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### From Periphery to Center

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# From Periphery to Center:

## A Review of Edward C. Keefer and Myra Burton, eds. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, vol. 28: Southern Africa*

Ryan M. Irwin

The history of southern Africa changed at 12:20 AM on April 25, 1974. If at that moment you had been listening to Lisbon's Rádio Renascença, you'd have heard an eerie rendition of the song "Grândola, Vila Morena." Composed by musician Zeca Afonso two years earlier, the quiet ballad eulogized fraternity, democracy, and fairness—values that had eroded under a forty-year dictatorship in Portugal. "It is the people who lead / Inside of you, oh city," Afonso sang. "It is the people who lead / In the shadow of a holm oak / Which no longer knew its age." His words announced the beginning of a carefully orchestrated military coup—months in the planning—against Prime Minister Marcelo Caetano, who had ruled the country since its previous dictator, António de Oliveira Salazar, suffered a stroke in 1968. Later named the Carnation Revolution, the affair was over within hours. Caetano accepted exile in Brazil; and a military junta, led first by General António de Spínola and then Francisco da Costa Gomes, took the reins of government to establish a framework to end Portuguese colonialism in Africa and create a genuine democracy at home. When the junta disbanded two years later, Portugal was a fundamentally different country, and southern Africa—the region where so many anti-Caetano soldiers had fought and died in the name of empire—was being transformed by the dual imperatives of decolonization and superpower geopolitics.

The coup unfolded in the shadow of the Watergate scandal, and it shows up as a memo—written by Henry Kissinger on April 29, 1974—about one-third of the way into Myra Burton's new *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, vol. 28, Southern Africa*. "A reorientation of Portugal away from Africa and toward Europe could be traumatic," Kissinger speculated to President Richard Nixon. However, he continued, there was "little reaction to [the coup] from the Portuguese territories of Africa," and the "local governments [were] urging business-as-usual" (98).<sup>1</sup> His diagnosis hinted at the quiet before a storm. As Burton demonstrates, events in southern Africa consumed Washington during the next two years. Although Kissinger had derisively suggested in 1969 that "history [had] never been produced in the South," the region moved inexorably from the periphery to the center of U.S. foreign relations after 1974.<sup>2</sup> Whether in Angola, where Portuguese decolonization prompted an ill-fated U.S. covert operation that led to an acrimonious congressional investigation, or in Zimbabwe, where Kissinger became deeply involved in peace negotiations, top U.S. officials found it impossible to ignore the historical transformations that unfolded in the wake of the Carnation Revolution. The region was the first great battleground of the post-Vietnam Cold War, and events there were the harbinger of changes that

would remake U.S. global power in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Burton's document collection is one of the better *FRUS* volumes I have read. By selectively blending policy statements and memoranda with meeting minutes and phone records, she provides the reader with a useful summary of official thinking and quotable anecdotes to illuminate the frustrations, eccentricities, and hubris of U.S. leaders. The collection is organized in four chapters that proceed chronologically and thematically. The first section, entitled "Regional Issues," covers the Nixon administration's early dealings with southern Africa, lingering on the formation of National Security Study Memorandum 39, which announced that regional change would only come through collaboration with white rulers, and the passage of the so-called Byrd Amendment, which rolled back U.S. sanctions against Ian Smith's controversial government in Salisbury. The second and third sections flow together, covering Portuguese decolonization and the Angolan civil war between 1974 and 1976. Here, Burton expertly highlights the role of Zambia and Zaire in prodding the United States into action and illustrates how the Cold War helped distill a complex reality into easy bullet points in Washington. The volume ends with a section called "Independence Negotiations," which explores Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy in the region at the end of 1976. Eager perhaps to rehabilitate his reputation after the Angolan debacle, the secretary of state essentially renounced National Security Study Memorandum 39 and nudged Smith into indirect dialogue with Tanzania's Julius Nyerere, Zambia's Kenneth Kaunda, and several of the liberation organizations, setting the stage for initiatives that carried into the Jimmy Carter administration.

This period and region have already been examined in two of our field's more prominent international histories, Piero Gleijeses's *Conflicting Missions* (Chapel Hill, 2002) and Odd Arne Westad's *The Global Cold War* (Cambridge, 2005). Burton's collection, in part, confirms the conclusions of these books. For instance, Gleijeses's once-controversial claim that Angola's MPLA had more support than UNITA or FNLA and therefore possessed more legitimacy than its rivals is tacitly confirmed by U.S. consular cables, meetings minutes, and policy documents. Kissinger was at his most cynical in 1975. Although he made no secret of his belief that the "history of Africa [had] shown that a nation's only focal point [was] the capital" (113) and admitted that the MPLA controlled Luanda and most of Angola's populated areas (135), the secretary nonetheless moved against conventional wisdom in Washington and put America's weight behind an illogical covert operation that ended in disaster. "What real choice do we have?" he queried blandly



as CIA funds flowed into the region that summer. "I know the AF bureau says that [Africans] care about economic aid, but there's no empirical evidence for that" (111). The subsequent civil war lasted twenty-five years, left 500,000 Angolans dead, and put the MPLA (eventually) at the helm of a country engulfed by AIDS and ethnic strife. Could this bloodshed and devastation have been avoided without U.S. meddling? Reading Burton's collection, it is hard not to marvel at Kissinger's callousness:

William Hyland [INR Director]: We will have a problem of answering critics.

Kissinger: I'm relaxed. . . . So what if critics attack us, we can't be faulted. What grounds would they use?

H: They can claim that we are perpetuating war by arming the people; that we will turn a civil conflict into a bloodbath.

K: What would they have us do, abandon the country to the Communists? (123)

For culturalists, there is suggestive evidence that racism influenced U.S. policy thinking. Especially in the early years, when Washington was so intent on rejecting African initiatives at the United Nations, Nixon and Kissinger refer to Africans casually as cannibals, savages, and uneducated naïfs. "Mobutu I think is a semi-savage," Kissinger stated casually at the height of the Angolan crisis in 1975. "You can say we gave [FNLA's] Roberto [dollar amount not declassified] but he didn't need money, but strategy. Does Mobutu know strategy?" (111). Yet many of the African politicians Kissinger dealt with were shrewd rhetoricians who flirted dexterously with the meaning of words and knew how to manipulate an audience. "When I come to Africa, you'll attack American imperialism?" the secretary asked Zambia's foreign minister in late 1975. "Yes," the minister responded, "so they'll listen to the rest! [Laughter]" (150).

A deeper conceptual question shapes this well-crafted collection: Did the United States actually shape events in southern Africa or did it follow the initiatives of others? For Gleijeses, of course, the United States was "in the lead" by the mid-1970s, "flanked by Zaire and South Africa," with England and France "at the rear."<sup>3</sup> But this is not the

only possible conclusion. As Burton shows, at the height of the Angolan crisis, Kissinger's support of UNITA and FNLA stemmed primarily from ongoing conversations with Zambia's Kaunda and Zaire's Mobutu, who lamented MPLA's Agostinho Neto and saw U.S. action as a means to influence their new neighbor. Only moments after calling Mobutu a semi-savage, the secretary declared, "[First,] we consider Zaire one of the two or three key countries in Africa. Two, we consider him one of the two or three key leaders in Africa. Three, we want to cooperate with him" (111). Washington's subsequent covert aid went not to UNITA and FNLA but to Mobutu's government; and Kissinger rarely pursued goals that were wholly inconsonant with the recommendations of the frontline states, especially after 1974. The situation on the ground—even the existential issue of communism—was secondary to America's "credibility" with Zaire and South Africa, as well as Zambia and Tanzania.

What are the implications of these documents for U.S. foreign relations history? Was the region an outlier or microcosm of wider global trends? And how should we remember Kissinger's tenure as secretary of state? Hopefully these questions will find answers in the coming years as historians devote more attention to this period, region, and volume. Whether employing the theoretical framework of empire or writing in the classic mode of diplomatic history, they will have many reasons to pick up *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, vol. 28, *Southern Africa*. Congratulations to Burton on a job well done.

Notes:

1. Numbers in parentheses refer to documents rather than pages.
2. Cited by Mark Atwood Lawrence, "History from Below: The United States and Latin America in the Nixon Years," in *Nixon in the World: American Foreign Relations, 1969–1977*, eds. Fredrik Logevall and Andrew Preston (Oxford, UK, 2008), 269.
3. Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959–1976* (Chapel Hill, 2002), 293.