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# 'An intricate and distasteful subject': British Planning for the Use of Force Against the European Settlers of Central Africa, 1952-65

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## Abstract

This article examines British planning for military intervention against the European-dominated governments of Central Africa from 1952 to 1965. By

the time of Southern Rhodesia's unilateral declaration of independence (UDI) in November 1965, it had become an article of faith within Whitehall that a military response was out of the question. This owed much to long-standing anxieties about deploying British troops against white Rhodesian forces. The article argues, however, that the crisis over the Northern Rhodesian constitution in the early months of 1961 transformed the nature of the debate. Detailed planning was conducted for a 'contested reinforcement' (in effect, for an invasion) of Northern Rhodesia in the event of the white-dominated government of the Central African Federation staging a coup. This planning exercise enabled the Chiefs of Staff to shift the nature of the debate from the loyalty of British troops to the logistical obstacles to an invasion. They were particularly keen to impress on Ministers that there was no question of a 'limited' military intervention, since the insertion of British troops would have to be preceded by the elimination of the Royal Rhodesian Air Force, an action likely to entail considerable civilian loss of life. The Chiefs of Staff appear to have calculated – correctly – that their elected leaders would be reluctant to contemplate full-scale war against the Rhodesian settlers. The planning process of 1961 coloured subsequent thinking on military intervention, and helps to explain why an invasion was never seriously contemplated in the months immediately preceding UDI.

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