

How to handle reports

Why secret Angola

By Anthony Lewis

IN THE LAST six months the Ford administration has secretly supplied \$25 million in arms and money to factions it favors in Angola.

The President has approved another \$25 million. American pilots are flying five American artillery spotter planes in and out of Angola from neighboring Zaire.

The Angola operation is already one of the largest covert actions ever mounted by the United States outside Indochina, and it raises large questions of policy.

Does the Angolan faction we oppose, which gets aid from the Soviet Union and Cuba, threaten basic American interests? Is there any realistic chance of defeating it, or is the prospect an endless struggle without success?

But there is a fundamental question of process before those of policy. If American action is needed, why should it be clandestine? Why has our policy on so dangerous a problem been made and executed in secret?

The answer given is that U.S. aid might embarrass the recipients if sent openly. But an operation as large as that in Angola could hardly be expected to remain secret for long, so the answer is less than persuasive. In any event, the Angola action has now been disclosed in considerable detail. Continuing to handle the policy covertly is not likely to avoid embarrassment.

The Angolan affair, in fact, makes clear what must often be the real reason that officials chose the covert path. It is more convenient. It allows policy to be made by a handful of men who know best. It avoids annoying questions by Congress, the public and experts within the executive branch.

After Vietnam, an open decision to intervene in an armed struggle thousands of miles from the United States and outside our traditional sphere of interest would surely have aroused some questions. There is no need for conjectures. Seymour M. Hersh of

the New York Times has disclosed that there was governmental opposition to the Angolan policy — and that it was suppressed.

Secretary of State Henry Kissinger made the decision for military aid against the advice of his own assistant secretary for African affairs,

Nathaniel Davis. Davis felt so strongly about it that he quit the job last August. Since then Kissinger has cut down the flow of cables on Angola to the department's African specialists and even to the bureau of intelligence and research, which also opposed his decision.

Davis is said to have seen three



'Never mind, chief—Washington had his Valley Forge. But, of course, he only fought one war at a time'

policy?

main dangers in the growing U.S. involvement in Angola. The factions we favor are so weak that the policy probably will not work. A prolonged struggle ending in failure would damage the two African figures on whom we most rely, Presidents Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia and Joseph Mobutu of Zaire. And the United States may become identified with white South Africa.

Those arguments look rather convincing today, after a direct South African military intervention in Angola and after the decline in the fortunes of the Angolan groups favored by the Ford administration. But right or wrong, the arguments should have been heard—heard by someone other than Kissinger.

Under the American system, secret discussions by one official or a few are wrong in principle. They also tend to be wrong in practice. Whatever good we can imagine covert operations doing, what they actually did is evident enough in the major examples: Vietnam, Laos, Cuba.

Kissinger's record makes it particularly unwise to leave policy on Angola largely in his hands. A National Security Council memorandum drafted under his direction in 1970 predicted continued Portuguese power in Angola, and thereafter some help was given to Portugal in its colonial war.

But the point is much larger than the specifics of Angola. Our attitude toward that affair will really indicate whether we have learned from Vietnam and Watergate and the rest how much harm we do to ourselves by secrecy — by letting a handful of officials make policy without public examination of the premises.

The worst danger of covert action on such a scale is that it may commit the United States to a position and make extrication awkward. That may indeed be the intention. The time to stop the process is now.

Anthony Lewis is a columnist for the New York Times.