

MEMORANDUM

Cy: Ambassador Clyde Ferguson
Department of State - U/CF
Room 1004 - New State

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

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MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

Held at a luncheon
at the Residence of the Nigerian Ambassador
on Sunday, October 12, 1969, 1:00-4:00 p.m.

Participants

For Nigeria

Minister of External Affairs Okoi Arikpo
Permanent Secretary Baba Gana
Ambassador to the United States Joe Iyalla

For the United States

Roger P. Morris - NSC Staff

Biafran Weakness

Ambassador Iyalla opened by saying that the Biafrans were torn by dissension among their leadership and widespread popular disaffection with the war. A Nigerian victory was imminent.

I asked Arikpo for his views on prospects in the civil war, and particularly how he explained reports of high morale inside Biafra.

Arikpo said that Biafran morale was an illusion. Ibo villages were extremely parochial and thus indifferent even to the civil war taking place a few miles away. That tribal isolation, rather than support for Ojukwu, explained the seeming tranquillity in Biafra. The Biafran elite was almost entirely expatriate, in the sense of cultural identity with the resident Ibos in the East. These were foreign-mannered opportunists returned to mislead a hapless and unsophisticated people on a wild political adventure.

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-2-

I replied that I would not quarrel with Arikpo on this point. But if his view were correct, the Biafrans were putting up a very impressive front. That kind of ingenuity -- if not genuine popular support for secession -- presented Lagos with a formidable challenge.

US Relief Policy

Iyalla then launched into a lengthy (and standard) list of US transgressions in the civil war -- our frequent public condemnations of the Federal side (e.g., on the Red Cross plane shoot-down), our failure to supply arms or even diplomatic support, our tolerance of Biafran propaganda, our willful flaunting of Nigerian sovereignty in support of the JCA flights, etc. Iyalla said the President's letters to General Gowon were supposedly written by a friend. But the United States continued to act as all but an enemy. Nigeria understood that we had a domestic political problem on the relief issue, but that they expected the Administration to lead rather than follow on this issue. The equities so clearly lay with a friendly government trying to put down a cynical rebellion dangerous to the whole Continent.

I replied that the United States understood very clearly the paradox in a policy which continued friendly relations with Federal Nigeria, yet generously contributed to feeding the rebels and thus, in a sense, the rebellion. But I would not bore the Foreign Minister with another explanation of the humanitarian impulse which had brought us to this dilemma. It was the simple fact that the United States was pledged -- as an expression of the President's deep personal concern, as well as domestic opinion -- to do all we could to help relieve the suffering of innocent civilians on both sides of the battle. Our diplomacy would make every effort, as we had thus far, to resolve the conflict between that genuine concern and our friendship with the Federal Government. We did not think the two elements need be irreconcilable.

FMG-French Relations

I then asked Arikpo how long Nigeria would go on saying harsh words to the United States on the relief issue when Lagos refused to lay a glove on the French for a less ambiguous, and more lethal, contribution to the other side.

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April 21, 2005

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-3-

Arikpo replied that Nigeria would "have our pound of flesh" from the French sooner or later. But they were frankly concerned that a move now might invite some kind of French intervention. They had no idea what form this intervention might take, but any greater French involvement would prolong the war. The FMG had therefore refrained from any action against Paris.

Interdiction of Uli

I asked Arikpo when the FMG would acquire an interdiction capability to close off the arms flights into Uli. I asked specifically why the British had not given them some help in this respect.

Arikpo said the problem was both logistical and political. The Nigerian Air Force had neither sufficient aircraft nor trained pilots. Prime Minister Wilson, for his own parliamentary reasons, had shrunk from providing anything more than small arms or "defensive" weapons, and ruled out jet aircraft. As a result, the Soviets were the only aircraft suppliers, and the FMG had decided not to request the kind of "help" from Moscow that they might have asked of Britain.

FMG Attitudes and Gowon's Position

I told Arikpo that it often seemed to us -- in reading conflicting statements or in hearing divergent views in official conversations -- that the FMG might be blessed like all good governments with an aviary of hawks and doves. I asked for his comment on that, especially if he thought General Gowon's position was stronger or weaker than it had been six months ago.

Arikpo said he would be candid. Gowon often stood alone against the Executive Council on foreign policy questions. Gowon had decided to accept the Red Cross agreement on daylight flights by personal fiat. An actual vote in the Executive Council would have gone heavily against him. But in most cases, Arikpo added, the Ministry of External Affairs backed Gowon's more moderate posture towards the relief operation and the powers which supported it.

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April 21, 2005

~~SECRET//NODIS~~

-4-

As for Gowon's position, Arikpo said simply that a coup d'etat could "never be ruled out" in a military regime. But he thought Gowon's personal integrity -- and especially the absence of a large tribal constituency which had made him an acceptable compromise to begin with -- left Gowon "the strongest man in Nigeria".

Baba Gana interjected at this point that the debate over the Red Cross daylight flights had indeed been heated. He asked when the United States was going to give the FMG some public credit for making this generous concession.

I replied to Baba Gana that we understood the utility of encouraging a moderate position on relief. The United States had made repeated and vigorous efforts to negotiate an expansion of relief into Biafra, and some of those efforts had, of course, led to misunderstandings with Lagos. We were not prepared to accept public blame from any quarter for the continuing relief impasse. We were still hopeful that daylight flight arrangements might be salvaged to the benefit of Lagos as well as Washington. For that reason, we had refrained from making any statement that might complicate any efforts to resolve the problem. But the time was surely coming, I said, when it would be necessary to establish clearly the position of both sides.

Baba Gana said the FMG agreed that there might still be some hope for daylight flights, but the US must be prepared to call the rebels to account for their refusal.

Possible US Role

Arikpo said he appreciated the frankness of this exchange, and, therefore, wanted to raise the most important question of his trip to Washington. General Gowon had often reflected, he said, that the US had no real interest in Nigeria. Thus it was futile to expect any positive help from us. Arikpo said he had argued with the General that the US did have a considerable interest in the unity of Nigeria. And if we did, we should be willing to take a hand in preserving that interest.

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April 21, 2005

~~SECRET/NODIS~~

-5-

Arikpo wondered specifically if the US would be willing to tell the French that the time had come to end this dangerous civil war. There was no question of a "Biafran rebellion"; this was quite simply an adventure conceived and sustained from the Elysee Palace. The French were the key to everything. If President Nixon is truly interested in ending the suffering and fighting, the US would go to the French, make our own position clear on the preservation of Nigeria -- and then offer, in effect, to act as a go-between among Paris and Lagos to help the FMG find out "the necessary price". The FMG was prepared, Arikpo said, to examine "what's the deal".

I replied that this was a very complicated and sensitive matter which the United States would have to think over with some care. As Arikpo well knew, we had no desire to impose -- or even seem to be imposing -- a great-power settlement on an African civil war. But we were convinced that the earliest end to the fighting was in everyone's interest. I hoped Arikpo would explore this question further with Under Secretary Richardson and Henry Kissinger the following week.

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