

AMERICAN COMMITTEE ON AFRICA  
211 East 43rd Street  
New York, New York 10017

Copy of G. Mennen Williams'  
Letter to George Houser

December 18, 1964

Dear Mr. Houser:

The Secretary has asked me to reply to your letter of November 27, which has been studied with the same sympathetic concern which the Department always gives to your constructive suggestions on African policy questions.

May I first assure you that the United States Government considered at length all aspects of the difficult decision to provide transport for the Belgian paratroopers who, with the authorization of the Government of the Congo, engaged in the six-day humanitarian rescue operation in the Stanleyville area. There were a great many factors to be considered, including the almost certain prospect that many African leaders might misinterpret our action in the light of their own experiences in a colonial past or fear that this action might be taken as a precedent for subsequent interventions by other countries.

It was also difficult to decide whether the rescue operation, if undertaken, would create the very calamity it was intended to avert, namely, a massacre of those being held as hostages. This decision had to be based on previous experience in the liberation of rebel-held towns by Congolese land forces, which showed that hostages were most likely to escape execution when the possibility of rescue came suddenly and by surprise. In the case of Stanleyville however, there could be no prospect of surprise for the ANC's land attack, and we had reason to believe that the rebel leaders were actually inciting the jeunesse to massacre the hostages should the advancing ANC column reach Stanleyville. Dr. Carlson and our consular personnel, accused of being mercenaries, were taken November 18 before an unruly mob which howled for their death.

The experience of the actual air drop has confirmed that our judgment, reached jointly with the Belgian Government, was correct, and that almost 2,000 persons, including hundreds of Congolese and other non-Europeans, were saved from almost certain slaughter.

I can assure you that the alternative course of negotiating for the release of the hostages through the OAU and the International Red Cross, which you suggest, was attempted in all earnestness and good faith. We reluctantly concluded that it was doomed to failure because of two factors:

1. There was no convincing evidence that Mr. Kanza, who was negotiating in Nairobi, in fact represented the views of the rebel leaders and could commit the rebels to a course of action. We had reason to believe that these leaders had only the most tenuous control over the mob of jeunesse. At the same time that Mr. Kanza was giving assurances of the continued safety of the hostages, Mr. Gbenye, the rebel "President", was denouncing the missionaries and our consular personnel as captured mercenaries and adjuring his followers (over the radio and through the columns of the Stanleyville revolutionary paper) to dismember these hostages and make ornaments of their skin.

2. Mr. Kanza persisted in demanding, as a condition for the continued safety of the hostages, political and military concessions from the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

This last demand, of course, made to the United States Government through Ambassador Attwood, was based on an assumption which the Congolese rebels were most successful in spreading and which may, unfortunately, be believed by some people in this country. The assumption is that it lay within the power of the United States Government to halt the advance of the ANC column advancing on Stanleyville. The fact is that neither the U.S. nor Belgium controlled the column and we are convinced that we could not have either stopped the column or effected a cease fire. Furthermore we were not authorized to negotiate on behalf of the Congolese Government and any attempt on our part would have constituted blatant intervention in Congolese affairs. We do not "control" the Congolese, Tshombe is not our "puppet" and we cannot negotiate on behalf of the Congolese without their authorization, and certainly not on matters involving a problem of internal security.

The United States could, you may say, have withdrawn the transport planes which we had put at the disposal of the Congolese Government to move supplies and Congolese troops. But the termination of our transport assistance at this stage might have delayed, but would certainly not have prevented, the advance of the ANC columns. We would have incurred the enmity of the Congolese Government, prolonged the ordeal of the hostages, and probably not have altered the fate which was in store for them.

You state that the Belgian-U.S. rescue operation in Stanleyville cannot be seen in isolation from the political-military offensive of the Central Government and the Congolese troops. This is true only in the narrow sense that the greatest danger to the hostages was bound to occur as those troops entered the city from the south, and if the hostages were to be saved, a lightning rescue operation had to take place before the fighting reached Stanleyville. The rescue mission had no military goal. Those involved released the hostages, effected the evacuation of civilians, and withdrew from Stanleyville when their humanitarian mission had been accomplished. Paulis reverted to the rebels after the rescue mission had completed its brief, narrowly defined task. According to one American hostage, who was fortunate enough to escape from the group being mowed down by machine-gun fire in the street, the paratroopers who arrived on the scene in Stanleyville simply fired in the air and there was not a single Congolese body on the street--littered with wounded and dying hostages-- after the rebel soldiery fled the scene.

As for the wider issue of noninterference which you have raised, the Department agrees that any ultimate and lasting solution must have a large degree of political content, and we would hope that the Government which is scheduled to be formed on the basis of the elections scheduled early next year will be broadly based, with adequate representation from those regions and ethnic groups which have provided some support for the rebellion. To the extent that this rebellion was encouraged by real grievances of inadequate and in some cases corrupt administration, we are doing our utmost, in our own economic and technical assistance, in our support for the UN Civil Operations Program and through whatever influence we have with the Congolese Government, to help eliminate such basic causes.

Virtually everyone agrees, however, that the first condition for recovery must be the maintenance of stability and a cessation of insurrection and insurgency. We are doing a great deal to help the Congolese Government achieve that end, notably in the furnishing of transport and communications equipment and advisors for the training of effective police forces. We naturally regret that neither Prime Minister Adoula nor Mr. Tshombe was successful in their efforts to obtain forces from other African countries to help maintain internal security. We may regret the Congolese Government's decision to employ mercenaries particularly from southern Africa, as an alternative, but we cannot really question its sovereign right to do so, any more than we question the right of the Kenyan and Tanzanian Governments to call on British troops to put down the mutinies in their armies.

You propose that the United States "take the initiative in calling for an international pact of noninterference in the Congo". There are already a whole series of UN resolutions which bear on this subject and which call for efforts to preserve the unity, political independence and territorial integrity of the Congo. The Secretary General in his statement of June 29 last stated that these resolutions continue in force. Our assistance to the recognized legal Government of the Congo to achieve these objectives is entirely consistent with these resolutions, just as any effort from any quarter to assist those seeking to overthrow that Government and destroy its unity is to defy them. What is needed is not a new international covenant but simply the compliance of all states with the resolutions already adopted by the United Nations. Certainly for the United States to take the initiative in calling a special international conference on this subject would be inconsistent with our efforts to achieve a primarily African solution and might even be resented by the OAU, which already has the question on its agenda.

You concede that "it is right for the United States to want to see a stable Central Government in the Congo" but question our responsibility to become involved in its internal politics. I do not believe that the degree of involvement is inappropriate or that it exceeds what is required to assure the best utilization of our aid. Helping a government fighting for its existence against forces of anarchy and dissolution inevitably entails a certain degree of involvement. We have discreetly urged the need for a broad government of national reconciliation, as has the OAU, but we have had no voice in the actual selection of ministers.

It is important to bear in mind that the United States Government was not responsible in any way, even indirectly, for the decision of President Kasavubu and his closest political advisors to summon Mr. Tshombe to form an interim government pending elections. Both the Congolese rebellion and our own limited program of military assistance predated by many months the installation of Mr. Tshombe in this position. Our policy of economic and technical assistance to the Congolese Government, regardless of who was Prime Minister, has been consistent through three U.S. administrations. The danger of Communist domination of this vast area, which you appear to minimize, has been only one element in determining this policy, which is directed toward helping the Congolese people achieve economic recovery and tranquility and not to create either an economic colony or a political vassal for the United States.

As we had foreseen, the recent events have occasioned wide-spread misunderstanding of our policy in Africa, although we know from the private assurances of many African leaders that this misunderstanding is by no means as wide-spread as various public pronouncements would suggest. But this Government must, in the final analysis, do what it believes to be right even at the risk of recriminations from many of our friends who are often not as well informed as we would wish on actual conditions in the Congo.

With every good wish.

Sincerely,

G. Mennen Williams