Yes, Minister: Reassessing South Africa’s Intervention in the Angolan Civil War, 1975-1976

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Yes, Minister

Reassessing South Africa’s Intervention in the Angolan Civil War, 1975–1976

• Jamie Miller

In 1975–1976, South Africa’s apartheid regime took the momentous step of intervening in the Angolan civil war, endeavoring to thwart the Marxist Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) and its backers in Havana and Moscow. The failure of this intervention and the subsequent ignominious withdrawal had major repercussions for the evolution of the regime and for the history of the Cold War in southern Africa. Yet no comprehensive study has appeared explaining how and why Pretoria became involved. This article addresses these questions squarely, drawing on a wide variety of primary sources from South African archives in addition to interviews with key protagonists. The research shows that amid deep divisions at the highest levels of government, the South African Defence Force (SADF) and the South African minister of defence, P. W. Botha, relentlessly and successfully pursued deeper engagement as a response to national security threats perceived through the prism of the emerging doctrine of “total onslaught.” In this way, South Africa’s intervention in Angola was first and foremost the product of strategic calculations derived from a sense of threat perception expressed and experienced in Cold War terms, but applied and developed in a localized southern African context.

South Africa’s ill-fated intervention in the Angolan civil war (July 1975–March 1976) shattered Pretoria’s hard-earned aura of invincibility and exposed the apartheid regime’s mortality, marking a turning point in the fate of the regime. Apparent defeat at the hands of forces bearing the black nationalist standard made a deep impression on opponents of the regime at home and abroad, reviving at a stroke the possibility of real change in southern Africa.¹

How did this debacle occur? Who or what was responsible for getting South Africa involved? And what does this tell us about the collision of decolonization and the Cold War in southern Africa?

**Past Assessments**

The intervention by Pretoria in the Angolan civil war has undergone little scholarly examination. 2 Numerous South African works together provide a solid overview of the military dimension of South Africa’s efforts. 3 However, with the exception of F. J. du Toit Spies’s *Operasie Savannah*, one of two authorized SADF histories, these tend to feature a somewhat limited elucidation of the political, diplomatic, or broader strategic aspects of South Africa’s involvement, which together provide the context and meaning for the military narrative. 4 Some also use sources in a manner that falls short of rigorous and judicious scholarly standards. Memoirs and authorized biographies that could have provided some first-hand insight into the broader picture offer little beyond the basics. 5 Informed secondary accounts remain few and far between. Robin Hallett’s 1978 article, “The South African Intervention in Angola, 1975–76,” strong on the international dimension of the conflict, and Deon Geldenhuys’s brief but insightful treatment in *The Diplomacy of Isolation* (1984), which focuses on the decision-making in Pretoria, have both stood

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the test of time surprisingly well. However, the number and quality of available sources has increased markedly since the mid-1980s. More recently, in a pioneering account of U.S. and Cuban policy in Africa, *Conflicting Missions*, Piero Gleijeses devotes a couple of chapters to exploring South Africa’s intervention in Angola, but he does so predominantly in terms of the U.S.-Cuban rivalry. As such, he offers understandably little new research in South African primary sources, and the depth of his analysis of South African politics is limited. It is indicative of the dearth of literature in the field that his book is the most useful account at present.

One issue on which the literature is broadly in agreement is its portrayal of South Africa as a proxy for U.S. Cold War interests. An alternative thesis, positioning South African actions in an African context, is advanced here. My research indicates that the U.S. government had little to do with South Africa’s decision to intervene, though it played an important role later in 1975 when the conflict evolved from African civil war to Cold War test of wills. (A fuller discussion of U.S. policy is beyond the scope of this article.)

The failure of historians to provide a comprehensive understanding of how South Africa became involved in Angola is attributable to two factors. The first has been a tendency to point the analytical lens at the wrong time frame; that is, at the later stages of the conflict from mid-November 1975 onward, when Cuban intervention on the one hand and the revelation of extensive U.S. and South African involvement on the other briefly seized the international community’s attention. However, such an approach provides little insight into why South Africa became embroiled in the conflict in the first place and indeed has obscured that question.

The other reason for the limited state of the historiography is the notable lack of authoritative evidence available to historians, itself a consequence of the extreme secrecy imposed by Pretoria on its military actions. The entire campaign, codenamed Operation Savannah, was subject to heavy official censorship, and the key strategic decisions were made by just a handful of South Africa’s leaders. Until press revelations suddenly emerged in mid-November 1975, only a small number of people within the regime were aware of the full extent of South Africa’s presence in Angola. Members of parliament from the ruling National Party, officials in the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA), and even the cabinet were kept in the dark. Consequently, much of the documentary record, for instance in the form of DFA files or cabinet minutes, is

unhelpful. The corollary of this phenomenon is that even now rumor and hearsay dominate over authoritative fact. Even the better secondary works often cite other secondary works for crucial or controversial claims. Highly placed interviewees frequently contradict one another (and themselves) on basic points. Every effort has been made here to bypass the conventional wisdom and instead derive the argument from first principles based on new primary research, including archival material and interviews. These new sources get us closer to the decision-making of the apartheid regime than ever before.

South Africa’s decision to intervene in the Angolan Civil War provides a fascinating window into a regime at the crossroads of decolonization and the Cold War. This article explores these frontiers by operating on multiple levels. It shows how the intervention was a classic creeping engagement, with no measured decision ever taken over whether to become fully invested in the conflict or to stay out completely. The article illuminates the role of internal politics, focusing on how the issue of intervention laid bare the bitter conflicts between Pretoria’s hawks and doves over the appropriate interactions with black Africa to secure the country’s future; and it discusses the intellectual undercurrents that shaped and defined these conflicts, illustrating how South Africa’s understanding of the situation in Angola was forged by the emerging philosophy of “total onslaught,” a homegrown doctrine of threat perception articulated in Cold War terms.

**Pretoria’s African Policy**

South Africa’s involvement in Angola must be seen against the background of its existing foreign policy in Africa. Pretoria’s central security fear during the years that John Vorster served as prime minister (1966–1978) was that black liberation movements, contained easily enough on their own, might garner enough tangible support from Communist powers to pose a real threat to the regime’s existence. Consequently, since the early 1960s, the South African government had been cooperating militarily with fellow white regimes in Portugal and Rhodesia to keep the twin forces of decolonization and black African nationalism away from its borders. Simultaneously, however, Vorster had been steadily extending his “outward policy” (roughly 1967–1975), using South Africa’s economic predominance to forge bilateral ties with moderate black African states in an audacious counterattack against increasing interna-

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tional isolation. The Portuguese coup of April 1974, which heralded the transfer of Portugal's colonies in Mozambique and Angola to local rule, gave a renewed urgency to this quest for coexistence with black Africa while also driving a change in strategy. In a new initiative known as “détente,” Pretoria began enthusiastically presenting itself as part of the solution to renewed racial tensions in Southern Africa, particularly in Rhodesia, rather than an integral part of the problem. As a May 1975 foreign policy briefing to the Afrikaner Broederbond Executive Council explained, “It became unmistakably clear that something drastic had to be done to stave off [afweer] a bloody confrontation. . . . South Africa once again took the initiative. Channels of communication that heretofore had not existed were now opened.”

Like outward policy, détente was predicated on the assumption that African leaders in southern Africa would prefer to see South Africa help create stability and security for all in the region, rather than make its apartheid system a leading cause of instability. South Africa was content to assume the mantle of regional power broker, but only so long as all states “fully subscribe[d] to the principle of non-interference in each other’s domestic affairs.” This cardinal principle of non-interference, specifically designed to quarantine apartheid from South Africa’s relationships with black Africa, was vitiated by Pretoria itself through its intervention in Angola.

In keeping with this new thinking, Pretoria surprised many in May 1974 by promptly indicating its intention to recognize the Marxist Frelimo (Liberation Front of Mozambique) government in Lourenço Marques, provided it refused to allow South African guerrilla movements to operate from within its territory. Pretoria then cooperated extensively with Zambian President Ken-
neth Kaunda in an endeavor to shepherd a transition to majority rule in Rhodesia, located between the two and South Africa’s former ally in the white redoubt. The boldness of these initiatives caught unsympathetic foreign observers off-guard while captivating an initially skeptical electorate. London’s Financial Times observed in a feature article on détente:

There is a curious mood in the Republic today which is almost euphoric. . . . For the first time for well over a decade White South Africans, pilloried and isolated in the international community, now believe they are well on the way to acceptability. They find it a heady experience.14

By mid-1975, détente had become the undisputed centerpiece of South Africa’s foreign policy and Pretoria’s designated vehicle for international rehabilitation.

Vorster’s foreign policy team of Bureau for State Security (BOSS) chief Hendrik van den Bergh, Secretary for Foreign Affairs Brand Fourie, and Foreign Minister Hilgard Muller instinctively believed that through careful diplomacy and judicious use of South Africa’s substantial resources they could provide solutions to Africa’s problems and thus gain international acceptance. In this sense, the Vorsterian approach to foreign affairs was one of cautious optimism, always looking for diplomatic opportunities to secure peaceful coexistence. But Defence Minister Botha and his SADF saw the world differently. They believed that South Africa was under attack from a Communist-driven “total onslaught” that was responsible for the full panoply of opposition to the apartheid state.15 From Botha’s perspective, the international revolution of Marxist doctrine, Soviet and Chinese foreign policy, African socialism, and regional liberation groups such as the African National Congress (ANC) and South West Africa People’s Organization (SWAPO) all formed part of a potent and monolithic threat aimed squarely at Pretoria’s independence and the self-determination of Afrikanerdom. According to such thinking, Western opponents of apartheid simply played into the Communists’ hands. In such dangerous times, Botha argued, the assertive and proactive


14. “South Africa’s Trade Routes to Détente,” p. 4. See also “South Africa,” Financial Times.

preservation of national security was the imperative in every situation. In a typical speech in May 1975, Botha urged,

The broader pattern today is typified by the belligerence of certain African States, a strengthening of the Soviets’ presence in the Indian Ocean, an expansion of the footholds the Soviets and Red China have gained on this continent, and the collapse of democracy’s resistance in much of Asia. This is the background against which South Africa must view its own defence measures. . . . This means that we must not only have an adequate capability but also have it conspicuously so that it may serve both to deter and to repel those who may have designs on our country, its stability and its sovereignty. We would be foolish not to give our full support to these [détente] efforts, but equally foolish to allow ourselves to be lulled into a false sense of security, to neglect our military capability, and to be ultimately reduced to speaking from a position of weakness.16

The distinction between these two approaches to South Africa’s foreign policy was not a dichotomy. The defence minister not only supported détente publicly at the time, he would even vigorously defend it twenty years later in his submission to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.17 Likewise, Vorster was committed to a strong national defense. Under persistent pressure from Botha, he substantially increased the defense budget even before the Angolan experience.18 Vorster may well have realized that bolstering national defense not only placated his cantankerous defence minister but also gave him political cover for his audacious détente diplomacy. However, in terms of emphasis and tenor, Vorster’s and Botha’s philosophies differed markedly. After the Portuguese coup, Vorster sought peaceful cohabitation with neighboring Mozambique. “We regarded the events in Moçambique as a challenge,” Muller later explained. “It was seen as an opportunity to prove that we, as is the position in the case of our relations with our other neighboring states, are prepared to, and can, live together with our neighbours.”19 Botha saw the region quite differently. He perceived, as he told a group of newspaper editors, “a Russian pincer movement aimed at certain friendly countries like Zambia, Rhodesia, and South Africa. The two points of this movement were Mozambique and Angola.”20

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20. “Vergadering van Minister van Verdediging met Koerant-Redakteurs op Dinsdag, 9 Des 75.”
case of trouble in Lourenço Marques. For Botha, two inescapable and interrelated conclusions followed from his perception of a state of total onslaught. First, given the range of threats against South Africa, the definition of what areas of governance fell under the rubric of “national security” had to be broadened. Second, because national security was the preserve of the SADF, its responsibilities and resources had to be expanded accordingly.

Stage One: Arms and Funds

All the early assessments by South African diplomats had been that Mozambique would be the primary source of regional instability in the wake of Portuguese decolonization. However, Vorster cannily realized that Frelimo was the only plausible successor to the Portuguese and that Mozambique was heavily dependent on the South African economy. Hence, skillful diplomacy could produce a modus vivendi in a situation that Pretoria could not readily change anyway. Instead, from late 1974 it became apparent that Angola would pose the major problem. Numerous armed groups claimed power there. The MPLA, a Marxist guerrilla movement led by Agostinho Neto, had its stronghold in Luanda and in regions east of the capital. The National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA), led by the corrupt and unimpressive Holden Roberto, was based in northern Angola. Roberto was very closely linked to Mobutu Sese Seko’s Zaire and preferred to run his operations from Kinshasa, only rarely entering Angola itself. Finally, the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) was based in the south. Though less militarily and politically organized than the others, UNITA had the advantage of being led by the charismatic and capable Jonas


23. For a more extensive outline of the groups and their respective strengths at this early stage, see Buro vir Staatsveiligheid, Weeklikse Oorsig Nr. 2 Vir die Week Eindigende 9 Januarie 1974, in SADFAA, 1/22/1 OS, 18, Angola: Political Situation and Developments.


Savimbi. Both of the latter groups were ideologically flexible, though the MPLA’s commitment to Marxism and the politics of its long-time supporters in the Soviet bloc soon shaped the FNLA and UNITA into an uneasy alliance under a nominally anti-Communist banner.26 The Alvor Agreement, concluded in January 1975, announced that political power would be shared between the three movements until independence on 11 November. The unity interim government quickly became untenable. South African Consul-General Mike Malone’s reports from Luanda depict a steady descent into civil war.27 The factions spent their time fighting one another, while their representatives went abroad seeking diplomatic recognition of their claim to the throne as well as arms and funds to strengthen the capabilities of their paramilitary wings.

Events in Angola constituted an unwelcome development for South Africa’s détente agenda of providing stability and security throughout Southern Africa. In Pretoria—and particularly within the SADF, one of whose primary responsibilities was the security of South-West Africa (SWA)—officials were deeply concerned that SWAPO cadres might obtain safe havens in southern Angola from which they could more effectively undermine South African control across the border.28 The last thing South Africa needed in its quest to be considered an African state—rather than a neocolonial one like Rhodesia—was to be drawn into an active counterinsurgency against a black nationalist liberation group, a conflict that would inevitably attract unified African opposition.29 However, the existence of a tangible security threat was not the only factor distinguishing the situation in Angola from that in Mozambique a year earlier. Unlike in Mozambique, South Africa had little economic leverage to ensure neighborly behavior from postcolonial Luanda. Moreover, whereas in Mozambique the transfer of power to Frelimo had been a foregone conclusion, in Angola none of the movements was preeminent. In the three-way power struggle developing in Angola, Pretoria therefore per-

26. The FNLA-UNITA alliance was essentially an anti-MPLA alliance of convenience along the lines of “my enemy’s enemy is my friend.” Clashes between the two “allies” continued for months. See CSI to Military Secretary, “Intrep 168/75,” 11 September 1975, in SANDFA, Group 4—PW Botha, Box 153, 48/3, Inligtinggoorsig: DMI, Vol. 9; and Hoof van Staf Inligting to Military Secretary and other senior military officers, Intrep 248/75, “Friction between FNLA/UNITA,” 10 November 1975, in SANDFA, Group 1—HSAW Chief of Defence Force, Box 174, HSAW/82/1/1, Vol. 1, Terroriste Bedrywighede en Onluste: Angola.

27. See reports in SADFAA, 1/22/1 OS, 19, Angola: Political Situation and Developments and SADFAA, 1/22/3, 5, Angola Relations with South Africa.

28. DMI, “Die Militêre Bedreiging teen die RSA.”

ceived a unique opportunity to shape the nature of the postcolonial govern-
ment to its advantage.

From the outset, the question of coming to an arrangement with the
MPLA was a non-starter. As even a cursory glance at the major South African
newspapers from the time reveals, the excitement and cautious optimism en-
gendered at home by détente continued to be counterbalanced by a visceral
fear of the dangers of Communist expansion. The public remained acutely
sensitive to any suggestion of the spread of Communist influence—broadly
defined—in any part of Africa or the Indian Ocean. Even a minor Soviet
buildup in distant Somalia in June sent South Africa’s editors into hyperbolic
overdrive.30

Pretoria therefore launched a series of exploratory overtures to the FNLA
and UNITA to see whether an Angola ruled by either would provide the re-
gional stability and security that South Africa desired. From February 1975,
SADF military intelligence and BOSS officials began meeting regularly with
the upper echelons of both organizations in Angola and Europe.31 Both the
FNLA and UNITA were desperate for help and said what South Africa
wanted to hear: namely, that an Angola under their control would form part
of an anti-Communist bloc in southern Africa, built on the three pillars of
economic interdependence, good neighborliness (goeie buurskap), and non-
interference in each other’s affairs.32 Crucially, both committed to denying
SWAPO bases from which to operate in southern Angola. “Dr Savimbi prom-
ised,” Spies wrote, “that SWAPO attacks on South-West Africa would not be
permitted.”33 The FNLA, not to be outdone, said it would allow the SADF to
conduct “hot pursuit” operations against SWAPO operatives up to 80 kilo-
meters inside Angola.34 Consequently, over the coming months Pretoria sup-
plied limited military aid and funding to both organizations.

What transformed the situation in Angola was the increasing realization
that the MPLA was becoming the dominant movement. A BOSS assessment

31. UNITA had accepted very small quantities of arms from South Africa in October and December
1974. For more details of these early contacts, see Du Preez, Avontuur in Angola, pp. 13–15; and Spies,
Operasie Savannah, pp. 60–65. Throughout this article, the term “military intelligence” has been em-
ployed instead of “Afdeling Miliêre Inligting (AMI)” for ease of use.
32. Spies, Operasie Savannah, pp. 60–65. When Daniel Chipenda met South African officials in SWA
later in the year, he did much the same. All three leaders were willing to promise just about anything
to get external support.
33. Ibid., p. 62.
34. Ibid.
from January 1975 described a situation of three viable contenders with—if anything—the FNLA predominant.35 A dispatch from March—after a split in the MPLA led to Daniel Chipenda taking around 2,000 relatively well-trained troops over to the FNLA—was even more upbeat: “There is more and more evidence that the Communist-dominated MPLA Party is losing ground in Angola . . . and, although they are still definitely a force to be reckoned with, it is my personal opinion that a FNLA/UNITA combination is likely eventually to come out on top.”36 But from late May onward, the MPLA gradually gained the upper hand in Luanda, besting the well-armed but ill-disciplined FNLA forces.37 Simultaneously, having been dispatched to form a second FNLA front in the south, Chipenda approached Pretoria, requesting assistance.38 Both developments grabbed Vorster’s attention, and he asked for a comprehensive review of the situation from the SADF and BOSS.39

The BOSS’s recommendations remain unknown, but the SADF report presented by Botha to Vorster on 26 June, was categorical. According to the SADF, the MPLA, having obtained support from the Organization of African Unity, the Portuguese Communist Party, leftwing African states, and the Soviet Union, was the presumptive ultimate victor in Angola. “Only drastic and currently unforeseeable developments,” the SADF report concluded ominously, “could alter such an outcome.”40 Four courses of action were outlined. South Africa could:

1. Provide help to the FNLA (Chipenda). This would cost relatively little. However, nothing guaranteed that he alone could bring stability to southern Angola or prevent an MPLA takeover.
2. Help UNITA and both wings of the FNLA to form “a united anti-Communist front.” To support them would yield benefits in the long

35. Buro vir Staatsveiligheid (BOSS), Weeklikse Oorsig Nr. 2 vir die Week Eindigende 9 Januarie 1974, in SADFAA, 1/22/1 OS, 18, Angola: Political Situation and Developments.
36. E. M. Malone, SA Consul-General, Luanda, to the Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Pretoria, Developments in Angola, 19 March 1975, in SADFAA, 1/22/1 OS, 18, Angola: Political Situation and Developments.
37. BOSS, message, Visser to Wilson, 14 July 1975, in SADFAA, 1/22/1 OS, 19, Angola: Political Situation and Developments; and DMI, “Die Militêre Bedreiging teen die RSA.”
38. Spies, Operasie Savannah, p. 63.
40. “Waardering oor die Moontlike Gebruik/Aanwending van Chipenda/FNLA tot Voordeel van RSA.” The SADF assessment of the situation in Angola was more alarmist than that reaching Washington at the same time. “We believe it is highly unlikely,” one brief for the U.S. National Security Council meeting on Angola on 27 June noted, “that the MPLA will be able to vanquish its rivals and achieve complete control of Angola in the next several months.” See “Special Sensitive Memorandum Regarding the Response to NSSM 224,” n.d., in Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library (GRFL), U.S. National Security Institutional Files, 1974–1977, Box 10, NSC Meeting 27 June 1975—Angola (1).
term, including the formation of a friendly neighboring state and a secure Angola-SWA border.

3. Furnish socioeconomic assistance to southern Angola. This would bolster South Africa’s détente aims and help future Angola–South Africa relations. However, the exclusion of SWAPO from the border area by a future government in Luanda would not be guaranteed. Moreover, in light of the fierce fighting between them, it is doubtful whether any of the parties would have been interested in such assistance.

4. Contribute no assistance to any party. This would give South Africa no control over events.

The SADF clearly favored the second option, and this was the path Vorster chose.

The significance of the SADF report lay not only in its direct role in Vorster’s decision but in its establishment of the total onslaught paradigm through which Pretoria construed subsequent developments in Angola. However, the clarity with which the conclusions predicted a pending Cold War confrontation between a foreign-backed MPLA lacking any real domestic support and the anti-Communist forces of Roberto, Savimbi, and Chipenda masked the complexities of the on-the-ground situation, as the lengthy report itself reveals.41 Far from two ideological blocs naturally developing in Angola, the FNLA and UNITA were at least as much rivals with each other as they were with the MPLA. “The relationship between the FNLA and UNITA in Southern Angola cannot be considered a good one,” the report noted. “The differences between Chipenda and Savimbi are too great to allow an alliance between the two to work.”42 Similarly, the SADF assumed that the MPLA, as a fellow liberation movement, would actively support SWAPO, but the report made clear that the future compliance of the FNLA and UNITA with South Africa’s security aims was far from guaranteed:

Although Savimbi earlier made it clear that he would not interfere in the internal affairs of RSA or support South Africa’s enemies, SWAPO terrorists were [previously] trained in Southern Angola by UNITA instructors and housed in UNITA bases. UNITA leaders are currently doing nothing to restrict the UNITA-SWAPO understanding in Southern Angola.43

41. For more on these complexities, see Marcum, The Angolan Revolution.
42. “Waardering oor die Moontlike Gebruik/Aanwending van Chipenda/FNLA tot Voordeel van RSA.”
43. Ibid.
The FNLA was even receiving military training from Communist China, which soon wisely extricated itself from the burgeoning conflict. In mid-1975, Angola was at the chaotic intersection of a variety of historical forces, with many possible outcomes.

Yet the SADF’s superimposition of a Cold War dichotomy onto a considerably more subtle postcolonial power struggle was not just misguided; it was also counterproductive and self-fulfilling. In July 1975, tangible international Communist support for the MPLA was decidedly limited.\(^44\) Although Havana, Pretoria, and Washington all became concerned about the course of events at roughly the same time—in mid-July—Cuban assistance was much slower in materializing. Not until late July did modest financial support—only $100,000—flow in from Havana, and not until early September, well after substantial further South African involvement, did Cuban advisers arrive to train and bolster the MPLA’s forces.\(^45\) Soviet involvement was similarly delayed. However, influenced by the doctrine of total onslaught, South Africa overreacted, perceiving a massive alignment of Communist support behind the MPLA when such support was at that point inchoate. Not until 2 November—two weeks after South Africa had sent regular forces into Angola—did the SADF receive confirmation that the Cubans were supporting the MPLA on the ground.\(^46\) South Africa’s (and to a lesser extent the U.S.) depiction of events in Angola as an ideological struggle is what raised the stakes and transformed the conflict into a test of Cold War wills, while also galvanizing international Communist support for liberation movements in southern Africa, first in the form of the MPLA and, from 1976, in the form of SWAPO. In an important sense, therefore, South Africa’s intervention in Angola is what gave rise to the total onslaught, rather than the reverse.

On 4 July, SADF Director of Operations Constand Viljoen and BOSS Head of Foreign Operations Gert Rothman went to Kinshasa to consult with Savimbi and Roberto about their military needs. Viljoen recalled:

> Savimbi was there. Holden Roberto was there. They explained to me the situation. They said “Can you give us any support that will be able to assist us in holding our positions?” . . . I then made certain recommendations to the government that the two forces of Roberto and Savimbi cannot hold themselves against

\(^{44}\) Gleijeses, *Confl icting Missions*, pp. 247–256.

\(^{45}\) Ibid., pp. 246–265. When Havana finally moved, it did so decisively. Almost 500 advisers—several times what the MPLA had requested—arrived to staff four training centers. But the centers were not up and running by 18–20 October. Soviet interest was similarly delayed.

the MPLA forces supported by Cuba and the USSR [sic], and they had to find another way of fighting, which was the more conventional way.47

Viljoen compiled a list of weapons, supplies, and equipment—mortars, machine guns, rockets, grenades, plastic explosives, vehicles, and radios—to send to UNITA and the FNLA. The total cost amounted to some 20 million rand. Even as he did so, the situation in Angola was deteriorating sharply. By mid-July, urgent South African dispatches were warning Pretoria that the MPLA had nearly gained control of the capital.48 The FNLA and UNITA left the interim government. Fears of a full-blown Cold War conflict in southern Africa began to materialize. “What is looming then,” editorialized the influential Afrikaans daily Die Burger (often seen as a mouthpiece for Botha and his Cape caucus of the National Party), “is a spreading proxy war between China and Russia in Africa, in which the two Red powers, not ready for the long predicted day of reckoning on the Asiatic borders, are skirmishing, as Hitler and Stalin did in Spain, for imperialist advantages.”49

On 14 July, in this tense atmosphere, van den Bergh, Fourie, and SADF Chief of Staff Ray Armstrong flew to Klippen to see Vorster, who was then on his winter holiday.50 The prime minister approved the list and empowered van den Bergh to obtain the necessary arms from abroad to hide the extent of Pretoria’s role.51 From the outset, the goal was to influence the nature of post-colonial Angola’s government, not to determine it. Viljoen recalled:

The MPLA were getting the best in Angola because of support from the USSR and support from the Cubans [sic]. So the whole idea of participating in action against them was to maintain UNITA and the FNLA in a position where they would be able to participate in a government of national unity which was due to start on 11 November 1975.52

The 20-million rand decision reflected South Africa’s earlier African policy of outsourcing the realization of its national security aims to avoid drawing attention to itself and its apartheid policies. For a decade, South Africa had supplied massive amounts of equipment and training, as well as some personnel, to help both Lisbon and Salisbury fight their counterinsurgencies against lib-

47. Interview with Constand Viljoen, Pretoria, 13 July 2011. Meaningful Cuban and Soviet support actually materialized considerably later.
48. Buro vir Staatsveiligheid message, Visser to Wilson, 14 July 1975 (second message), in SADFAA, 1/22/1 OS, 19, Angola: Political Situation and Developments.
51. Du Preez, Avontuur in Angola, p. 18; and, Spies, Operasie Savannah, p. 65.
52. Interview with Constand Viljoen, Pretoria, 13 July 2011. See also Fourie, Brandpunte, p. 200.
eration movements (which, in the former instance, included both UNITA and the FNLA). Likewise, in 1964 in the Congo, it had bankrolled Portuguese efforts to bolster Moïse-Kapenda Tshombe’s anti-Communist forces with arms and mercenaries and thereby crush the Simba Rebellion. Therefore, Pretoria’s decision to support the FNLA and UNITA at arm’s length to avoid detection was in accord with a preexisting template for action.

At this point, a divergence appeared between BOSS and the SADF, the two bodies responsible for South Africa’s national security, over the merits of involvement in Angola. “Already at this stage,” Spies writes, “the SADF was of the opinion that weapons deliveries would not suffice, but had to be complemented by logistical support . . . and the provision of a few officers . . . to help plan an appropriate political and military offensive.” But although the SADF was already looking ahead to deeper involvement, BOSS was uncomfortable with even the existing level of commitment. Johan Mostert, then a junior BOSS officer, recalled:

It so happened that I was working in General Van den Bergh’s office when the [weapons] request from the Military came through. Van den Bergh, to the best of my knowledge, had no hand in drawing it up. I had to process it . . . . It was in conversations with him during that time that I got the impression that he was not very keen on the war effort.

Van den Bergh harbored what turned out to be well-founded doubts about where South Africa’s open-ended and ill-defined commitment to the FNLA and UNITA would lead and the impact it would have on the détente program with which he was heavily involved. By mid-1975, negotiations over the future of Rhodesia, Pretoria’s highest foreign policy priority, were at a crucial stage. The historic Victoria Falls summit (Brugberaad) brokered by Zambia and South Africa would be held at the end of August. The uncertain consequences of South Africa’s covert involvement in Angola could derail everything.

Bureaucratic rivalry provided an additional and underlying dimension to the BOSS-SADF disagreement. There was no love lost between the two bodies tasked with preserving South Africa’s security. BOSS believed it sat at the pinnacle of South Africa’s intelligence structure, with military intelligence re-

53. See Miller, “Things Fall Apart.”
54. Spies, Operasie Savannah, p. 65.
porting to it. Van den Bergh and Vorster were personally close, having been interned together during the Second World War. This proximity to power was reflected not only in the substantial resources accorded to BOSS, but also in the responsibilities given to it outside the intelligence field. A former policeman, van den Bergh had stood quite improbably at the heart of South African foreign policy for almost a decade and was frequently used as Vorster’s emissary on sensitive missions to black Africa. The SADF, however, saw itself as the only body responsible for countering actual national security threats. In its view, therefore, military intelligence detailed specifically military threats, BOSS reported on broader threats in the “social, political, economic, ideological and psychological” spheres, and the SADF sat on top of the two, charged with developing strategic responses to threats of all kinds.58 In practice, their relationship was one of little coordination and much rivalry. “Van den Bergh was at that time one channel of communication to the Prime Minister,” Spies wrote. “The second . . . was through military intelligence to the Minister for Defence and thereby to the Prime Minister.” The two channels converged only at the top.59 The Potgieter Commission (1969–1971), convened to clarify the distinction in responsibilities, achieved little. Rhodesian Central Intelligence Organisation head Ken Flower recalls, “It was depressing for us on our visits to South Africa to have to listen to ‘BOSS’ reviling the Military, the Military berating ‘BOSS’ and, towards the end, ‘BOSS’ railing against the Police—in short, almost everyone denigrating almost everyone else.”60 Into the mid-1970s, the rivalry only grew as Botha, prickly and aggressive at the best of times, became ever more assertive in his advocacy of the SADF’s remit. The long-time defence minister (1966–1980) and the SADF forged a close relationship, with Botha endlessly pursuing (and securing) more resources and responsibilities, and the SADF in return providing Botha with a power base to support his political ambition and security philosophies.61 (Even after he became prime minister, Botha did not give up the defense portfolio for a further two years.) Vorster’s appointment calendar sheds valuable light on how the BOSS-SADF rivalry operated in practice. Meetings with the prime minister at this time—whether about Angola, Rhodesia, or other security topics—often included the foreign policy double team of Fourie and van den

Bergh (Muller often being abroad), or Botha, but only rarely all three. Inevitably, therefore, the question of how Vorster would decide to approach the emerging problem in Angola became heavily influenced by the rivalry between the SADF and BOSS over their relative roles in the security sphere and their differing conceptions of the country’s security priorities.

Stage Two: Crossing the Border

The event that transformed South Africa’s interest in the security of southern Angola was the seizure of the Calueque Dam and the Ruacana hydroelectric installations, both largely financed by Pretoria and located just across the SWA/Angola border (hereinafter referred to as “the border sites”). Both at the time and ever since, the seizure has been shrouded in controversy and confusion, but new evidence helps to illuminate what occurred and why.

Starting in July 1975, the MPLA and UNITA had been involved in skirmishes throughout anarchic southern Angola, where the Portuguese presence was only nominal. Into early August, workers at the border sites complained of repeated harassment by UNITA forces. This was brought to the attention of the SADF’s upper echelons at a meeting in Pretoria late on the afternoon of Friday, 8 August, and a contingency plan was developed for the sites’ protection. That evening, the workers were again stopped and threatened by local UNITA fighters, and the next morning a small border patrol unit moved in unilaterally. The plan was immediately put into action. According to du Preez’s authorized history, “people in Pretoria” ordered reinforcements from Otjiwarongo and the deployment of an entire battalion out of distant Walvis Bay to secure the region surrounding the sites. By Monday, the South African army was entrenched in southern Angola.

Subsequently, the seizure of the border sites facilitated heavy South Afri-

64. At this stage, South Africa’s relationship with UNITA was both low-key and covert. The bandits had no idea about the emerging alliance.
65. Informed about the action the following week, the Portuguese objected to the presence of South African soldiers on Portugal’s sovereign territory. The South African DFA soon (accurately) countered that it preferred to have Portugal defend the sites, but the Portuguese were unable and unwilling to do so. See B. G. Fourie, Sekretaris van Buitelandse Sake, to Admiral H. H. Biermann, Hoof van die Suid-Afrikaanse Weermag, Pretoria, 21 August 1975, in SADFAA, 1/22/3 OS, 6, Angola: Relations with South Africa; and Kommandement SouthWest Africa to H Leer, “Minutes of meeting with SA and Portuguese Personnel,” 27 August 1975, in SADFAA, 1/22/3 OS, 6, Angola: Relations with South Africa.
can involvement in Angola. The DFA, the cabinet, and (eventually) the press were told that the SADF was holding the border sites, which served as a plausible explanation for the observable increase in operational activity. From that point on, however, all three were kept in the dark as South Africa sent troops and war materiel deep into Angolan territory under the cover of reinforcing the existing position at the border. This much of the deception, at least in its broad outline, has long been known.

However, a closer inspection of the evidence suggests that the seizure of the border sites should be understood quite differently. Botha and the SADF were intensely concerned about the possibility that southern Angola might provide a rear base for SWAPO forces striking into SWA—this possibility was a key focus of the SADF’s operational command. From late July, these concerns sharpened. Having effectively secured control of Luanda and its environs, the MPLA began an offensive into the south. As John Stockwell, who was then head of the Central Intelligence Agency’s Angola program, later explained in his memoirs, the situation was “deteriorating rapidly. The MPLA controlled twelve of fifteen provinces and was gaining momentum.” Elements within the SADF began to agitate for a decisive response to halt the MPLA’s surge.

In this context, the border sites affair became something of a Gulf of Tonkin incident, manipulated by the SADF to force the agenda and justify further engagement in Angola. In this respect, the minutes of a tense interdepartmental meeting held at the Union Buildings in Pretoria on 11 August are illuminating. Clarifying an elliptical suggestion in du Preez’s account, the minutes show that although a contingency plan had been developed and approved by the SADF on the 11th, the larger question of what would be done about the harassment of the workers was supposed to be addressed at the interdepartmental meeting. Instead, as Hugo Biermann, chief of the Defence

66. On the cabinet’s briefings, see Kabinet Notuleregister, 19 August 1975, in SANA, 1/1/6, 1, though more fully only on Kabinet Notuleregister, 9 September 1975, in SANA, 1/1/6, 1. The DFA materials are stored in SADFAA, 1/22/3 OS, 6, Angola: Relations with South Africa. On the press and the public, see “Keeping Public Informed,” Pretoria News, 8 September 1975, p. 13; and “Min. PW oor SA troepe in Angola,” Die Transvaler, 9 September 1975, p. 1.


68. Stockwell, In Search of Enemies, p. 87.

69. Fourie, Brandpunte, p. 200.

70. Minutes, Vergadering Oor Kunene-Skema, Union Buildings, Pretoria, 3 p.m., 11 August 1975, in SADFAA, 1/22/3 OS, 6, Angola: Relations with South Africa.

71. In his account, du Preez writes that at the SADF meeting “[s]omeone decided: ‘The whole thing could stand over till Monday.’” See du Preez, Avontuur in Angola, p. 24. The chairman, Fourie, declared at the start that “the meeting was requested before the events of the weekend. The events of the weekend have however made the meeting superfluous.” The composition of the meeting shows that its
Force, informed the meeting, when reports of the attacks on the workers flowed in, Botha sought approval for action from Vorster. The prime minister, busy with the landmark détente meeting with Ian Smith that produced both the Pretoria Agreement and the Victoria Falls summit, assented. Neither Fourie nor van den Bergh was consulted, and both subsequently vented their opposition at the meeting. The urbane Fourie, chairing the meeting, angrily pointed out that it was “an act of aggression to send troops across the border” and demanded to know “on whose authority the SAW [the army] had acted.” He could scarcely believe Biermann’s assertion that the seizure was indeed executed with the proper authority. Van den Bergh agreed with Fourie, stressing that “confrontation must be avoided at all costs.” The minutes thus show definitively that the military was the sole force behind the decision to seize the border sites and that, in what would become a familiar pattern in the months and years to come, Botha had consciously circumvented collective decision-making to obtain his desired end. For his part, Viljoen later suspected that the seizure of the border sites not only became a convenient cover for South African involvement after the fact, but that Botha had made use of a minor incident to justify a long-sought presence in Southern Angola:

Let me put that straight. [The seizure of the border sites] was used in order to explain the presence of South Africa in Angola. It is true South African involvement in the scheme was big, and it’s true Ovamboland [in northern SWA] was very dependent on the water, and South West Africa on the electricity. But I must be honest, I always got the impression it was a handy way of explaining an operation that didn’t have the intention of protecting Calueque and Ruacana. It was a handy explanation to use to the rest of the world.73

**Stage Three: Training and Advisers**

Throughout August, the SADF lost confidence in the ability of the anti-Communist coalition to hold its own. Angolan refugees began streaming into SWA, suggesting an escalation of the conflict, and the MPLA continued mak-
ing inroads into the south, as well as east toward the Zairian border. On 28 August, following a trip to the border area to gain first-hand knowledge of the situation, Botha ordered the SADF to begin covertly supplying weapons to the southern arm of the FNLA, led by Chipenda. Botha's authorized biography confirms that he only later informed Vorster of this action, which had been planned since 14–15 August. These weapons supplemented the 20 million rand worth of arms purchased by BOSS that had begun to reach the FNLA and UNITA. Yet the SADF also believed that training was required in addition to the arms. The next day, 29 August, several SADF officers, headed by Lieutenant Colonel Jan Breytenbach, held talks with Chipenda at the SADF base at Rundu (SWA), developed an operational plan to help him retake the south, and sent it back to Viljoen in Pretoria.

The Breytenbach-Viljoen recommendations state that in addition to the existing South African weapons supplies, the FNLA had a “great need” for not only training but logistical support and operational command in the form of South African officers. “Personally,” Breytenbach wrote in the original operational plan, “I believe that the success of the operation depends on good leadership at every level, that is to say, white South African command and logistical support.” A four-stage support program was proposed. First, South Africa would provide a variety of weapons to compete with the MPLA’s Soviet equipment and would show the local forces how to use them. Next, the SADF would train the guerrillas in semi-conventional warfare, enabling them to hold major centers, and would then launch a two-to-three-week crash course to create nine separate offensive units that would drive the MPLA (and SWAPO) forces from southern Angola. In the final stage, South Africa would help train a regular force that could provide security in the south and allow “normal government functions” to be carried out.

At the annual congress of the Cape National Party in East London at the

75. “Op Savannah: Opsomming van Gebeure tot 10 Jan 76.”
76. De Villiers and De Villiers, PW, p. 248. According to the official histories, the supply of weapons to Chipenda occurred under operational order 8/75, issued on 28 August 1975, but the internal SADF documents show this to be somewhat misleading. Du Preez, *Avontuur in Angola*, p. 27; and Spies, *Operatie Savannah*, pp. 66–67.
77. Spies, p. 67. Viljoen initially was at the Rundu meetings, too, but he had to leave to go back to Pretoria. Spies refers to the recommendations being sent to Geldenhuys, who worked as director of staff operations for the army.
78. Viljoen to H SAW, Malan, “Op Savannah—Hulp aan FNLA,” 3 September 1975, in SANA, MEM, 1/572, I15/2, DG Ops. This document, written by Viljoen, was based on Breytenbach’s original recommendations and forwarded by Botha to Vorster.
start of September, Botha sought to persuade Vorster that South Africa should adopt the recommendations and take a more assertive role in training and arming the anti-Communist movements. In his speech as leader of the Cape caucus, he portrayed events in Angola even at this early stage as posing a major national security threat in the context of the Cold War:

> Weapons pour into the country in the form of Russian help to the MPLA. Tanks, armoured troop carriers, rockets, mortars and smaller arms have already been delivered. The situation remains exceptionally fluid and chaotic, and provides cover for SWAPO terrorists out of South-West Africa. Russian help and support, both material and [illegible] in moral encouragement, constitutes a direct threat.\(^80\)

He gave the recommendations to Vorster, along with a short handwritten note: “I think we have to do it. We will implement [toepas] with great secrecy.” The next day, the two men flew back to Pretoria together.\(^81\) The prime minister gave his assent.\(^82\) Training of roughly 400 FNLA (Chipenda) guerrillas soon began under Breytenbach at Mpupa in southern Angola. The UNITA program, for some 800 men and structured along the same four-stage template, followed shortly thereafter.\(^83\)

This single decision—Vorster’s approval of the Breytenbach-Viljoen recommendations—was pivotal to South Africa’s subsequent escalating commitments in Angola. The SADF’s commitment at the time amounted to little more than the 20-million-rand arms package, supplied under plausible deniability. Pretoria could have walked away from the brewing maelstrom. Certainly this is what BOSS was advocating.\(^84\) At the conclusion of the Breytenbach-Viljoen recommendations, Viljoen candidly observed: “I have reason to believe that General van den Bergh will not be entirely on board largely due to the impact that any leak will have on the détente campaign. It may therefore be necessary to keep our Minister [Botha] fully informed throughout so that at the Prime Ministerial level the matter is put by both sides.”\(^85\) This evidence, coupled with Mostert’s recollection above, flatly contradicts the thesis that BOSS was eager to intervene in Angola. That notion

\(^{80}\) P. W. Botha, speech, “RSA se Strategiese Posisie,” 1–3 September 1975, in SANDFA, Group 4—PW Botha, Box 142, 76/1, Strategie: Algemeen, Vol. 1. If Cuban intervention in Angola had been a factor in Pretoria’s thinking in early September, Botha surely would have mentioned it in this speech.

\(^{81}\) Aantekeninge en Dagboeke, Vorster’s Dagboek, in ARCA, PV 132, 5/1/19–22.

\(^{82}\) Du Preez, *Avontuur in Angola*, p. 28.

\(^{83}\) “Op Savannah: Opsomming van Gebeure tot 10 Jan 76.”


\(^{85}\) Ibid.
was widely propagated after the war, particularly in SADF circles. The allegation features prominently, for instance, in an authorized biography of Botha. 86

Van den Bergh’s concerns were ignored. Vorster’s approval of the four-stage plan, now christened Operation Savannah, became the point of no return, although it was never intended as such. By committing the SADF to the end of bolstering the FNLA and UNITA, the prime minister inadvertently gave the military free rein in subsequent months to claim that it had insufficient means to achieve the designated end, which remained constant. This was the mechanism by which all subsequent escalations—including the insertion of SADF forces in mid-October—would be justified. 87 Yet even at this early stage, Botha was planning something more than a training and support role. An internal SADF summary of the chronology of the war notes that on 24 September:

The following operational plan was approved in principle by the Minister:

Phase One: Land and cities must be brought under UNITA/FNLA control.

Phase Two: Occupation and pacification [skoonmaak] of the south-western corner of Angola, including cities like Sa de Bandeira and Mocamedes.


Phase Four: Conquest of Luanda. 88

How did Botha gain control of the policy process and convince Vorster to intervene in Angola over the objections of the influential van den Bergh and Fourie? A variety of factors were responsible. First, the issue of involvement in Angola was presented as a function of preserving the security of SWA. Whereas on other issues in the broad national security field, BOSS and the SADF tussled for preeminence, the SADF had a free hand in SWA. This gave Botha’s recommendations a particular salience. Second, it was crucial that the decisions to commit resources in Angola were made incrementally. Over time, this facilitated a much greater level of involvement than Vorster could have envisaged at the outset. Third, Botha’s consistent focus on the concept of national security threats within a Cold War paradigm—which now seemed to be materializing in a total onslaught alliance of the MPLA, SWAPO, Yugoslav arms, Soviet funds, and (later) Cuban soldiers—helped him outmaneuver his

87. This important point is unmistakably clear from Spies, Operasie Savannah, p. 147.
dovish rivals, who disdained Botha’s hawkish approach and crude thinking and had no alternative conceptual framework with which to tackle the deteriorating situation in Angola. The doves were sidelined: Even as events in southern Africa escalated, Fourie, van den Bergh, and Muller preferred to focus on cultivating South Africa’s foreign relationships in a business-as-usual way, which largely meant negating Western criticism of apartheid by highlighting Communist designs on Africa, and Viljoen and Rothman were employed as the envoys to Mobutu, Roberto, and Savimbi. In effect, Muller and Fourie absented the DFA from the ongoing contest over which bureaucracies would be responsible for which elements of national security policy, leaving a vacuum that Botha readily filled.

The final factor explaining Botha’s success in encouraging the escalation of South Africa’s involvement was his ability to use the mechanisms of Vorster’s policy-making to his advantage. In stark contrast to the autocratic style of both his predecessor, Hendrik Verwoerd, and his successor, Botha, Vorster was a consensus seeker and practiced a leadership style designed to avoid the destructive effects of policy disputes. He therefore afforded his ministers substantial leeway to run their portfolios. In practice, this primus inter pares model had dangerous consequences. “The more powerful ministers were effectively in a position to determine overall government policy by presenting the Prime Minister with a fait accompli, and the Cabinet was reduced to an almost peripheral role in the overall elaboration of policy,” political scientist Dan O’Meara explained. “No overall strategic nor policy leadership was forthcoming from the Prime Minister’s office.” Botha had all the attributes needed to thrive in this system. A member of parliament since 1948, a minister since 1961, and the head of the powerful Cape faction of the National Party, he was one of the most senior officials in a rigidly hierarchical system. He was uncompromising and difficult to argue with, and he had an extreme interpretation of the dangers of not granting the SADF the resources and power to do its job. Consequently, as his alarmist views concerning the total onslaught crystallized in 1975–1976 against the backdrop of events in Angola, he began to flex his muscles. The number of motions he proposed in the cabinet rose exponentially. As was customary in Vorster’s system, the vast majority were approved. Botha briefed the cabinet only sparsely and after mili-

89. Ibid. For a good idea of how Muller and Botha differed in their perception of South Africa’s foreign policy priorities at this time, see Address to the Foreign Affairs Club, Waldorf Hotel, London, 22 September 1975, in ARCA, PV 528, 3/2/51, Hilgard Muller, Toesprake.
91. O’Meara, Forty Lost Years, pp. 206–207. Nothing in the prime minister’s limited files from this time contradicts this thesis.
tary actions had already been taken. When he needed prime ministerial approval, as with the Breytenbach-Viljoen recommendations or the seizure of the border sites, he went straight to Vorster, bypassing the cabinet and other ministers.

In addition, abundant evidence suggests that on other occasions Botha escalated South Africa’s involvement in pursuit of the broad ends approved by Vorster but without consulting him about the specific decision. After all, such extreme action could be easily justified—and in subsequent years would be openly justified—by the apocalyptic results of inaction according to the precepts of total onslaught. There is no reliable or verifiable evidence in any of the sources, including the SADF-sponsored histories by du Preez and Spies, that the cabinet or the prime minister was consulted prior to the first (minor) weapons delivery to UNITA in October 1974, the granting of more substantial assistance to the same in February 1975, the decision to start assisting FNLA (Chipenda) in late August, or the support for Holden Roberto’s last-minute attack on Luanda on 10 November. Spies claims at one point that on 24 September the cabinet “approved” Botha’s “plan of action” for training UNITA.93 This cannot have happened. No cabinet meeting was held on 24 September. A meeting was held on the 23rd, but the minutes show that Botha did not brief the cabinet on South Africa’s strategy in Angola. Indeed, it is not clear that he was even present.94 With similar inaccuracy, Magnus Malan, head of the army, later claimed in his memoirs that Botha had kept the cabinet informed before the seizure of the border sites.95 Evidently, Malan, the SADF, its historian Spies, and probably the cabinet itself all thought that Botha’s actions were, at every step, subject to more political authorization than actually took place.

Stage Four: Regular Forces

By the end of September 1975, South Africa was supplying arms and some advisers to the FNLA in the north of Angola and providing full-scale training and logistical support programs for the FNLA (Chipenda) and UNITA in the south. Because of the diplomatic volatility of South Africa’s apartheid system, extreme secrecy was deemed integral from the outset. This extended not only to the DFA, the cabinet, and the press but also to the SADF itself. As the

93. Spies, Operasie Savannah, p. 147.
95. Malan, My Life with the SA Defence Force, p. 113.
Breytenbach-Viljoen recommendations spelled out, the officers involved in
the programs, both in Pretoria and operating out of SWA, were to be specified
in advance by name. The Angolan organizations were ordered to do likewise
for their contacts with the South Africans. “The FNLA soldiers,” the recom-
mendations stipulated, “are to be told that they are being trained by merce-
naries.”96 All equipment, weapons, and ammunition were to be delivered us-
ing non-conventional channels. SADF uniforms and insignia were avoided.
Everything on the ground as in the cabinet room was on a strict need-to-
know basis. In the end, the emphasis on secrecy and the corresponding insis-
tence on a limited intervention severely restrained the SADF’s ability to domi-
nate the inferior MPLA before the intervention of Cuban forces in October.

Lieutenant Colonel Kaas van der Waals, formerly the SADF’s contact
with the pre-coup Portuguese military in Angola, was designated to run the
UNITA training program. His “impossible orders” were to train two brigades
of UNITA fighters in conventional (i.e., non-guerrilla) warfare, launch an op-
eration to stop the MPLA’s advances toward the UNITA capital of Nova
Lisboa “at all costs,” and to do it all in seven weeks, before 11 November,
when he would be withdrawn. “I had one day to prepare everything. That
evening I had to brief the army general staff . . . And the next day I had to
fly in [to Angola] . . . A week later all the personnel that I had chosen would
go in.” The South African goal was the same as it had always been: “We
wanted to put UNITA—and the same with the FNLA, where I was not
involved—in such a strong position that the world and the Organisation of
African Unity would have to recognise both the FNLA and UNITA as well as
the MPLA as equal partners . . . That was the broad concept.”97

The reinforced anti-Communist coalition soon attempted to reverse the
MPLA’s recent gains. Apart from the groups’ inability to use advanced equip-
ment, the central challenge for the SADF was how to transform hit-and-run
forces of limited discipline into armies capable of taking and holding territory.
“The problem which Savimbi and Roberto experienced,” explained Viljoen,
who oversaw both training programs, “was their troops were guerrillas and
they had the habit of fighting and running away in order to be able to fight
another battle.”98 Consequently, the advances met with little success. On
5 October, in a skirmish at Norton de Matos, near Nova Lisboa, just a week
after the arrival of van der Waals’s training team, the UNITA column fled, as
had been their instinct throughout their decade-long insurgency against the
Portuguese. The outspoken van der Waals told his superiors that because of

96. Viljoen to H SAW, Malan, “Op Savannah—Hulp aan FNLA.”
97. Interview with Kaas van der Waals, Centurion, South Africa, 15 August 2011.
98. Interview with Viljoen.
the scale of the conflict and the deficiencies of South Africa’s allies, Pretoria could never achieve its aims through a covert, small-scale, equipment-lite intervention.99 From his experiences with the FNLA at Mpupa, Breytenbach concurred.100

Their recommendations came at a crucial time. By early October, the MPLA had gained control over the capital, most of the harbors, and large parts of the south and east. A massive Cuban military training program aimed at stiffening MPLA forces was almost fully operational.101 It had become clear that despite South Africa’s arms supplies and training programs and the deployment of South African command, logistical, and operational support for the FNLA and UNITA, the MPLA was in a position to seize power by 11 November. “The MPLA enjoys at this stage an advantage over the other two movements and will in all probability emerge from the struggle as the victor,” military intelligence reported. “The MPLA . . . will probably rule Angola.”102

On 8 October, the SADF’s upper echelons agreed with the consensus emanating from the front: the FNLA-UNITA–South Africa alliance could not achieve the desired political end by staying on the defensive and had to go on the offensive by waging conventional warfare.103 South African leaders decided to double down. On 14 October, South Africa sent regular forces, ready and waiting in SWA, into Angola on a short-term mission to bolster the FNLA’s and UNITA’s chances of participating in government on 11 November.

The insertion of South African regular troops to reinforce the advisers and logistical staff already with UNITA and the FNLA was evidently an escalation of means rather than a qualitative shift in strategy. Even so, the injection of regular forces was a watershed moment; it signified a drastic departure from the cardinal principle of South Africa’s foreign policy and the key mechanism for excluding its own apartheid policies from its relationships with black African states: the principle of non-interference in other states’ internal affairs. For this reason alone, a close analysis of how the decision was taken is

99. Interview with van der Waals. Viljoen likewise agitated for the introduction of armored cars and other advanced equipment: Interview with Constand Viljoen, Pretoria, 13 July 2011.

100. Breytenbach, They Live by the Sword, p. 13.


102. DMI, “Die Militêre Bedreiging teen die RSA.” The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) agreed. “The Popular Movement still holds the advantage, both politically and militarily, and shows no willingness to make concessions to anyone. Its leaders expect that on November 11, Lisbon will have no alternative but to leave the Popular Movement in control.” See CIA Cable, origin and destination unclear (likely from Africa to the United States), October 1975, in CIA ERR.

103. Spies, Operasie Savannah, p. 82.
merited. Two sources are highly revealing. On their own, the sparse cabinet minutes and Vorster’s daily calendar say little. But read together and with careful attention paid to the chronology of events and meetings, they provide the details that help illuminate the bigger picture.

On 6 October, Vorster saw his foreign policy team of Muller, van den Bergh, and Fourie. He met again with van den Bergh and Fourie on the morning of 7 October before the scheduled cabinet meeting. Presumably on the basis of these discussions, Vorster informed the cabinet that both Zambia and Zaire had told South Africa that the MPLA was going to win in Angola. The concerns expressed by Pretoria’s African partners must have caused Vorster and the doves to assume that intervention in Angola would not undermine détente with African countries and indeed might even improve the situation. This amber light was all the opportunity Botha needed to press his case.

Upon Viljoen’s return from consulting with Roberto and Savimbi on 9 October, Botha promptly invited him to deliver the SADF’s recommendations to the next meeting of the State Security Council (SSC), scheduled for 14 October, ostensibly to gain approval for the introduction of SADF forces. In fact, the operational orders had already been given. On 9 October, Eland tank squadrons had been dispatched from their base in Bloemfontein to the SWA-Angola border, ready to be airlifted deep into Angola on the 14th, surely not a coincidence. A further tank column, codenamed Zulu, had also been assembled, again seemingly without prime ministerial approval.

Botha was taking matters into his own hands. On 4 September, Vorster had committed the SADF to the goal of preventing an MPLA takeover in Angola. Thus, Botha arrived at the SSC with broad prime ministerial approval for action and treated the council—not for the last time—as a rubber stamp. However, even this analysis understates the degree of autonomy that Botha was arrogating to himself. The Zulu tank column was dispatched from Rundu toward the Angolan border at 2:00 p.m. on the 14th. But the SSC did not convene until 2:30. A fait accompli indeed. Observers of South Afri-

106. Spies, Operasie Savannah, pp. 82, 147.
107. Ibid., p. 83. The Bloemfontein squadron’s entry into Angola was delayed for several days because an OAU fact-finding team was visiting southern Angola.
108. Ibid., p. 87.
109. Aantekeninge en Dagboeke, Vorster’s Dagboek, in ARCA, PV 132, 5/1/19–22. Zulu left Rundu at 2:00 p.m., but it traveled parallel to the border until it arrived at the crossing at Katuitui at
can politics in later years often refer to the leeway given the armed forces in the system of governance that Botha employed as prime minister and then state president. There is no need to look any further for the first clear case of this phenomenon.

Conclusion

In the aftermath of South Africa’s humiliating withdrawal from Angola, P. W. Botha did his best to shift responsibility for the venture to several other parties. Everyone else was to blame: South Africa’s fickle allies, BOSS, even the SADF’s antiquated weapons. The evidence suggests, however, that the key to explaining how South Africa became involved in Angola lies elsewhere, namely, with the repeated recommendations from Botha and the SADF that current levels of assistance were insufficient to thwart an MPLA takeover and deny SWAPO a safe haven from which to undermine South African rule in SWA. These strategic concerns were themselves informed by an analysis of developments in Angola viewed through the lens of the emerging doctrine of total onslaught. This process intersected with Vorster’s own deep desire for South Africa to be accepted by black Africa. The pleas of moderate African leaders at key junctures were critical to the prime minister’s decisions to acquiesce in Botha’s wishes. The decision to intervene in Angola was thus the product of a unique confluence of the rival approaches advocated by the regime’s top decision-makers when pursuing the common goal of South Africa’s national security.

The Angolan venture resulted in two great ironies. The first was that South Africa’s intervention actually brought the perceived total onslaught closer to fruition. Alarmist South African perceptions of the expansion of Communist power in Africa actually hastened its materialization. Indeed, one of the major reasons that the Cold War arrived in Southern Africa during the Angolan civil war was Pretoria’s own propensity to perceive in Cold War terms both events in Angola specifically and the conflict over majority rule in the region more generally, laying down the gauntlet to Communist powers. Many South African and especially SADF sources recount that South Africa’s intervention was a response specifically to Cuban involvement, but it is clear

10:00 p.m. and crossed into Angola shortly afterward, by which time SSC authorization would have been given.


111. Hansard, House of Assembly Debates, 17 April 1978, Col. 4852; O’Meara, Forty Lost Years, pp. 222–223; and Interview with Constand Viljoen, Pretoria, 13 July 2011.
that Havana’s presence was non-existent until late August and remained very limited until October.\(^{112}\) Even so, South African officials later claimed that the distinction between decolonization in Mozambique and Angola lay in the role of foreign intervention. “South Africa has not and will not attempt to prescribe to other countries what kind of government their peoples should choose,” Ambassador Pik Botha told the United Nations Security Council in late January 1976. “As in the case of Mozambique and neighbouring countries this is no concern of ours. It is the right of those people, if that is their will, to choose, for instance, a Marxist or a Communist government. It is however a totally different matter when a foreign power intervenes to decide who should govern a country.”\(^{113}\) Such statements did not reflect the reality of South African motives or actions. Instead, Communist powers, seeing that South Africa’s would-be Western allies would be placed in an extraordinary diplomatic bind by Pretoria’s apartheid policies, readily took up the challenge that had been rashly defined by Pretoria itself.

Accordingly, the level of Moscow’s and Havana’s engagement and interest in southern Africa was infinitely higher by the time of South Africa’s withdrawal to the border sites in January 1976 than it had been a year earlier. The result was that total onslaught began to receive far wider currency beyond the SADF, even in the highest office in the land. The growing strength of the doctrine was clear from Vorster’s landmark speech in Parliament on 30 January 1976, in which he defended his government’s intervention in Angola:

> It is necessary for a moment to consider the total strategy of the Communists.
> There is no doubt at all that the strategy of the Communists is world domination, and that this will continue to remain their strategy. . . . We have learned a lesson in Angola . . . when it comes to the worst, South Africa stands alone.\(^{114}\)

These words—very much reminiscent of Botha himself—reflected an unmistakable departure from the vision of regional cooperation and peaceful coexistence that the prime minister had been vigorously promoting in mid-1975. By both increasing the reality of Communist penetration in Africa and successfully stoking fears of that penetration, total onslaught possessed a remarkable capacity for self-fulfillment and self-promotion.

The other major irony is that with the renewed focus on South Africa’s isolation and vulnerability, Botha finally managed to secure his long-held twin objectives: large increases in South Africa’s defense budget and a com-

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113. SA Mission to the UN, New York, to Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Cape Town, 28 January 1976, in SADFAA, 1/22/3 OS, 8, Angola: Relations with SA.
mensurate expansion of the SADF’s responsibilities in the security field. Within eighteen months, the defense budget had increased by 60 percent. The SADF had secured permission to launch “hot pursuit” operations up to 200 kilometers into Angola without political authorization, and it had obtained prime ministerial approval to change its remit from a defensive posture to an offensive orientation. Finally, it had taken active steps to spread its philosophy of total onslaught and its proposed solution, total strategy, to other government departments, culminating in formally submitting its philosophies to both Vorster and the cabinet for adoption as national policy. Botha had led his country into the Angolan quagmire; yet far from being forced to resign, he emerged stronger than ever, as did his idiosyncratic security theories, a development that had major consequences for the unfolding of the southern African theater of the Cold War in the years to come.

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