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Thinking About Southern Africa

If the anti-Communist rationale of the administration's Angola policy remains in force, Rep. Charles C. Diggs Jr. (D-Mich.), black Africa's leading voice in Congress, points out, we're in big trouble. For the Russians and Cubans, by just a small investment in the black liberation forces in Namibia, Rhodesia, and eventually South Africa, can thereby push the United States to the side of the white minorities there in the name of anti-communism. "By the same rationale," he says, "we'd intervene."

To Diggs, the answer is simple. For years the Soviets have supported African liberation movements. In Angola they are collecting some chips and positioning themselves to play elsewhere. So the United States should start identifying more with the remaining liberation movements. The first step is to recognize the new government in Angola promptly, rather than sulking and granting a begrudged recognition later. That is the way to head off not only a deepening of the cold war in Africa, but also racial fire.

Diggs, a leader of the Congressional Black Caucus, thinks that, despite everything, the United States still has credit with the liberation groups. He attributes this more to the personal exertions of various American diplomats and others, than to the calculated policy of the government.

That policy he finds grievously wanting: "You just can't expect the remainder of unfreed Africa to stay quiet." But he thinks the country's and the Congress' general disinterest in sub-Saharan Africa is starting to yield to the "new assertiveness" of Congress in foreign affairs—it has not been lost on him that a black African cause finally benefited from a congressional foreign-policy rebellion, when Congress moved to end the American role in Angola late last year.

He believes, too, that "Angola dramatized to black Americans the relevance of American foreign policy to them as nothing has since the independence movements of the 1960s." Indeed, how would Americans, black and white, react if the United States found itself supporting the minority white side in an outright war in southern Africa?

By contrast, the administration in its own thinking about post-Angola developments seems frozen in an "Angolan"

mode in which the main enemy is portrayed as a Congress gutlessly unwilling to halt the spread of Communist and Soviet influence in Africa. Singled out, the administration offers up Zaire as the country most needful and worthy of American aid to stem the Red tide.

To be sure, there is a danger. There was no physical Soviet or Cuban presence before, and there is one now. It can't be dismissed as unreal, or as the expectable response to administration policy, or as Henry Kissinger's problem, or as the wretched Africans' due. Their success and presence give the Russians both opportunity and temptation to stir things up elsewhere in southern Africa. Although one can hear a range of judgments on the Kremlin's African intentions, it seems to me prudent to figure they'll make trouble.

The issue for the United States, however, is not simply to oppose the Russians by backing horses (like Zaire) that profess to be running against them, but to try to figure out how to slow the race down.

Diggs' answer, which makes a lot of sense to me, is for the United States

to steal some of the Russians' advantage by coming more openly to the side of the black-majority liberation movements in Rhodesia and Namibia (South West Africa) and by taking a stronger position against apartheid in South Africa.

In the same spirit, the United States ought to be more supportive of the black nations just north of South Africa—Zambia, Mozambique, Tanzania. Much depends on their success in nation-building and in acting as a bridge between black and white in Africa. The United States ought not to continue letting the larger role of these nations be submerged by its distaste either for their domestic ideologies or for their votes on symbolic Third World issues (such as Zionism, Puerto Rico) in the United Nations.

There is, I suspect, more congressional support available for such a policy on Capitol Hill than the Ford administration has been ready to seek or acknowledge.

In sum, the problem is not a lapse in the will of the Congress but a flaw in the policy of the President. That is the distinction on which debate ought to proceed.