

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

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MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

Time: September 25, 1969 - 2:00 to 6:30 p.m.
Place: Residence of Mr. Norman Cousins, New York City
Participants: Biafra

Foreign Minister Onyegbula
Ambassador (to the U.K.) Kogbara
Representative in the U.S. Nwokoby

US

Roger Morris and Charles Hermann, NSC Staff.

Introduction

Morris opened by stressing the circumstances under which the US was entering this conversation. He said he had been authorized to follow up in person, as Onyegbula had requested, the earlier talks with Norman Cousins and the Foreign Minister's letter to Henry Kissinger. He wanted it understood, however, that these were strictly informal explorations, implying no US commitment of any kind. Absolute secrecy was essential if there was any hope of continuing the dialogue and he hoped for a thoroughly candid and authoritative exchange of views. Morris noted that both Biafra and the U.S. may have been guilty in the past of speaking with several voices. He said it was essential in discussing these serious matters of war and peace that the dialogue be kept in a single channel which clearly reflected the policy of the two principals. He said he wanted to make these points clear at the outset, but had come primarily to ask questions and listen.

Onyegbula replied that Biafra was generally opposed to pre-conditions, but would readily accept all those the U.S. had stipulated for these conversations. He was very heartened by this response to

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his letter to Dr. Kissinger. He wanted to begin the talk with some points of Biafra's attitude toward the United States. Biafrans had grown up in the western tradition and identify naturally with the U.S. And although we were allied with the British and thereby had supported the FMG, most Biafrans still looked upon the U.S. as neutral in the civil war. They may have been particularly encouraged by the sympathy shown by President Nixon during his campaign. But Onyegbula stressed that the Biafran Government had found the actual policy of the new Administration very disappointing thus far. The U.S. had not understood, in his view, that Biafra signalled a major change in the shape of African politics, and that self determination in Africa was a direct reflection of American ideals. Onyegbula said he hoped this conversation is the start of more realistic and productive U.S. policy.

Morris replied that he had not come to carry on a post-mortem of past U.S. actions, or to discuss the merits of either side in the civil war. This exploration could be useful only if it were both dispassionate and highly practical. He had come to see if there was any way an outsider might be helpful in ending the war. He wanted to concentrate on practical considerations, and particularly some of the points raised in Onyegbula's letter to Kissinger. Onyegbula agreed.

Starting Negotiations

Morris asked Onyegbula to comment further on the assertion in his letter that Biafra would pose no pre-conditions -- neither a cease-fire nor claim to independence -- prior to negotiations.

Onyegbula said at least "preliminary meetings" could be held without a cease-fire. And these meetings would be important to establish the climate for a meeting of principals. He stressed, however, that an ultimate agreement on the basic issues had to be reached by the principals, General Ojukwu could not be expected to take the risk of attending such negotiations while the fighting continued. Negotiations had made no headway in the past, he thought, primarily because the war was going on. Besides, he thought a cease-fire would only enhance the authority of the FMG because it would leave them under control of a substantial portion of Biafra. But he emphasized again

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that a cease-fire was not a pre-condition for peace talks. Biafra proposed no pre-conditions; and they could not be expected to accept the current Federal insistence that they acknowledge a one-Nigeria prior to a settlement.

Morris observed that negotiations on issues of such magnitude must proceed slowly and gradually. In his view, the fatal flaw in the past efforts at negotiation had been the absence of careful preparation and planning. He said the Biafrans should recognize the Federal side would be unlikely to agree simply to a meeting of two principals alone. The important point was that all of the negotiations be conducted authoritatively, avoiding any excuse for subsequent renunciation by either side. As for the FMG, that condition might well be satisfied best by a group of men rather than Gowon alone. He thought the Biafrans should broaden their concept of what constituted talk between "principals".

Partial Stand-Down

Morris said the issue of the cease-fire was very thorny. What were the prospects of a partial stand-down in the conflict -- for example, a moratorium in the air war, the Biafran order of a unilateral cease-fire along one portion of the front, etc.?

Onyegbula said the Biafrans had considered this question and had to reject it as altogether unworkable.

The U.S. Position

Onyegbula asked if U.S. relations with Britain precluded a mediating role for the United States.

Morris replied that if the U.S. thought it might be helpful as a third party, we would approach that role without a preconception as to the outcome of the war or as to the relative merits of the two sides. The U.S. would seek to be scrupulously impartial. It was true, he said, that there were some U.S. interests in Nigeria, such as investments, etc. But our first concern has been and will continue to be

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to save lives. Morris said that the Biafrans would have to give the U.S. the benefit of the doubt if it were to play no useful role in the settlement. He said again that he thought it important to steer this conversation away from substantive judgments about the two sides.

Negotiation Procedures

Morris asked how Biafra would envision the role of mediator, whether the talks should be secret or open, whether there was any significance to the date of November 1 which Onyegbula had mentioned in his letter to Kissinger?

Onyegbula said a mediator might play a useful role by shuttling between the two sides prior to a face-to-face meeting, but that there was a definite limit to what that could achieve. He said there had to be a decision by both sides on the basic questions -- independence or reintegration, the viability of Nigeria with or without Biafra, etc. Once these major issues had emerged and were resolved, the secondary questions would quickly fall into place. He said there was no special reason for the date of November 1. In fact, "the earlier the better". But the U.S. had to make up its mind as to what might realistically emerge from the negotiation, what was vital and necessary, and then go for it. He reiterated the point in his letter distinguishing the role of a third party in (a) getting the parties to the table, and (b) serving as a formal mediator during negotiations. He said it would not be necessary for the U.S. to play both of these roles, but Biafra thought that highly desirable. Other governments were unacceptable because of their clear involvement with one side or the other. He said the talks would have to be held in strict secrecy.

The OAU

Morris asked about a possible role for the OAU at some stage in a negotiated settlement.

Onyegbula said that the OAU would be acceptable if it were represented by countries friendly to Biafra as well as those supporting the FMG. The Consultative Committee of the OAU had been totally

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biased for the Federal side. And if normal procedures were followed, the war could go on for several more months before the OAU could reconstitute the Committee into a more impartial body acceptable to Biafra. "Why", Onyegbula asked, "did the U.S. so often promote the role of the OAU in this problem?"

Morris responded that there were two main reasons for this. First, the U.S. did not want to see a settlement imposed from outside; second, any lasting settlement would probably depend upon some kind of role for an external authority, and such a role was best played by the Africans themselves. Finally, the U.S. thought it in everyone's interest to encourage regional responsibility in the developing world. But these concepts were neither a rigid formula nor an abrogation of U.S. interest in Africa's future.

Security Guarantees

Onyegbula then said that the central issue was the safety of Biafrans in Federal territory. Those going from Biafra to Nigeria had to be treated in the same manner as Biafrans going to Ghana or the Ivory Coast. He doubted that any external authority -- African or otherwise -- could guarantee this right. Biafra had seceded from Nigeria simply because its only protection was a separate existence. He talked at length of the atrocities in northern Nigeria.

Morris asked if there would also be a problem protecting Ibos in the Midwest and West. Onyegbula said the problem was equally grave throughout Nigeria.

Other Powers

Morris asked how Biafra saw the role of other powers in a settlement, particularly those that had been directly involved in the conflict such as the U.K., the Soviets and the French.

Onyegbula said the Western world should sort out its own differences on the Nigerian question. The Soviets would undoubtedly try to sabotage any negotiations. The others, however, would have to be brought in at some point. The British were absolutely essential in order to bring around the FMG.

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Nwokoby interjected at this point that as long as the war continues, Gowon would have to share his power not only with his commanders but also with his arms suppliers. The end of the fighting would consolidate Gowon's position, reduce the influence of would-be rivals, and halt the rising influence of the Soviet Union.

Gowon's Position

Morris asked for Onyegbula's personal assessment of Gowon's position in the FMG.

Onyegbula replied that he had little intelligence about the political situation in Lagos. The Ibos were closer to Americans than they were to the Federals. He said he had great difficulty, in fact, following any line of reasoning or motivation on the other side. He said he could not consider Gowon to be a man of peace as so many portrayed him. He said he agreed with Morris's earlier assertion that it did not matter who represented the FMG in the negotiations -- so long as the negotiators had ultimate authority. He simply could offer no opinion on Gowon's position, the likelihood of his overthrow, or any other question on which the U.S. might be speculating.

Relief

Morris asked how relief might relate to peace negotiations, and particularly how the problem of daylight flights might be resolved. Could the U.S. do something to break the impasse on daylight flights?

Onyegbula immediately responded that Biafra had agreed to daylight flights, but had been deceived by the Red Cross, which concluded a substantially different agreement with the FMG. He said that nothing in the current U.S. position suggested that we could close the gap between the Biafran position and the Red Cross-Federal agreement. He said Biafra's only recourse was to try to expand the night-time airlift.

He then stressed that the United States might be helpful if it gave Biafra an "undertaking" that it would do "certain things" if the daylight airlift were violated -- as it probably would be -- by the Federals.

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He said Biafra found it incredible that the FMG could write into the agreement with the Red Cross a virtual carte blanche to violate the agreement (a reference to the provision that the airlift would be "without prejudice" to FMG military operations).

Morris then said he would like to pose a hypothetical question for Onyegbula's consideration. He asked that the Biafrans think about what their reaction would be if the United States were to (a) declare publicly the inviolability of the relief airlift, and (b) offer certain technical arrangements to make that practical. Obviously there was no question of a U.S. "guarantee" or any kind of direct involvement. But the Biafrans had an enormous stake in leaving the door open to an accommodation of public gestures and private arrangements which might actually get the flights started. He stressed, however, that this was only a friendly suggestion; that this was something that might conceivably be discussed at a later point.

Onyegbula gave an assurance that Biafra would not close this question, and that they would be prepared to look carefully at any proposal of the kind Morris had described. He said specifically, "We would be most anxious to see the wording of such a public declaration."

Shape of the Settlement

Morris asked Onyegbula for his views on what practical arrangements might be realistic in reconciling the two sides.

Onyegbula stressed again the issue of Ibo security. He said there would be a strong aversion among his people even to the name "Nigeria". It would be a long time before Biafrans would be safe in the rest of Nigeria. However, cooperation could develop in stages, beginning primarily with economic matters. He went into a detailed discussion of possibilities for a common market, common rail lines, the sharing of oil revenues, and trading relations. He said it would be unthinkable for Biafrans to exist economically "apart" from the rest of Nigeria. Biafra was ready to compromise and bargain fairly on the full range of economic relationships with the Federal side. They were also willing to talk about requirements for security, including the question of military and police forces, but that was a much more difficult and complex subject which he did not wish to discuss at this meeting. He

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repeated that Biafra was not making their claim to independence a pre-condition to negotiations, and they were ready to have serious discussions with the Federal side on the precise arrangements envisioned in the Federal concept of one-Nigeria.

But Onyegbula stressed that Biafra had not fought a long war with terrible sacrifice simply to return to the status quo ante-- and least of all to the bogus arrangements in the Federal 12-state system created during the war. He said Biafra would welcome honest U.S. mediation. But a mediator should be under no illusion that Biafra would negotiate simply as a form of surrender. They were prepared to fight to the death, and to stand alone, rather than deliver their people to the inevitable fate of a one-sided settlement.

Onyegbula added, however, that these strong words by no means ruled out genuine compromise. For example, he said, Biafra was perfectly willing to accept an internationally-supervised plebiscite to determine the boundaries of Biafra. He realized the question of minority tribes troubled the United States. He said this was not a problem, that Biafra was confident of winning the allegiance of minority groups in the Southeast and Rivers areas, and that they would accept any outcome of a free vote.

Morris thanked Onyegbula for his views and said he would convey the content of this conversation to Dr. Kissinger and the President. In answer to Onyegbula's question about a subsequent talk, Morris replied that we would be in touch with the Biafrans again at some point soon after considering the results of these discussions.

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