

How To Arrange Disaster

By Anthony Lewis

CLEVELAND, Jan. 14—Suppose the United States had immediately and vigorously objected when South African troops entered Angola in force last October. This country would now have a degree of credibility in Africa as a friendly, disinterested power. It might be able to play a useful role in easing the difficult African transitions that lie ahead.

Instead, Secretary of State Kissinger gave silent assent to the South African action. He kept American arms and money going to the Angolan factions favored by South Africa. He declared that Soviet support of the other side made the Angolan conflict a major test of East-West relations.

The results were predictable—indeed, they were predicted. The United States was tainted in most of Africa by association with the white supremacists of Pretoria. The U.S.S.R. and Cuba, seeing a glorious opportunity to win credit for fighting racism, increased their intervention. Pro-Western leaders in black Africa were embarrassed.

Apt words were used by Congressman Charles C. Diggs Jr. to describe the Kissinger policy: blunder, folly, fiasco. And the reckoning is not over. I think the worst effects of the Angolan policy will be felt, in time, in South Africa.

Until Angola, South Africa's policy toward its neighbors had been marked by caution and acceptance of change. The Prime Minister, B. J. Vorster, accepted without a murmur the transition of Mozambique, right on South

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Africa's border, from Portuguese colony to left-wing black rule. He worked with Zambia to force change on the white minority Government of Rhodesia. His policy evidently was not to interfere with nearby black countries, in the hope that they would leave his internal situation alone.

Then, with uncharacteristic rashness, Mr. Vorster sent his forces into Angola. The action calls into question the good faith of his entire external policy. More important, it promises to arouse grave new problems for white rule at home.

Sooner or later, and probably sooner, South Africa will have to pull

its troops out of Angola. (The U.S. is already hoping for that, and if necessary may come to say so out loud.) The withdrawal, however disguised, will be a defeat for white South Africa—and will be seen as such by her non-white majority. The psychological effects of that will be great.

The victory of Mozambique's revolutionaries over the Portuguese had an enormous impact on the blacks of South Africa, raising expectations and greatly increasing militance. So I was told by blacks and whites when I visited there last summer. A perceived defeat for South African troops in Angola would be much more significant.

South Africa's intervention in Angola, in short, seems likely to hasten the radicalizing of her own black population. It reduces the hope for peaceful change in that country—the hope that blacks can somehow gain human rights without a terrible race war.

That is the potential price to be paid for Mr. Kissinger's Angola policy. It has to be his responsibility, because he drove the policy through Government councils against advice from his own specialists. He had a great opportunity to save South Africa from its own rashness, and in doing so to enhance America's position. He chose the course of disaster.

Why? Inevitably, one has to ask the question about such a performance by an intelligent, experienced statesman. For this policy has gone beyond the mistaken to the irrational and hysterical.

Item: Mr. Kissinger says he wants to prevent Communist influence in Angola. So he adopts a policy that assures a much greater and more lasting Communist role.

Item: When the Soviet Union intervened massively in the 1973 Middle East war, a matter of the deepest interest to America, Mr. Kissinger saw no violation of détente. But now he says Soviet aid in Angola, where our interests are remote, does threaten détente.

Item: As Mr. Kissinger's Angolan policy gets in trouble, he tells Israel that his failure there could jeopardize its security. When you are in a game with almost no chance to win, raise the stakes!

Why should a serious man want to dramatize unfavorable situations and make them worse? The only answer to hand is that there is a gloomy self-punishing side to Mr. Kissinger—and enormous ego-involvement. He has been trying to convince us for years that power in today's world can be balanced as it was in tiny 19th-century Europe. When the theory is shown up in a place such as Angola, he tries to make the facts fit the theory. Many will pay, and heavily, for this egocentric folly.