

Chester Crocker and Namibia

• MATTHEW ECKER

Whenever I list the names of the interviewees from my documentary film on Namibia's liberation struggle, people's faces light up – Andimba Toivo ya Toivo, Hage Geingob, Martti Ahtisaari... and then I say the name Chester Crocker. Every time an eye-roll. And at first I didn't really understand why.

I have a friend who attends Georgetown University, where Chester Crocker taught before and after his eight years as US assistant secretary of state for African affairs during the Reagan administration. He told me that Crocker's classes are some of the most sought after in the entire department, mainly because of Crocker's work in implementing the USA's 'linkage' policy: which tied Namibian independence to the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola.

So why do Namibians dislike this man and his 'linkage' policy so much? I had thought that Crocker's 'linkage' plan played a major role in bringing about Namibian independence. Was there another feasible path to the liberation of Namibia?

Face To Face

To better understand the perceptions of Crocker and the general feeling of the world at the time, I decided to look back at the day I met with him in 2013. I sat in a conference room on the top floor of a building at Georgetown University in Washington waiting for the former diplomat. The wall at the back of the room was decorated with a lone framed map of the world. The bookshelf at the front was filled with various trinkets from around the world. Small dolls made in Asia, South American musical instruments, African wood carvings.

Soon Crocker walked into the room wearing the official uniform of Washington DC: a sharp blue suit with an understated, but professional necktie. He was bald on top with vibrant white hair outlining the sides of his head. He no longer sported the mustache I had seen in old pictures from the 80s. He did not chain-smoke cigarettes like I read he had done while being questioned in hearings by the US Congress.

After a brief introduction, the conversation immediately delved into the dynamics of US diplomacy in Southern Africa during the second half of the 20th century. We started talking about attitudes around the world during the Cold War. I recalled a conversation with liberation fighter Ben Ulenga in 2012 about his memories of US helicopters leaving Saigon in 1975. Ulenga said "It was amazing to see this superpower, who the Soviets were very nervous about, running away from Vietnam". US policymakers, like

Crocker, were concerned that international perceptions of American military power were changing from robust to 'running away'. Washington was also worried about losing influence in the region if left-leaning African movements, like the MPLA, were to come to power and become communist.

Birth Of Linkage

The Angolan civil war between the MPLA and Unita was America's first major foray into Southern Africa. US weapons and money supported the South African Defence Forces and Unita as SADF very quickly forced the MPLA to retreat north from the Namibian border in 1975. However, later that year MPLA's ally, Fidel Castro, and tens of thousands of Cuban troops arrived on the shores of Luanda. The intimidating size of the Cuban forces led to a withdrawal of the SADF in 1976. Agostinho Neto then opened the Angolan borders to host exiles from Swapo, the ANC, and Zapu. Shortly afterwards, the American congress passed the Clark Amendment prohibiting the US government from providing additional covert aid to Unita.

This brings us to the beginning of Crocker's term in 1981. Crocker was chosen as assistant secretary of state for African affairs based on research he had written while in charge of African policy at Georgetown University's Centre for Strategic and International Studies in the 70s. His articles were critical of president Jimmy Carter's tactics in dealing with the white South African government; he argued that Carter was too hard on the apartheid government, potentially hurting US influence in the region.

Instead of publicly pressuring Pretoria, Crocker thought it better to establish a policy of 'linkage'. He recounted the policy to me in this way: "Yes, South Africans ought to leave Namibia. Yes, South Africans ought to stop coming across the border into Angola. But it would be a good idea if the Cubans also left Angola [so the] Angolans could deal with each other." Namibia's independence was therefore tied to the Cubans leaving Angola.

Before taking office in 1981, Crocker estimated that Namibian independence would be achieved through the 'linkage' plan in about 18 months. But it did not. And criticism poured in throughout the ensuing decade against both Crocker and the Reagan administration as a whole.

Evidence of the negative perceptions of the Reagan administration in Namibia can be found throughout the pages of the *The Namibian* in the 1980s. Opinion pieces regularly attacked Reagan both for his policies and his personal intelligence. The main policy criti-

cisms were regarding Crocker's supposedly soft attitude towards the apartheid government, particularly his opposition to the US Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act of 1986. The act, which passed through congress despite a veto by president Reagan, imposed economic sanctions against South Africa. Crocker defended Reagan's veto, arguing that it was not a sign of support for the apartheid government, but was for political reasons.

First, Crocker said, the opposition to sanctions 'was really a struggle for who conducts US foreign policy: Congress or the Executive Branch?' Because the act was drafted through congress, Reagan vetoed the sanctions because he felt that the power of enacting sanctions was a job for the President, not for congress. Secondly, according to Crocker, 'sanctions would have probably hurt black South Africans more than the whites who controlled the economy.'

After Crocker explained the reasoning behind Reagan's veto of the anti-apartheid act, he added "we believed in pressures against the South African regime. And we were applying our own... We were also pointing out to them non-stop that unless they worked with us on our Namibian framework they were on their own... facing a region in which the Soviets and their allies were well-established."

Crocker continued "...and I would say that to the South African defence minister 'you don't want to work with me? Go ahead. You can have Southern Africa to yourself. See how nice it is without any Western negotiated framework'".

Swapo Leaders

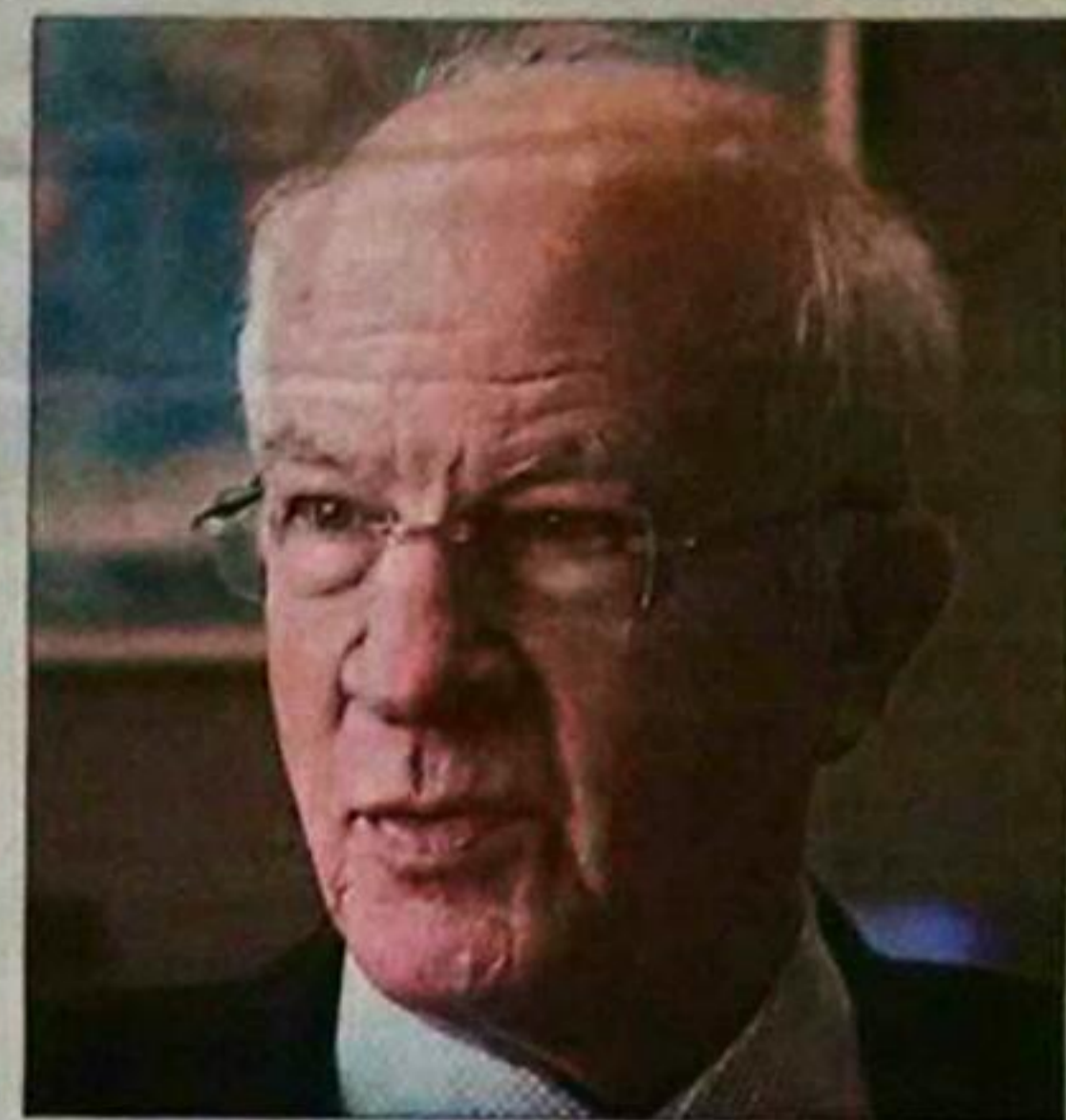
In 1987 South African troops had an especially good year fighting the MPLA. Castro responded by increasing the size of the Cuban deployment in Angola to about 50 000 troops. Crocker says "we now know [today] that the reason [Castro] did it was to use it as a negotiating card..." And Castro's 'negotiating card' worked. In December of 1988, national representatives met to sign the Brazzaville Accords, finally fulfilling Crocker's linkage policy. Cuba agreed to remove troops from Angola and South Africa agreed to a pathway for Namibian independence.

Insight into the way that Crocker perceived Namibian independence can be gleaned from the way that he describes his meetings with Swapo leaders in the 1980s. Crocker refers to individuals like Toivo ya Toivo and Nujoma as 'political heavyweights', and not always productive to talk with. However, he favourably describes Theo-Ben Gurirab as "a diplomat's diplomat" and Hidipo Hamutenya, as "not friendly to us, but [was] very

direct and helpful to talk to". Crocker recalls that Swapo leadership would often ask the US to drop the 'linkage' plan and just get on with Resolution 435. This seemed nonsensical to Crocker seeing as the very goal of his 'linkage' plan was to get South Africa to agree to move forward with Resolution 435. Crocker thought back to these conversations chuckling "I was sometimes tempted to say, 'Ronald Reagan has

other things to do than deal with Southern Africa. Would you like us to disengage?'" Crocker paused and laughed again. "The story is we did not disengage. We got the job done."

– Matthew Ecker co-directed and produced the film *From Windhoek to Washington: An Oral History of the Struggle for Namibian Independence*. He can be contacted at matthewecker97@gmail.com



Chester Crocker in 2013.

Vacancy



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