

The Overlooked Diplomat:
Donald F. McHenry and American Foreign Policy,
1979-1981

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George C. Herring's *From Colony to Superpower* offers a sweeping account of American foreign policy, but it barely mentions Donald F. McHenry. This omission matters. In 1979, President Jimmy Carter appointed Donald McHenry to one of the most visible diplomatic roles in American foreign policy, replacing Andrew Young as U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations. While Herring frames the Carter years around headlining crises such as the unsolved legacy of the Vietnam War, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the Iran hostage crisis, this perspective leaves little room for understanding the place of diplomacy in the Carter presidency, or the behind-the-scenes moments that made McHenry an important figure in diplomatic history. The U.N. was a key venue for the Carter presidency, which was determined to make human rights a priority for the U.S. Nowhere on the globe was this priority more visible than in southern Africa, the region where McHenry's expertise lay. McHenry's background in diplomacy and his knowledge of southern Africa made him more than simply a replacement for Andrew Young: he became an important figure in managing the Carter administration's foreign-policy challenges at a particularly unstable moment. His efforts to bring peace and independence to southern Africa demonstrated the power of diplomacy, made way for the establishment of Namibia as an independent nation, and laid the groundwork for the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa.

The incident that led to McHenry's appointment as U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. was remembered by generations to come. Andrew Young was forced to resign from the position in 1979, after it became public that he had met with the Palestine Liberation Organization's (PLO) U.N. representative, Zehdi Terzi. At the time, the U.S. policy prohibited contact with the PLO. Like many ordinary American citizens, the Carter administration treated these meetings as a breach in security and trust.¹ They were a clear sign that Young had put his own personal beliefs on Israel and Palestine ahead of his government's policy, acting as if his own beliefs were those of the United States. His resignation left a vacancy in the position of U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. at a time of considerable international unrest, including the turmoil associated with the reorganization of southern African nations.

On August 31st, 1979, President Jimmy Carter announced that he would nominate Donald F. McHenry to be the United States Permanent Representative to the United Nations.² In an interview, Carter claimed: "McHenry fulfills all the requirements, I think, for a superb appointment."³ McHenry's appointment was especially important because his abrupt start came at a moment when the U.N. was central to Carter's foreign policy agenda. Unlike his predecessor, McHenry had experience with multilateral diplomacy. His career had been "devoted to ambassadorial or diplomatic service," according to President Carter. He was also considered an expert in "the Far East, including the Pacific region," and he had the "best working knowledge of southern African problems."⁴ An examination of his background, appointment,

¹ "Editorial Note," in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980, vol. IX, Arab-Israeli Dispute, August 1978-December 1980*, 2nd rev. ed., Document 281, Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v09Ed2/d281>.

² Jimmy Carter, "United States Representative to the United Nations Nomination of Donald F. McHenry," August 31, 1979, *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/united-states-representative-the-united-nations-nomination-donald-f-mchenry>.

³ Jimmy Carter, "Plains, Georgia Informal Exchange With Reporters," August 31, 1979, *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/plains-georgia-informal-exchange-with-reporters-2>.

⁴ Carter, "Plains, Georgia Informal Exchange With Reporters."

and role in southern Africa shows that McHenry deserves a more prominent place in the study of Carter's foreign policy than Herring assigns him.

McHenry's appointment filled a diplomatic vacancy and, at the same time, gave the Carter administration an experienced multilateral representative at the United Nations. Carter's term as president ended with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which escalated Cold War tensions and forced the United States to respond through a combination of diplomacy and military action.⁵ But during the bulk of his presidency, finding a solution to the unrest in southern Africa was a major focus. This situation required diplomatic attention.⁶ Carter trusted McHenry's expertise in this region. An African-American diplomat, McHenry used his position to advance decolonization in southern Africa. In doing so, he and the Carter administration made every effort to work in partnership with the U.N.⁷ Even Young, whose background was as a Civil Rights activist and a congressman, recognized McHenry's unique qualifications for the role of U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. at the particular moment when he was appointed. Young referred to McHenry as bringing more "knowledge of the United Nations and of our foreign policy to this job than perhaps any other person we've ever had in the position."⁸ To understand the significance of McHenry's appointment to U.S. diplomatic history, it is worth looking at his past and how he emerged as a diplomatic essential.

McHenry's path to diplomacy began well before his 1979 appointment. Before becoming a U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Donald McHenry had a background in diplomatic

⁵ George C. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations Since 1776* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 860.

⁶ Nancy Mitchell, "Excerpt from the Introduction," in *Jimmy Carter in Africa: Race and the Cold War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, n.d.), Stanford University Press, <https://www.sup.org/books/history/jimmy-carter-africa/excerpt/excerpt-introduction>.

⁷ Jimmy Carter, "Address by President Jimmy Carter to the UN General Assembly," March 17, 1977, U.S. Department of State, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/io/potusunga/207272.htm>.

⁸ Jimmy Carter, "United States Representative to the United Nations Remarks at the Swearing In of Donald F. McHenry," September 23, 1979, *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/united-states-representative-the-united-nations-remarks-the-swearing-donald-f-mchenry>.

affairs and educational scholarship. McHenry was born on October 13th, 1936, in St. Louis, Missouri, and he was raised in East St. Louis, Illinois.⁹ He grew up in a segregated and economically-challenging environment where his mother promoted education, books, and cultural exposure. McHenry then attended Illinois State University on a state scholarship, where he double-majored in international affairs and rhetoric and studied public address. Following his graduate studies, he taught at Howard University while continuing his academic progress at Georgetown University, where he pursued a Ph.D.¹⁰ All of these educational pathways lay a strong foundation for a career in diplomatic affairs. Additionally, he was deeply influenced by Adlai Stevenson's run for Governor of Illinois following his time in the United Nations. McHenry credits Stevenson's "marvelous international background" for sparking his own interest in foreign affairs.¹¹ He also came of age at a time of widespread optimism about the U.N., a fact that helps explain his later commitment to multilateral diplomacy and his desire to become an expert in international affairs, ultimately leading to his professional rise within the State Department and in U.N.-related work.

Unlike many diplomats, McHenry never obtained his Ph.D. because he was offered and accepted a job in the Kennedy administration's State Department. There, he had the "responsibility for oversight of colonies and the decolonization process," a role that quickly evolved into leadership of the Bureau of African Affairs.¹² That formative experience gave him deep familiarity with southern African politics at a time when the continent was reshaping itself along the fault lines of colonialism and Cold War rivalry. All of these experiences prepared him

⁹ The HistoryMakers, "Honorable Donald McHenry," accessed May 5, 2026, <https://www.thehistorymakers.org/biography/honorable-donald-mchenry>.

¹⁰ McHenry, *Oral History Interview*.

¹¹ Donald F. McHenry, *Oral History Interview*, interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, March 23, 1993, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, <https://www.adst.org/OH%20TOCs/McHenry,%20Donald%20F.1993.toc.pdf>.

¹² McHenry, *Oral History Interview*.

for the challenges of diplomatic service. They also illustrate how, prior to his appointment as U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, McHenry built a substantial career in foreign affairs through public service, policy work, and deep knowledge in multilateral diplomacy.

In the early 1970s, McHenry left government for a time and worked with institutions such as the Brookings Institution, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. This move was a part of a broader break by younger career diplomats frustrated with U.S. policy in Southeast Asia. Leaving the State Department allowed him to think systemically about U.S. policy from outside the government. He returned to public service as a member of Carter's transition team, and in September of 1977, he was appointed U.S. Deputy Representative to the United Nations Security Council. In this role, he became deeply involved with negotiations over southern African affairs and Namibia's future.¹³ He gained experience working alongside Young as one of five members of the U.N.'s Security Council.

Herring minimizes McHenry's significance by avoiding the Carter administration's and McHenry's diplomatic achievements and major advancements in southern Africa. Human rights were a centerpiece of Carter's presidency, and his agenda in this area played out in the fragile situation in Namibia and across southern Africa. McHenry's regional awareness and, in particular, his central role in negotiations toward Namibian independence were instrumental in establishing independent nations and ensuring lasting peace in the region.¹⁴ McHenry's role in African peacekeeping, decolonization, and racial justice often gets overlooked, even though his diplomacy helped the United States avoid deep political and strategic setbacks in southern

¹³ John M. Goshko, "The Man Behind Namibia's Success," *Washington Post*, July 30, 1978, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1978/07/30/the-man-behind-namibia-success/b4be5f3b-23e9-4b9a-8a16-09d4840d3f10/>.

¹⁴ McHenry, *Oral History Interview*.

Africa. But it's important to recognize that, by the time Carter chose McHenry to replace Young in 1979, he was not an unknown figure but an experienced U.N.-centered policymaker whose earlier career had prepared him for one of the most difficult diplomatic posts in American foreign policy.

Following the appointment, McHenry entered the office of the U.S. Representative to the U.N. under public pressure. He was not only inheriting Young's seat at the United Nations, but he was also stepping into a position that had become politically sensitive at home and diplomatically important abroad.¹⁵ Carter felt he needed someone who could reaffirm the United States' commitment to diplomacy and international organizations while also highlighting crises prominent in southern Africa, Afghanistan, and Iran. McHenry's diplomatic experience and external work made him an appealing candidate who came without the controversy that Young had brought to the position. His appointment reflected the Carter administration's desire for both consistent leadership and a high level of diplomatic knowledge. That it included a seat in Carter's Cabinet indicates that he was considered a key advisor to the president. McHenry attended Cabinet meetings and helped advise the president on foreign policy generally, as well as during critical events such as the Iran hostage crisis and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.¹⁶ This made him a central figure in foreign policy. Although McHenry's background, education, and early career prepared him for high-level diplomacy, his importance is most evident in the series of specific policy disputes the U.S. faced during his tenure, in which his expertise and experience shaped President Carter's decision-making. This was especially true of policy in southern Africa.

¹⁵ June Goodwin, "Ambassador McHenry: Cool Presence in a Hot World," *Christian Science Monitor*, June 12, 1980, <https://www.csmonitor.com/1980/0612/061258.html>.

¹⁶ McHenry, *Oral History Interview*.

One of the clearest diplomatic examples of Donald McHenry's contribution was his leadership in negotiating a new agreement for the independence of South West Africa, which is now known as Namibia. In 1884, the German government claimed Namibia, calling it German South West Africa. It became even more lucrative as a possession after the discovery of diamonds in 1908. During World War I, South Africa launched attacks on the German colony, eventually occupied it, and sought to incorporate it into South Africa. Throughout these eras of occupation, tensions built among the native population over the stealing of their land, forced labor policies, and increasingly, the introduction of apartheid rules, including "discriminatory policies that marginalized the local black population," such as the movement of Black residents further and further from city centers.¹⁷ In 1960, the South West People's Organization, called SWAPO, was formed as a political party for the Namibian people. SWAPO pressed for independence, finally winning recognition in 1973 by the U.N's General Assembly, which voted to recognize SWAPO as the official representative of Namibia's people.

McHenry has been described as a "little-known ambassador" who performed the "intricate footwork" behind Namibia's 1978 independence agreement.¹⁸ His prominent role in negotiations and diplomatic efforts that resulted in that agreement illustrates the extent to which, prior to his appointment as ambassador to the United Nations in 1979, McHenry had emerged as the Carter administration's key official in leading the UN-supervised path to Namibia's independence. He spent much time traveling in Africa to bring South Africa and SWAPO to an agreement.¹⁹ Carter's later decision to elevate McHenry after Young's resignation reflected more than a routine personnel change; it showed that the administration valued his regional expertise,

¹⁷ John Powell, "Namibian War of Independence," *EBSCO Research Starters*, 2023, <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/history/namibian-war-independence>.

¹⁸ Goshko, "The Man Behind Namibia's Success."

¹⁹ Goshko, "The Man Behind Namibia's Success."

with President Carter crediting him with having the “best working knowledge of southern African problems” at a moment when southern Africa had become a major test of international diplomacy.²⁰

This made Namibia far more than a regional dispute for the Carter Administration. It has been described at times as "one of the most complicated negotiating tasks in modern diplomatic annals" because of the ways it sat at the intersection of decolonization, apartheid, Cold War rivalry, and the ongoing effort to find credibility in American human-rights diplomacy.²¹ Between South Africa's audacious occupation of Namibia, SWAPO's mounting campaign for independence, and the pressure exerted by the United Nations' for a transition to majority rule in southern African nations, the United States faced a difficult but definitive choice: retreat from deep involvement out of post-Vietnam caution or take a more active role in both establishing the importance of global human rights and modeling the imperative of negotiated settlements. McHenry was one of the administration's most irreplaceable figures, having the courage and the expertise to navigate this choice.

What made McHenry so significant was not only his general knowledge of African affairs but his ability to turn American foreign policy goals into diplomatic processes. As part of the Western Contact Group, comprising the United States, Britain, France, Canada, and West Germany, McHenry helped build support for a UN-supervised plan for Namibian independence that could be defended to African leaders, Western allies, and the United Nations alike. His role mattered because he combined regional expertise, credibility at the United Nations, and the patience required for difficult negotiations.²² Media outlets like the *Washington Post* may have

²⁰ Carter, "Plains, Georgia Informal Exchange With Reporters."

²¹ Goshko, "The Man Behind Namibia's Success."

²² Karns, Margaret P. "Ad Hoc Multilateral Diplomacy: The United States, the Contact Group, and Namibia." *International Organization* 41, no. 1 (1987): 93–123. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300000758>.

described McHenry as a little-known deputy ambassador during this time, whose role was to lay the groundwork for the Namibia agreement.²³ But in practice, McHenry helped the United States remain influential in southern Africa while avoiding deeper political embarrassment and strategic setbacks in a region where colonialism and apartheid had already damaged American credibility.

His importance became even more clearly visible when negotiations between southern African countries and the United Nations began to break down. In 1978, planned negotiations were canceled after South African forces launched an attack to destroy SWAPO's military headquarters. SWAPO's military headquarters were in Angola, necessitating the involvement of multiple southern African states.²⁴ This complicated situation threatened to halt negotiations. Clarence Redekop's study of the Namibia independence process notes that after talks stalled, "it was Donald McHenry who again attempted to salvage the process" by flying to Angola to personally visit its president, Agostinho Neto, in hopes of negotiating. McHenry approached Neto to suggest ways to create peace in southern Africa.²⁵ This story is important because it shows how McHenry's value to the Carter administration lay specifically in his skills when diplomacy became unstable. Rather than withdrawing when tempers escalated and negotiations grew more difficult, he worked to preserve an American role in the settlement process. In practical terms, this helped the United States avoid greater political tensions in southern Africa at a time when Washington was already vulnerable to criticism over apartheid, colonialism, and Cold War inconsistency. These moments show how McHenry was one of the key figures who allowed the Carter administration to remain diplomatically active in southern Africa without appearing either passive or reckless.

²³ Goshko, "The Man Behind Namibia's Success."

²⁴ C. G. Redekop, "The Limits of Diplomacy: The Case of Namibia," *International Journal* 35, no. 1 (1979–1980): 81.

²⁵ Redekop, "The Limits of Diplomacy," 81.

McHenry's role in Namibia matters not only because of the success of the settlement process itself, which he helped advance, but also because it reveals how diplomacy depended on experienced officials like McHenry, whose work often remained behind the scenes. The Namibia case reveals why McHenry deserves more credit than he receives from historians, including Herring, in numerous accounts of Carter's foreign policy. He was in no way the most famous diplomat of the administration, and he is often overshadowed by larger crises and personalities. Yet, in one of the most sensitive, overlooked, and risky diplomatic moments in the late 1970s, he gave American diplomacy direction, reinforcement, and consistency. His work in southern Africa shows that foreign policy often does not depend on publicly recognized figures, but rather on diplomats who remain behind the scenes yet play major roles in keeping the United States a global superpower and protecting the multipolar world we live in.

Though Herring undervalues Namibia's influence in diplomacy, noting it was referenced only during Ronald Reagan's presidency, Namibia's independence and the SWAPO negotiations were among the most important aspects of Carter's presidency. Herring emphasizes major pressures faced by the United States during the Carter administration, such as how America responded to Vietnam, the Iran hostage crisis, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and these are certainly more widely known events. McHenry's career fits within the framework of these events, while also revealing an often-overlooked aspect of history. The history of Africa is often neglected because, from the perspective of the long history of colonialism, Africans are often portrayed as lacking their own significant history. Eurocentric educational perspectives and a focus on the continent's poverty rather than its riches also tend to minimize Africa's place and importance in historical accounts. McHenry's work in the United Nations and his expertise in southern Africa provide an important, if too often overlooked, lens through which to understand

the Carter administration's achievements, including the ways that, during a period of crisis, the administration relied on negotiation and institutional diplomacy to pursue both African independence and American interests.

Even after leaving public service, McHenry remained committed to diplomacy and continuing to shape the world's public leadership. He served on the boards of major corporations such as Coca-Cola, FleetBoston Financial, AT&T, GlaxoSmithKline, International Paper, and Columbia Pictures, while also continuing his involvement with the Council on Foreign Relations. At the same time, he devoted himself to a wide range of philanthropic and policy institutions, serving on the boards of organizations such as the Ford Foundation, the Brookings Institution, the Peterson Institute for International Economics, the Johnson Foundation, Africare, and the World Peace Foundation.²⁶ His post-government career reflects the same confidence, personality, and long-term global engagement that shaped his diplomatic work during the Carter administration.

Donald McHenry's story matters because it changes how foreign policy can be understood during the Carter administration. McHenry was not a household name, but his role in Namibia and southern Africa shows that less-visible diplomats still shape important international outcomes. His diplomacy helped the United States avoid setbacks in a region dominated by colonialism, apartheid, and signs of communism, all of which threatened American interests. In that sense, McHenry's career proves that foreign policy is often made not by the most famous figures but through sustained work and diplomatic engagement.

²⁶ Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, "Donald F. McHenry," Georgetown University Walsh School of Foreign Service, accessed May 6, 2026, <https://isd.georgetown.edu/profile/donald-f-mchenry/>.

