

## **THE EFFECTS OF NIGERIA'S CIVIL WAR ON NIGERIA-U.S.A FOREIGN RELATIONS, 1967-1970**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper re-examines the effects the Nigeria's civil war had on the Nigeria-U.S.A foreign relations from 1967 to 1970 when the war ended, It critically analyses the political, social and economic effects of the war on the diplomatic relations between the Federal Military government, Biafra and the United States of America. Even though the U.S.A did not take any sides in the war, certain humanitarian efforts championed by Igbo students in the U.S.A, churches, International Red Cross, Caritas and other humanitarian groups compelled United States of American politicians to intervene by providing official humanitarian corridor to bring in relief materials to circumvent the naval blockade of Biafra land to avoid genocidal starvation of the war torn areas. This work looks at the political, social and economic effects of the civil war on the Nigeria-U.S.A relations within this period.*

**Keywords:** Biafra, Genocide, Humanitarian aid, Opacity, Pierson Report, MCarthy, Nixon, Ojukwu, Gowon

### **Introduction**

The history of the United States' relations with Nigeria has alternated between periods of close or special relations and periods of indifference, neglect and hostility.<sup>1</sup> Different periods in Nigeria's political history have elucidated different relations between it and the U.S. For instance, there were cordial relations from 1960-1966. There also were strained relations from the first Nigerian military *coup* of 1966 up to the end of the civil war in 1970. The present discussion on the effects of Nigeria's civil war is an attempt to look at the predominant features of Nigeria-U.S relations during this period of internal domestic conflict with special attention to political, social and economic effects of the war on their relationship. Let us examine them one by one.

### **Political Effects**

Since independence, one of the major problems which have confronted Nigeria's leaders has been how to maintain national unity in the face of disintegrative forces caused by Nigeria's multi-ethnic composition.<sup>2</sup> In early 1966, a group of army majors instigated a military take-over of power which brought Major-General Aguiyi-Ironsi to power. Following the July 1966 *counter-coup*, Lieutenant Colonel Yakubu Gowon assumed leadership of the country. The Governor of the Eastern Region, Lieutenant-Colonel Chukwuemeka Odimegwu Ojukwu, refused to recognise Gowon's authority and subsequently declared his region as an independent state of Biafra on 30<sup>th</sup> May, 1967.<sup>3</sup>

Nigeria's primary goal at the time was to limit the international assistance Biafra received. It tried to convince African governments that it could end the secession quickly, in order to prove to the western nations that it was capable of deliberation and restraint. On this score, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) was known to have supported re-unification of the Biafra Republic with Nigeria. Besides, the OAU was known to have urged other members of the international community to work against the backing of the new Republic of Biafra. But Biafra on its part campaigned to involve the world in what was portrayed as a struggle against genocide. The goal was to mobilise international pressure to get Nigeria to accept an unconditional ceasefire. Although, four African governments recognized Biafra, Biafra did not succeed in provoking greater international recognition or in persuading Nigeria to agree to a ceasefire. When therefore Biafra became the focus of international relief operations, it was able to prolong the war. Although Biafra tried to make its viability and self-reliance the centre-piece of its foreign policy, it was defeated militarily and was forced to surrender on 15<sup>th</sup> January, 1970.<sup>4</sup>

Lyndon Johnson did not have John F. Kennedy's interest in Africa, even though his foreign policy did not differ much from that of his predecessor. It would interest the reader to note that unlike President Johnson, President Kennedy supported African nationalism which gave rise to new independent African states. Kennedy was sympathetic towards African nations. He opposed continued European colonialism, accepted African non-alignment policy and initiated economic programmes to help in Africa's development.<sup>5</sup>

After the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963, Lyndon Johnson continued in office and retained Dean Rusk as Secretary of State, who advised the continuance of the foreign policies of the previous administration. However, much attention was not paid to African issues due to America's interest in Western Germany and the war in Vietnam at that time and as such, African issues were scaled back.<sup>6</sup>

It has been pointed out that American optimism over Nigeria's future as a unified country playing a leadership role in Africa was shattered by the January 15, 1966 *coup*. The U.S. had hoped that the military government would keep Nigeria united. Although, Nigeria had wanted to buy arms from the U.S., the latter declared an arms embargo on both sides on July 10, 1967. On its part, Nigeria had accused the U.S. of supporting Biafra. It was probably due to loss of faith between the U.S. and Nigeria that prompted the Nigerian government to look for alternative sources of arms supply through the then Soviet Union. The U.S. later modified its neutral policy somewhat by authorising funds for relief, but the U.S. role in the relief effort further strained its relationship with Nigeria.<sup>7</sup>

The election of Richard Nixon in November, 1968, buoyed the hopes of the Biafrans that a change of U.S. policy might occur. Although, policy-makers explored the option of recognising the Republic of Biafra, Nixon and Henry Kissinger, (U.S. Secretary of State), decided to expand the relief programme instead. The Nigerian government was concerned that any shift in the U.S. policy would involve the U.S. in political questions.<sup>8</sup> On their part, the Biafrans had hoped that Nixon would support a cease-fire. The Nigerians were relieved, therefore, when Nixon announced that there would be no major new U.S. involvement in the Biafra-Nigerian imbroglio. In all, by the time the civil strife ended in 1970 President Nixon offered to the Gowon military regime an additional sum of \$10 million for relief programme.<sup>9</sup>

### **Social Effects**

It may be argued that the United States did not wholly pursue a policy of neutrality in the Nigerian-Biafran war. This could be deduced from the then U.S declaration that the unfolding crisis was a Nigerian affair; a matter "for the Nigerians themselves to determine". According to Joseph Palmer II (Assistant Secretary for African Affairs),<sup>10</sup> the U.S. government seemed to have given the impression that it was neutral in the war. But on May 30, 1967, the day the secession by the Biafrans was announced, Dean Rusk, who was U.S. Secretary of State at the time, responding to the declaration, reiterated what he called the "basic position" of the United States to the effect that the "problem of Nigeria is a matter of primary concern to Nigerians, to Africa and to the Commonwealth". Even though the U.S. would maintain a consular presence in the east, he added it would not be construed as U.S government's recognition of the sovereign state of Biafra.<sup>11</sup>

In the thick of the war in February, 1968, and in response to the insinuations that the U.S was backing Biafra, the Department of State declared that: "the U.S continues to recognize the Federal Military Government as the only legitimate government in Nigeria. We do not recognize "Biafra" nor, as far as we know, does any other government in the

world”<sup>12</sup> Socially, this statement dealt a devastating blow to the Biafran war efforts and boosted the Nigerian government’s war efforts and morale.

However, the military component of the United States policy became known on July 10, 1967, when it announced that it had turned down a request for military assistance by the Nigerian government.<sup>13</sup> The “request for military assistance” claim was denied by the Nigerian government the next day claiming that it only sought permission to purchase arms.<sup>14</sup> The Nigerian government had simultaneously requested for ‘immediate sale’ to it of “12 fighter bombers, 6 PT-boats and 24 anti-aircraft guns” from the United States and Britain, threatening to “get them from any source that would make them available”.<sup>15</sup> The United States, in explaining why it would not sell arms to Nigeria claimed that doing so would deepen the conflict and introduce an element of “great power competition” (sort of arms race) into the conflict. The refusal of the United States to sell arms to Nigeria was also demoralising to Nigeria’s war efforts and made it to turn to the Soviet Union for supply of arms to prosecute the war.

With time, in the course of the war, the support for Biafran self-determination among U.S. political figures became increasingly intense, feeding on Biafra’s claim of genocide, and the humanitarian consideration of arresting starvation in Biafra.<sup>16</sup> Prominent among these political figures were Eugene McCarthy and Richard Nixon, both of them Senators. Addressing the American Senate on May 17, 1969, McCarthy had talked about widespread starvation in Biafra resulting from the “compression in millions of refugees into the area one-quarter of the original homeland, from disrupted planting, and from cutting off of trade routes by the Nigerian forces”.<sup>17</sup> He admitted that the government and the people of the United States had responded compassionately to the humanitarian problems of the war, but such a response, he added only alienated “a fraction of the suffering”.<sup>18</sup> Such humanitarian response, McCarthy further stated would only be inadequate as long as the fighting continued and as long as the U.S policy was hinged on peace through military victory.<sup>19</sup>

In the circumstances, therefore, McCarthy did not believe that the policy of the United States at that time had been appropriate. Nigeria, he argued, was an artificial creation, and its boundaries were, therefore, not sacred. He further argued that a defeated Biafra would mean that the ensuing federation would be no more balanced than the post-regional arrangement had been. The Igbo, as was already clear in the twelve state structure, would be “confined to a crowded, infertile region smaller than their ancestral homeland with no access to the sea”, and deprived of all but token participation in the reconstituted unitary state”. Yet he concluded the United States claimed that it was neutral, even though it has been neutral only in “refraining from shipping arms” to the Nigerian government.<sup>20</sup>

The Senator added that “it is time, therefore, to re-examine our policy of ‘One Nigeria’, which has resulted in our accepting the deaths of a million people as the price for preserving a nation that never existed”<sup>21</sup> Senator McCarthy realising that the pro-Nigeria policy-makers would argue that granting diplomatic recognition to Biafra would amount to intervention, countered with the aphorism that “non-recognition is also intervention.”<sup>22</sup>

Nixon’s pro-Biafra statements of July 17 and September 10, 1968 as a presidential candidate made more impression, and created, more than any other, the possibility of a reversal of the United States’ policy towards the war. He blamed what he saw as the failure of relief efforts as a consequence of the desire of the Nigerian government to “pursue total and unconditional victory”. Such a war that meant that the “destruction of an entire people as an immoral objective”, and can never be justified; it can never be condoned”.<sup>23</sup> This was the view of Nixon in his campaign even though he seemed to have subscribed to the policy of non-involvement when he stated that: “America’s goal is not to intervene in the civil war in Nigeria, not to take sides between the armies,-it is to take sides against starvation.” This conclusion was only apparently innocuous; and it had significant policy implications.

It could be argued that humanitarian and not political or military intervention was what Nixon meant, particularly considering his anti-starvation stance. American lawmakers were very familiar with the immense contribution towards relief made by private American concerns and the government. Asking for more relief without also ending the conflict was, therefore, self-defeating. Hence, the logical option was intervention.

Shepard, Jr. was a pro-Nixon when he thought that the United States and the “incoming Nixon administration”, in particular, was in the best position to end the conflict: The United States alone he maintained in a position to bring the contestants to a negotiating table”.<sup>24</sup> The British, being too pro-Nigeria, had “lost all moral and political bargaining force,<sup>25</sup> this the United States had”, he concluded.

Biafran political functionaries had been following Nixon’s rethink of the U.S. policy. General Ojukwu then was quite appreciative of Nixon’s call for a change of the U.S. policy. This was reflected when he was quoted to have said: “I am optimistic in that I see in him a man with sympathy”.<sup>26</sup>

While condemning Lyndon Johnson’s presidency which he claimed “assisted the Gowon regime to starve thousands of Biafrans to death” as inhuman, Ifegwu Eke, Biafra’s Information Commissioner, praised Nixon’s “effort in the cause of humanity” and assured him that by it, “he will have earned for himself and the United States the undying praise of posterity”.<sup>27</sup>

However, Nixon's pro-Biafran sentiments did not translate into policy. As president, he endorsed Johnson's policy of non-political and non-military involvement in the Nigerian war. In a release on February 22, 1969, announcing the appointment of Clarence Clyde Ferguson, Jr. as special coordinator of relief efforts from the United States, Nixon re-affirmed the Johnson policy.<sup>28</sup>

An influential explanation of the U.S. policy towards the war is the British factor, which is that the U.S. usually followed the lead of the colonising states of Europe in Africa and of Britain in the Nigerian war.<sup>29</sup> It had also been argued that the U.S. at this time was preoccupied with the war in Vietnam and "was not prepared to repeat her experience of unsuccessful involvement in the Congo crises."<sup>30</sup>

### **Economic Effects**

Research has shown that the period of the civil war in Nigeria, 1967-1970, which is often neglected in the analysis of the Nigeria oil industry has revealed that it was during this period that the structures, policies and political relations between Nigeria and the U.S., that created Nigeria's unique version of 'oil curse', was established.<sup>31</sup> New evidence reveals that a tax battle waged by the U.S. oil companies contributed to the regional and ethnic tensions that led to the outbreak of the war. In the pre-war oil boom period in Nigeria, the U.S. independent oil companies undertook intensive lobbying and propaganda campaigns to convince Nigeria that the newly imposed Libyan-style tax laws would force them out of business.<sup>32</sup> They (the U.S. oil companies) had argued that the regions where they operated, as well as the ethnic groups inhabiting there would be subjected to perpetual poverty. This campaign against the then military government exacerbated ethnic tensions and falsely heightened the stakes over which the war was fought.<sup>33</sup>

Furthermore, key actors in the drama, the Federal Military Government under Yakubu Gowon, the international oil companies and their home governments as well as the secessionist leader, Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, all concluded, for different reasons, that oil matters were best kept out of public sphere.<sup>34</sup> As a result, the particular political economy of oil in Nigeria introduced opacity which was a deliberate obfuscation of information related to oil production, revenues, accounting and operations as a governing principle which had led to the impoverishment of Nigeria and Nigerians till date, despite enormous oil wealth and proven gas reserves.<sup>35</sup>

Although, Nigerians grasped the implications of the oil boom in the 1960s, the U.S. Embassy and the U.S. oil companies tried all they could to downplay its importance. Both felt that extravagant public comments should be avoided for, according to them, "it would

be unfortunate if over-optimistic predictions were to lead to unrealistic expectations on the part of Nigerian officials and then public and then followed by disillusionment.”<sup>36</sup> The Pearson Report, a 1966 U.S. Agency for International Development Study, commissioned to assess the impact of increased oil revenues on Nigeria, “discovered that the official Nigerian government statements concerning the anticipated oil revenues were substantially lower than what the oil company officials knew could be forecast, and that both these projections were lower than the figures estimated by the oil operators.”<sup>37</sup> The report acknowledged that this information would “have extremely explosive results if its contents were made known directly or indirectly to the government of Nigeria, especially since it was issued during the period of Ojukwu’s stand-off with Gowon.”<sup>38</sup> As a result, the report remained classified in the U.S. Embassy.

According to Thomas J. Biersteker, the civil war taught the Nigerian government that the multi-national oil companies could not be trusted. He attributes this to their “fence-sitting” during the war, as well as to their failure to disclose crucial production data. A highly placed Nigerian politician had informed Biersteker that, “state officials had to guess the contributions oil revenue would make to Nigeria’s exports and capital inflows, as well as their implications for the Nigerian pricing system”.<sup>39</sup> Accordingly, “there was a high level resentment of the role of the oil companies at the outset of the conflict”.<sup>40</sup> While there were political reasons for understating reserves and production estimates, there were also business strategies commonly employed by the oil companies in their operations abroad. Keeping such information confidential prevented national governments from demanding higher production, which in turn helped oil companies then to manage global oil supply.<sup>41</sup>

The high-level resentment also arose from the six months battle that the American oil companies waged against the Petroleum Profits Tax Ordinance of 1966-1967, which imposed the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) terms before Nigeria officially joined the organisation in 1971. All of Nigeria’s oil contracts included a “most-favoured African Nation” clause guaranteeing that if better terms were negotiated elsewhere on the continent, Nigeria would receive same. In 1965, Libya adopted a tax scheme that required all companies to pay taxes and royalties posted rather than realised prices. Posted prices were per-barrel figures agreed on by the oil companies and producers. They were often slightly higher than the realized price and were designed to protect producers from price fluctuations in the global oil market. The Libyan scheme also required companies to treat royalties as expenses rather than as tax offsets as had been the practice before. This technical change could substantially increase revenue for producers in Nigeria; the government would receive additional taxes equal to 50 per cent value of royalties. In both countries then, Libya and Nigeria, U.S. oil companies and the oil

independents fought bitterly against the new tax law, arguing that they could not afford to increase costs.<sup>42</sup>

While the tax laws did not alter the original allocation system, they served as a substantial new source of revenues which the oil producing regions would not share. Neither the U.S embassy nor the American oils companies at that time seemed to have been aware of the political implication of the new laws. Focused on their business interests, the U.S oil companies complained that Shell BP was trying to drive them out. The U.S. embassy then, meanwhile discovered that Shell BP had been negotiating a new contract on a 'Super-Secret' basis for more than a year and that they had offered new terms in the hopes of pre-empting the possibility that Nigeria might join OPEC.<sup>43</sup>

## **Conclusion**

It could thus be argued that the impact of the activities of the U.S oil companies on Nigeria during the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970) laid the foundation for the oil curse and created opacity in the industry which has negatively affected transparency and accountability in the oil industry in Nigeria, and further contributed immensely to the poverty and environmental degradation affecting the oil communities in Nigeria till date.

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