

Angola: Is it a blurred mirror

For Americans, Angola is a major issue largely because of the comparisons with Vietnam. In fact, the two countries are alike and unlike, as AP Special Correspondent Peter Arnett, who spent many years in Vietnam, points out in this article.

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Is Angola a mirror-image of Vietnam for the United States?

It depends on whom you are listening to.

Secretary of State Kissinger argues eloquently that it is different, yet uses language remarkably similar to that chosen by the late President John F. Kennedy to justify American aid to Vietnam in the early 60s.

Congressional critics declare Angola and Vietnam look-alikes, but concede some differences in time, place and politics.

What is the truth?

A look at both countries suggests that in some ways Asia's Vietnam and Africa's Angola are very much alike, in other ways markedly different.

In Angola, all the nationalist groups now competing for power fought against the colonial government, and can lay claim to the revolutionary mantle.

Not so in Vietnam where, during the long, bloody war against the French, the Vietnamese Communist party under Ho Chi Minh completely took over the revolutionary movement. When the battle for South Vietnam began, the American-backed Saigon government found itself branded a Western puppet. It was the Communist Vietcong that caught the imagination of the Vietnamese.

Those arguing that the United States should leave Angola completely alone, point out that in Burma, Indonesia and other Asian countries where no political faction was strong enough to take over complete power, these countries eventually evolved governments able to contain the Communist minorities. Angola is seen as a similar situation.

In Vietnam the Communist party harnessed Vietnamese nationalism for a real social revolution. But nationalism and ideology are less important factors in Angola than tribal politics, and the civil war maps of today bear close resemblance to the colonial charts of tribal regions drawn up under Portuguese rule centuries ago. So central rule from

Luanda by the Soviet-backed Popular Movement most likely would be contested.

The geopolitical picture is vastly different.

The South Vietnamese Communists had the backing of North Vietnam, which was in turn supplied by her giant Communist neighbor, China. The Soviet Union also shipped war goods to the Vietnamese.

But the Angolan group, currently aided by the Soviet Union and Cuba, has no such easy routes. In fact, the immediate Angolan neighbors of Zaire and Zambia support the two other factions — the National Front and the National Union — as does South Africa.

The strategic situation of Angola today is seen as vital to U.S. interests, just as Vietnam and the rest of Indochina were, more than a decade ago. President Kennedy, on March 23, 1961, told press conference about a small, remote nation called Laos where several factions were fighting for supremacy, one backed by the Soviet Union.

"It is this new dimension of externally supported warfare that creates the present grave problem . . . We strongly and unreservedly support the goal of a neutral and independent Laos . . . If these Communist attacks do not stop the United States and others will have to consider their response," Kennedy said.

Those comments, with the substitution of Angola for Laos, were almost the text of recent statements about Angola by both Secretary of State Kissinger and President Ford.

U.S. government spokesmen also have been using the "domino theory" for Angola. They argue that if it should fall to the Communist-backed side, then Zaire, Zambia and ultimately South Africa might follow.

The same argument was used for two decades in Vietnam, with Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia numbered among the falling dominoes. Events have proved this prediction wrong.

Supporters of American involvement in Angola argue that victory for the Communist-backed side would give Russia an Atlantic port and potential control of oil shipping routes.

That argument echoes the early Vietnam years when those supporting U.S. intervention argued that ports such as Danang and Cam Ranh Bay were integral to the defense of the United States and should never be allowed to fall into Communist hands.

Just as the U.S. government has perceived the threat to American interests in Angola as similar to

image of Vietnam?

the threat it saw in Vietnam, it has reacted not only with similar rhetoric, but with similar actions.

Revelations that secret aid was channeled to Angola through the CIA in early 1975 had a historical ring. Similar secret aid was sent to anti-Communist

factions in Hanoi in 1955, also through the CIA.

Covert American entry into the Angolan war has changed to open requests for public support for that policy. But what took years to develop in Indochina has taken only months in Africa.