

Feb 27 1975 The CIA: Angola and Portugal

THE NEW REPORTS of covert CIA activities in Portugal and Angola underline a deep crisis in American foreign policy. In Portugal, The New York Times reported, the United States is funneling funds to the democratic parties through and with like-minded political elements in West Europe; partly as a result, Portuguese democrats' prospects are looking up. In Portuguese Angola, Washington is said to be sending arms and money through Zaire to one of three factions contending for power as the colony nears independence on Nov. 11; in spite of—or perhaps because of—its known American connection, the Holden Roberto faction seems to be fading.

The crux of these reports lies in the considerable differences between the two operations. The Portuguese case is, in our judgment, legitimate and well advised. One can wish that we did not live in a world where undernourished democratic forces representing the majority's spoken will have to contend with a small avowedly totalitarian Communist Party sustained by large amounts of Soviet money. But we do. American values and American security and political interests alike justify CIA help. That the United States' principal friends and allies in Europe are apparently partners—majority partners, we trust—in this enterprise makes it all the more acceptable. Purists may argue that steps taken to seat democracy in a friendly, strategic and allied state amount to unacceptable interference in another country's domestic affairs. We would argue back that docile acceptance of a Soviet-sponsored Communist regime in Lisbon would be high-mindedness carried to perilous, not to say ludicrous, extremes; it accords neither with our vital interests nor our established principles.

But Angola? The operation there seems much closer to the questionable, crudely anti-Communist adventures which have so marred the CIA's past. Reportedly, the United States is backing the almost certain loser, Mr. Roberto. It is doing so partly on the discredited premise that it matters for Washington to contest with Moscow for influence and resources in proud, new, changeable, African states. Though the U.S. evidently is gaining

favor with Mr. Roberto's main sponsors in Zaire, it is losing the broader political credit elsewhere in Africa that non-intervention would probably have reaped.

The plain fact is that no effective way has yet been found to submit proposed CIA operations to the kind of timely and close external scrutiny that public policy in other areas routinely receives. In these new cases, the leaders of the armed services, appropriations and foreign relations committees of both houses were consulted but not broadly or deeply enough to cull the "bad" operation (more unwise than fatal) from the "good" one. In the absence of agreed standards on what constitutes a good or bad operation, both the executive branch and Congress tend to frame the problem as one involving their own role in decision-making: the executive demands initiative and flexibility, the Congress oversight and review. But it should be obvious by now that this institutional problem is insoluble as long as relations between the two branches overall are so raw. No amount of institutional or procedural tinkering will alter this basic political fact.

Were these stories leaked to spoil the operations and further hurt the CIA, or to force the pace of congressional reform, or conversely to demonstrate that the United States still can influence farflung events? Whatever the answer, the disclosures illuminate the strange new semi-public setting in which "secret" operations must now be devised. Those unlikely to survive unofficial disclosure probably should not be undertaken at all. Some would consider this anticipation of exposure as a healthy deterrent or even as just retribution for past excesses. We find it deplorable. The United States still has, we believe, reason to conduct certain covert operations abroad—Portugal is an excellent example. It should not be necessary to point out that covert operations must be covert. "National security" unquestionably has been overworked as a rationale for secrecy but it has not lost all validity. It would be extremely helpful if the simultaneous disclosure of the Portuguese and Angola operations—the one valuable, the other questionable—were to make this vital point clear.