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PA/HO Department of State  
E.O. 12958, as amended  
April 21, 2005

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*Part 1*

SUBJ: Draft Memorandum of Conversation  
PLACE: Grand Trianon  
DATE: March 1, 1969  
TIME: 10:00 A.M.  
PARTICIPANTS: United States: Secretary Rogers and party  
France: Minister Debre and party  
Mrs. Porson, Interpreter and Drafting Officer  
(Mr. Lebel interpreted for French side)

Minister Debre opened the meeting by suggesting that it be conducted as though all the time necessary were available. He asked what subjects the Secretary wished to discuss first.

Secretary Rogers thought it would be helpful to begin discussing Biafra.

Minister Debre agreed to that but asked for an opportunity to discuss economic and monetary problems for one-quarter of an hour at some point during the day.

Minister Debre then set forth the French position on Biafra. The French view Biafra as an especially important problem for several reasons. First, owing to the moral aspect of the question. For many months now there has been much tragedy in Biafra. The U.S. Government was as aware of this as the French. All information available to the French indicates that the tragedy is growing day by day. The French have established health facilities outside of Biafra and information received in recent weeks demonstrates that the distress of the refugees is growing

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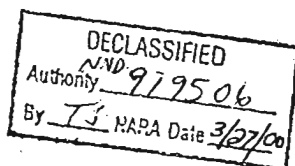
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By *TS* NARA Date *3/27/00*

daily and that the children are suffering more and more from famine. This, despite the efforts made with more or less success by the ICRC, the French Red Cross and European and American charitable organizations. Therefore, the situation is morally unbearable.

As for the political aspect of the problem, he had two comments to make. The first regarding the internal situation in Africa and the second regarding the way the problem affected the relations between the great powers.

The French believe that the argument that Biafra has seceded from Nigeria is not very valid. In 1959 and 1960 when Minister Debré was Prime Minister, the French had been faced with another problem of how to grant independence to their former colonies. They had the choice of giving the African nations around Dakar -- former French West Africa -- their independence as a group, and the territories around Brazzaville -- former French Equatorial Africa -- their independence as a group, or allow the people of Africa to pursue their own destiny. The French decided to grant independence state by state because they thought that giving independence to a federation was a mistake and would lead to serious conflict and bloodshed. At one instance Senegal and the Sudan sought to create a state but that lasted only a year. The French believe that the United Kingdom made a mistake in giving the territories around Lagos their independence as a federation. It was obvious that the situation couldn't last. It is wrong to think that granting independence to a multi-racial group in Africa can lead to a lasting arrangement.

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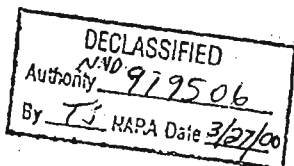
Therefore, the French believe that the view that the Ibos, who are the leading ethnic group in Biafra, are seceding is a rather abstract one because the error was obvious from the start.

Looking<sup>at</sup> the problem from the external standpoint, Minister Debré stated that for two years now we have witnessed the presence of the Soviet Union in the heart of Africa. The U.S. is as aware as the French are of Soviet policy, attempts and failures in Africa. At the present time through its arms shipments to Nigeria and its support of the Arab countries that are helping the Moslem elements vs. the non-Moslem elements -- namely the Christians -- they are creating a politically dangerous situation. The French fail to see how the Western nations cannot recognize its importance.

Minister Debré continued by stating that African leaders, both French-speaking and English-speaking, such as Houphouet-Boigny, Nyrere, and Kaunda have stated that they do not see how the Western nations, among them the U.S. and the U.K., fail to realize the extent of the danger entailed in increased Soviet influence in Africa. They may be exaggerated but none the less this is a danger which the French feel is very present.

The next point Minister Debré made<sup>was</sup> that the Ibos, who ~~constituted~~ constituted the majority in Biafra, do number 9 or 10 million. Of course, in view of the hundreds of thousands of deaths in the last year or so, it is hard to know precisely how many there are. None the less, the French do not agree with the concept that the establishment of Biafra as a new state would tantamount to merely setting up another very small

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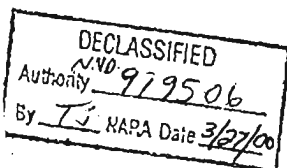
state in Africa, because most African countries do not have that large a population. If the situation as it has existed for the last 18 months is allowed to drift, we will have those millions of people in revolt and we will have a festering wound in Africa. Therefore, the French believe it is necessary to take steps to stop arms shipments and then with the help of African leaders -- who are only too willing to help -- to get talks going based on the right of self determination of the Ibos. Minister Debré did not know what course U.S. diplomacy would take but that in essence was the French line.

He realized that this may seem a relatively small problem to that of the Middle East but it was necessary to take account of the infiltration in Africa by the Russians, the Arabs and possibly the Chinese. It is for that reason that the French think it is important to act.

Minister Debré added that the French do not agree with the argument that the United Nations General Assembly is not competent to deal with the question owing to the existence of the Organization of African Unity. He had already rejected that thesis speaking before the United Nations. If one were to argue that because of the existence of continental bodies the United Nations was not competent, then soon the U.N. would have jurisdiction only over the oceans and the seas.

Minister Debré then stated that in the firm position taken by General deGaulle and the government the French were not pursuing any material interests. Were that the case, the French would have to support the Lagos government. In a fortnight, Minister Debré would be seeing the Foreign Minister from Lagos and would talk to him exactly as he had talked to Secretary Rogers.

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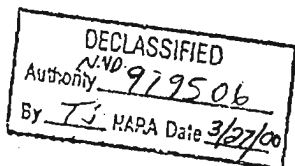
He again stated the urgent need for action. Although the question was not as important as that of the Middle East, he believed there was a danger for world security. It is dangerous to allow revolutionary and subversive trends to develop which would lead to sustained anarchy.

Secretary Rogers thanked Minister Debré for his presentation, adding that in this area the U.S. respects the French advice and views because our experience as a nation there is rather limited. We realize the gravity of the situation in Nigeria. Also there has been much concern about it expressed by the American people. Several Americans who have gone to Federal Nigeria and Biafra recently have reported that conditions were very ~~like~~ much as Minister Debré had described them. There is the danger of further starvation, more deaths and famine. There is the risk of further deterioration in the next 3 or 4 months. Therefore, as a government and a people we are deeply concerned about the humanitarian question.

United States policy is to support states as they now exist in Africa. Our reasoning is that they are members of the United Nations and we say and we mean it when we say it, that we respect their sovereignty. Also many boundaries in Africa are illogical. They are not based on geography or population and are purely fortuitous. If attempts are made to change them, they could lead to revolts and rebellion. Hence our policy is not to encourage changes but to support existing governments.

We recognize the validity of the point that Minister Debré had made so as a government we are not involved with openly or covertly in the political aspect of the problem. We are doing much on the humanitarian

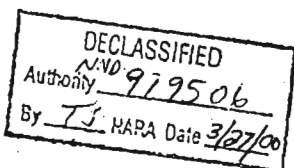
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side. We have provided some \$25,000,000 worth of food and other such supplies, we have furnished planes to transport the food and we have ~~have~~ recently appointed Dr. Ferguson of Howard University to serve as relief coordinator. President Nixon has authorized the government to make a maximum effort on the humanitarian side. We stand ready to provide larger amounts of food and medicine and more transportation to help. The problem is how to get the food to Biafra. We have talked over the situation with representatives of some of the neighboring states. We find it hard to understand why Biafra is not willing to agree to daylight flights. We do not see what the military problem is; we could give them all the protection they need regarding daylight flights. Our position is that we will do all we can to provide food and like supplies.

Secretary Rogers continued by stating that we recognize the threat entailed in the Soviets supplying military equipment to the Federal government. He referred to Minister Debré's statement of surprise that the U.S. and the U.K. do not appear to recognize the seriousness of the problem, and made it clear that indeed we do. The U.K. states that it cannot stop sending military equipment to the Federal government because if they don't supply it, The Soviets will and thus gain greater influence. The U.S. does not intend to become involved either by sending military equipment to anyone or by taking sides on the political issue. We would support any initiative that the French or other countries might make towards United Nation involvement. We are as aware as the French that the OAU does not think it appropriate for the U.N. to become involved, and they themselves refuse to. We would hope that the U.N. could be

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effective but we don't quite see how this could be achieved.

Secretary Rogers then made reference to Minister Debré's comment that it would be helpful if there were a secession of arms deliveries. We would support that if all of those involved were to stop. We are not supplying arms and we do not intend to. He then asked what else the U.S. could do that could be helpful.

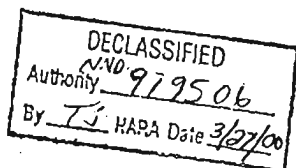
Minister Debré stated that the French believe that anything done on the humanitarian side would be inadequate compared to the immensity of the tragedy. Efforts are being made to collect money, the ICRC and other groups are trying to do so too but it will never be enough. Also the problem is political because in the Minister's view the Ibos will never consent to becoming Nigerian citizens again. If they will never agree to that, the military tragedy will continue.

He then commented that he had discussed the question with the Soviet government. Their policy in Africa is to support the Arabs and the Moslems, thus this takes on the aspect of a religious war in Africa. If no action is taken in the name of self determination and if no action is taken to allow the Ibos to set up a state, then the war will go on.

Minister Debré then stated his view that the reason why the OAU will never favor peace is because of the number of Moslem states in the OAU.

Minister Debré fully understood the legal and procedural issues involved but reiterated that the war will go on if appropriate steps are not taken. If the war goes on then this will lead to an increased presence of subversive movements which all the neighboring states believe will gradually result in serious consequences.

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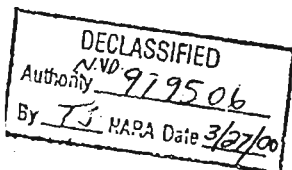




Based on the present situation the French ~~will~~ are convinced that if the U.S. and the U.K. could put pressure on the Federal government to agree to peace talks on Biafra based on the right of self determination of the Ibos -- it being understood that there could be confederal links between areas -- then there could be peace. But Lagos must not be allowed to think that it can continue with its present line and have the support of the great powers.

Secretary Rogers remarked that the concept of self determination takes many forms. If we were to speak of it as meaning that any group in a sovereign state can secede, then it takes on an entirely different meaning. In the U.N. the African states mean self determination between people in a given state. Otherwise, it is an invitation to any group to secede. We recognize that there may be moral arguments to the contrary but generally the phrase does not but rather the right of the people within a state to determine their own future. Therefore, in relation to the suggestion that the U.S. government support the right of self determination we do support that right but generally within existing states. Moreover, when talks are suggested it is always accompanied by the idea that a conclusion has already been reached, i.e., that Biafra will decide whether it will be sovereign or not. He thought it better to suggest talks without suggesting a conclusion. Secretary Rogers added that he was not certain that the Biafran leaders want to talk without conditions. He asked whether Minister Debré thought they were ready to talk without setting terms or conclusions. Minister Debré said that the French thought that it is Lagos that will not consent

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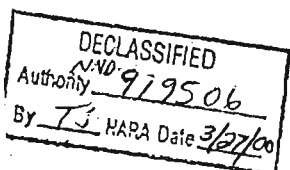
to talks unless Biafra agrees to forego secession. The problem in achieving peace is whether the Lagos government will agree to talks regardless of the outcome. That is, even if Biafra goes independent.

Secretary Rogers again asked whether the French thought Biafra would agree to talk unconditionally. Minister Debré replied that that would be easy to find out. The French have the feeling and it is only a feeling that Biafra would agree to peace talks without preconditions. Secretary Rogers thought this was a point worth pursuing. Secretary Rogers then remarked that he was very interested in Minister Debré's reasoning regarding the Soviet Union's support of the Federal government. He agreed with Minister Debré's premise that their presence is a serious impediment to progress. He was interested in Minister Debré's rationale about why support to Biafra offset that. The U.K. says that if it does not continue its support of the Federal government, then the Soviets' efforts will be even more successful.

Minister Debré said the only reply to that argument was that, <sup>if</sup> there were peace talks, their evaluation could change the course of events. At present, the U.K. is a prisoner of the fact that it thinks the cause of the Lagos government must be defended. This opens the way to an increase Soviet presence, which only an effort at stopping arms deliveries could forestall.

Secretary Rogers explained that his point was that based on the logic of the situation, if the Soviet Union were making inroads by supplying military equipment, then the U.K. could say that it would supply more equipment, enough to end the war and get the credit for it.

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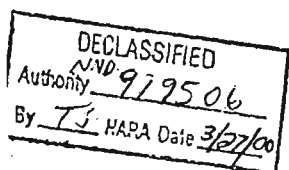
That is the logical conclusion of this line of reasoning without going into the moral merits of it.

Minister Debré replied that he was certain that Secretary Rogers' colleagues who visited Africa (and he hoped they would do so soon) would find that the presidents of the Ivory Coast, Zambia and Tanzania will all say that the U.K.'s present policy is placing the Soviet Union in the heart of Africa. Secretary Rogers asked what the conclusion of that reasoning was. Minister Debré's comment was that President Houphouet-Boigny exaggerate but in conversations with the French, he continually warns them that Soviet aid to Lagos could have serious political consequences which in his view should not be underestimated. Minister Debré did not think that President Houphouet-Boigny was wrong. Secretary Rogers stated that we agree on that point but there is a question of logic involved. It could be suggested that the U.K. should send the Federal government all the arms it needs in which case they would not need Soviet equipment. Minister Debré commented that a nation at war gets its weapons wherever it can. There is no answer to the problem other than peace.

\* Secretary Rogers replied that we agreed on that. He added that we would talk further with the French about the forms of humanitarian assistance we could give. Minister Debré replied that in his view humanitarian assistance will not solve the problem because it is a political one and that is how it should be viewed.

Secretary Rogers wished to conclude the discussion on Biafra by asking what, apart from what we are already doing, the U.S. should do.

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He thought we should try to urge the Federal government to talk unconditionally. We should increase the humanitarian effort even though we recognize that it is inadequate. Also we ~~was~~<sup>should</sup> welcome any initiatives that might be taken by the French, U.S. and other governments that hold out the promise of progress. Minister Debré replied that a statement by the Lagos government that it is ready to talk peace without preconditions would be a decisive step. Secretary Rogers asked: "even while the war goes on accompanied by a cease-fire?". Minister Debré replied that if this formula were accepted, a cease-fire would accompany the start of the talks. In any event the French are convinced that if preconditions are not imposed, there can be peace talks. To this Secretary Rogers replied that a cease-fire is a precondition and it was more conceivable that there would not be a cease-fire. It is possible that the Federal government rightly or wrongly thinks it may win the war and may make a major effort in that direction in the next month or so. We believe that everyone concerned should be urged to talk without setting any preconditions including a cease-fire.

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