UNITA WE STAND
Angola’s Continuing Strife
Kenneth Good

After Nicaragua, Angola has the government
America most wants to see defeated.
Why? And can it survive?

Angola has pro-Western Zaire and Zambia to its north-east and east, and Namibia and South Africa to the south. It is a potentially rich country which, since independence in 1975, has been purposefully prevented — chiefly by the United States and South Africa — from achieving its potentialities. It has oil, diamonds and iron, and vast resources of land capable of producing both a range of export commodities and sufficient food for its relatively small population of 6-7 million.

It inherited from Portugal an education system so poor that only 15 percent of Angolans were literate in 1975, and destroyed equipment when the half million Portuguese expatriates fled. But this does not account for the losses suffered since then. Earlier, the world’s fourth-largest coffee producer, it has seen its production cut to less than one-tenth from 1973 to 1981. Similarly, while formerly the world’s sixth-largest diamond producer, with an output of 2.4 million carats in 1974, it has experienced a drop in production to 750,000 carats in 1985, and the country now imports between 50-90 percent of its food.

This decline is the consequence of external and internal aggression, and the effort to oppose it absorbed 60-80 percent of government revenue in 1986. The government of the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) has faced a situation of continuous crisis since its formation. Avowedly marxist since 1977, it is also moderate and non-doctrinaire. The leadership of the first MPLA
government, led by Agostinho Neto, was described by one authority as “skilled, educated, and dedicated”, and that of his successor, Eduardo dos Santos, has stressed its desire for foreign investment and trade with the West. The External Trade Minister, Gaspar Martins, recently referred to the large and growing role of American and French corporations in the oil industry, and said: “We’re not dogmatic. We look at the systems of the world and decide what is applicable to Angola.” He noted, too, that 80-85 percent of his country’s trade was with Western countries. “This is where the market is, where we sell and where we buy. We want technology from the West. There is no reason why this shouldn’t continue.” President dos Santos had earlier declared that Angola was prepared to live “in an atmosphere of tolerance” with South Africa once Namibia was independent. The MPLA government is, at the same time, relatively free from the mismanagement and corruption which has self-induced bankruptcy in some other African countries.

It is not the policies of the MPLA, but the existence of fratricidal divisions within the nationalist movement which has facilitated external aggression against the country. Originating in Zaire in the 1950s was what subsequently became Holden Roberto’s Front for the National Liberation of Angola (FNLA). Roberto had close association with a number of American organisations, and it is said that United States pressure encouraged the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) to recognise a Roberto-led government-in-exile briefly in the 1960s. But Roberto preferred to remain in “life-long exile” in Zaire, and the FNLA was structurally incoherent, deeply racist and tribalist — little other than a vehicle for the brutality of its leader, who also espoused a “visceral anticommunism”.

The third movement, the Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), was formed by Jonas Savimbi in 1966 as a splinter group from the FNLA — little more than “twelve guys with knives”, as an American official then described them.3 But UNITA must be compared with Roberto’s group as well as with the MPLA, and what distinguished it strongly from the FNLA was the stress which Savimbi placed on organisation inside Angola and actual engagement in armed struggle. There is evidence, however, that Savimbi in the early 1970s was prepared to collaborate with the Portuguese in military action against the MPLA and to discredit it politically within the OAU. It was Savimbi who subsequently sought a more durable association with South Africa.

The United States has long supported Portuguese colonialism and it had foreseen neither the collapse of Portuguese militarism in Africa nor the overthrow of fascism in Lisbon. When the United States began to increase its intervention in Angolan affairs, in January 1975, it did so against the MPLA and by expanding aid to Roberto. The initiative in Washington came from Secretary of State Kissinger who was spurred on by a vision of world-wide confrontation with the Soviet Union. The United States, reports John Stockwell, then chief of the CIA’s “Angola Task Force”, “clearly ... wanted this war”. It ignored the fact that the Soviet Union had stopped supporting the MPLA in 1973 and had only resumed significant arms shipments in March 1975. It also ignored possibilities other than covert military and economic intervention: it further ignored the obvious negative features of the FNLA in apparent preference for Roberto’s anti-communism. As Stockwell noted: “Most of what (the CIA) knew about the FNLA came from Roberto, the chief recipient of our largesse”, and “we knew even less about Savimbi and UNITA”.

The United States, however, did not act alone and, in the initial stage, the CIA obtained the co-operation of Mobutu in Zaire and Kaunda in Zambia. Shortly afterwards, during the second half of 1975, the CIA began encouraging South Africa to intervene in Angola, in association with Savimbi and again with Mobutu and Kaunda. To the CIA, says Stockwell, “the South Africans were the ideal solution”. The American agency “traditionally sympathised with South Africa and enjoyed its close liaison with BOSS”, the then main intelligence organisation in Pretoria: “coordination was effected at all CIA levels and the South Africans escalated their involvement in step with our own”.4

Washington’s strategy in Angola following the departure of the Portuguese administration was to place Roberto’s FNLA in power in Luanda, despite their palpable unfitness for national government and the known strength of the MPLA in urban areas. The result was the rout of the inexperienced FNLA and their Zairean allies, and the elimination of the FNLA as a viable fighting force by the beginning of 1976. Washington’s opposition to the MPLA government thereafter assumed two forms which are still maintained. Savimbi was advised to continue fighting, and the United States embarked on a punitive policy of non-recognition of the MPLA government to undermine Angola’s economic relations with the West and hamstring reconstruction in the country.

South African forces invaded Angola before the country’s independence. Pretoria would seem to have been responding to the opportunities presented to it by the divided Angolan nationalist movement, but also to pressure from other countries that it should act. Stockwell reports that “it came into the conflict cautiously at first, watching the expanding US program and timing their steps to the CIA’s”.5 As it became clear that neither the FNLA nor UNITA had the ability to stop the MPLA, Zambia, Zaire and the United States called for increased South African intervention in support of UNITA. Like Kissinger, both Kaunda and Mobutu feared the establishment of a Soviet-supported government in Angola. In mid-

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October a South African armoured column, totalling some 2,000 troops, travelled northwards from Namibia, drawing UNITA and FNLA units in its wake. It, too, was repulsed south of Luanda, and the bulk of the force was withdrawn in January 1976. Kaunda was left to rail against the Soviet and Cuban assistance to the MPLA as a fearsome “tiger and its cubs”, and to try to deny recognition to the MPLA government. By mid-1976, however, Savimbi, with continuing assistance from Pretoria, had organised a renewed rural insurgency against what he now called “Soviet/Cuban occupation”.

South Africa carried out two large-scale invasions of Angola under the Reagan presidency, in August 1981 and in December 1983. The latter operation, named “Askari”, involved no less than 10,000 troops, and ended in fiasco.

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But UNITA continues to provide South Africa and the United States with the weapon of economic destabilisation over much of the sparsely populated countryside. Savimbi’s forces concentrated on economic sabotage, mining roads and fields in the richest farming areas. The apartheid regime provides UNITA with requirements like uniforms and fuel and stands ready to defend Savimbi’s redoubts in the south when MPLA attacks are close. The Reagan government has recently offered Savimbi increased recognition, money and new weaponry, and greatly enhanced UNITA’s destructiveness.

From March 1975, some two months after the United States and Zaire initiated covert assistance to FNLA, the Soviet Union and then Cuba moved to provide the MPLA with its vital defence capability. Cuban military aid was requested by the MPLA in March 1975. Some 230 advisers arrived around May, followed from September by a very rapid build-up of Cuban troops and heavy weaponry, first using Cuban ships and later Soviet aircraft. Cuba’s dramatic intervention, says one authority, represented “a decisive turning point” in the war, but it “followed upon substantial intervention by others”. The Cuban action, unlike that of America, was in no sense covert, and it was proclaimed by Fidel Castro as an expression of established state policy and Cuba’s African heritage. By early 1976, about 12,000 Cuban troops were present. These forces plus the heavy weaponry which the USSR and Cuba supplied, helped the MPLA’s guerrilla-trained units to shift successfully to conventional direct confrontations with the South African military.

But the war of economic destruction and South African incursion continued, and in 1980 there were about 20,000 Cuban troops and some 17,000 advisers and technicians from other communist states in Angola. They operated and trained Angolans in the use of tanks, missiles and radar systems as well as the fighters and assault helicopters which are the shield against South African attack on Luanda and a limited offensive capability against Savimbi’s sabotage. It was this weaponry which threatened a major defeat for Pretoria’s Operation Askari at the end of 1983. Soviet satellites had monitored the build-up that preceded the invasion, and Soviet diplomats informed the South Africans in New York that the USSR was ready to strengthen its forces in Angola in response to any escalation in pressure from Pretoria.

This was a significant expression of tacit policy, but what the Soviet Union did not provide is also significant. Soviet economic aid to Angola is parsimonious — similar to what is offered to other socialist-oriented African states, but totally unlike the heavy financial assistance given to Cuba and Viet Nam; on the figures of one authority, Soviet economic aid through 1978 totalled only US$17 million. Nor, after eleven years’ fighting, has the Angolan government acquired the capacity to eliminate Savimbi, shielded as he is by CIA support bases in Zaire and the South African military in the south. The government’s dry season offensive in August-September 1985 came close to Savimbi at his southern base of Mavinga, but the South African military quickly flew in reinforcements, and the attack was repulsed. The Luanda government would require additional heavy weaponry and would be obliged to escalate the fighting in order to annihilate UNITA today.

Washington’s non-recognition denies Angola Western economic aid, and the bulk of the government’s budget is financed by oil exports, presently depleted by low world oil prices. With coffee and diamond production seriously curtailed, oil provides 90 percent of Angola’s foreign exchange, and the greater part of this is exported to the United States. Angola is America’s fourth-largest trading partner in Africa, but the oil corporations are under pressure from the Reagan administration to pull out, and are even threatened with attack by UNITA. In this sharp polarisation of proclaimed national and commercial interests, the American companies have chosen to maintain their effective alignment with Luanda, which is thus in a stronger economic position to defend itself. Oil giant Cabinda Gulf’s general manager boldly observed that the United States was “backing the wrong guy” in Savimbi, and the president of Chevron, its parent company, assured dos Santos that his company would not be bullied into leaving.

Under Reagan, the United States has moved closer to South Africa. Reagan soon referred to South Africa as a friend that had stood by America in all its wars, and which was “strategically essential to the free world”. Controls on sensitive exports to South Africa, introduced under Jimmy Carter, were relaxed in 1982, and important computers and perhaps nuclear materials were
supplied. Military relations were restored. Attachés were again placed in the respective capitals, top South African military commanders were brought secretly to Washington for briefings, and the CIA shared intelligence data with Pretoria. American approval in 1982 helped Pretoria to secure a much-needed loan from the International Monetary Fund. Reagan and his entourage saw South Africa as a good anti-communist country which should be brought within Washington’s strategic embrace. Following the policy of “constructive engagement”, apartheid was accepted as a problem internal to South Africa.

Such policies had strong implications for Angola. Next to Pretoria, Washington by 1982 was the strongest supporter of the notion of linkage between the Cuban forces in Angola and independence for South African-dominated Namibia. Unlike its Western allies, America insisted on the prior withdrawal of Cuban forces from Angola, a policy which not only delayed freedom for Namibia, but promised to expose Luanda to Pretoria’s attack. Then, from the opposite side, the “Reagan doctrine” represented increased American support for Savimbi, suddenly depicted not as a traitor and saboteur but as a “freedom fighter” and “scholar warrior” in the global anti-communist crusade. When Congress, in July 1985, repealed the Clark amendment which had barred covert aid to UNITA, Reagan quickly supplemented recognition with financial and military assistance. CIA chief, William Casey, met with Savimbi in Kinshasa in March 1986, and the shipment of new weapons through Zaire began. In June 1986, a delegation from the US Senate secretly visited Savimbi in Angola, and met CIA station chiefs in Kinshasa and Pretoria. In August the CIA was training UNITA forces on American anti-aircraft missiles and anti-tank weapons at a secret location. Buoyed up by this support, Savimbi intended to seek a larger commitment from Washington. The harmony of outlook between Washington and Pretoria was indicated when the South African Defence Minister, General Malan announced, in September 1985, that it would continue supporting UNITA because this was in the “interests of the free world”.¹

UNITA has come a long way in 20 years, from tortuous exile manoeuvrings in Zaire to the White House in Washington. The organisation can claim greater political reality than the FNLA earlier or Renamo in Mozambique today, the latter being nothing other than faceless terrorists. But what UNITA is concentrating upon inside Angola in 1986 is indiscriminate assault in the countryside. In the reports of foreign relief agencies as well as the Luanda government, UNITA had planted anti-personnel land mines by the hundreds in village farmlands, trails and roads, in the north and the south-central highlands. The immediate result was injuries inflicted on thousands of peasants with, for example, 6,000 to 8,000 victims in the Huambo region alone. The longer consequence is the abandonment of the fields in some of the most fertile districts and a further drop in national food production. The Luanda government, in April 1986, put the number of “totally destitute and mutilated persons” in need of food aid from foreign donors at 600,000, an increase of 100,000 over the previous year.

Savimbi has many foreign sympathisers in addition to the Reagan right wing, and the apartheid regime. President Mobutu in Zaire still renders important assistance, chiefly as an alternative to Savimbi’s
total regional reliance upon Pretoria, and Tunisia, Morocco, and possibly certain Francophone West African governments are sympathetic. There is also support in political and financial circles in Britain, not least from the Lonrho corporation, a company with extensive African interests; and a minister of the Chirac government in France recently praised what he called, in Reaganite terms, Savimbi's “brave fight for freedom”. Nevertheless, it is very likely that UNITA would be defeated without United States and South African support. At the end of 1985, two of the three major intelligence agencies in the United States, the CIA and the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, concluded that Savimbi had no chance of winning on the battlefield, and little prospect of forcing a coalition government in Luanda. The sole agency predicting a possible victory for UNITA was the Pentagon's Defence Intelligence Agency which had then, for several months, shared intelligence material with Savimbi and provided communications support to his forces.

Rising black resistance inside South Africa, and the growing movement for international economic sanctions against Pretoria inexorably undercuts Reagan's support for both South Africa and Savimbi. Secretary of State Shultz reportedly resisted the rearming of Savimbi in 1985-86 because it disrupted American diplomacy in southern Africa, and Congress has defied Reagan to impose a range of significant sanctions.

Decreased American support for Pretoria would rationally involve dissociation from Savimbi. But the anti-communism of the Reagan entourage is of a rabid, crusading, and adventurist kind, which revels in covert action in Angola and other socialist-oriented Third World countries. If such tendencies are, in fact, both the bedrock and content of Reagan foreign policy, UNITA might for some time yet survive.

NOTES:

5. Stockwell, p. 191.
6. Quoted in R.W. Johnson, *How Long Will South Africa Survive?*, London, 1977, pp. 147 and 163. See also “Briefings”, *RPE*, pp. 85-86, where it is suggested that Savimbi "begged" South Africa to intervene and was assisted in this by Kaunda, Mobutu, and Houphouet-Boigny of the Ivory Coast.
7. Crawford Young, *Ideology and Development in Africa*, New Haven, 1982, p. 87. There was also in 1978 a Cameron agreement which pledged US$75m.
8. Cabinda Gulf's installations were attacked in April, and Savimbi later demanded that Chevron must assure him that it would not block his efforts to obtain more American aid. He noted that French companies in Angola were "keeping up their contacts with us". *Guardian Weekly*, 17 August 1986.
9. Hanlon, p. 109
10. Savimbi held meetings with a number of Chirac's ministers and with the speaker of the national assembly in Paris in October. Interviewed on French radio, he said that "they understood us and promised us aid". *Times of Zambia*, 28 and 29 October 1986.

KENNETH GOOD teaches politics at the University of Zambia, Lusaka.