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Challenging the Narrative: Rhodesian Political Strategy Supporting Military Success During the Bush War (1965-1979)

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On November 11, 1965, the British colony of Rhodesia unilaterally declared independence (UDI) from the United Kingdom.¹ In the words of the self-proclaimed nation's Prime Minister Ian Smith, Rhodesia's declaration had "struck a blow for the preservation of justice, civilization and Christianity" against the Communists and Afro-Asian Bloc.² Despite the high-minded rhetoric of Smith, he himself privately stated the opinion of many of Rhodesians that "The white man is the master of Rhodesia. He has built it and intends to keep it."³ The newfound nation, built on the principle of white-minority rule, faced seemingly insurmountable strategic odds from its inception. Internationally the Rhodesian decision was almost universally condemned. Britain, the Commonwealth, and the United Nations all deemed the UDI illegal, with the UN implementing economic sanctions on Rhodesia, a first in UN history.⁴ Ghana, Algeria, Cuba, Egypt, the Soviet Union, China, and other states began to support the black nationalist movements in Rhodesia by offering arms, training, and advisors. The population of minority-ruled Rhodesia in 1965 was about three million, of which only about eight percent were white.⁵ Yet

¹ "Unilateral Declaration of Independence," *The Government of Rhodesia, Wikisource*,

https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Unilateral_Declaration_of_Independence (Accessed April 21, 2022).

² Michael Evans, "The Wretched of the Empire: Politics, Ideology and Counterinsurgency in Rhodesia, 1965-80." *International Journal of Phytoremediation* 18, No. 2 (2007): 181.

³ Eddie Michel, "'This Outcome Gives Me No Pleasure. It Is Extremely Painful for Me to Be the Instrument of Their Fate': White House Policy on Rhodesia During the UDI Era (1965-1979)." *South African Historical Journal* 71, No. 3 (2019): 443.

⁴ "Unilateral Declaration of Independence," *The Government of Rhodesia, Wikisource*,

https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Unilateral_Declaration_of_Independence (Accessed April 21, 2022).

⁵ Peter A. Kiss, "Rhodesia, 1962–1980: Tactical Success, Operational, Strategic, and Political Failure", In *Winning Wars Amongst the People* (Potomac Books, 2014), 55.

Rhodesia's white minority managed to hang onto power until 1979 all the same.⁶

Most modern scholars point to the end of Rhodesia as inevitable. According to historian Matthew Preston, popular scholarship surrounding the war believes that while security forces fought an innovative and highly effective counter-insurgency campaign, failures on the political front led inevitably to ultimate defeat.⁷ Historian Michael Evans summarizes these widely held views by writing "In the annals of the modern history of small wars, Rhodesia is probably the best example of a counterinsurgency campaign rendered ineffective by an almost complete lack of a realistic political strategy to complement an efficient military effort."⁸ Yet this oft-repeated argument fails to address how the 250,000 white Rhodesian's held back the tide of history for fourteen years. Against such odds, a "complete lack of a realistic political strategy" seems utterly insufficient to the task. This narrative also unjustifiably separates Rhodesia's military successes from its political strategies under the assumption Rhodesia's foreign policy only weakened its military effort. However, contrary to Evan's popular narrative, I believe Rhodesia's political strategy was realistic and successfully supported its military campaign. During its tenuous existence from 1965 to 1979, Rhodesia used effective political strategies rooted in the global Cold War to fuel its counter-insurgency efforts, enabling the strategically unstable, militarily weak, and politically isolated state to survive an implausible fourteen years.

During this fourteen-year conflict, Rhodesia's greatest challenge was gaining foreign support. Due to its pariah status internationally, Rhodesia could never expect widespread foreign recognition and open support, but Rhodesians did believe they could build enough support from similarly minded countries,

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Matthew Preston, "Stalemate and the Termination of Civil War: Rhodesia Reassessed," *Journal of Peace Research* 41, No. 1 (2004): 71-72.

⁸ Evans, "The Wretched of the Empire: Politics, Ideology and Counterinsurgency in Rhodesia, 1965-80," 191-192.

political movements, and foreign leaders to support their war effort. Only in South Africa and Portugal, fellow white-minority governments in southern Africa, was this support easily found. However, relations between Pretoria, Lisbon, and Salisbury were often fraught and the regimes' interests were not necessarily congruent, resulting in cooperation being mostly limited to trade, arms, and intelligence sharing.⁹ While a short-lived tripartite alliance known as ALCORA was created, it was not a formal defense pact and collapsed following the 1974 Carnation Revolution in Portugal that overthrew its authoritarian pro-colonial government.¹⁰ The Communist and Third World blocs were both firmly against Rhodesia but divided in their goals for the country, with the rebel group ZAPU supported by Angola, Cuba, the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact and the ZANU rebels supported by Tanzania and China.¹¹ This left the democratic West and particularly the United States as Rhodesia's best hope for major foreign support in its war against insurgents. Using a combination of effective political strategies, Rhodesia was able to get a large amount of support from a publicly hostile West, a major accomplishment that runs contrary to the narrative of an unrealistic Rhodesian foreign policy.

Politically, Rhodesia's main strategy toward the West was to position itself as a bastion of Western values against the spread of Communism in southern Africa. There was certainly some truth to this argument, as shown in a 1977 meeting between East German leader Erich Honecker and Fidel Castro, in which Castro tied Rhodesia in with ongoing Cuban-backed conflicts in Angola, Mozambique and Zambia as part of a grand communist strategy in

⁹ Gary Baines, "The Arsenal of Securocracy: Pretoria's Provision of Arms and Aid to Salisbury, c.1974-1980," *South African Historical Journal* 71, No. 3 (2019): 424.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 425.

¹¹ "Fidel Castro's 1977 Southern Africa Tour: A Report to Honecker (excerpt)," dated April 03, 1977, DY30 JIV 2/201/1292; document obtained by Christian F. Ostermann; translated by David Welch with revisions by Ostermann, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Berlin, Wilson Center Online Digital Archive.

southern Africa to gain power in the region over the West.¹² The vehemently anti-communist statements of the Rhodesian government, whether sincere or for political gain, resonated across Vietnam-era America, and many American conservatives were angered by US hostility towards a Western-oriented anti-communist stronghold in southern Africa. The Rhodesian offer to send soldiers to Vietnam further reinforced the conservative view of Salisbury as an ally in the global fight against communism.¹³ The Rhodesian UDI also occurred at a key point in US political history, allowing Rhodesia to turn its internationally “unacceptable” racial policies into a strength. Many of Rhodesia’s most vocal supporters, such as Senators James Eastland, Strom Thurmond, and Jesse Helms, supported Salisbury on racialist grounds and feared that if the “White Redoubt” were to collapse in southern Africa this could spell the end of white supremacy in Dixie.¹⁴ As a result of its racial and anti-communist policies, Rhodesia created enduring tangible support in the US domestic political scene throughout the tumultuous 1960s and 70s that translated into weakened US resolve against Rhodesia.

Though “official” US policy toward Rhodesia from 1965-1979 is summed up by President Lyndon Johnson's 1966 statement to the Organization of African Unity that the US hoped to “open full power and responsibility of nationhood to all the people of Rhodesia-not just 6 percent of them,” Rhodesia’s anti-communist rhetoric led to a very different approach behind closed doors.¹⁵ In a 1966 memorandum to President Johnson written by presidential advisor John P. Roche, Roche stated an intervention in Rhodesia and other anti-communist African states would be “completely

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Michel, “‘This Outcome Gives Me No Pleasure. It Is Extremely Painful for Me to Be the Instrument of Their Fate’: White House Policy on Rhodesia During the UDI Era (1965-1979),” 445.

¹⁴ Ibid., 446.

¹⁵ Hearings before the Subcommittee on Africa of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives, 91st Congress First Session, United States Government Printing Office in Washington D.C., 37-287, 1969.

contradictory” to America’s general posture towards the communist world and “at best useless, at worst counter-productive.”¹⁶ This statement shows that in the wider Cold War struggle for southern Africa, US administrations were cognizant of the need to avoid actions against Rhodesia which could damage broader relations with the white-controlled states of the region. On a geopolitical level, the United States retained close strategic and economic ties with the anti-communist racist regimes of Portugal, which was a key NATO ally, and South Africa, which monitored Soviet activities in the south Atlantic, provided facilities for US aircraft and naval vessels, and hosted an important NASA tracking station.¹⁷ By positioning itself as an anti-communist ally to the West alongside Portugal and South Africa and racist ally to American conservatives, Rhodesia both precluded Western intervention against it and helped create the most consequential acts of Western support for its regime, the continuous violations of UN economic sanctions on Rhodesia by Western states.

In the first few years after the UN instituted sanctions, it became obvious they were not being effectively enforced. According to a 1968 CIA report “the comprehensive sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council on 29 May 1968 against Rhodesia are unlikely to have much more effect in forcing Salisbury to relinquish its independence than have previous limited sanction efforts.”¹⁸ While the report blamed South Africa and Portugal as the reason for Rhodesian success in skirting sanctions, the real culprit was the Western states that refused to enforce them. The offending countries included France, Belgium, Luxemburg, the Netherlands, Italy, Greece, West Germany, Britain, the US,

¹⁶ John P. Roche to Lyndon B. Johnson, November 30, 1966 in Robert Lester, et al., eds., in Lyndon B. Johnson National Security Files, 1963-1969, Africa, (Frederick, Md: University Publications of America, 1988), 62-63.

¹⁷ Michel, “‘This Outcome Gives Me No Pleasure. It Is Extremely Painful for Me to Be the Instrument of Their Fate’: White House Policy on Rhodesia During the UDI Era (1965-1979),” 446-447.

¹⁸ 556, Intelligence Memorandum Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency, Lyndon B. Johnson National Security Files.

Israel, Japan, various African countries, Brazil, Mauritius, and Taiwan, among others.¹⁹ German, Japanese, French and Dutch exports to Rhodesia increased by 62%, 62%, 22% and 24% respectively, while Swiss imports from Rhodesia increased by 107% in the two years following the UDI. Even Britain, Rhodesia's former colonial master and therefore the Western country most outraged by its UDI, repeatedly and flagrantly violated sanctions despite publicly enforcing them. Publicly, Prime Minister Harold Wilson's 1965 address to Parliament stated Britain's official position that "It is the duty of everyone owing allegiance to the Crown...to refrain from all acts which would assist the illegal régime to continue in their rebellion against the Crown," and in 1966 Britain deployed the Royal Navy to enforce the oil embargo on Rhodesia by preventing oil tankers offloading their cargo at the Mozambican port of Beira.²⁰ Privately, however, many British companies, including Shell and BP, were violating sanctions through the Mozambican port of Lourenço Marques which the Royal Navy did not patrol. In 1967, annoyed at the fact it was constantly accused by the British government of breaking international sanctions, the Portuguese government revealed that out of the 169 oil tankers which entered Lourenço Marques between April 1966 and May 1967, 58 were British flagged and owned.²¹

While private sanction busting in the West was incredibly common, it was not publicly endorsed until the United States Congress passed the Military Procurement Act of 1972. In this document, Section 10, known as the Byrd Amendment, allowed the importation of strategic raw materials "of any foreign country or area not listed as a Communist dominated country or area, for so

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ House of Commons Debate 11th November 1965, 720, col. 356; Alois S. Mlambo, "'Honoured More in the Breach Than in the Observance': Economic Sanctions on Rhodesia and International Response, 1965 to 1979," *South African Historical Journal* 71, No. 3 (2019): 381.

²¹ Mlambo, "'Honoured More in the Breach Than in the Observance': Economic Sanctions on Rhodesia and International Response, 1965 to 1979," 381.

long as the importation into the United States of material of that kind which is the product of such Communist-dominated countries or areas is not prohibited by any provision of law.”²² The wording was deliberately formulated to allow US corporations access to the mineral wealth of Rhodesia, an action in open violation of UN sanctions. The act authorized the importation into the United States of seventy-two strategic and critical minerals from Rhodesia, with chrome being the most valuable, and considering the US had been forced to import it from the USSR as the only other major source of chrome after UN sanctions on Rhodesia, the most politically justifiable.²³ While the economic value of Rhodesian resources was certainly an important reason the bill passed, the Congressional debates on the subject point directly to the success of Rhodesian anti-communist and racist policies in winning conservative American support. Senator James Collins echoed Rhodesian propaganda in a Senate debate, saying “why should Rhodesia be singled out when there is not a single democracy in the whole continent of Africa. If self-determination is a United Nations feature, why do we do business with Russia, Red China, Latin-American dictatorships or any other authoritarian country?”²⁴ Other powerful racially conservative senators like Byrd, Thurmond, Stennis, and Goldwater fought for the passage of the amendment, which appeared to pair the domestic “Southern Strategy” adopted by the Nixon White House with a “Southern Africa Strategy” designed to gain white political support by slowing down the pace of racial change in both the southern states and southern Africa.²⁵ Historian Gerald Horne suggests that the two strategies were mutually compatible in the context of Cold War-era conservatism, which often painted both African

²² Armed Forces Authorization of 1972, H.R. 8687, Public Law 92-156, 92nd Congress (November 17, 1971).

²³ Eddie Michel, “The Luster of Chrome: Nixon, Rhodesia, and the Defiance of UN Sanctions,” *Diplomatic History* 42, No. 1 (2018): 158.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 156.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 156-158.

Americans and Africans as the allies or dupes of the communists.²⁶ Through a remarkably effective international campaign, Rhodesia had used the issues of communism and race to turn the West from a bloc united in hostility towards its existence in 1965 into one willing to privately and publicly trade with it by 1971, which was a remarkable accomplishment for a racist white-minority ruled African state created by rebels against the British Crown and sanctioned by the United Nations.

Despite Rhodesian political success abroad, all would be for naught if Rhodesia could not translate this into military strength at home. The central problem of Rhodesia's military, known collectively as the Rhodesian Security Forces, was the fact that they needed to control a vast country of 389,000 square kilometers and 3 million people with an army that at the peak of its strength had only 15,000 personnel (3,400 regulars, the rest conscripts) due to financial constraints and white demographics (due to the limited attempts to utilize Blacks in the security forces until very late in the war).²⁷ Security forces were also limited by the Rhodesian government's unwillingness to follow a "hearts and minds" strategy that offered an acceptable political solution that would win over the Black population from the guerillas, damning the military to fight a nationwide holding-action until a political solution was reached.²⁸ With their political constraints and limited manpower, the security forces could not hope to completely cover and control the entire country, but they managed to consistently locate and defeat the guerrillas in the areas that were the most important economically (primarily the cities and the European farm belt) and effectively contest the countryside for 14 years. This major accomplishment was the result of innovative counter-insurgency tactics made possible by high-tech military equipment and a relatively massive military budget gained through the economic rewards of Rhodesia's political strategy.

²⁶ Ibid., 142.

²⁷ Kiss, "Rhodesia, 1962–1980: Tactical Success, Operational, Strategic, and Political Failure," 52-59.

²⁸ Ibid., 60.

By the height of the war in the mid-to-late 1970s, funding military operations for the guerrilla war was costing Rhodesia roughly one million dollars per day.²⁹ By the 1969 estimates of economist Robert McKinnell, Rhodesia's economy "must apparently" have stagnated or gone into recession due to sanctions by that time, which would have placed major constraints on Rhodesia's ability to pay for the war.³⁰ However, through the West's willingness to accept trade from UN sanctioned Rhodesia, the country was able to meet these costs. According to a UN report on Rhodesian sanctions, Rhodesia's exports in 1973 were estimated to be worth \$640 million (a major increase when compared with \$474 million in 1972).³¹ The situation changed little by 1978, with the UN helplessly recording hundreds of illegal exports that year.³² Willingness to accept Rhodesian exports also extended to toleration of Rhodesia importing western arms. The arms had to be obtained through third-parties or middlemen, but they made their way into the country all the same, with some of the leading pro-sanctions western countries supplying them. Rhodesia sourced arms and aircraft from Italy, the USA, the UK, France, Switzerland, Jordan, Luxemburg, Israel, Belgium, Portugal and West Germany.³³ Rhodesian tactical superiority in the war was largely the result of its western machine guns, artillery, armored and unarmored vehicles, small arms, and airplanes. For example, the massed use of airpower by Rhodesia, such as the forty-two helicopters and thirty-five fixed-wing aircraft used in the

²⁹ Evans, "The Wretched of the Empire: Politics, Ideology and Counterinsurgency in Rhodesia, 1965-80," 191.

³⁰ Robert McKinnell, "Sanctions and the Rhodesian Economy," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 7, No. 4 (1969): 580.

³¹ Seventh Report of the Security Council Committee Established in Pursuance of Resolution 253 (1968) Concerning the Question of Southern Rhodesia, United Nations Online Database, S/11594/Add.3.

³² Tenth Report of the Security Council Committee Established in Pursuance of Resolution 253 (1968) Concerning the Question of Southern Rhodesia, United Nations Online Database, S/12529/Add.1.

³³ Mlambo, "'Honoured More in the Breach Than in the Observance': Economic Sanctions on Rhodesia and International Response, 1965 to 1979," 392.

successful 1977 Chimoio Raid, would not have been possible without the western supply of aircraft, fuel, repair parts.³⁴

Despite global condemnation and UN sanctions following the UDI in 1965, Rhodesia managed to secure legal trading rights from the United States via the Byrd Amendment in 1971 and illicit trade with dozens of other western countries to the tune of over \$600 million in exports by 1973. These funds and support were crucial to Rhodesia's remarkably successful fourteen-year counter-insurgency campaign and would not have been available if Rhodesia had "a complete lack of a realistic political strategy." On the contrary, Rhodesia's successful use of anti-communist and racist rhetoric, tailored to western and American Cold War-era political interests, allowed the country to continue exporting its raw materials and goods both openly and covertly. If western leaders had not been influenced by Rhodesia's political strategy, it is likely a strict enforcement of UN sanctions would have occurred, resulting in financial losses that would have greatly reduced the longevity of the embattled white regime in Salisbury, regardless of the "efficient military effort" and tactical prowess of the security forces.

³⁴ Darlington Mutanda, *The Rhodesian Air Force in Zimbabwe's War of Liberation, 1966-1980*, (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2017), 101.