete fully with its Western rivals and support its foundering satellites. Kissinger believed Brezhnev was not captive to delusions of grandeur, unlike Joseph Stalin and Nikita Khrushchev. Instead, the Soviet leader was well aware of the USSR’s weaknesses and therefore used “ruthless opportunism” as the basis of Soviet foreign policy. Lacking resources to pursue a foreign policy that would allow dialogue with the company of legitimate countries, the Soviet Union scavenged for opportunities to increase its international status by extending its influence across the globe.

For Kissinger, peace was not the absence of war but “stability based on an equilibrium of forces within a legitimate international order.” To buck the international order, as the Soviet Union and Cuba had done by

73. Ibid., pp. 10–11.
75. Ibid., pp. 119–20.
intervening in Angola, was to be willfully belligerent. This particular conception of the Soviet modus operandi coupled nicely with Kissinger’s understanding of the U.S. role in world affairs. The United States, he believed, had a historic responsibility to implement the conditions for “long-term security.” Declassified documents from this period point to the perceived Soviet propensity for intervention and its negative consequences for global stability. It was up to the United States to manage Soviet power. In Kissinger’s words,

to expect the Soviet leaders to restrain themselves from exploiting circumstances they conceive to be favourable is to misread history. To foreclose on Soviet opportunities is thus the essence of the West’s responsibility. It is up to us to define the limits of Soviet aims.

For Kissinger it was inconceivable that the Cubans had acted independently. Soviet aid to the MPLA constituted an unacceptable violation of détente (in contrast, U.S. aid to the FNLA and UNITA was simply prudent politics). The covert action was intended to “harass” the Soviet Union in Angola as punishment for contravening détente’s unspoken rule on Third World intervention and seeking territorial and ideological aggrandizement in Africa by using the Cubans as proxies.

Thus, the internationalization of Angolan independence was problematic only when U.S. interests were not in control. The United States responded positively to military aid donated to the FNLA even by U.S. adversaries Romania, Libya, and China. Threats of retaliation and the responsibilities of superpower status should have limited Soviet involvement. At stake was not control over Angola or the welfare of its inhabitants but U.S. credibility. On the pillar of U.S. credibility rested every other assumption about superpower behavior and the international system.

Angola forced the United States (and perhaps the Soviet Union) to acknowledge that strategic bipolarity alone was not sufficient to ensure a “global

77. In reality, South African behavior was likely what destabilized the continent. South African obduracy infuriated many black African countries and was a lightning rod for regional tensions (especially post-1980 after Zimbabwean independence). Reports of atrocities in Sharpeville (1960) and Soweto (1976), as well as the death of activist Steve Biko (1977), galvanized global anti-apartheid movements. By the 1980s, ending apartheid had become an international cause célèbre, and the United States had found itself increasingly alone on the matter.
78. Kissinger, White House Years, p. 125.
80. Kissinger, White House Years, p. 119; emphasis in original.
81. Stockwell, In Search of Enemies, p. 45.
equilibrium of forces”—Third World countries could have competing agendas of their own. Having no background or interest in the complexities of African politics, Kissinger declared to South African Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs B. G. Fourie that “[s]even and a half years of neglect is what Africa deserved.” In Kissinger’s formulation, no African state should be able to affect the international system. The fact that African revolutionary states had been able to upset détente and cause tensions in the Western alliance was cause for great alarm. That world and domestic opinion limited Kissinger’s range of action was even worse. When the Kenyans requested police helicopters and small arms, Kissinger was told by Assistant Secretary for the Bureau for African Affairs Donald Easum that the United States could not raise the funds to ship the arms. Kissinger’s response is again telling:

Secretary Kissinger: Look, a great country that cannot give aid in a revolutionary situation is going to become irrelevant.

Mr. Easum: This is not a revolutionary situation.

Secretary Kissinger: Africa is a revolutionary situation.

The Angolan intervention in 1975 was one of the first events that discredited the policy of détente. U.S. liberals were aghast that the Ford administration had colluded with South Africa and was still engaging in what were widely considered to be reckless covert operations overseas. IAFEATURE had a profound impact on the U.S. intelligence community, leading to increased congressional oversight, a rash of dismissals at the CIA, and an overall loss of faith in the intelligence process. The damage to the CIA’s credibility was especially significant—the agency was characterized as a “rogue elephant” with no regard for democratic sovereignty and congressional authority—and it continually damaged U.S. prestige by failing to deliver operational success. Conservatives pounced on what they perceived to be U.S. weakness and lack of resolve. During the 1976 Republican primaries, Ford eliminated “détente”

82. “Meeting with B. G. (Brand) Fourie and Ambassador to the US RF Botha,” 15 December 1976, in NARA, RG 59, Box 15, Folder 5.
83. “Secretary’s Regionals and Principals,” 23 December 1974, in NARA, RG 59, Box 5, Folder 11.
from his vocabulary, replacing it with the phrase “peace through strength,” but it was too late.85

**Conclusion: Decolonization, Order, and Disorder in the International System**

The common denominator in this story is a preoccupation with the consequences of decolonization and revolution, fears of global disorder, and a vaguely Spenglerian notion of the decline of the West in the face of threats from the decolonizing world. African independence struggles were challenging for Western policymakers. Decolonization fundamentally altered the international system, and the devolution of sovereignty from Europe to the Third World happened more rapidly than anyone expected, including anxious U.S. officials. Events such as the Bandung Conference (April 1955) heralded a new era, if short-lived, of non-alignment and Third World solidarity. For the United States, decolonization was at once a blessing and a burden. New states could be caught, in the Rostovian sense, before falling into the Soviet orbit, thus presenting U.S. policymakers with new allies in the war against Communism. But they were also disorderly and destabilizing, prone to socialism and anti-Western attitudes. Even worse were revolutionary states that seized their independence at gunpoint and did not wait for power to be transferred or independence to be granted. Angola exemplified the different approaches to the social, political, and ideological struggle that was brewing over national liberation, race, and decolonization and the growing rift between those who advocated large-scale, rapid political change and those who opposed it. The division between those determined to challenge the racial and spatial hierarchies of the international system and those determined to defend their privileged positions, often over issues of self-determination and independence, was one of the most significant problems of the twentieth century.

Especially for the United States, Angola exemplified how the irresponsible behavior of the Soviet Union could allow non-Western countries to wreak havoc on the international system in complete disproportion to their relative importance and strength. To have a perception of disorder and unacceptable behavior, there must first exist a general vision (not necessarily a consensus), whether political, intellectual, or affective, of what it means to have international order and acceptable behavior. The United States, here acting as a

status quo power, considered itself the arbiter of the international system and became desperate in its attempts to mitigate and balance the revolutionary objectives of the Cubans, the Soviet Union, and the Angolan liberation parties themselves. Thus, another way of looking at the Angolan crisis is as a site where revolutionary ambitions and counterrevolutionary traditions collided.

Despite the myriad changes in African politics, the constant push of decolonization, and the rising wave of Third World nationalism, few expected that an African movement of national liberation could affect the international strategic calculus. Even so, Angolan nationalists and their allies were also acutely aware of the challenges they posed, not only to the receding European empires but to postwar relations among states. Angolan independence, located at the nexus of Cold War and decolonization, is an ideal case for exploring the history of international relations and the blurring of epistemic lines between the “national,” “international,” and “transnational.” Successful transnational actors can be the ones that best learn to negotiate and navigate the international system, interacting with one another and with established nation-states to achieve their goals. However, Angola also clearly demonstrated the effects that the international can have on the transnational—and on national liberation. Although various progressive states and organizations supported Angolan independence, an equally powerful bloc of status-quo powers colluded to undermine this process and to fuel the antagonisms between rival groups. As a consequence, the violence in Angola dragged on for decades.

The Angolan revolution was a rare incident on the African continent that was widely perceived to have a great effect on the international system. As such, it helps illustrate the intersections between race and revolution, nationalism and anti-Communism, and decolonization and fragmentation in the international system. It also raises several issues still relevant to the contemporary world. How far can a powerful country go to preserve the global equilibrium? What are the limits of intervention? How do less-powerful countries handle infringements upon their sovereignty? Is Africa exceptional, or do politics on the African continent fit into the wider history of the twentieth century? No discussion of twentieth-century international relations is complete without acknowledging African revolutionary politics. The Angolan revolution signaled the fraying of U.S. policy in the Third World, fatally wounded détente, and set the stage for decades of crisis and intervention on the African continent.