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Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and South Africa,  
1959-1976 (review)

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***Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and South Africa, 1959–1976.*** By Piero Gleijeses. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. ISBN 0-8078-2647-2. Maps. Photographs. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Pp. xix, 552. \$34.95.

This splendid account of Cuban policy in Africa moves from Algeria, where Cuba assisted those fighting the French in 1961 and then supported the new Algerian government, to Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), where in 1964–65 one hundred Cubans led by Che Guevara clashed with CIA-controlled mercenaries, to Congo-Brazzaville, where the Cubans trained forces of the MPLA (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola) in the mid-1960s, to Guinea-Bissau. But it is the story of the arrival of tens of thousands of Cuban troops in Angola in late 1975 that lies at the heart of this book. Its great strength is that Gleijeses, a professor of American foreign policy at Johns Hopkins University, gained access, though not entirely unrestricted, to the Cuban archives. He also draws on a mass of archival material in a number of other countries, including documents obtained under the U.S. Freedom of Information Act, and on hundreds of interviews. The result is an extremely well-researched and well-written study that opens up much new ground. Though much more a diplomatic than a military study, it adds much to what is known of a number of minor wars in Africa, as well as of the major conflict in Angola in 1975–76.

Gleijeses stresses that Fidel Castro's African policy was driven primarily by revolutionary zeal, and argues that Castro acted on his own, without prior consultations with the Soviet Union. President Ford and Henry Kissinger, determined to demonstrate U.S. resolve in the aftermath of the Vietnam debacle, saw the MPLA as a Soviet front, which must be stopped. So in July 1975 they launched a covert operation called IAFEATURE, which involved collaboration with the South Africans, who had their own reasons for not wanting to see an MPLA government installed in Angola. In October the South Africans, encouraged by the Americans, moved rapidly towards Luanda, and it seemed that the MPLA might be routed. It was then that Castro sent in his troops, who in a series of engagements halted the South African advance. After Congress stopped funding for the U.S. covert operation, the South Africans, abandoned by the Americans, had to withdraw. So not only had Kissinger and the U.S. suffered a severe blow, but so too had the apartheid regime, which as a result of the Angolan debacle became even more militaristic and reactionary. Gleijeses used two accounts in Afrikaans by military personnel for the South African intervention, and did not gain access to the South African archives on relations with the U.S., but his book will stand for a long time as the major study of the "conflicting missions" of Washington and Havana in Africa to 1976.

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