

MEMORANDUM

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

Tuesday, January 28, 1969

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

FROM: Henry A. Kissinger *K*

SUBJECT: U. S. Options in Biafra Relief

You asked for a study of the Biafra relief problem by January 28. A member of my staff prepared the attached survey. I have taken the liberty of underlining the most significant parts.

Underlying is a sketch of the background of the problem with a useful map. I thought it important to trace in some detail the interplay between politics and food. Each of the following Tabs, however, is designed to stand alone for a quick overview.

At Tab A is a list of six basic realities of the U. S. involvement in the relief effort.

At Tab B are the main options for expanding relief into Biafra. (The data here are drawn from recent AID and Defense studies, but the details of cost and availability might be subject to change in a formal, up-to-the-minute review by all agencies concerned.)

Recommendation:

That you authorize me to sign the NSSM at Tab C. This would get the bureaucracy moving toward consideration of alternative Biafra relief programs at an early NSC meeting.

Authorize NSSM *[Signature]*

No

See me

NSSM 11 issued 1/28/69
distributed 1/29/69
[Signature]

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There are no exact numbers on the scale of the human tragedy gathering in Biafra. But all our sources do agree that more than a million people are likely to be in danger of starvation over the next 2-3 months. The disaster certainly overshadows direct U.S. interests in Nigeria. There would be no question about evacuating the 5500 U.S. citizens or sacrificing the \$300 million private investment on the Federal side if these stood in the way of relief. The heart of our dilemma, however, is that our instinctive moral concern and involvement with this tragedy cannot be separated from the political tangle -- either in the eyes of the two sides, or in the real impact of relief on the course of the war and its broader consequences for Nigeria and Africa. Policy must be measured in terms of (1) its effect on our ability to help get in relief, and (2) long-range damage as well as the immediate disaster.

Background of the Problem

The civil war is rooted in the failure of the first generation of British-tutored politicians to make something of independence and unity. While London and Washington poured in money and high expectations, corruption grew apace and decisions were drained of content by the tribal bickering that lay behind the facade of national parties. In one sense the first coup in 1966 was a classic effort by young officers to set things right. But they were also eastern Ibos who murdered with ritual flair a northern Hausa Prime Minister along with the Premiers of the Northern and Western States.

An Ibo general stepped in and tried honestly to hold the union together for a year. But the coup leaders went unpunished and the spiral was rapid. Six months later the general was murdered and 30-40,000 Ibos were savagely slaughtered in the North. Young colonels in a coalition of West and North took over in Lagos. The East (2/3 Ibo, 1/3 minority tribes) took back a flood of terrified Ibo refugees from the rest of the country and talked secession. There followed a predictable sequence of mutual bad faith, mounting chauvinism and outflanking of moderates. The war began in July 1967. It has come down to a stand-off with the rebels -- rechristened Biafra -- holed up in the Ibo heartland, about half the territory they began the war with. The Feds outnumber the Biafrans 2:1 in effectives, but French arms and higher morale give the rebels parity for the present.

The Two Sides

Federal Military Government (350,000 sq. miles, 47 million). General Gowon -- 36, Sandhurst-trained, devout Baptist -- rules almost literally by unanimity over a tenuous coalition increasingly strained by the standoff. The Western Yorubas, about 1/3 of the coalition, are stirring ominously in tax riots and seditious talk by local politicians. The army seems to remain

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reasonably solid, if not tightly controlled from Lagos. There is an urge for unity among the elite of all factions, though the strongest cement at this point is probably common tribal hatred of the Ibos. The Feds have cultivated a little elan in discovering they could run the country without the Ibos, who were the backbone of commerce and civil service in the north as well as the south. The Nigerians are proud and latently xenophobic, with a special rancor toward the U. S. that comes of being a guilty offspring who disappointed parental hopes.

They conduct the war with often incredible ineptness both in battle and public relations. They tolerate the Red Cross relief operation on both sides but would hardly be averse to winning by starvation. They were outraged by the recent U. S. sale of eight old transports to the Red Cross and other relief agencies. For Gowon's regime the logic is simple: food keeps the rebellion alive as well as the rebels.

Current Position: The Feds still insist that Biafra must renounce sovereignty before they'll talk peace in earnest. Within a "federal structure" they have talked about schemes for Ibo protection, including an international police force. But they are vague on questions of political amnesty and the place of Ibos in the future federal army. They see the outside world, and particularly us, drifting toward the rebels out of evil design or misguided sympathy. They feel their own war-weariness, are frightened and emboldened by it, and are probably very near a xenophobic outburst which would find an external scapegoat for their frustrations. Our eight transports almost triggered it. Recent intelligence indicates that the Feds plan a major offensive in March before the spring rains bog everyone down. Barring a real escalation in weaponry or expertise from outside sources, their prospects of breaching the rebel perimeter are still slight. That failure would bring Lagos to the boiling point.

Biafra (3,000 sq. miles, 4-6 million). Colonel Ojukwu -- 35, British-trained, erstwhile playboy -- presides over the popular support and military morale of a people convinced that defeat means extinction. The Ibos are the wandering Jews of West Africa -- gifted, aggressive, Westernized; at best envied and resented, but mostly despised by the mass of their neighbors in the Federation. They have fought well (by African standards) against heavy odds; their cynical public relations use of the starvation has been brilliant.

Current Position: Ojukwu says in one breath his sovereignty is not negotiable, yet in the next talks about a compromise "confederation" or "commonwealth" which he never defines. He has ruled out the British as

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mediators and distrusts the OAU, just as the Feds accept it, because of its pro-Federal stance. Biafra proffers a "ceasefire" knowing that neither Gowon nor his coalition could survive a hiatus which only gave a respite to the rebellion. The rebels seem more aware than before of their desperate food situation, but are convinced they can hold out (or will be bailed out) until the Feds collapse. Short of that, Biafra is almost certainly unable to win the war militarily. If Gowon (as he likes to see himself) is Lincoln fighting it out in the Wilderness with draft riots and copperheads back home, Ojukwu is Jeff Davis before Gettysburg with time on the side of secession.

Relief and Diplomacy

The immediate food crisis is on the Biafran side, which has been reduced to a 70- by 40-mile enclave in Federal-held territory. The only relief access is to the one working airstrip used for both arms and relief flights at night only. The planes come from two small islands off the coast. The religious voluntary agencies (some U.S., some European) fly from Portuguese Sao Tome. But Portugal has been sympathetic to Biafra and occasional arms flights also go in from Sao Tome. The Red Cross had been flying from Fernando Po until stopped last week by their landlord, the government of Equatorial Guinea. That problem is a mixture of high-handedness by the Swiss Red Cross people, perhaps some pressure on the Guineans from the Feds, and mostly the urge of a new and uncertain black regime to show the white men in their midst who's boss. State is hard at work on this. The Red Cross should be able to "rent" a grace period to continue flights until an agreement is negotiated.

For the moment, deaths have probably gone down in Biafra as a result of the 300 tons or so of protein concentrates flown in per week before the block on Fernando Po. But the fall harvest in Iboland is being consumed, and they face a carbohydrate famine which will have still greater impact on the population and require much greater bulk than the present relief airlift could possibly handle. The tortuous politics of relief boil down as follows:

-- Both sides have obstructed relief, but the balance of guilt rests with Biafra. In part, there are military priorities over food, but in the last account the rebels know well there's political profit in going hungry.

-- Biafra blocks daytime relief flights (which could substantially increase deliveries) because they're afraid Fed MIGs will tailgate and knock out the airfield (which the MIGs avoid at night or in daylight when anti-aircraft is free to shoot at anything in the air.) The rebels also enjoy the "cover" their arms flights get from relief planes at night, should the Feds grow bolder after dark.

-- The Feds endorse daytime flights in principle (to isolate the night arms run and maybe get a daytime crack at the field despite

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pledges to the contrary). But they regard (with reason) the voluntary agencies flying from Portuguese Sao Tome as pro-Biafran potential gun-runners, and thus illegal. And they don't want the Red Cross, which they do accept, flying in the fuel necessary to distribution of food.

-- The Feds want the airlift to operate from Federal territory, which would let them inspect the food for hidden arms. Biafra argues a Federal-based airlift means poisoned food (a potent fear in West Africa) and at very least that relief would be hostage to their mortal enemy. The relief people contend a Federal base will (a) hamstringing their flights where military operations would take precedence in already overtaxed facilities, (b) cripple what does go out with endless bickering over what's relief (fuel, spare parts, tools) and what's military.

-- The Biafrans oppose an overland corridor unless it's policed by an army as big as the Feds' to prevent a sneak breakthrough. The Feds talk about a corridor -- again, in principle -- but manage objections to specific proposals and usually demand prior agreement by the rebels.

Over all this are two hard facts about the total relief picture:

1. Without either (a) a major enlargement of the present airlift (air drops, building another "neutral" airstrip inside Biafra, etc.) which would bring a break between the Feds and the relief operation or (b) a land corridor, we can only scratch the edges of the food crisis soon upon us.

2. Of the 4 million people now existing on outside relief and medicine, easily half are dependent on the continuation of the International Red Cross (read white - foreign) operation in Federal-held territory.

Where Others Stand

The British could change things dramatically if they gave the Feds covert help with pilots to interdict the arms flights into Biafra. We have evidence they may have been trying that half-heartedly, but there are no results and time is running out for Gowon. Otherwise, London tries to look as energetic as possible to quiet backbench critics. The British have no real negotiating leverage in spite of -- or because of -- their arms supply to the Feds.

The French are behind the arms flights from neighboring Gabon that save the rebels. They think the Feds will break up first and they'll have a

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dynamic new client amid the wreckage of an Anglo-American dream in Africa. It's a cheap investment -- justified so far by events and, one suspects, de Gaulle's romantic taste for underdogs.

The French have responded to US urging and Red Cross pleas by saying finally they'll approach Ojukwu on accepting daytime flights. But there is no sign, and much evidence to the contrary, that they're backing off from their gamble on Biafra's survival.

The Soviets jumped in as arms suppliers to the Feds after we declared an embargo on both sides and the British were slowed by Parliamentary conscience. Gowon is at pains to assure us that Moscow is a temporary patron of last resort. So far, in fact, the Soviets have little to show for their MIGs and unskilled Egyptian pilots. But they too hold the key to interdiction with a few pilots who can fly the MIGs at night. The most recent CIA estimates are that Moscow is content to wait for the right moment, if ever, to play that trump.

Obviously, the Soviets don't have a vital interest in Nigeria, and they may shrink from greater involvement as the war drags on and their new clients in Lagos weaken. Despite their aid, they're prey eventually to the general xenophobia awakened in Nigeria by the war. But the Soviet move to become an arms supplier must be seen in several lights: (a) in contrast to their low-profile, de facto retreat from Africa in the last five years; (b) in the wider context of new foothold in the Middle East; (c) as a response to our own discomfort in Nigeria and the "long-reach" mentality in some Soviet quarters; and (d) for its impact on the U. S. public and Congress (so far, slight).

The Africans. All but four of the OAU (Ivory Coast, Gabon, Tanzania, Zambia) support the Feds. The latest OAU Summit Resolution at Algiers in September reaffirmed the stand. Nigeria's plight is seen as a Pandora's box on a Continent where 2,000 ethnic groups are squeezed into 41 states and secession is a recurrent nightmare for most leaders. The balance of forces is too varied country-to-country for Africa to splinter if Biafra makes it. Yet a rebel victory would probably invite imitation in several vulnerable spots. The odds are heavy it would at least tear apart the rest of Nigeria.

Real or imagined, fears about the war's impact are widespread among Africans. They want the war over as much as we do. But they have no real leverage on either side, and Emperor Haile Selassie has all but exhausted his prestige in four different rounds of abortive talks. We and the Africans have talked a lot about their solving their own problems; this one is just too hard and came too early before power caught up with good intentions.

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U. S. Congress and Public: I need not describe this in detail. The public outcry has been passionate if not always sophisticated. On the Hill the Problem joins unlikely allies such as Kennedy and McCarthy, Brooke and Russell, Lukens and Lowenstein. The pressure has been intense; it is bound to grow. Senator Kennedy is now all but calling for an independent Biafra. The public campaign is well-financed and organized -- an amalgam in part of genuine concern and left-wing guilt feelings over Vietnam. The same people who picket on our "interference" in Asia also demand we force-feed the starving Nigerians.

U. S. Policy and Options

At Tab A are some basic realities of the U. S. position, whatever our policy.

At Tab B is a sketch of relief data and the main options for enlarging the flow.

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TAB A

BASIC REALITIES

1. We must not be enmeshed in irrelevant experiences of our past involvement in Africa. Others -- most notably the Congo -- have put down secession and minimum U.S. help (a few C-130's in quick operation) made a difference. Unlike most in Africa, this is a real war.
2. At the very minimum -- for moral reasons let alone domestic politics -- we must mount every reasonable effort to get in relief. But we must decide what is "reasonable" in terms of long-range damage as well as the immediate disaster.
3. Our role is important but it alone will not ensure a solution. We have little leverage beyond threats or promises of greater embroilment. Neither national interest nor national security justifies U.S. military intervention. There is no prospect that U.S. military intervention -- with the political disaster it would bring -- would solve the relief problem.
4. To the degree we have leverage, we have it only with the Feds. We need their active cooperation in one half of the relief effort and at least their tacit acceptance in the Biafran half to avoid a military clash. We need their trust for any peace-making role we might assume. The relief effort and our political influence can survive the continuing displeasure mixed with hopeful expectation about our role in Biafra. Neither relief nor influence would survive a break with the Feds.
5. There is at least an even chance an outright Fed military victory would bring some slaughter of the Ibos. The rebel charges of genocide are exaggerated and unproven. Gowon is an honorable man who knows Nigerian unity would be lost if victory led to mass murder. But he may not be able to bridle his Northern troops fresh from the bush. "One Nigeria" is probably still possible, but we must be prepared to deal with some possibility of atrocities as a result, or scuttle the concept as carrying an unacceptable risk of "complicity" in supporting the Feds even diplomatically.
6. The passage of time -- as starvation grows and Fed coalition weakens -- only reduces our options. A rapid end to the war is the best way to save most of the people now threatened by starvation. We simply don't know how long the Biafrans can live with current prospects, or how long the Fed coalition will hold together. The odds are now that the coalition will outlast the food, but it's close.

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TAB B

RELIEF OPTIONS

The Need (This does not deal with the 2-3 million people in Federal territory, where presently there are no problems of access.)

Estimates vary widely because of the very fluid situation in Biafra. Also, State has shrunk from sending in a relief expert for fear (probably well-founded) of trouble in Lagos, and we must rely on private figures and fragments from one or two CIA sources. Put together, the relief agencies, UNICEF, CIA, etc. see the need as follows:

| | | |
|---|----|--|
| <u>Population in danger in Biafra</u> | -- | <u>1.5 to 3.5 million</u> over next 4-6 mos. |
| <u>Relief needed</u> (based on minimum caloric needs, and adjusted for bulk carbohydrate shipments) | -- | <u>30 to 40,000 tons per month</u> |

In practical terms, these are obviously wide ranges. But until (if ever) we have more documented figures, our relief experts accept these and advise that we prepare for the high -- or worst -- calculation.

Present Airlift (assuming resumption of Red Cross operation from Fernando Po)

Night flights, 15 - 18 planes = 4,000 tons per month maximum

Conditions: - hazards of night operation

- intermix with arms flights and vulnerability to Fed attack
- insufficient air-ground control
- limited capacity of present aircraft

Result: Actual deliveries have never reached the capacity of 4,000 tons.

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Options

1. STEP-UP ONE

Substitute larger planes = 8,000 tons per month maximum
available commercially

Conditions: - Same as present airlift above

- added airfield maintenance on islands and in Biafra

Cost: \$3 - 4 million for lease or sale of aircraft

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TAB B

2. STEP-UP TWO

Dayflights, substitute = 12,000 tons per month maximum
15 C-130-type aircraft

Conditions: - major improvement of airfield facilities in Biafra
and on islands
- Biafran agreement to day flights or construction of
second airfield
- recruitment of new crews, probably making necessary
use of U. S. military personnel

Cost: \$16 million per month for operations
\$2-3 million for airfield improvement or construction

3. STEP-UP THREE

Add Air Drops to Step-Up Two = 23,000 tons per month maximum
with 10 more C-130-type aircraft

Conditions: - additional base airfields since islands at capacity
in Step-Up Two

- additional personnel (100 - 200) again involving
U. S. military

- additional ground control to insure distribution
in Biafra

Cost: \$36 million per month for operations
\$3 - 4 million anticipated rental for additional fields

4. STEP-UP FOUR

Day flights, 35 aircraft = 30 - 40,000 tons per month maximum
with 17-ton capacity

Conditions: - Major involvement U. S. military personnel and aircraft
- Security and maintenance usually requested by Joint Chiefs
- Massive reconstruction of present airfields (amounting
to U. S. take-over)
- Major improvement distribution facilities in Biafra
- Biafran agreement to day flights or second airfield

Cost: est. \$200 million minimum total for 3-4 months

TAB B

5. STEP-UP FIVE

Land relief corridor = 35 to 45,000 tons per month maximum
into Biafra combined with
present relief flights

Conditions: - Agreement by Federal Government and Biafra
- Some improvement of roads and bridges
- Possible provision of additional trucks and ferries
- Improvement of port and storage facilities in
Federal territory
- Added distribution in Biafra

Cost: est. \$8 million per month for operations

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Political Constraints on Relief Options.

Each Step-Up would be heavily dependent on U. S. initiative, money and equipment. Most require U. S. personnel. Others have shown by now that they lack either the resources, the will, or both.

STEP-UP ONE (substituting larger planes), by itself, would probably move the Feds to sever relations with us. The urge would be stronger in Lagos to eject the Red Cross, but they might continue operations in Federal territory at the price of discontinuing aid to Biafra.

STEP-UP TWO through STEP-UP FOUR would, by all estimates, definitely bring a break with the Feds. We must be prepared to (a) encounter military attack on relief aircraft, (b) sacrifice the Red Cross operation in Federal territory and take over the airlift ourselves, (c) have personnel subject to ground attack in Biafra by Federal planes and troops.

STEP-UP FIVE (land corridor) would probably require (a) visible involvement of OAU or other Africans to mitigate Nigerian sensitivities to a heavily white operation and (b) manifestly workable guarantees against large-scale violation of the corridor to meet Biafran objections, or at least to satisfy world opinion that their objections were unreasonable in face of the need for food.

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