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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Memorandum of Conversation

DATE: July 31, 1969
5:00 P.M.

SUBJECT: Report of Norman Cousins' Trip to Nigeria

PARTICIPANTS: Mr. Norman Cousins, Editor of the Saturday Review

Mr. David D. Newsom - AF
Mr. Roy M. Melbourne - AF/W
Mr. Birney A. Stokes - AF/W

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Mr. Cousins, reporting on his recent trip to Nigeria and Biafra, said that his vantage point was "non-political." He explained his involvement in past years in various humanitarian efforts. He had become interested in the kwashiorkor victims in Biafra and decided to see what he could do to help. He presented his idea to Mr. Onyegbula, Permanent Secretary of Biafran Ministry of External Affairs, when the latter was in New York. Starting in December 1968 he began to recruit doctors to send into the Biafran area to treat the stricken children. The Biafrans supplied supporting personnel. The big problem was getting medical supplies into the area. He calls his project "Aid to Biafran Children (ABC)".

Mr. Cousins said General Gowon had spoken to him of his determination to conduct the war in a manner which would permit post-war reconciliation with the Ibos. The General referred to a recent speech he had given before a university audience in which he had emphasized that the war was not being fought against enemies. He showed his orders to the Army commanders in which he stated the precepts for the conduct of troops in the field vis-a-vis the rebel soldiers and the civilian population. He also showed a letter he had written to Ojukwu proposing what he called talks without pre-conditions and the reply thereto in which the General averred that Ojukwu had insisted that certain facts would have to be taken into account in any talks that might take place. Mr. Cousins felt in reading General Gowon's letter that, while the General contended that it involved no pre-conditions, in fact the context of one or more of the paragraphs included certain conditions for talks. General Gowon had asked him, he said, to transmit to Ojukwu his desire for a peace with honor and justice and had asked that he return and report Ojukwu's reaction.

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From Libreville Mr. Cousins flew into Uli Airstrip. In reply to a question from Mr. Newsom, he said he believes the largest part of the shipments from Libreville are relief supplies. He said that FMG attempts to interdict Uli are a bit farcical, neither scientific nor military. The runway could easily be destroyed, but the bombs from FMG planes had all fallen wide. He also had the impression that Biafra has vastly improved its military position and that the FMG capture of Umuahia was more than offset by the Biafran reoccupation of Owerri. US public lacked understanding of this because of the absence of newspaper people on the scene and the printing of biased stories. Biafrans were having more success in their military operations and were able to obtain the major part of their arms supplies by sucking in and encircling Federal units whose arms and equipment then fell into Biafran hands. The Biafrans have a highly organized guerrilla organization, including a number of people who participate part time. The city of Umuahia may be retaken by the Biafrans and one third of it was being contested at the time Cousins was there. He spoke of the widespread mining of the highways by the Biafran military and did not see how the FMG could win and hold the area against the existing Biafran military organization.

Mr. Cousins said that the people in the cities seemed better off than he had anticipated. Outside the cities, however, the population seemed to be suffering from severe malnutrition. He said that the Land Army in Biafra was producing sufficient food but it was mostly of poor nutritional quality.

Mr. Cousins said that he had to travel a long way from Owerri to see Ojukwu, who seemed tired but calm. He was deeply impressed with Ojukwu's "exquisite command of the English language." and knew of no one since Nehru who had such command. Ojukwu made the same sort of statements as Gowon about possible negotiations to end the war, i. e., no pre-conditions and that war is a great tragedy for all concerned.

Mr. Cousins feels that there are contradictions in the FMG and Biafran positions. The FMG fears Ibo domination and yet the war allegedly is being fought to ensure that the Ibos are included in the Nigeria of the future. The Biafrans insist on their right to independence and yet they talk about freedom of movement within Nigeria. Words such as secession have become barriers to communications to the warring sides. There is a need to get the two sides talking about real grievances and problems, such as security and the re-integration of the Ibos.

Mr. Cousins felt that Ojukwu is willing to meet with Gowon, but is afraid to propose it for fear it would be taken as weakness. He also would be willing to enter into meetings at lower levels but wants to be sure that these are not used for propaganda or as a cover for military advantage. Ojukwu believes Gowon cannot

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carry through without the British and the Northerners behind him. Cousins feels that it is up to the United States to bring pressure to bear to get talks going. He had suggested to Ojukwu that he write a letter to President Nixon with regard to a United States initiative. Mr. Cousins indicated such a letter had been prepared.

Mr. Cousins said he asked Ojukwu whether he had accepted the Cross River proposal. Ojukwu replied affirmatively. He then asked Ojukwu whether he had changed his mind and withdrawn. To this Ojukwu replied he thought there had been a misunderstanding and that there had been a premature announcement of the plan. He said he was prepared to accept the Cross River proposal.

Mr. Cousins reiterated this is the time to try to get both sides to enter into talks because of the balanced or stalemate situation. This would have to be done secretly since publicity would cause both sides to denounce the talks. Biafra is neither too strong nor too weak. It is able to defend itself but not able to pursue an advantage. Nigeria is paying a fearsome cost for the war and the war is imperiling the country's future. Both Gowon and Ojukwu are men of reason who understand the facts of their situation and the implications. The United States could influence Ojukwu.

Mr. Newsom referred to FMG preference for talks within an Africa context and asked what role the Emperor of Ethiopia might play. Mr. Cousins said he thought the Emperor may have expended such credit as he had with the Biafrans. Mr. Newsom referred to Ojukwu's statements to Cousins that the UK is the key to FMG willingness to negotiate and asked whether Cousins thought the Biafrans were in a similar position vis-a-vis Houphouet-Boigny and the French. Mr. Cousins said he had no valid opinion in this matter. Mr. Cousins believes Ojukwu is the more capable and intelligent of the two leaders and feels there is more solid backing for Ojukwu in Biafra than for Gowon in Nigeria. In this regard Mr. Melbourne spoke of the coalition structure of the FMG as contrasted with the Biafran situation.

Mr. Cousins said in reply to Mr. Newsom's question that he had returned to Lagos with the hope of seeing General Gowon after his meeting with Ojukwu. Unfortunately he was not able to do so, but he made his report nevertheless through Chief Justice Ademola.

Mr. Newsom said there was a time, a month or so ago, when it was felt the situation was not amenable to negotiations. Neither side seemed ready to admit its military aim could not be obtained. Mr. Cousins' comments would indicate that there may have been a change. He thus asked Mr. Cousins for his assessment of the attitude of other Biafrans toward an attempt by Ojukwu to move toward talks. What would be Mr. Cousins' evaluation of the total Biafran response to such a change? Mr. Cousins did not reply directly. He believes the situation is ready to be tested and suggested the sequence should be first to pin down one side and then the other.

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In this respect he suggested the President reply to Ojukwu's letter (referred to above) as one step in this direction. With respect to the FMG, he suggested that the UK assess FMG readiness to move towards talks. Mr. Melbourne briefly mentioned earlier attempts to induce negotiations and the breakdown of all these attempts over conditions and caveats laid down by one side or the other.

The conversation closed with Mr. Newsom's question whether anyone amongst the Biafran leaders enjoys the special confidence of Ojukwu. After a discussion of several possibilities, Mr. Cousins felt that, if anyone enjoys the special confidence of Ojukwu, it is Mr. Onyegbula.

NOTE: Although he did not raise the matter in his talk with Mr. Newsom, in an earlier meeting this date with representatives of AID, U/CF, AF/P, AF/CW and AF/W, Mr. Cousins proposed transferring the idle ICRC C-97's to the French Red Cross. He said Colonel Merle, French Officer in Charge of the Libreville airlift, had agreed to carry ABC medical supplies into Biafra and he argued this is the only transit point which is not already clogged. The Department representatives told Mr. Cousins this would be almost impossible since the French Red Cross had held aloof from the ICRC and Colonel Merle's airlift was a pretty shadowy operation involving arms supply as well as relief.

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