

War in Angola / Border War / Bush War

September-October, 1987

"A mercenary mob from all over the world, cutthroat-thugs who rushed to kill in the young African Republic for the money of the bloody Apartheid regime, also took part in the attack"

(c) humorous article about the war in Angola

The war lasted from 1966 to 1989 (in Angola to ~ 2002), and is one of the longest conflicts in Africa.

Major fights took place in:

- 1) Northern Namibia, which called South West Africa or SWA, and was under the protectorate of South Africa
- 2) South and Central Angola
- 3) Zimbabwe, which was first Southern Rhodesia, and then the Republic of Rhodesia
- 4) Mozambique, which became the People's Republic of Mozambique
- 5) Episodic battles and clashes occurred in the southwest of Zambia (which was Northern Rhodesia)
- 6) Botswana, which was Bechuanaland
- 7) Lesotho (Kingdom of Lesotho) and Swaziland, which were Basutoland
- 8) In South Africa (SA)

Roots of conflict. From South Africa and SWA

South Africa received a mandate to manage the SWA (former German colony) from the League of Nations at the end of WWI, and viewed it as the 5th province. After WWII, on the territory of SWA, with the support of Cuba and the USSR, the national liberation organization SWAPO (SWAPO) was organized and acted. SWA fought against the policy of apartheid pursued by South Africa. Its military wing PLAN, carried out acts of sabotage and attacked police patrols on the SWA territory.

To fight the rebels, special police units Koevoet (crowbar) were created in South Africa. This unit was prepared for operational search actions, identification of the rebels, as well as their interception and elimination. Also, these units were used to combat ordinary criminals in South Africa and SWA. By the mid-70s, due to the increasing activity of the PLAN, South African troops also began to conduct operations against PLAN and SWAPO, whose camps were located in southern Angola. The purpose of the operations was to prevent PLAN militants from entering the SWA territory. There are two key tasks that the South African army solved in Angola: the destruction of the SWAPO / PLAN bases in the south-western regions and the support of the UNITA movement in the south-eastern regions in order to prevent the SWAPO / PLAN militants to the border in the east of Namibia.

South Africa imposed with sanctions (Britain and the United States), prohibiting trade in military equipment and materials, which created problems with the repair and upgrading of existing equipment and weapons. This forced South Africa to develop and manufacture its own weapons, often in collaboration with Israel. In connection with the change of policy and SWA (Namibia) gaining independence, South Africa by the beginning of the 90s ceased active hostilities in Angola and Namibia. From the beginning of the 90s to the mid-2000s, now former soldiers from the South African army trained the military MPLA, and participated in the fight against UNITA. And they did it much more successfully than the USSR and Cuba before.

From Angola

Angola was one of three Portuguese colonies in Africa (two others: Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau). In the 1960s, a rebellion began, almost simultaneously in all three colonies, the purpose of which was to establish independence from the metropolis. As one of the poorest European countries, Portugal did not have enough strength and means to put down a rebellion in the colonies and was forced to grant them independence. Naturally under the pressure of the world community, which this time was unanimous, both from the west and from the east.

As a result of the swiftness of this process, anarchy was established in Angola, as three opposing groups tried to take advantage of, having previously fought together for independence, but represented the interests of various nationalities and had different political views:

- 1) MPLA - Marxists, supported by Cuba and USSR, Kimbundu, (Central and West Angola, big cities)
- 2) FNLA - Nationalist, supported by Zaire and USA, Bakongo (North Angola)
- 3) UNITA - Maoist (China based Marxists), supported by SAR and from mid 80s by USA, Ovimbundu (Central, South and South-East Angola, mostly rural areas)

Pic.1 shows three pleasant young men are the leaders of three movements before the democratic elections.



Pic.1 – Angolan leaders of three movements before the democratic elections.

- 1) Agostino Neto - MPLA, in the center, the first president of Angola and the head of the MPLA. He wanted to build an "African Cuba" in the territory of Angola, assuming that the USSR would help him.
- 2) Holden Roberto (and in fact Jose Gilmore) FNLA - on the right, a relative of the President of Zaire, dreamed of the Angolan Empire, as in the good old days. His group was cut out first, part of his followers then formed the 32nd battalion of the South African army.

But he returned in the 90s and first participated in the election of the President of Angola, but received 2% and became just a member of parliament.

3) Jonas Savimbi - UNITA, left, he studied at the doctor at the university, so he was called the Doctor. In reality, no, he studied at a university in Switzerland (where he fled from the Portuguese), where he graduated from the Faculty of Economics, Social and Political Sciences. Got a doctorate. The university became involved in revolutionary activities. At first he was a fellow of Roberto (No.2), but did not agree on political views. He organized his movement among the villagers.

In less than a year, they will become sworn enemies and plunge Angola into the abyss of civil war.

Visited Beijing and learned guerrilla warfare in China. Then he tried to get the support of the USSR (and even got sort of it), but was ousted by the more promising candidate No.1. After the first democratic elections ended in armed conflict, he moved to the south-east of the country from where it led the UNITA movement, which slowly but surely ousted the regular army of Angola from the southern and eastern regions of the country.

In the mid-80s he began to contact with the United States and UNITA began to receive some military assistance (for example, in the form of Stinger MANPADS). When the USSR and Cuba stopped helping the MPLA, UNITA, under his leadership, captured vast territories in the center of Angola and was close to victory over the MPLA. And the MPLA had to go to peace agreements and hold a second democratic election, where Savimbi received 40%, which traditionally ended in armed confrontation, in which the MPLA destroyed UNITA supporters in the capital, apparently to consolidate the success. Which again led to 10 years of a new civil war. In the end, the MPLA leaders hired the former South African military, under the strict guidance of which the issue with UNITA was resolved, and Savimbi was killed. Places where the main process went pic.2.

What is the result?

General elections (the first since independence) in Angola, November 11, 1975, escalated into a civil war between the three factions. To help the MPLA, the Cuban military contingent was moved into the country (but looks like actually the Cubans were invited by the last Portuguese governor of Angola before retiring). Cuba and the USSR provided significant assistance by supplying modern weapons and equipment, as well as providing various specialists and advisers.

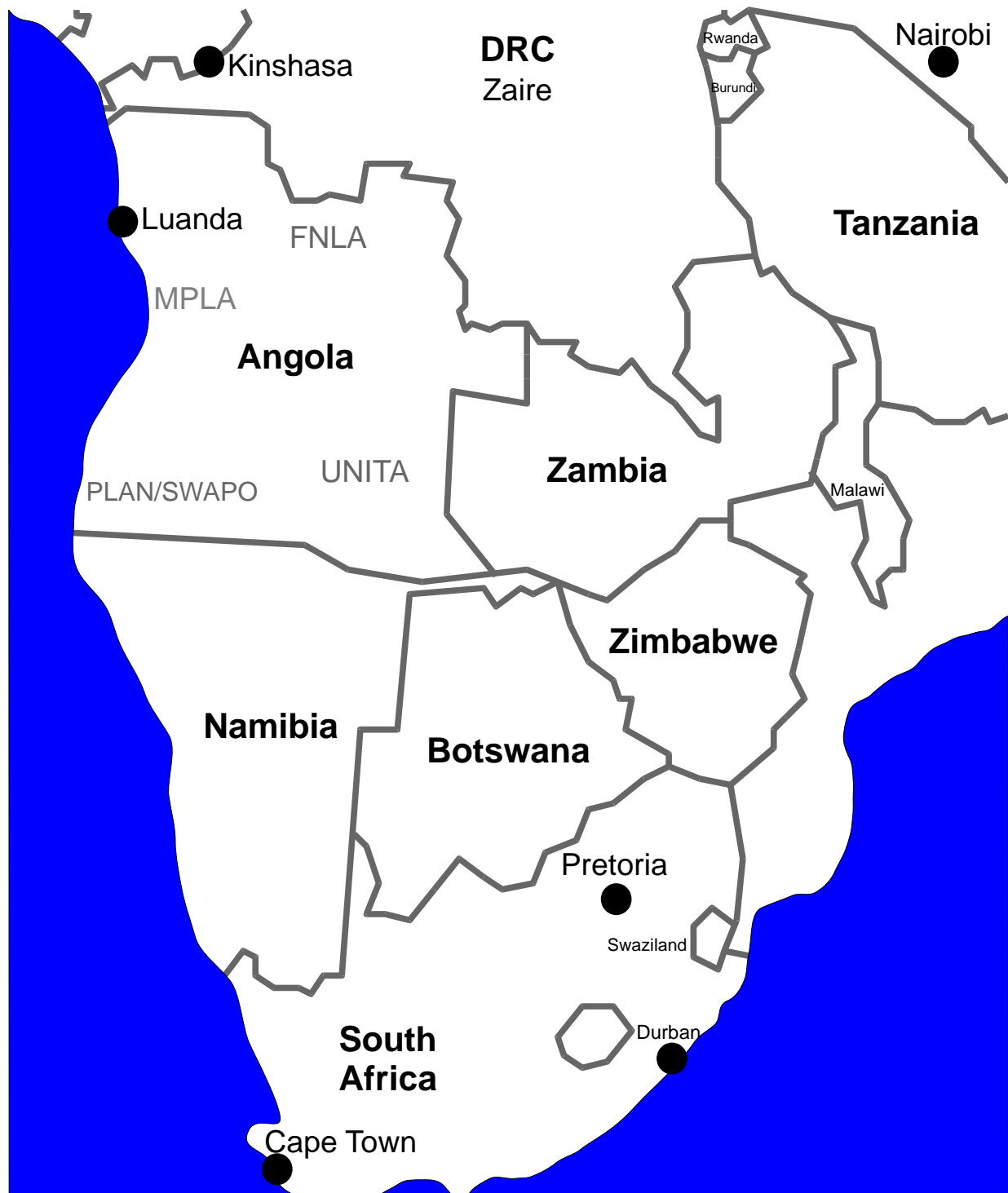
This war lasted until 2002, as a result of:

- As a result, the MPLA won - having previously thrown hundreds of tanks, APCs and other weapons through forests and fields. Which was kindly provided by the USSR and Cuba on an irrevocable basis.
- FNLA was crushed and expelled from the country in the late 70s.
- The leaders of the military wing of UNITA were killed (already with the help of mercenaries from South Africa), and the regular UNITA militants joined the Angolan army. The movement itself has become a political party and participates in elections.
- Cuban troops left Angola and stopped military assistance to its government (the USSR also stopped, for obvious reasons).
- China received the greatest influence in the country, which did not support any of the parties directly.

Operation "Saludando a Octubre" / Operation "Moduler"

In 1985-1987, the Angolan army (FAPLA) undertook large-scale offensive operations in order to eliminate UNITA as an organized movement. All operations proceeded along roughly the same scenario: at the beginning of the year, troops concentrated in forward bases in southwestern Angola (mainly in Cuito Cuanavale) and then (apparently with the onset of relatively dry weather), moved in the southeast and east directions to the Mavinga town - the forward base of UNITA. Somewhere along the way they met an organized offensive of UNITA units, the FAPLA offensive was halted

and then finished. At the same time, UNITA led sabotage on FAPLA military facilities and supply routes of the attack force, which passed through dense forests and bushes, which greatly contributed to the covert approach and organization of ambushes. As a result, the offensive stopped and with the onset of the rainy season, FAPLA troops returned to the bases.



Pic.2 - Places where the main process went

Nevertheless, the Angolan troops had some success, for example, in 1986, a large UNITA base in eastern Angola was destroyed. The attack was led by ANC units (ANC - organization where Nelson Mandela fought for peace in the Worldwide), reinforced by armored vehicles and heavy weapons received from the USSR and Cuba. But despite successes in the east, in the southeast, the advancement of FAPLA was stopped. Various experts from South Africa (but so far without heavy weapons) came to the aid of UNITA. But in general, it became clear that Soviet and Cuban

assistance is increasing, and the next attack is likely (in 1987) will end in defeat for UNITA. In the same years, the UNITA leadership began to establish contacts with the United States.

If we look at the map, we can see that UNITA controlled the territories adjacent to the border of SWA (now Namibia), which was under the "protectorate" of South Africa, and to the narrow elongated sector of SWA, which is sandwiched between Botswana which, despite its neutrality, also supported various "liberation groups" and Angola. Thus, a hypothetical loss of an ally on one side of the border would have led to significant difficulties in protecting this territory, and most likely to complete loss of its control.

And here comes 1987, this time Cuban instructors in FAPLA prepared significant tank forces – 4 tank battalions, equipped with T-54B / T-55 tanks, about 22 tanks each. Also there were 4 motorized rifle brigades equipped with armored vehicles and armament, which included one tank company each. In fact, everything was not as good as it sounds, out of 4 brigades there were about two combat-ready, and tank companies were taken from those 4 tank battalions that were formed. But in any case, it was a significant step forward, and hard times were coming for the UNITA troops, who had Landover with RCLs as the heaviest weapons. By the "standards" of Africa, 4 FAPLA brigades with tank battalions were a very serious force, comparable to the South African troops stationed in SWA. At the same time, superiority in tanks was overwhelming, more than 50 tanks in Angola, against 0 tanks from South Africa.

Realizing that this time Mavinga town is likely to be captured, two battalions of the South African army are deployed to the aid of UNITA: the 101st and 32nd (Bravo Group), and later the 61st mechanized battalion (Alpha and Charlie groups). All this is organized in the 20th Brigade, which is tasked with preventing the FAPLA assault groups from reaching the Mavinga. It must be remembered that UNITA and South Africa were not "full-fledged" allies, but only forced (the difference in ideology was affecting - anti-communist sentiments were strong in South Africa, and UNITA was a Maoist-nationalist movement), acting on the principle of the enemy of my enemy - my friend. Therefore, their joint operations looked rather strange - they acted independently, sometimes exchanging information and coordinating their actions somewhat.

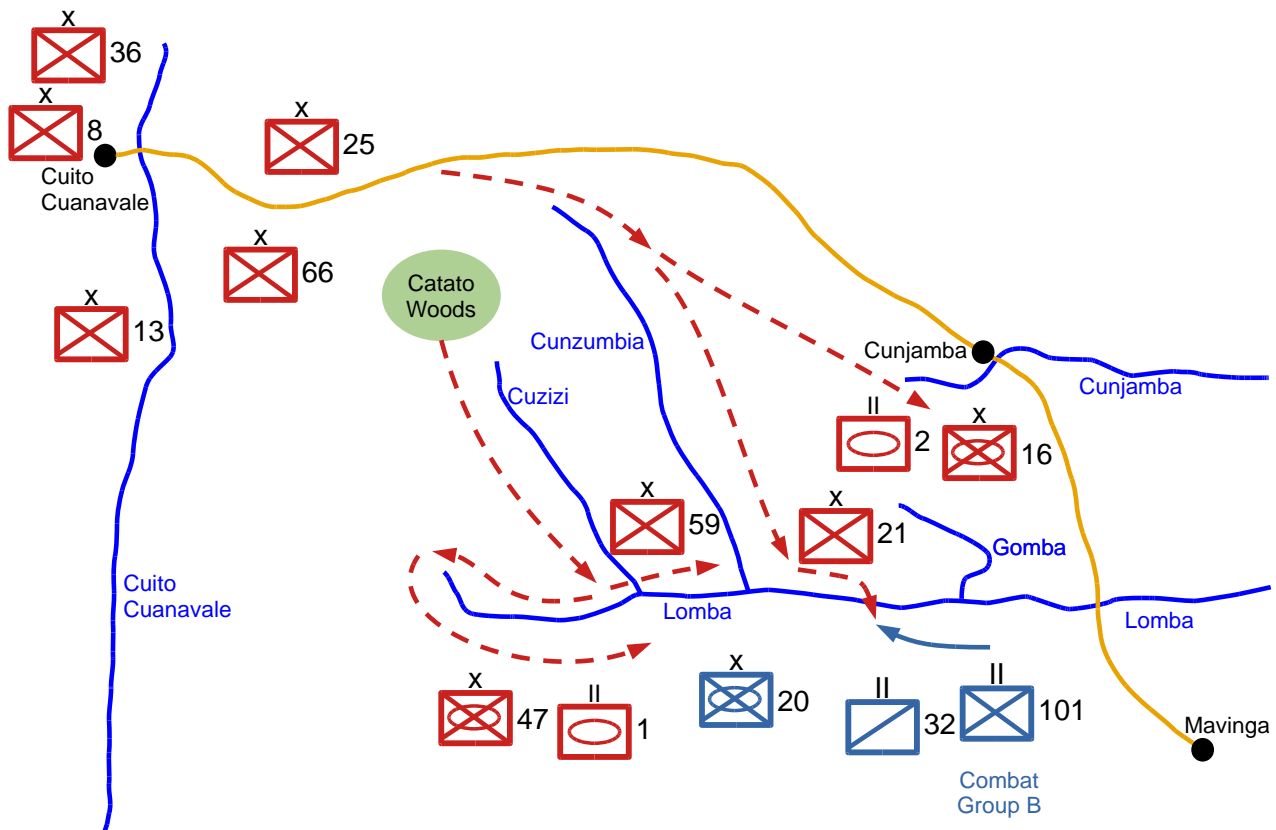
And in the summer of 1987, the moment came, the FAPLA assault groups from Cuito Cuanavale began to move towards the Mavinga, with the most combat-capable 47th Brigade, with a full-fledged tank battalion moving in the strangest and most intricate route, through the wildest places of southern Angola, where are they constantly being attacked by UNITA, and the SADF artillery strikes. Another, 16th Brigade, which was also has attached a tank battalion, moved along the old Portuguese road from Cuito Cuanavale to Mavinga, but then also turned into wild places. Two less combat-capable brigades, the 21st and 59th, operated in the area between the 47th and 16th.

The main natural obstacle to FAPLA's actions were numerous rivers (Cuzizi, Gomba, Lomba, Cunjumba) with a wide marshy flood plain, some of which had to be crossed. And the key clashes turned around the crossings (or places of potential crossings) across the Lomba River, which flowed across the main direction of the offensive.

In the final

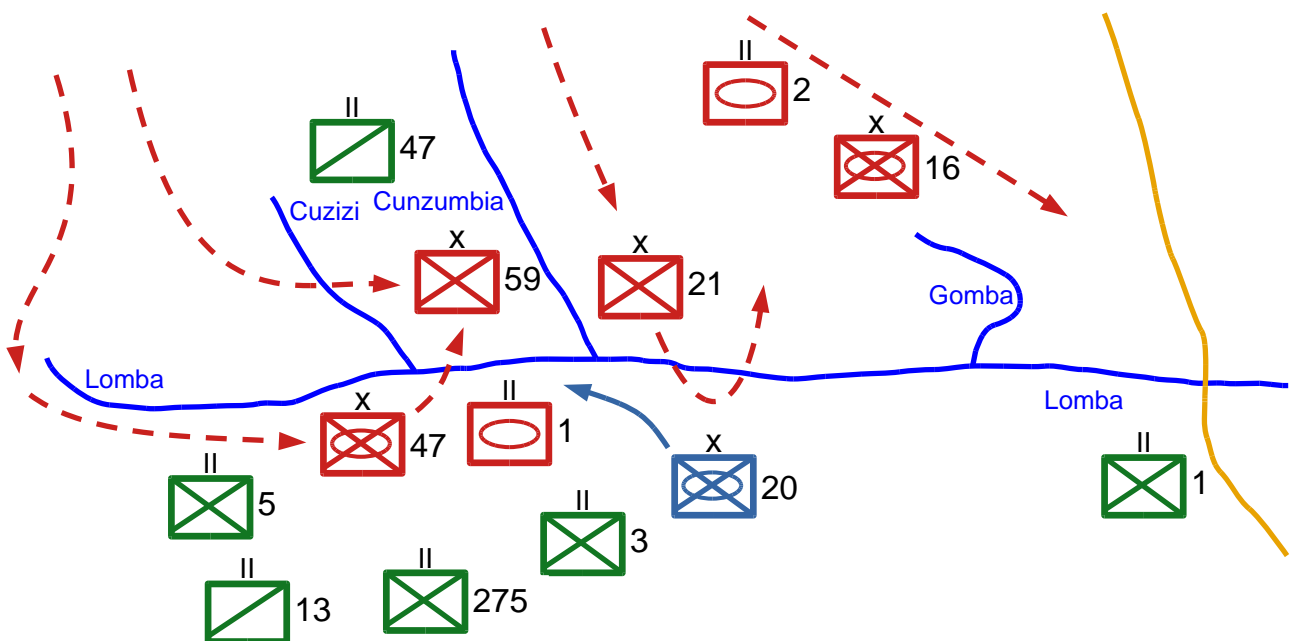
If you follow the same route from year to year, then inevitably everything will end badly. It happened this time. The HQ of the 20th SADF Brigade reasonable assumed that if they can defeat the most combat-capable brigade, the rest will not be a significant problem, since in fact they are located in different places and cannot support each other. The 47th Brigade was the most efficient, and instead of crossing the Lomba river, it moved around river's source. On the one hand, this complicated the situation for UNITA and South Africa, on the other hand, 47th and 59th brigades,

which previously moved together, began to attack in different directions and lost the ability to support each other.



Pic.3 - Approximate moving routes for FAPLA brigades

After several small clashes, the attempt of the 21st Brigade to cross the Lomba River was halted, and the 47th Brigade took up defensive positions in the forest already on the right (southern) bank of the Lomba River. Such a position made it difficult for the brigade to attack directly, but its advancement also halted.



Pic.4 – Battle with 47th Brigade

At the confluence of the rivers Lomba and Cuzizi, a forward observer was placed, who controlled the movement of the Angolan brigades and recorded attempts to set up crossings. The radio intelligence units also acted, which tracked the communication of the brigade commanders with the operations headquarters. Apparently, the Angolan command realized that movement in the forests and swamps far from the main goal would not lead to the desired result. And after sitting for days on the river bank, the 47th Brigade began to move along the river to join up with the 59th Brigade, which was located on the north bank. At the same time the crossing of the 47th Brigade to the northern bank began (pic.4). Instead of the obvious crossing of the 59th Brigade to the southern bank of Lomba River and continuing the offensive to the Mavinga as a group of two brigades ...

The observer (whos spent about a week sitting on a tree near the confluence of the Lomba and Cuzizi rivers) found the crossings, and HQ of the 20th SADF Brigade decided that this was the right moment to resolve the issue with the 47th Brigade. The area near the crossing was relatively open, which allowed firing from great distances, rather than fighting Angolan troops at pistol distances in the forest.

South Africans (Alpha and Charlie groups) lined up at dawn and began moving westward, their right flank rested on the south bank of Lomba River. Between 08:00 and 09:00 on October 3, Ratel-90, under the command of Corporal Duncan Taylor, came across the enemy on the right flank and made the first shot... As it turned out (probably by interrogation of prisoners) until the moment of opening fire, the Angolans were completely unaware about the presence of the forces of South Africa, which sneaked up on a hundred of armored vehicles on them.

Here we need to pack the Apartheid dogs a well-earned punch, or repel the Communist threat looming over South-West Africa...