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Author's Response by **Jamie Miller**, Quinnipiac University

In 1975, South Africa began a military intervention in Angola in an effort to influence the nature of its post-colonial government. Through an incremental escalation eerily familiar to scholars of the Vietnam War, the armies of the apartheid regime ended up deep inside the decolonising Portuguese territory. The impact across the region of Pretoria's subsequent humiliating withdrawal on both white confidence and black expectations was immense. My article, "Yes, Minister: Reassessing South Africa's Intervention in the Angolan Civil War, 1975," which Chris Saunders recently reviewed for H-Diplo, cuts through years of hearsay and explains, on the basis of research in South African archives and interviews with key figures, why Pretoria embarked on this ill-advised and critical venture in the first place.¹ The divergence between Saunders's perspective on these events and my own illuminates much bigger questions in the field, specifically how we understand the efforts of the South African leadership to preserve apartheid, the Southern African theatre of the Cold War, and the emerging multipolarity of the 1970s. I am therefore particularly grateful to H-Diplo for the opportunity to contribute this response.

¹ Jamie Miller, "Yes, Minister: Reassessing South Africa's Intervention in the Angolan Civil War, 1975," *Journal of Cold War Studies* forthcoming (2012). The Saunders review is available at <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/AR440.pdf>.

Pretoria's involvement in Angola has long been seen as a function of the apartheid leadership's desire for better relations with its "reluctant uncle"² and nominal Cold War superpower, Washington. Based on the same tired sources — CIA agent John Stockwell's autobiography, ex-Assistant of State for African Affairs Chester Crocker's memoirs, and a range of second- (and third-) hand accounts — the thesis that South Africa intervened in Angola at the behind-the-scenes invitation of a Ford Administration unable in the immediate post-Vietnam era to fight its own Cold War battles has become the received wisdom. The most detailed elucidation of this argument is advanced by Piero Gleijeses.³ Many books on South Africa's 'border wars', a currently thriving genre, repeat this as fact.⁴ This is the historiographical background to Saunders's suggestion that I fail to "examine the argument that Vorster and Botha were encouraged by the United States to intervene in Angola."⁵

However, the existing primary sources do not validate a U.S.-centric explanation for South Africa's intervention. "Yes, Minister" is a conscious effort to return to the primary material and re-examine the intervention anew. I argue that when South Africa's actions and motives are assessed in the light of its existing foreign policy programmes, its leaders' understandings of the apartheid regime's place in Africa, and divisions within the corridors of power in Pretoria, a very different picture to that of Gleijeses emerges. What we see is the intertwining of two distinct worldviews, thought progressions, and policy prescriptions. Defence Minister P. W. Botha forcefully advocated intervention in Angola to prevent a takeover by the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA). In his "total onslaught" ideology, Botha saw the MPLA as nothing more than a front for global communism. Botha duly badgered Prime Minister John Vorster to strike hard and early at Moscow's beachhead. Indeed, as the primary sources illustrate, he used substantial finesse and know-how to brilliantly navigate through the bureaucratic obstacles and achieve his end. The title of the article refers to this forgotten side of Botha: the master bureaucratic operator. Botha is habitually and accurately portrayed as an irascible bully. Van Zyl Slabbert, Leader of the Opposition during the 1980s, described

² Thomas Borstelmann, *Apartheid's Reluctant Uncle : The United States and Southern Africa in the Early Cold War* (New York ; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

³ Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959-1976* (Chapel Hill, N.C.; London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), pp. 273-299.

⁴ This thesis also features prominently in both of the works that Saunders refers to: Nerys John, "South African Intervention in the Angolan Civil War, 1975-1976: Motivations and Implications" (University of Cape Town, 2002), p. 47; Rodney Warwick, "Operation Savannah: A Measure of SADF Decline, Resourcefulness and Modernisation," *Scientia Militaria* 40, no. 3 (2012), p. 356.

⁵ I explicitly state in the original article that the American role lies beyond the scope of the study.

Botha in his memoirs as “belligerent, abusive, and alienating.”⁶ But Botha had dropped out of university to work for the National Party way back in 1936. He knew no other life than the Party. In this time, he had developed an expert understanding both in principle and practice of how to work behind the scenes to get his way. Never were these skills more evident than here.

At the same time, Vorster was deeply committed to building bridges with black Africa. He was distracted by dreams of a remarkable, against-all-odds rehabilitation of the apartheid regime among moderate African states. (Much like the U.S., South Africa’s government projected through its foreign policy a progressive position on race that belied—and was largely seen to bely—the realities of racial discrimination at home). In late August 1975, for instance, as the foundations of “Operation Savannah” were being laid, Vorster was meeting with long-time foe Zambian President Kenneth Kaunda at Victoria Falls. In his eyes, nothing less than the long-term security of the besieged state was at stake. As Botha campaigned for an escalation of South Africa’s commitment in Angola, the conflict-averse and distracted Vorster reluctantly acquiesced. Angola was not a priority right up until the covert intervention was unmasked in mid-November 1975.

Saunders suggests that I do not explain in “Yes, Minister” how my “own findings differ from [Gleijeses’s] account”. On the contrary: it is clear how, where, and why we differ. When one subjects the evidence to close scrutiny, the thesis that South Africa intervened at the United States’ behest is revealed as little more than assertion. We know that both the CIA and South Africa established covert programs to support the anti-communist front in Angola in July 1975. It is also accepted that there was some co-operation between the programs on the ground, though the extent remains unclear. For instance, in the thirty-five page official CIA history of the conflict, a sizeable section remains fully withheld, covering precisely the area in the narrative where one would expect to find mention of co-ordination with the South Africans.⁷ This is not the same as Gleijeses’s account: “The US government urged South Africa, which might otherwise have hesitated, to act.”⁸ In fact, the evidence suggests that Americans never had to rely on a manoeuvre as risky as soliciting the involvement of the armies of the apartheid regime in a power struggle in black Africa. The South Africans, with Vorster egged on and out-manoeuvred by Botha, were ultimately more than eager to become involved for their own reasons. It was only later, when the South Africans were found out, that Vorster repeatedly met with U.S. Ambassador William Bowdler in a last-gasp search for American support.

⁶ F. van Zyl Slabbert, *The Last White Parliament* (Johannesburg: J. Ball Publishers : H. Strydom Publishers, 1985), p. 71.

⁷ CIARR, CIA Office of Regional and Political Analysis, “Soviet and Cuban Intervention in the Angolan Civil War”, March 1977. See Section “B”.

⁸ Piero Gleijeses, “Moscow’s Proxy?,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 8, no. 4 (2006), pp. 5-6.

In fact, after extensive research in South African and Rhodesian records, as well as in the Ford Presidential Library, National Archives II, the National Security Archive, *FRUS*, WikiLeaks, and elsewhere, I would suggest that we have a fairly clear—if counter-intuitive—picture of what occurred. South Africa did approach the Americans about a joint effort in Angola prior to Vorster signing off on a 20-million-rand assistance package (the first substantive stage of the South African intervention). The newly declassified version of the minutes of the NSC meeting on 27 June 1975 record Director of Central Intelligence William Colby as saying: “South Africa would like us to join with them in an effort, but we can avoid the problems that would create and deal with the black [African states instead]. Some [of these] would be encouraged for the US to take a role, and that would activate them.” [sic]⁹ Washington followed Colby’s advice and rejected Pretoria’s entreaties. In November, NSC staff member Hal Horan told the 40 Committee, the body that oversees covert interventions: “The South Africans have an interest in this themselves; they asked for help but when we didn’t give it they stayed because of their own interests.”¹⁰ In January 1976, Henry Kissinger likewise told his inner circle: “We didn’t encourage them to go into Angola, but we certainly – they did the only fighting that was going on there for a while.”¹¹ None of these were public declarations for show. Nor have I found any countervailing evidence in any South African archive.

Whether South Africa acted on its own initiative or purely as the United States’ tool by intervening in Angola has far-reaching repercussions for how we understand the Cold

⁹ Minutes of NSC Meeting, “Angola”, 27 June 1975, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Southern Africa, 1969-1976*, vol. XXVIII (Washington, D. C.: State Department, Office of the Historian, 2011), p. 269. This bears out Gleijeses’s instinctive determination in *Conflicting Missions*: “It is difficult to believe that the CIA did not approach the South Africans. (Relations between BOSS and the CIA were notoriously close.)” Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*, 291.

¹⁰ Memorandum of Conversation, 40 Committee Meeting, 14 November 1975, in *Foreign Relations of the United States: Southern Africa, 1969-1976*, p. 342.

¹¹ DNSA, *Kissinger Transcripts*, Minutes of Secretary Kissinger’s Staff Meeting, 30 January 1976. This new evidence helps to illuminate American officials’ efforts to distance themselves from accusations of cooperation with the toxic apartheid regime. For instance, Ford instructed his African Embassies at the height of the diplomatic furore over South Africa’s intervention: “The US in no way sought or encouraged the South Africans to become involved in Angola nor was our advice sought”: GFL, National Security Adviser, Presidential Country Files for Africa, 1974-1977, Box 2, Angola: Presidential Message, Secretary of State to African Embassies, “Presidential Message on Angola”, 3 January 1976. Kissinger likewise recalled in his memoirs: “South Africa had opted for intervention without prior consultation with the United States”, Henry Kissinger, *Years of Renewal* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), p. 820. Joseph Sisco, then Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs, told Gleijeses: “A reasonable premise is that while it cannot be demonstrated that the Administration explicitly took steps to encourage South Africa’s intervention, it certainly did not discourage it”, Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*, p. 299. For other contemporaneous (and public) denials of cooperation with the South Africans, see Kissinger’s testimony to Congress in U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Subcommittee on African Affairs, Angola, 29 January 1976, p. 13 and Schaufele’s, 6 February 1976, p. 176; Mulcahy, U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on International Relations, United States Policy on Angola, 26 January 1976, p. 22.

War in Southern Africa. In 1975, Washington and Pretoria's interests in Angola were aligned, but the latter were not a function of the former. Much like the post-colonial leaders who excoriated them in international forums, the architects of apartheid were involved in similar processes of mining Cold War discourses for ideological tools that would assist in state-building—adaptation, not wholesale adoption. Vorster, Botha, and others took ideas and terms from the Western canon and hammered them into frameworks that propped up their apartheid order. The bizarre alloy of anti-communism and neo-Wilsonianism that characterised Pretoria's articulation of the homelands vision from the late 1970s onwards is a case in point. How South African leaders variously utilised Cold War terms, norms, and language in an (ultimately unsuccessful) effort to relegitimise their regime and define the state's role on the international scene was the central engine of Pretoria's foreign policy, its strategies for survival, and the intervention in Angola. These conceptual processes then framed South Africa's own geopolitical calculus.

Jamie Miller received his PhD from the University of Cambridge. He is a Visiting Assistant Professor at Quinnipiac University and a recent Fox International Fellow at Yale University. He is currently working on a book manuscript entitled *The Alchemist and the Hammer: The Struggle to Preserve Apartheid, 1974-1980*. He won the Saki Ruth Dockrill Memorial Prize for best paper at the University of California Santa Barbara - London School of Economics - George Washington University International Graduate Conference on the Cold War (2011), the African Studies Association Best Graduate Paper Prize (2013), and has articles in *Cold War History* (2012) and the *Journal of Cold War Studies* (2013).

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