The Reagan Administration has followed a policy of "constructive engagement" in southern Africa, aimed at promoting long-term regional stability through improved communications among all the governments there, the peaceful settlement of regional disputes, economic growth, gradual racial reform in South Africa, and a reconciliation in Angola. An important element of this policy has been the proposed "linkage" between a phased reduction in the number of Cuban troops in Angola and step-by-step progress toward independence for Namibia in accordance with United Nations resolutions.

At times, this policy has appeared on the verge of success, but the United States has to date proven unable to bring Angola and South Africa together on the terms and conditions of a settlement. Moreover, Angola to date refuses to consider negotiations with Savimbi, whom it condemns as a rebel.

With the repeal of the Clark amendment and the 1985 offensive against Savimbi, many Americans came to favor some form of aid to UNITA. On Feb. 18, 1986, following Savimbi's January-February visit to the United States, the Assistant Secretary of State for Africa, Chester Crocker, told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the decision to aid Savimbi had been made and that "the process is in motion." Press accounts spoke of an initial commitment of $10 million to $15 million in covert military assistance to Savimbi. Crocker's testimony suggested that the Administration did not view a UNITA military victory as a possibility, but rather regarded the covert assistance as a means of pressing Angola to agree to some form of negotiated settlement with Savimbi and on the Cuban troop issue. But on Mar. 30, 1986, the Washington Post reported that the Administration had decided to supply Savimbi with highly-accurate shoulder-fired Stinger anti-aircraft missiles. (For further information, see CRS Report 86-649 F, Stinger Air Defense Missiles: Weapons Facts, by Steven R. Bowman.)

For some critics, aid to Savimbi is a mistake that will only make negotiated solutions in southern Africa less likely, while allowing the Soviets and Cubans new opportunities to expand their influence in the region. Many who hold this view support legislation to prohibit involvement in Angola.

Other critics, however, believe that the Administration has not gone far enough in assisting UNITA. They would like to see a large-scale assistance program, including anti-tank and additional anti-aircraft weapons, intended to overthrow the Angolan regime and bring Savimbi to power or at least raise the price to the Soviet Union of its Angolan involvement. Many are suspicious of a covert program, on the grounds that it can be too easily kept limited, and favor mandatory legislation that would create a substantial, public program of aid to UNITA.

The Angolan operations of the Chevron/Gulf Corporation have become controversial in connection with the Angolan policy debate. Some argue that it is contradictory for the United States to aid UNITA while permitting Chevron/Gulf to continue operations that provide foreign exchange to the Angolan government. Chevron/Gulf owns a 49% share of the Cabinda Gulf Corporation, which produces an estimated 75% of Angola's oil through its operations in oil-rich Cabinda province. In 1987, Cabinda Gulf was reportedly producing an average of 200,000 barrels of oil a day, taking 98,000 barrels a day for Chevron (half of which was shipped to the United States) and turning the rest over to the Angolan national oil company. Chevron/Gulf's investment in Angola is valued at $600 million. The Angolan government reportedly derives about 90% of its foreign exchange from oil sales. (In February 1987, Chevron said it would sell one-fifth of its share