

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

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Friday, June 13, 1969

MEMORANDUM FOR HENRY KISSINGER

FROM: Roger Morris *Roger*

SUBJECT: Federal Nigeria and the Relief Airlift

I am afraid I was none too grim in the foreboding I gave you last week about a Federal move against the relief airlift. In the last 48 hours the Feds have begun to talk very tough and we have intelligence that they may soon have some kind of night-fighter capability -- including British mercenary pilots and a radar guidance facility supervised by Soviet personnel.

Ostensibly, the interdiction will be aimed at the nightly arms flights. But the Feds suspect the church groups of running guns anyway, and they would just as soon see the Red Cross flights stopped. One way or another, the relief flights will be likely casualties of an interdiction effort.

Our Ambassador in Lagos is seeing General Gowon this morning to try to nail down all the suspicion and reports with a straight answer on Federal intentions. On the basis of that conversation, Elliot Richardson will send over this evening a complete wrap-up on where we stand and our contingency plans. Meanwhile, as a refresher, here is a brief run-down of the problem and a preview of Richardson's report. (I have been directly involved in the planning work with State this week.)

The Problem

1. The nighttime relief airlift has always provided a species of cover for the Biafran arms flights. That is precisely why Ojukwu doesn't buy daylight flights, even at the expense of added tonnage which would save more lives. The Feds have had to tolerate this intermix of arms and relief, however, because they simply lacked the capability for night interdiction.

2. Yet stopping the arms supply has always been the key to ending the war. Biafra could not long survive without the steady flow of small arms and ammunition (roughly 200 tons a week). It is just one of the mysteries of this war that the Feds have not moved sooner -- on their own or with British or Soviet help -- to hire the people and equipment

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to interdict. Goaded by the failure of their latest "final" offensive (and even some embarrassing Biafran victories in the process), Gowon at long last looks as if he will make a serious effort.

3. In hard military terms, therefore, the Feds do have legitimate reasons to attack half of the aircraft coming into Biafra at night. Their problem -- and ours -- is to make sure they tackle the right half.

4. The ideal solution from the Federal point of view would be an outright embargo on all relief flights, letting the mercenary pilots shoot down anything in their sights. But Gowon is apparently aware to some degree that a total relief blockade would be politically disastrous for the Federal side. Thus, he will almost certainly offer some kind of "control" arrangement whereby the Federal MIGs could somehow "identify" the relief aircraft. As Lagos sees it, this is a sufficient sop to humanitarian interest, and the relief agencies can take it or leave it at their own risk.

5. The problem, of course, is that in "control" -- as in nearly everything else -- the Feds are bound to be tragically inept. The arrangements they envision in the air are signals like waving wings or lowering landing gears. The margin for error here -- with nervous pilots on both sides in the black Equatorial night -- I need not describe. As an alternative, the Feds talk about transferring all relief operations to Lagos under their own strict control, which the relief agencies strongly oppose (and justifiably so) as making their operations political and logistical hostages on the Federal side.

In sum, we face a Federal move to interdict arms flights for legitimate military reasons, yet under circumstances which will either amount to (a) a de facto relief embargo or (b) serious danger of shooting down relief aircraft.

The U. S. Reaction

I readily confess that I am not enchanted with the Federal cause in this civil war. In fact, I spend most of my time at State redressing the policy balance to ensure that we stick closely to the President's preference for scrupulous neutrality. On this issue, however, I find it very hard to argue that we should lean too heavily on the Feds for an action we both recognize to be in the interests of ending the war with a Federal victory -- the outcome of which the President has concluded, albeit reluctantly, to be in our long-run interests. At the same time, we have to keep the relief supplies going in by some means as long as the need exists. And despite recent reports that the food situation in Biafra is improving, the relief supplies are still crucial.

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I see the policy problem as finding some way to give the Feds a clear shot at the arms supply if they can do it. Thus we have been thinking about the following scenario:

1. If Gowon confirms today that they are going all out for interdiction, we would go back with a very strong demarche to the effect that any attack on relief aircraft, accidental or otherwise, would have grave consequences for our relations.

2. We would then ask Gowon, in effect, to hold off a few days to give Clyde Ferguson a chance to nail down an alternative relief channel -- the surface corridor running up a river from the coast into Biafra -- which he has been trying to negotiate with both sides over the last six weeks. So far, the Biafrans have done their usual stall on agreeing to the corridor. But the Feds have agreed in principle, the logistics are manageable, and there is no fighting in the sector to impose legitimate military obstacles.

3. We would propose to Gowon a "one-shot" operation of the corridor -- a vessel loaded with medical supplies -- to confront the Biafrans with a fait accompli of relief. If that corridor were established, we have assurances from the Joint Church Agencies and Red Cross that they would shift their operations from the nighttime airlift to the surface corridor. This would address the relief problem and simplify Gowon's interdiction. The one-shot operation can be carried out next week.

4. If the Biafrans reject the corridor for any reason (and that's most likely), the United States would publicly fix the blame for the failure of an alternative relief arrangement.

5. At this point, the Feds would be in much stronger public position to impose controls on the relief airlift. But those controls must still be as fool proof as possible. We would then consider giving the relief agencies technical help in establishing with the Feds the necessary arrangements.

6. This boils down to:

-- Telling the Feds they have to wait on interdiction until we force the issue on a surface corridor to get an alternative relief route.

-- If forcing the issue doesn't work, they still have to hold interdiction until the establishment of effective and reasonable controls to distinguish relief from arms flights.

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-- We put the Biafrans on the spot and save the Feds from political debacle.

-- Hopefully, we keep the relief going in, despite the constant willingness of both sides to sacrifice it to political and military advantage.

Richardson's memo will probably lay this out in more elaborate detail, but I wanted you to have a rough idea. I see our first job as maintaining relief. That's the crux, after all, of the public and Congressional pressures. It remains the sole stated purpose of our involvement in the civil war. I think all of us recognize that, under the circumstances, this scenario amounts to helping the Federal side. On the other hand, relief continues per se to keep the rebels going. But the night fighters and mercenary pilots inevitably cut away the purely neutral ground we have been standing on.

As I stressed to you in my first piece on this problem back in January, the hard fact in the politics of relief has been that the Feds do exercise a veto over the food for the rebels. It has been relatively easy to stay neutral and noble as long as the Feds either couldn't or wouldn't make that veto effective. We may have come to the end of that luxury.

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