

THE STRUGGLE NEVER ENDS

***Comments by George M. Houser* at the 50th anniversary of ACOA,
The Africa Fund & APIC,
(now Africa Action) in Washington, DC, October 3, 2003***

The theme for what I want to say can be summed up in three words -- words which I learned particularly from the struggles in Mozambique, Angola and Guinea-Bissau: "A Luta Continua". The struggle continues ever anew as evidenced today in the campaign against the blight of AIDS to which Africa Action is giving major attention.

But also the struggle continues as we are confronted with an endless so-called war against terrorism which can be a rationale for an ongoing threat of pre-emptive invasion any place in the world by our own government - unless we can stop it. A luta continua. There is no time to look back in any detail, on the history of the movement for freedom in Africa, of which we were a part, and which, I believe, was one of the great achievements of the twentieth century. But I would like to recall the principles and purposes which motivated us as we started our journey more than 50 years ago. The principles under which we acted developed out of conviction and out of practical experience. To these principles and actions we devoted our lives. Let me summarize:

1. First we were committed to the liberation struggle. This is how we got started. It was the Defiance Campaign in South Africa sponsored by the African National Congress to which we responded, resulting in more than 8500 arrests for nonviolent civil disobedience against the apartheid laws. It was Bill Sutherland who urged us to get involved. As representative of CORE (the Congress of Racial Equality), I corresponded with Walter Sisulu, the newly elected Secretary General of the ANC and he encouraged our support. With Bill Sutherland and Bayard Rustin, we organized Americans for South African Resistance. I still remember the woman from Arizona who sent us her diamond ring, saying "sell it, the diamond came from South Africa, send the proceeds to help the liberation effort". We demonstrated at the South Africa consulate in NY, raised funds for legal defense and welfare for families who lost a breadwinner during the Defiance, issued a bulletin updating developments in South Africa.

The American Committee on Africa grew out of this beginning, expanding from the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa to contacts with the rapidly developing movements throughout the continent. At the conclusion of the Defiance Campaign in early 1953 the volunteers working on the campaign wrestled with the question: Was there enough concern for Africa in the United States to sustain an organization and a small staff? Many thought not. Yes, we had raised and sent several thousand dollars to South Africa and had a mailing list of 1500 or so. But how to proceed with uncertain public interest? Chester Bowles, later Under Secretary of State in the Kennedy administration, told the story of going to a Connecticut library and

looking through the card file for African countries and found the Congo listed under "B" for Belgium, the Gold Coast under "G" for Great Britain, Ethiopia and Liberia were listed under "miscellaneous". It was a step of faith to organize ACOA.

2. Second, events unfolding in Africa motivated our actions here. It started in South Africa with the Defiance Campaign, and then the Congress of the People, the Treason Trials, the Sharpeville Massacre. But other events demanded action -- the Algerian independence conflict with France, the rise of the Mau Mau in Kenya, the independence of Tunisia, Morocco, and the Sudan, the dramatic emergence of Kwame Nkrumah and independence of Ghana in 1957, the overnight independence of Guinea from France in 1958, the liberation struggles under Portuguese domination, Congo independence, sanctions against Rhodesia, the All African Peoples Conferences, the founding of the OAU, the Soweto uprising of 1976. To these and so many other events, the ACOA responded with programs and projects that formed our agenda. They led to our publication program beginning with AFRICA TODAY, our UN work, to which Betsy Landis contributed so much, to the establishment of our Defense And Aid Fund, and then to the Africa Fund which was granted a tax exempt status that had been denied to ACOA.

3. Third, we made contacts with liberation movements our primary focus. This began with the ANC and Indian Congress leadership in South Africa -- Sisulu, Cachalia, Luthuli, Tambo, Z.K. Matthews, Manilal Gandhi and later Mandela, and so many others. We can still recite the initials and acronyms by which the movements were commonly known -- the CPP in Ghana, NCNC in Nigeria, FLN in Algeria, the PAIGC, MPLA, FRELIMO, UNIP, ZAPU, ZANU, SWAPO, SWANU, TANU, KANU, MNC. Maybe its easier to use names of leaders -- Nkrumah, Azikiwe, Mondlane, Cabral, Nyerere, Kaunda, Kenyatta, Mboya, Nkomo, Mugabe, Kozonguizi, Nujoma, Neto, Lumwnba. Each name conjures up memories. I recall when Sam Nujoma, now president of Namibia, first came to NY after escaping from the then Southwest Africa after the Katatura uprising of 1959. One of the first places he came was to our office. And when Lumumba (whom we had met at the All African Peoples Conference in Accra in 1958), briefly was in NY for an appearance at the UN, in July 1960, as trouble broke out in the just independent Congo, Peter Weiss, Homer Jack, and I had a long session with him.

4. Fourth, we did not play the cold war game. Our allegiance was to the liberation struggle, which is in the best American tradition, not to the competition between the United States and the Soviet Union for supremacy. The US was usually in the unfortunate position of backing its NATO allies, most obviously in the case of the Portuguese colonies. The cold war entered tragically into the African struggle with Congo independence. And it is to the shame of our country that it played such a central part in Lumumba's assassination.

5. Fifth, we maintained our independence, as an NGO, from US government policy. Yes, we were an American committee and wanted to influence government policy, but not to seek assistance from the government. We set up the Washington office which gained early stability with Ted Lockwood and

Chris Root. The only government that I know of which ever sent any funds to us was the \$50 we received from Tunisia after a reception we sponsored following their independence in 1956. We sought no financial assistance from any government. Because we supported the struggle against Portuguese domination in their African colonies, the Portuguese-American Committee on Foreign Affairs, backed by a business conglomerate of 40 overseas Portuguese companies, called on the US government to investigate us and to try to force us to register as a foreign agent. We resisted this with expert legal assistance from Bill Landis, Peter Weiss, Bill Booth and others. Since there was no evidence of any foreign assistance for ACOA, the case was dropped. As a result of the investigation, however, with a bit of poetic justice, the Portuguese-American Committee had to register as a foreign agent. Its financial underpinning came from Portugal.

6. Sixth, we early adopted the principle of disengagement from South Africa, economic, cultural, and in sports to keep a racist South African team from the Olympics. In the sports campaign we worked along side Dennis Brutus and Richard Lapchick, and African-American leaders, notably Jackie Robinson. Economic disengagement began with the campaign urging people and organizations to withdraw accounts from Chase and Citibank, the only American banks-with branches in South Africa, and part of the consortium of 10 US banks loaning money to South Africa. This developed not only into the Bank Campaign, (collaborating with Tim Smith and the Interfaith Center for Corporate Responsibility) but to sanctions finally adopted by Congress over President Reagan's veto. This was a great victory in which Jennifer Davis, Richard Knight, Josh Nessen, Dumisani Kumalo and Prexy Nesbitt (ACOA staff and many others, contributed so mightily. ACOA had taken initiating steps, and then the campaign took off and extended through labor, state and local governments, churches and student activities far beyond the limits of ACOA-Africa Fund.

7. Finally, we always conceived our work as part and parcel of the civil rights struggle. The ACOA was interracial and in close solidarity with campaigns for equality and justice for all. A Philip Randolph, Martin Luther King, Jim Farmer were involved along with Bill Booth, Hope Stevens, Bob Van Lierop, Bob Browne and so many others. ACOA initiated the formation of the American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa with the NAACP, Urban League, SCLC, CORE, Nat'l Council of Negro Women, Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters as the foundation. The struggle in Africa was to us, as Americans, an extension of the battle on the home front.

To conclude, I recall when in January 1961, John Marcum and I trekked into the liberated areas of northern Angola with the rebels and spent two weeks fighting mosquitoes, drinking water from the local streams, eating such food as was available. Hiking through tall, cutting grass, with no clear path I stubbed my toe on an unseen rock. I thought the toe was broken, and I tried to hobble along a few paces. One of my Angolan comrades came immediately to my aid.

He lifted me on his broad shoulders and started carrying me. This went on for several hundred yards, before I could not stand the thought of being

transported this way. He let me down gently but continued to hold me up. I think of this because of the way I have been lifted up so many times by the challenge and the exhilaration of the struggle for freedom in Africa in which we joined our African comrades in a memorable, period of history.

But **A LUTA CONTINUA!**

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