

# AN INTERVIEW WITH CHESTER CROCKER

*Chester Crocker served as Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs under the Reagan administration. Mr. Crocker served as the agent of the agreement in December 1988 among Angola, Cuba and South Africa for the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola and the halt to Namibian occupation by the Republic of South Africa. Currently a Distinguished Fellow at the United States Institute of Peace and Research Professor at the School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, Mr. Crocker spoke on December 12, 1989 with Christopher Shaw and Peter Oppenheimer in Cambridge, Massachusetts.*

**FORUM:** You have said that the agreement which you brokered among Angola, Cuba and South Africa seemed to legitimize negotiation as the technique of choice for conflict resolution.

Where does the negotiation process succeed where other alternatives fail?

**CROCKER:** Negotiation creates an example of success, and success tends to breed more efforts to negotiate. It also demonstrates what is required. It presents an example of a compromise from which everybody gains and in which nobody is selling out. That is a very important principle, and one that is particularly necessary in the South African case at present. The traditional positions of the government and many in the mass democratic movement are group rights and transfer of power, respectively. Neither one of those formulas is a serious answer to the problem of South Africa, and neither one of them is going to provide the basis for a solution. So, while in a formal sense they may still adhere to those kinds of doctrines, I think that even as we sit here today there are people exploring the reality of the compromise.

**FORUM:** On the compromise itself, could you elaborate on the convergence of interests among the three parties which led to the successful conclusion to the negotiation?

**CROCKER:** There were a number of factors. You need a realistic conceptual structure to start with, and that is perhaps the most important role that the Americans played. We defined a solution in terms of several principles and trade-offs that made some sense, and that by definition represented a positive-sum game. We played other roles, too. We passed and brokered ideas, we mediated and we facilitated.

We did a lot of things, but I do not want to exaggerate the US role. Other important factors were the consistent failure of military offensives, particularly on the Soviet-Angolan side. The fact that the Cubans decided to find a way out of what they recognized to be a losing position several years ago was also very important, because there has to be some kind of rough equilibrium. You do not get negotiations to work at a time when someone has just been licked

or humiliated. That is the worst time to try to get a negotiation. And nobody was licked or humiliated. Both the South Africans and the Cubans, who represent the external elements of the Namibia-Angola Wars, feel they accomplished something on their own and in their own interest. If nothing else, at least now the Angolans have fewer foreigners living in their house, which should make it possible for them to treat each other as brothers.

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It takes strong parties to make decisions. It takes people prepared to actually provide ammunition to the other side of the table, back and forth, as a reciprocal process. It is a process, not an event. You have to know how much to try to settle without trying to settle everything, because if you overreach, you are probably going to run into a situation of overload. If we had insisted, for example, that part of the deal had to be a resolution of the internal Angolan civil war, the Angolans would have probably responded by saying, "Fine, provided we also settle the internal South African civil war." And then you can imagine where that would have headed.

*FORUM:* You spoke about credibility in the negotiating process. What sort of credibility would the United States have had if they had not supported UNITA?

*CROCKER:* I think we had substantial diplomatic credibility because we are a superpower, and, in a strange way, a country with whom all these parties would like to have a better relationship. The South Africans, Cubans and Angolans all have rather poor official relations with us for various reasons. In that sense, they may have felt that cooperating in an American-sponsored effort would lead to some improvement in their international reputation and standing, and perhaps even in our bilateral relations. But I think credibility for the diplomat comes first, last and always from having good ideas and being very well informed. In other words, whenever you meet the leader of the delegation from Country X, it pays if you are even better informed than he is, and that you have real information—I would not use the word "intelligence" because that is perhaps misunderstood—that is relevant to their needs and their priorities.

I think it demonstrated a degree of seriousness of the American political system, not just one or two men, that the Congress decided in 1985 to repeal the Clark Amendment. The administration, with Congressional support, decided to make use of that, not because we believed in military solutions, but in order to oppose anyone who did.

*FORUM:* You also mentioned that in the negotiations things were kept very quiet, that there were few public speeches made. How did the fact that you kept these things out of the public eye assist you in the negotiation process?

*CROCKER:* I think the broad objectives of the policy were pretty well known, but we had been doing it for so long that most of the media's eyes glazed over by 1986-87, which was not all bad. The only problem was that occasionally they implied that this was a waste of time, and you might hear some people saying, "It's a waste of time: why don't you stop it?" Of course it was not. Just when the consensus had developed that it was going nowhere was the time when it was getting its best lease on life. You know, the contrarian school of investment analysis dictates that you buy when the stock is cheap.

During the height of the very active shuttles going on in 1988, the final year of the negotiations, we did some background briefing of the press and so forth, but we were very firm in not revealing what was, in fact, sensitive information about the positions of the parties and the compromises that we might be thinking about. That would have been the surest way to destroy our credibility.

*FORUM:* You also alluded to the need to establish or make use of a balance between the parties at that key moment in the negotiations when you felt a breakthrough was possible. How do you identify that balance and that key moment?

*CROCKER:* I am not sure there is any abstract formula for it. It is a feeling more than anything else. We had four or five consecutive meetings with the MPLA (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola) between the summer of 1987 and January 1988, and we sensed that if we permitted the Cuban government to be represented in the process, something might really start moving on their side. So we decided to test that. We had been hearing these messages from Havana, and we thought the time had really come to find what that was all about. The messages kept saying that if the Cubans were allowed to participate, it would make a difference. So we said, "Alright, let's see the color of your money."

Then we had to describe all this in a way that made some sense to the South African side, with which we had been somewhat disengaged for several months, not least because of the effect of the sanctions' passage on the terms of the bilateral relationship. We had to try to re-engage them. It took some time for them to figure out whether we were selling them something that was not worth it. But we could tell after a couple of meetings that they might

also be looking for a road forward, or an alternative to the road we were on. You get it by feel, by people's body language and often as much by what they do not say as what they do say.

*FORUM:* Do you think there are any particular lessons from this process that could be applied, for instance, to Nicaragua or the Middle East?

*CROCKER:* Each case is a long subject in its own right, and of course they are very different. In the Central American case, we were pursuing a classic Reagan Doctrine approach for some time, which did generate some very real pressures. I think there were a number of people who never were quite clear as to whether the objective was to deal with the external factors or the internal factors or everything at once, which may have been a subject of some confusion for a while. Once the Central American presidents began their own diplomacy, it became a question of whether we support that or watch from the sidelines or what. We are still in something of that mode. If the Central American plan could go forward, I think you would find that the United States would support that process. The question becomes one of options. It is one thing if you are determined to stop cross-border activity and the infiltration of foreign troops and arms. If, beyond that, you try to solve an internal power question in a country, you may have to look at additional options.

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The Middle East, structurally, is totally different of course. I, for one, find it difficult to see how you can proceed too much further without addressing the question of Syria, which strikes me in some ways as the factor that simply has not fallen into anyone's focal lens yet. You also have the question of power inside the Israeli government, which in a sense is a divided government. It is not easy for weak or divided governments to become strong negotiating partners. I think basically that Secretary Baker's approach is correct. You do not give up on something like this—you keep hammering away at it.

*FORUM:* Has the policy of constructive engagement in South Africa worked as you had intended, and should it be continued?

*CROCKER:* Constructive engagement is the essence of any definition of diplomacy. That is what diplomacy is. The opposite of constructive engagement is a hands-off or disengagement approach. Disengagement is not normally perceived as an approach which allows you to advance your own agenda. It is like taking your hands off the wheel. I look at constructive engagement as a classic definition of our diplomacy toward any part of the world, whether it is the Soviet Union or the People's Republic of China or the Middle East. This particular policy of the Reagan administration secured the title "constructive engagement." People began to describe it as that, and then they began to insert their own definitions of what it meant, and we began to have a massive, very public debate about a set of words that nobody had an interest in accurately defining. It became a domestic political morality play in which everybody was pursuing something of a separate agenda, not much of which had anything to do with the situation in South Africa. So I think it is fair to say that this is the policy we are still pursuing, though no one is going to make any great effort to resurrect those words.

I do not think that the Bush administration wants to disengage from South Africa. On the contrary, we are continuing to build our aid programs to assist the institutional development of the victims of apartheid, as well as our labor programs, our community action programs, our human rights programs, our business training programs and so forth. We are trying to remain diplomatically engaged with all the players on the spectrum of South African politics. The current and previous administrations have put their weight behind certain negotiating concepts, and this means to me that we are remaining engaged. But the term "constructive engagement" has developed a coloration of its own that is not worth pursuing.

*FORUM:* Whatever term you want to use to describe the policy, do you think it contributed to the replacement of P. W. Botha and the somewhat more conciliatory policies de Klerk has implemented?

*CROCKER:* I think that we probably all too often exaggerate our role in history. In some ways we are far more parochial and provincial in this country than we would like to admit. We think our values, our approaches and our ideas are automatically looked at with great deference in other parts of the world. If you do not like the speed limit in Kuwait you pass a law in the US Congress to have it changed. Your question implies that whatever happens down there is in some direct sense a result of our actions. That is least likely to be the case in the internal restructuring of a foreign government. Everything about it is constitutional.

P. W. Botha was an old man who became ill, and that is why he was removed from the scene. But I do think there has been a learning process, and if there is one thing that we have tried to underscore, it is that the relationship between the United States and South Africa has a role to play, but South Africans cannot come to Washington to solve their problems. We have been saying this time and time again. I just got back from South Africa

and I spent half my time saying it again, because there is still that temptation on their part to see if there is not some way they can cut a deal with somebody in the West or somebody in the East or someplace. My message was that they have to cut a deal in their own country with each other. Obviously, the resolution of these regional questions in some way creates a new basis for addressing the internal problems in South Africa, in which the parties are roughly in balance, no one is feeling humiliated, and it is perceived that negotiations can work. The Namibian exercise is on track; democratic elections have just been held there. So it is a very positive backdrop.

*FORUM:* If the Bush administration continues to emphasize a constructive engagement policy, is that consistent with the trend of increasing the pressure on the South African government?

*CROCKER:* It is in many ways, because when you say you want to be involved you are not saying you want to be involved in some backroom dealing with the government with the lights turned off. That is not what our policy ever was. Being involved means not only being involved as investors, as people who do training and conduct various kinds of university and foundation work, but also as people who broker ideas and push a certain message about the utility of negotiations. I do not see an inconsistency there, but I also feel that at various stages and at various times, you have to decide on the balance of measures and policies you are going to adopt, and you should base that on what you see taking place on the ground at that period, not on some abstract theology that you bring to the job. Therefore, if some things are happening that are going in the right direction, that should be acknowledged, just as things that are going in a negative direction should be acknowledged.

*FORUM:* de Klerk has begun to dismantle certain aspects of petty apartheid, and has said that although he is not willing to let black majority rule occur, he is willing to give up white majority rule. Where do you see South Africa going?

*CROCKER:* I think what he is trying to do is change the climate, demonstrate a certain degree of good faith, and meet in practice some of the conditions that people have looked for: permitting the African National Congress to function inside the country, releasing people and taking some steps toward reform. I think he is probably going to continue doing that for a while in the hope that this will create a different political climate. When Parliament reconvenes in late January or early February next year, I suspect that there will be further announcements that deal with reform issues of various kinds, including reform in areas that people often concentrate on, that comprise the grand pillars of apartheid law and policy. He has pledged to end the Separate Amenities Act, which is sort of petty apartheid on a national scale, and to allow access to public facilities and so forth. But that will be dealt with in terms of changing the law, which you can only do when parliament is sitting.

The purpose of all this is presumably not just a series of unilateral gestures, but to try to get something going in the way of a political process, which I think is clearly what the government wishes to do.

I am not sure this really answered your question, which was more concerned with the bottom line. Frankly, I am glad they have not tried to answer this question. I would not want either side or any side—because there are more than two sides—at this stage to start defining bottom lines, because they do not know each other well enough yet. They have not engaged each other enough yet to know each other's priorities, and therefore where the trade-offs might be. To give a very practical example, consider what in the end of the day is most important to the white constituency of the National Party of South Africa. Is it geographic residential segregation? Is it the constitutional structure and the formal political role of whites therein? Is it the degree of tolerance of the system to permit people to do their own thing, have their own schools, speak their own languages, have their own churches? Is it the economy? Is it the role of whites in the economy, including white civil servants and pensioners? There are a hell of a lot of issues there, and I am awfully glad that people are not defining themselves in stone at this stage, because they would probably give the wrong answers.

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*FORUM:* Would the release of Mandela demonstrate that people were prepared to start talking about bottom lines, or would that be more of the culmination of such a process?

*CROCKER:* I look at that as the logical culmination of the climate-changing stage, and I have every reason to think that the government wishes that to happen. It is not just a question of turning a man out into the streets. That could be destructive without a proper context, and Mandela feels the same way. He wants a context created as well. But that would certainly help to demonstrate to everyone that this is a new period with new circumstances and a new climate, and I hope that it would contribute to actual talks, that we could recognize as such, taking place between various groups.

*FORUM:* How does the changing relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union bear on the internal struggle in South Africa?

*CROCKER:* It bears particularly at the level of conceptualization, and what South Africans of all kinds so badly need help on is conceptualizing. It discredits the notion that this is in some way an East-West struggle. It never really has been that, although there has been an overlay of that as the parties sought to identify themselves with one side or another. The South African white establishment has lost its enemy, because under the new thinking the Soviets have said basically that the armed struggle is a farce and is not going to go anywhere. They do not say that in public, but that is the reality of what they are saying privately. They are also saying that they do not believe the country should be ruined in order to get to a post-apartheid South Africa. It is important that something in the way of a viable economy remains functioning. In a sense the government has lost its principal excuse for not dealing with the black majority, which was that it was somehow part of a communist plot. At the same time, many in the black opposition movement may feel themselves to have lost an ally who was simply involved as a polarizing force. The Soviet message today is much more complicated. It talks about political solutions, and about a solution based on an equity of interests. The death of Marxism in the East is another interesting signal that plays into the South African equation. It is so transparently obvious that anybody who has lived under Marxism is fed up with it, and that has a certain positive spin in the South African situation. Finally, you have the whole nationalities crisis in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and how that might feed into the South African equation. I was in South Africa recently and made a speech in which I used the line that not even a superpower can make apartheid work. In practice that is very close to what the Soviet constitution is. That might be a useful message for people in the government.

*FORUM:* If de Klerk, in fact, is moving towards some kind of accommodation and settlement of this issue, perhaps ultimately ending apartheid under a coalition government, would it not be in the United States' best interest to align itself more vigorously with the black majority, if only to maintain our future interests in the country?

*CROCKER:* I have never understood why people think we are going to have problems with the future government of South Africa. The main threat facing South Africa and South Africans is that the dynamic, important countries of the world, like the United States, will simply walk away from them and write them off as another polarized, ineffective, Third World backwater. The main threat that faces South Africa, and most countries in Africa, is the threat of being ignored, of falling off the map, and frankly that is one of the themes I stressed when I was down there. It is incumbent upon them to get their act together if they do not want that to happen. Whether the government is white, black, green, pink or yellow—it does not matter. They are going to



have to convince the world again that South Africa is a place of hope and confidence, where investors would be attracted, so that major governments around the world will take them seriously and try to play a role there. This question does not really trouble me—it ought to trouble them. Our country's flag is flying high in South Africa. We have access to everybody. Our embassy is seen as just about the most balanced and most engaged of any of the embassies down there. We have no trouble reaching out to all points of the spectrum of the South African polity. I do not think we are suffering from any handicap.