

ABSTRACT

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THE EVOLUTION OF U.S. FOREIGN
POLICY CONCERNING THE NIGERIAN
CIVIL WAR

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The Nigerian Civil War or the War of Biafran Secession began on May 27, 1967 and ended on January 12, 1970. The war cost an estimated 500,000 to one million lives, and had a particularly devastating effect on the civilians living in the Eastern Nigeria (Biafra). From its colonial beginnings, Nigeria seemed destined for regional conflict. After independence, two military led coups in 1966 highlighted the regional problems inherent in the Nigerian Federal governmental system. Less than a year after the second coup, the eastern region seceded from Nigeria and plunged the nation into a civil war for nearly three years. The United States, a reluctant participant in the war, deferred all responsibility in the resolution of the war to the British or the Organization of African Unity (OAU) until photographs of starving Nigerian children became a political liability for the U.S. government.

NIGERIAN WAR – AMERICAN POLITICS: THE EVOLUTION OF U.S.
FOREIGN POLICY CONCERNING THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR

By

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I Significance of U.S. Involvement in the Nigerian Civil War

Introduction

As a background to the topic of the changing role of the U.S. in the Nigerian Civil War, it is important to look at U.S. support for colonial independence movements after World War II in the Middle East and Africa. Chapters two and three provide some historical background information dealing with Nigeria's regional problems immediately prior to independence and the event leading up to and through the two military coups of 1966. Chapter five focuses more specifically on the Nigerian Civil War with a description of the military, diplomatic, and propaganda aspects of the conflict between 1967 and 1970. Chapters six and seven then use internal Nixon Administration documents detailing foreign policy decisions to show how the role of the U.S. government changed during the course of the Nigerian Civil War. The conclusion will briefly summarize how the combined effects of U.S. foreign policy doctrine, Nigerian history, progress of the war, and U.S. popular opinion led to increased U.S. involvement in the war and how these same factors led to the abrupt U.S. withdrawal from this same involvement.

In the thirty plus years since the end of the Nigerian Civil War few historians have dedicated any work on the United States government's role in the resolution of the conflict. This is most likely due to the limited positive influence the U.S. exerted in the war. What historians have overlooked by neglecting to write about the U.S. involvement is why the U.S. played such a small role in a war that contained many of the elements, which had previously attracted U.S. involvement in other regions of the world. The Nigerian Civil War involved the Soviet Union, the organized starvation of a compelling group of pro-U.S. Africans by a military led government, strong popular opinion against

the U.S. policy, and a President who seemed to want to intervene on behalf of the Biafrans. Yet despite these strong motivators the U.S. government refused to become significantly involved in the war beyond paying for international relief operations.

Historiography

Four books address the role of the Nixon Administration's role in the war to varying degrees. These four books are: *International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970* by John J. Stremmlau; *Nigeria, Africa, and the United States* by Robert B. Shepard; *Uncertain Greatness* by Roger Morris; and *American Policy and African Famine* by Joseph E. Thompson. All agree that U.S. involvement increased over time because of demands by the American public to stop the growing starvation crisis in Biafra. They also agree that President Richard Nixon supported the Biafran plight against the Nigerian Federal Military Government (FMG) while the U.S. State Department bureaucracy supported the continuation of U.S. support for a united Nigeria. The following paragraphs will highlight the opinions of these scholars on the motivations for U.S. involvement in the Nigerian Civil War and explain how this paper adds to and differs from their analysis.

Stremmlau's book covered the involvement of all foreign governments in the Nigerian Civil War. He wanted to explain how African, European, and North American governments approached the problem of how to stop the suffering of civilians in Biafra without causing the disintegration of Nigeria.¹ He explained, in his sections addressing U.S. involvement, that President Lyndon Johnson's foreign policy was far more concerned with the Vietnam War, the Six Day War in the Middle East, and the

¹ John L. Stremmlau, *International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), xii.

preservation of the growing U.S./Soviet détente than with an African civil war. Stremmler also explained the U.S. general desire for European nations to handle African political problems.² Despite earlier indications of an increasing U.S. role in the conflict based on two campaign speeches made by Nixon, his administration's eventual policy towards the war differed little from Johnson's. The only two changes according to Stremmler were the increasing relief assistance to Biafran civilians and the appointment of a U.S. Coordinator for Relief, both intended only to quiet critics within the Congress.³ Stremmler was in Nigeria in 1969 and based his book on extensive interviews with 140 people involved in the war, notably Generals Yakubu Gowon and Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu as well as U.S. Ambassador William Trueheart and Lord Malcolm Shepard, the British Minister of State for Commonwealth Affairs. Stremmler's book is perhaps one of the most influential scholarly books on the subject of the Nigerian Civil War. Unlike this paper, Stremmler focused little on the role of the United States in the conflict and more on the peace talks in Africa.

Roger Morris, a member of both the Johnson and Nixon White House staffs explained how career bureaucrats in the State Department heavily influenced U.S. foreign policy decisions. He argued that these bureaucrats placed their personal career interests ahead of the interests of the nation. In the case of the Nigerian Civil War, Morris argued these bureaucrats took advantage of the general lack of strong opinion in the Nixon White House about the proper course of U.S. foreign policy to pursue in Nigeria resulting in the relative lack of U.S. involvement in the civil war.⁴ The Nixon Administration and the State Department worked at cross purposes with each other throughout the development

² Ibid., 63-65.

³ Ibid., 293.

⁴ Roger Morris, *Uncertain Greatness* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1977), 120.

of the U.S. policy towards Nigeria and compounding this problem was Nixon's "wavering within himself" over what the appropriate course of action for the U.S. should be. Morris argued Nixon's foreign policy position was guided less by doctrinal considerations than by individual and organizational politics.⁵ Morris based his work on his own recollections from his experiences on Henry Kissinger's staff as the National Security Council African Affairs Specialist. Morris's book is not a history like the others used in this paper. It was more of an insider's perspective on Henry Kissinger's time as the National Security Chief. It also included much of Morris's personal feelings about how the political system worked in the U.S. during his career. The book provided a perspective into the conflict between the National Security staff and the State Department during the Nixon Administration and explains some of the dynamics associated with creating a U.S. foreign policy approach to the Nigerian Civil War.

Shepard's book describes the Nigerian/U.S. relationship from the Kennedy to the Reagan Administrations. He dedicates one chapter to the civil war where he explains how Johnson paid the war little attention, and how Nixon's early desire to increase U.S. involvement changed when he realized neither side was willing to negotiate an end to the war. Like Stremlau, Shepard saw little difference between the two administration's policies. He argued Nixon's initial interest in the Nigerian Civil War was based on his belief that the outcome of the Nigerian Civil War would not affect the U.S. significantly positively or negatively so he felt he could attempt to resolve the war as one of his first actions in office. He directed Kissinger to study the war and provide him with policy options. The result of the study showed the probability of a Nigerian victory and recommended a policy little different from that pursued by Johnson's administration.

⁵ Morris, *Uncertain Greatness*, 20.

Shepard argued that Nixon was the only person in his own administration who supported the Biafrans.⁶ His State Department never wavered in their support for the Nigerians and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger admitted he “never shared the president’s enthusiasm for the Biafran cause.”⁷ Shepard cited few primary sources in his discussion of the U.S. role in the Nigerian Civil War. To make his points he used a few *New York Times* articles and used Roger Morris and John Stremlau’s histories as well as reporter John de St. Jorre’s account of the war. Given the scope of Shepard’s book, he spent little time covering the Nigerian Civil War and the role of the United States. His discussion of the war was simply one small aspect of the larger U.S./Nigerian relationship over a thirty-year period.

Thompson’s pro-Biafran account of the Nigerian Civil War explains the large role the U.S. public played in the increased relief support given by the United States to the international relief community. Thompson agrees with Stremlau and Shepard’s view of the primacy of the Vietnam War over events in Nigeria and like Morris explained how members of the State Department staff took advantage of the administration’s preoccupation with Vietnam to stall any policy changes towards supporting Biafra. Thompson used State Department records, the Congressional Record, and U.S. newspaper sources as his primary sources to show the popularity of the Biafran cause among the American people and U.S. Congress and explained how they influenced U.S. foreign policy decisions. The book showed how the conflict between politics and relief proved a deadly combination for Biafra during the Nigerian Civil War. Though his book did not provide a particularly balanced view of the war, he did make a significant point

⁶ Shepard, 44.

⁷ Ibid., 35.

about the role of the American people in the U.S. foreign policy making process. He argued that the U.S. government wanted to avoid involvement in the war, but the U.S. public demands for humanitarian relief forced a policy adjustment.⁸

None of these authors cited the U.S. State Department archives or the Nixon White House documents in their research. This is due to the fact that the Nixon sources were only declassified in April 2000. This paper has taken advantage of the availability of these resources to understand more fully the motivations of individuals and organizations within the U.S. government between 1967 and 1970. The State Department sources provided many detailed glimpses at the daily events in the U.S. Embassy in Lagos and the support of the FMG within the Embassy and within the U.S. State Department itself. The Nixon Project documents shed great light on the background of many of the Nixon Administration's decisions and the infighting between the NSC staff and the State Department. The documents in this collection included a number of memorandums from Roger Morris to Henry Kissinger recommending specific courses of action for the President to take in the development of his policy towards Nigeria and Biafra. It also contained similar memorandums from Kissinger to Nixon and decisions made by the President as well as many other related background memorandums and situation summaries.

Based on these documents and secondary sources this paper will explain how U.S. involvement in the Nigerian Civil War in 1969 went from avoiding any attempts at nation building or risking political involvement beyond relief funding, to engaging both sides in secret peace negotiations, and finally to the public criticism of the Biafran government and cessation of all U.S. diplomatic negotiation attempts.

⁸ Joseph E. Thompson, *American Policy and African Famine* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 169.

II U.S. Support of Colonial Independence

One issue central to U.S. involvement in the Nigerian Civil War was the conflict between the United States and Great Britain over colonial independence movements after World War II. Generally speaking, the United States supported the retention of Britain's colonies. The exception to this general rule occurred when opponents of colonialism threatened to turn to communist nations for support of their independence or separatist movements. In such cases, the United States applied political pressure to the British, forcing them to yield to the independence movements and U.S. foreign policy desires. As a consequence of this conflict, Great Britain increasingly ceded its former responsibility of defending challenges to post-colonial territorial integrity in Africa and Asia to the United States.

Containing Communism

The foremost U.S. foreign policy concern after WWII was the containment of communism. One of the important methods the U.S. felt it could use to prevent communism from gaining a foothold in the third world was a strong stance against colonialism and in favor of dismantling European empires. U.S. foreign policy doctrine feared Soviet rhetoric against western imperialism would prove a persuasive message for the nationalist groups in Africa and Asia. Given no other option between pro-colonial capitalism and anti-imperialist communism, these groups would, according to the theory, gravitate towards the Soviet sphere of influence. These groups threatened to realign regions or the entirety of former colonies with the Soviets. The United States foreign policy makers believed the U.S. could counter the Soviets if they took a strong stand

against colonialism and could offer an attractive alternative to communism in these same regions of the world. Despite their alliance during World War II, the United State's anti-colonial foreign policy put them at odds with Great Britain. World War II weakened Great Britain economically and militarily and as a result they saw no other alternative to an increased role of the United States in maintaining the boundaries of their former colonies.*

W.R. Louis places particular emphasis on the importance of the U.S. in the British decision to decolonize its empire in his histories. He argued that empires required acceptance within three areas, the colony, the metropole, and the international community. In the case of British colonies in Africa, he argued that pressure to decolonize came from all three areas. The British realized that the retention of their colonies in Africa was a losing proposition, but they did want to maintain their influence in the area. British foreign policy makers believed that a rapid withdrawal from their colonies would allow them to appease all three groups and maintain their political and economic influence in the region.⁹

An editorial letter in *Life* magazine on October 12, 1942 summed up the American point of view on the British Empire stating, "the American people might disagree among themselves about war aims, but ...one this we are sure we are not fighting for is to hold the British Empire together."¹⁰ Louis went on to say that President

* Central to our investigation are the works by W.R. Louis. Who dealt specifically with the role the United States played in the dissolution of the British Empire. In *Imperialism at Bay*, Louis looked the role of the United States in the decolonization of the British Empire during the Second World War. Another important secondary source was chapter two entitled "The United States and the Liquidation of the British Empire in Tropical Africa, 1941-1951" in Prosser Gifford and Wm. Roger Louis' book, *The Transfer of Power in Africa*.

⁹ Prosser Gifford and Wm. Roger Louis, ed. *The Transfer of Power in Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 55.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

Franklin Roosevelt held this same view, but also believed that not all colonial holdings were ready for independence at the same time.¹¹ Given Roosevelt's anti-colonial feelings, he had to balance carefully these feelings with overall goal of winning the war. Despite his recognition of the importance of maintaining this balance, Roosevelt's State Department proposed the "Declaration on National Independence for Colonies" in November 1942. This declaration provided continued independence for free nations, the restoration of occupied ones, and the support for people who desired independence in the future.¹² The British saw this declaration as a move by the U.S. towards "a sort of informal empire" based on U.S. economic domination. Independence, in the words of one official in the British colonial office, "has no real meaning apart from economics. The Americans are quite ready to make their dependencies politically 'independent' while economically bound hand and foot to them and see no inconsistency in this."¹³ While the Americans criticized the British government, members of the British parliament's radical left wing, and Indian nationalists were voicing similar critiques of the British Empire. Based on the sum of these criticisms, the British government began to designate a portion of its budget to improve social and economic welfare of their African subjects.¹⁴

U.S. anti-colonial pressure ebbed at the end of World War II, with the fears of communism in Italy and Southeast Asia trumping the voices of against continued European colonial occupations. During this period, the U.S. tolerated continued colonialism so long as it provided a stable and effective buffer against communism. But,

¹¹ Ibid., 33.

¹² Ibid., 34.

¹³ Ibid., 35.

¹⁴ Ibid., 38.

as the Dutch found out, Washington was more than willing to deny aid to the Netherlands in response to their perceived mishandling of nationalist forces in the Dutch East Indies which threatened to open the door to communism in that region. According to Louis, the British fully realized the willingness of the U.S. government to withhold vital financial support from its allies in order to promote anti-communism and anti-colonialism (in that order) within European colonial territories.¹⁵

British colonial policy, according to Louis, was a hands-off affair whenever possible. The British preferred to govern their colonies locally and at the least possible cost to the government. They believed colonial governments would eventually give way to local self-governmental bodies, and eventual transition to dominion status. This process would begin once the former colony convinced the British that the colony could “look after British commercial and strategic interests.”¹⁶

Transition in Africa

Political transition in Africa did not follow this structured model. Domestic and international anti-colonial pressures began to foretell the end of the British Empire and future transfers of power would not follow the British preferred course of decolonization. By 1947, a British governmental report revised the duration of the British colonial presence in Africa from a one hundred year estimate to a twenty-year projection. Additionally, the report acknowledged that ‘traditional’ African leaders were not capable of presiding over such a rapid economic and political change. The British would have to entrust local elites with the accomplishment of this task. The problem with this group, from a British perspective was their unwillingness to listen to any British plan that did

¹⁵ Ibid., 46-47.

¹⁶ Ibid., 51.

delayed independence. The British therefore realized that the only way they could hope to retain influence in Africa among the new political class was to decolonize rapidly and create an informal empire within the region.¹⁷ Political unrest in Ghana in 1948 sped up this already accelerated plan of independence in West Africa, shortening once again, the timeline for African decolonization. British leaders soon realized that the transition to independence within the region could not be given to one colony and not its neighbors.¹⁸ As a result, the British Empire in Africa rapidly disintegrated in the thirteen years between 1947 and 1960.

Louis credited American anti-colonialism as only one cause of many contributing to the dissolution of the British Empire in Africa. The empire could not survive the assault from within the colonies, the British metropole, and the international community. The three groups fed off of each other's increasingly strong position. The end of World War II saw Great Britain's position as a world power decline and the rise of the United States and Soviet Union. This led to an increase in political pressure on the colonial powers from the U.S. and U.S.S.R. to decolonize. Simultaneously national groups within the colonies, emboldened by foreign support (at least verbal support) began to demand independence more openly. These two groups caused citizens within the metropole to question the viability and profitability of maintaining their colonial empires. This questioning led to a lack of willingness to support the colonies financially, which in turn decreased their leverage within the colonies. This cycle continued until the metropole finally relented and dissolved their African empires.¹⁹

¹⁷ Ibid., 42.

¹⁸ Ibid., 43.

¹⁹ Ibid., 54-55.

The Suez Crisis

The Suez conflict in 1956 marked the first time the U.S. directly opposed British attempts to retain its colonial possessions and marked a significant shift in the Anglo-U.S. relationship. The crisis illustrated the ability of Great Britain to act militarily without the support of the U.S., but also showed British military action without U.S. financial support, oil, and military protection against the Soviet threat severely limited their ability to pursue a foreign policy independent of the United States.²⁰

The British also faced a challenge by the U.S. government in the Persian Gulf region. Washington policy makers believed the days of British Empire were numbered in the Persian Gulf region as well. The sooner independence could be granted to the British colonies in that region; the more likely they were to support the desires of the west. Many British critics of this U.S. policy believed that “supporting the desires of the west” really meant allowing U.S. oil companies greater access to Middle Eastern oil fields without British interference.²¹ As in other regions, the British deferred to the U.S. foreign policy and exited from the region.

The Congo Crisis

Before leaving the subject of U.S. foreign policy it is important to look at the U.S. involvement in the Congo after its independence in 1960. This case provides us with an African secession crisis where U.S. foreign policy most clearly followed the trends of supporting anti-communist forces against western allies. It also showed U.S. willingness to intervene in “internal” political conflicts in Africa, and the willingness of African nations to look increasingly to the United States to protect African borders. Nigerian

²⁰ Hugh Thomas, *Suez* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1967), 155.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 261.

politicians would later point to the U.S. actions in the Congo and question why the U.S. refused to support their cause just a few years later.

The Congo received its independence from Belgium in 1960 and within weeks the military revolted over the retention of Belgian control in many of the officer positions. Adding to the problems caused by the military revolt for the inexperienced government was the eventual uneasy power sharing relationship between Prime Minister Joseph Kasavubu and President Patrice Lumumba. Moïse Tshombe, the leading political figure in the mineral rich Congolese province of Katanga, took advantage of the political turbulence and seceded from the Congo with the backing of the Belgian government. Hoping to prevent the Katangan secession, Lumumba asked for and received military support from the Soviet Union.²² The U.S. government saw Lumumba's move as a sign of his anti-Belgian and anti-Western tendencies. Anti-Lumumbist elements in the Congolese government placed the president under house arrest in 1960 and assassinated him when he escaped in January 1961. Historians have generally agreed the Belgian government and the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency played some role in Lumumba's death, but whatever their role, the assassination of Lumumba led to the rise of military chief of staff Joseph Mobutu. Mobutu took control of the Congo from Kasavubu and eventually put down the Katangan secession in 1963.²³ Other regional conflicts continued to plague the Congo throughout the 1960's, but western desires for a united and anti-communist Congo led them to continue to support Mobutu. Mobutu used this support to consolidate his power and rule as a dictator from 1965 until 1997.

²² Frederick Cooper, *Africa Since 1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 164.

²³ *Ibid.*, 165.

Gowon learned through personal experience, U.S. foreign policy during the 1960s was guided by the self-interested principles of realpolitik where as he stated, “governments have no friends or enemies, just interests.”²⁴ U.S. foreign policy bore out this truth in Africa and the Middle East where the United State tempered its anti-colonial feelings after World War II in favor of their desire to fight global communism. In the cases where communism did not threaten regional stability, the United States was more than willing to allow Europe to maintain its colonies. In these cases, the U.S. policy rationalized that European presence provided a barrier to communist influence and ensured ‘order,’ or at least open markets for the U.S. In those instances when the communist forces offered their support, the anti-colonial policy of the U.S. was more evident. The U.S. had shown itself willing to force the governments of Europe, through threats to withhold vital assistance and aid, in order to counter any communist penetration. The United States hoped that these stands against colonialism and for independence would give the new nationalist organizations within the colonies an option other than communism.

The United States actions in Nigeria during the period of civil war between 1967 and 1970 did not follow this model. Despite significant Soviet military support for the Federal Military Government in Nigeria, the U.S. refused to provide political or military support for the Biafrans. In this case, the U.S. fear of communism’s growth in Africa was less serious than their political and economic interests in Nigeria. The only consistency in U.S. foreign policy towards the Nigerian conflict was the protection of U.S. interests over ideology. The standard justification for the lack of U.S. intervention in Nigeria or Biafra was the U.S. claim that the war was an internal Nigerian matter.

²⁴ Stremlau, *International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War*, 63.

Unlike the Middle East and the Congo where foreign military intervention necessitated U.S. involvement, the U.S. government discounted the Nigerian Civil War as a 'tribal' conflict. The next chapter will investigate the underlying causes of the civil war and show how the war was not 'tribal', but simply a political struggle between parties who organized along regional lines.

III The Rise of Three Nigerias

Motivations for secessionism within Nigeria were as old as the nation itself, dating back to the 1914 consolidation of Nigeria into a single colony by the British colonial administration. Larry Diamond has argued that the most damaging colonial legacy in Nigeria was the construction of its artificial boundaries. According to Diamond, feelings of regional identity in Nigeria grew from three major factors: ethnicity (including cultural, linguistic, and religious differences), political divisions, and literacy. While the artificial identities forged by regional division flourished in the colony, the boundaries suppressed and discouraged the formation of a Nigerian national identity. These divisions sowed the seeds of inevitable regional conflict. Awolowo Obafemi summed up the lack of nationalism in Nigeria when he stated, “Nigeria is not a nation. It is a mere geographical expression.”²⁵

Pre-colonial Nigeria

Pre-colonial Nigeria included many different states of differing size and political and economic systems. Given the modern boundaries of Nigeria, it is easiest to describe the pre-colonial history of the Nigerian people in three main regions: east of the Niger River, west of the Niger River, and north of the Niger/Benue Rivers. Though political groups within these three regions shared some traits, one should not infer that at any time in pre-colonial history were there three regional ethnic groups or nations that incorporated all of the people of these regions.

²⁵ Larry Diamond, *Class, Ethnicity, and Democracy in Nigeria* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1988), 26.

The people east of the Niger share linguistic characteristics from the Niger-Congo family and can be further subdivided into two groups: the Cross River Basin and the Kwa sub-families. Three of the largest members of the Cross River Basin group are the Annang, Efik, and Ibibo. The Igbo and Ijo are two of the largest of the Kwa group. The Igbo language group and its various dialectical variations constitute the single most common language of both the Cross River Basin and Kwa groups.²⁶

The basic political formation within the eastern region was the family. The Igbo people combined several independent, familial villages into regional federations where forms of checks and balances prevented abuses of leaders from impacting the individual communities. The confederations were localized and never formed large regional empires or kingdoms like the Kanuri, Oyo, or Benin kingdoms. In comparison, the Efik and Ibibo both had ruling families whose accession was elected and not strictly hereditary.²⁷

Economic expansion due to the growth of trade with Europeans “played the major role in transforming the socio-political systems of the peoples east of the Niger.”²⁸ European trade was a significant transforming process in the region because it created a class of wealthy men who derived their wealth outside of the control of their elders who had controlled wealth in the form of land. These new elites transferred the political organization of the coastal regions from the loosely organized familial villages to tightly controlled trading houses.²⁹

²⁶ Nwanna Nzewunwa, “Pre-colonial Nigeria: east of the Niger,” in *Nigerian History and Culture*, ed. Richard Olaniyan, (Essex: Longman Group Limited, 1985), 22.

²⁷ Nzewunwa, 26-27.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

Though the Atlantic slave trade transformed the political systems of the eastern region, it did not change the divided political nature of the region. Trading houses replaced the importance of agricultural and fishing villages, but did not unify the region prior to European conquest of southern Nigeria between 1850 and 1897.³⁰

The southwestern region includes many different political groups including the Yoruba, Edo, Itsekiri, Ijo, Urhobo, Igbo, and Egun. These groups are not completely distinct from each other as they often borrowed customs and practices from each other. Most of these groups share a respect for age, connectivity between religion and every day affairs, and used the family as the basic unit of organization.³¹ Historians believe the Yoruba were the first group to create a regional identity beyond the village level. Regional oral histories cite the unification of thirteen settlements centered near the area of Ile-Ife as having created the Yoruba identity. People leaving the Ile-Ife area founded kingdoms with customs and features similar to those present in Ile-Ife like the wearing of crowns by leaders and the construction of totems. Two centralized and powerful political groups from the southwest region that followed the Ile-Ife/Yoruba pattern were the Benin and Oyo Empires.³²

The Benin Empire peaked in the 15th and 16th centuries owing much of its success to the weakness of their neighboring states, ability to adapt their political and cultural practices within their empire, and later due to their access to European firearms.³³ The Oyo Empire grew in importance in the region due to its geographical position on the Niger River, where it could control access to the coast and conduct trade into the northern

³⁰ Falola, 54.

³¹ I.A. Akinjogbin and Biodun Adediran, "Pre-colonial Nigeria: east of the Niger," in *Nigerian History and Culture*, ed. Richard Olaniyan, (Essex: Longman Group Limited, 1985), 35.

³² *Ibid.*, 37.

³³ Falola, *History of Nigeria*, 21.

interior.³⁴ This control over regional trade led to an increase in economic power and an increased strength of the Oyo military by the middle of the sixteenth century. The increased military power allowed the Oyo to increase the size of their empire.³⁵ By the beginning of the nineteenth century, wars and rebellions led to the creation of other political formations other than those based on Yoruba influences. These wars also led to the increased involvement in the southwestern region by the British colonial government and the eventual destruction of the Oyo Empire.³⁶

Several other small polities developed in the region as offshoots of the Benin and Oyo Empires and from the interaction with other political groups in the southern region of modern Nigeria. These groups did not form large kingdoms or confederacies; most were village and/or clan based with councils of elders serving as the government.³⁷ They too declined in power with the increased presence of the British in the Niger Delta region near Lagos.

The northern region included the Kanuri Empire in the northwestern savannah, the Hausa States in the north, and a collection of independent polities in the region known as the Middle Belt. These polities ranged from the small, independent city-states of the Middle Belt, to the larger, but still autonomous Hausa States, to the centrally governed Kanuri Empire.³⁸

The Kanuri Empire was the first group to take advantage of the trade routes with North African and Middle Eastern markets and used this trade to increase its power in the region. As early as the ninth century, Kanuri leaders combined military ability with

³⁴ Ibid., 20.

³⁵ Akinjogbin and Adediran, "West of the Niger", 41.

³⁶ Ibid., 46.

³⁷ Ibid., 51.

³⁸ Falola, *History of Nigeria*, 19.

religious advantages of both Islam and local religions to increase their rule over smaller states in the north.³⁹ The empire went through a period of decline in the eleventh century as a result of several rebellions in the empire, but re-established their power in a second Kanuri Empire in the sixteenth century.⁴⁰ The government of the second empire included a central leader who ruled with the help of a council of 12 men and a separate group of 3 women who ran the palace.⁴¹ The second empire eventually declined in the late nineteenth century weakened by disease and facing attack from the army of the Wadai.

The Hausa States in the northern region of modern Nigeria were never as large or centralized as the Kanuri Empire, but as a group the independent Hausa States occupied a large geographic portion of the north. Initially politically based on villages, the Hausa States expanded their boundaries in proportion to the availability of natural resources.⁴² The Hausa States never unified or formed alliances with each other and as a result, they remained small and divided throughout the pre-colonial period. Like the Kanuri Empire, the leaders of the Hausa States adopted portions of Islamic religion and law to increase their power and rule their states. The general political framework of these Hausa States included two parts, a capital city ruled by the Sarki, a descendent of the founder of the state, and provincial leaders who governed outlying areas for the Sarki.⁴³ This system and its use of Islamic law made governing the states efficient. The conquering Fulani maintained the Hausa system of government during their occupation of the Hausa States.

³⁹ Toyin Falola and Akanmn Adebayo, "Pre-colonial Nigeria: north of the Niger-Benue," in *Nigerian History and Culture*, ed. Richard Olaniyan, (Essex: Longman Group Limited, 1985), 57.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 69.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 82.

The British colonial government also used the Hausa system as a basis of their indirect rule of the region.⁴⁴

The last political groups of the northern region exist within the Middle Belt. These small polities were similar to independent ones in the southeast and west of modern Nigeria. The large number of rivers in the area created a rugged terrain that provided natural defenses for the small states. As a result, the states remained relatively safe from expanding neighbors, but were also unlikely to increase their own geographic area either.⁴⁵

Colonial Nigeria

Despite the numerous pre-colonial political divisions among the people in the British colony of Nigeria, the British colonial administration in Nigeria saw three distinct geographical regions separating the three major linguistic groups as lines of ‘natural division.’ Based on these divisions, the British created a colony (northern Nigeria) and two protectorates (western and eastern Nigeria) and unified them under one colonial administration in 1914. The British division of Nigeria along these lines created three unequally sized regions both in terms of size and population. In 1953, the northern region was the largest including 56% of the colony’s population and two thirds of the physical area of Nigeria.⁴⁶ The British realized uniting these different regions would weaken feelings of nationalism within Nigeria. The fragmentary effects of regionalism

⁴⁴ Ibid., 83.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 83-84.

⁴⁶ Falola, *History of Nigeria*, 103.

The census in Nigeria was a highly contested political issue as seats in the federal government were assigned according to population ratio. The census figures in 1962 showed an increase in population within the eastern region of 71%, 70% in the west, and only 30% in the north. A recount in the north increased their percentage growth to 80%, neither the north or the south was willing to accept the results of the 1962 census so the Prime Minister was forced to order a new census. The 1963 census results again showed a larger gain in population in the south than in the north, but both sides disputed the results.

made a unified opposition to British colonial rule difficult to organize, and was an intended consequence of British colonial policy.⁴⁷ Though it was likely an unintentional consequence, the creation of strong regional identities within Nigeria laid the foundations for the future power struggles in the newly created Nigerian democratic state.

Politically, according to Larry Diamond, there were two distinct Nigerias, one in the north and one in the south. Indirect rule worked well in the autocratic north, and the British allowed the emirs to continue to practice Islamic law, and speak the Hausa language as the official language of the northern Nigeria.⁴⁸ The ruling emirs retained their hereditary power throughout the north and prevented the establishment of any competing political rivalries based on merit or abilities. One third of the northern population did not speak the Hausa or Fulani languages and settled primarily in the Middle Belt region of the north. The majority of this group was not Muslim, and resisted the autocracy of the northern emirs. According to the 1953 census, southern Nigeria was divided along the majority Yoruba and Igbo speaking lines. The western (majority Yoruba speaking) region contained 20% of the population, and the eastern (Igbo speaking) region contained 26%, and each retained about one sixth of the remaining Nigerian land mass. Due to the limited effectiveness of chiefs in these areas, the British governed the south more directly. Direct rule led to the adoption of English as the official language of the south. Additionally, the British encouraged missionaries in southern Nigeria, which led to the widespread acceptance of Christianity in the region. Another result of direct rule and weak traditional leaders was the introduction of an elected government in the southern regions twenty-five years earlier than in the north.

⁴⁷ Diamond, *Class, Ethnicity, and Democracy*, 28.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

Education was another difference between north and south in Nigeria. Education was one significant path for Nigerians to increase their social status within society. As a result of missionary influences in the west and east of Nigeria, and the restriction of missionary presence in the north, a great disparity in literacy rates developed between the north and south. The average literacy rate in the 1950s in eastern and western Nigeria was around 17% and in the north it was a mere 1.4%. This became a significant difference in Nigeria as they approached independence in the 1950s. The official language in the Nigerian government was English, and therefore Nigerians from the south were disproportionately represented in the colonial government.⁴⁹

Post-colonial Nigeria

During the British transition Nigeria from a colony to an independent nation in 1960, Nigerian political leaders met in Ibadan for the General Constitution Conference. In this conference, the leaders reinforced the regional structure of the Nigerian government and demanded greater autonomy among the three regions. In this system, the regions would delegate certain functions to the federal government and retain the remainder for their own administration.⁵⁰ The maintenance of the redundant systems within Nigeria worked well in the early 1950s until agricultural prices for groundnuts in the north and cocoa in the west began to fall. As the regions gradually lost their individual sources of revenue, they began to look increasingly to the federal government for assistance. This dependence on the federal government weakened the regional governments and increased the importance of the federal government. Due to the larger percentage of northern leaders in the federal government, the rise of the federal

⁴⁹ Ibid., 27.

⁵⁰ Rotimi T. Suberu, *Federalism and Ethnic Conflict in Nigeria* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2001), 24.

government resulted in an increase in the power for the northern region in Nigerian politics.⁵¹ The increasing political and economic value associated with the control of the federal government resulted in greater efforts by the north to maintain its position. Northern attempts to retain control through all means available led to claims of northern census manipulation in 1962-1963 by the southern politicians. Within the north, minority parties accused the leading political party, the Northern People's Congress, of election manipulation.⁵² The move from regional to federal governmental control in Nigeria highlighted the inequality of the British conceived constitution and increased the competition among Nigeria's three regions. This competition set the stage for the two military coups of 1966 and the secession of the eastern region in 1967.

The generalization made by the British and adopted by much of the western world that Nigeria was historically comprised of three major ethnic groups - Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo - is incorrect. More accurately the British colony in Nigeria created three regional political groupings among people who shared similar linguistic features in the three colonial administrative regions. The British generalization received little criticism during and after the colonial period because it was easy to understand and fit nicely into well defined geographic boundaries and accounted for a large number of Nigerian people. While there were arguably similarities of religion, and political formations within the regions, translating regional similarities with regional ethnicities or state creation is historically inaccurate. Further compounding the believability of the British ethnicity construction is the continued use of the three major political and language groupings by Nigerian politicians during the post-colonial period. Like the

⁵¹ Ibid., 27.

⁵² Ibid., 28-29.

British colonial government, Nigerian politicians realized that language is an easy way of uniting diverse people into a politically significant constituency. The events leading up to and throughout the Nigerian Civil War serve as a prime example of how political leaders in Nigeria emphasized ethnic tensions in Nigeria as a means to rally regional support and to cover their otherwise naked pursuit of political control.⁵³

⁵³ Cooper, *Africa Since 1940*, 69-70.

IV The Nigerian Military Coups of 1966

To outside observers the Nigerian federal system of government appeared to work for the new nation with only a few minor controversies. The three major political parties shared governmental control, though at the expense of the minority linguistic groups contained within each, and the political and military situation appeared stable from the outside.

Two coups in January and July 1966 shattered this peaceful appearance. These two coups were led by the military using the promise to rid the nation of corrupt politicians as a cover for their actions, but both were struggles among regional political groups to control the government. In both cases senior, and allegedly uninvolved, military leaders assumed control after both coups and established military governments.

The Major's Coup

On January 15, 1966, a small group of young, Igbo army majors, led the first Nigerian coup, dubbed "the Major's Coup." These British Military Academy trained officers were the elite core of the Nigerian professional army. They saw the growing power of northern politicians as a threat to southern Nigeria and the eastern region in particular. Their coup unsuccessfully attempted to seize control of the Nigerian government. Their stated goal was to rid the government of the corrupt civilian administrators, end the perceived northern bias within the government, and initiate a corrective regime led by a military government.⁵⁴ While it is possible the majors' motivation was political reform, the lasting result of the coup was the assassination of seven senior army officers (four from the north, two from the west, one from the mid-

⁵⁴ Robin Luckham, *The Nigerian Military 1960 – 1967* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 1971), 39.

west, and *none* from the east) leaving eastern born officers to assume the majority of the vacant positions.⁵⁵ Historians disagree on the reasons for the coup and its motivations, but there is strong evidence to suggest that regionalism played the central role in the coup.⁵⁶ Further ‘proof’ of the regional motivation of the coup was an Igbo power grab. The death of the two top (northern) politicians; and the deaths of four senior northern military officers, one high ranking western officer, and only one Igbo officer. Additionally, the one region where the coup failed completely was in the east. De St. Jorre argues that this was probably due to the fact that the organizers of the coup focused less in the east; a region they believed would sympathize with their cause.⁵⁷

Historians also disagree about the involvement of Major General Ironsi in the coup. Though he was an easterner, Luckham believes that Ironsi’s direct involvement was unlikely. Luckham believed that Ironsi could have known about the coup, but was not part of the conspiracy. Most likely, he watched the development of the coup, and took advantage of the situation to seize control of the government in the power vacuum that followed the execution of Nigerian Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa and the removal of President Nnamdi Azikiwe.⁵⁸

As the new head of the Nigerian military government, Ironsi appointed regional government leaders based on regional identities rather than military seniority. Though this move may have quieted the complaints of regional bias from the three largest political groups in Nigeria, the smaller and under-represented groups soon demanded a stronger centralized government where they could have more of a voice in the

⁵⁵ Ibid., 55.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 47.

⁵⁷ John de St. Jorre, *The Brother's War* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972), 45.

⁵⁸ Luckham, *Nigerian Military*, 25.

government.⁵⁹ Ironsi agreed with the need for a stronger central government, and believed regionalism was a force of division and conflict within Nigeria. He made the elimination of regionalism in Nigeria a top priority of his government, speaking against it weeks after assuming power.⁶⁰ Hausa-Fulanis of northern Nigeria saw the move away from a federal system of government as a threat to their power base. They feared that a centralized government would employ the most educated members of Nigerian society in many of the powerful and lucrative administrative positions. As a group, the north lacked the education of the south and would, therefore, hold fewer of these positions requiring higher average literacy levels.⁶¹

When Ironsi eliminated Nigeria's federal system of government in Decree #34 riots ensued in the north. In addition to Northerners' fears that they could not compete with the south in a unified political system, they saw this decree as further proof of the Igbos power grab.⁶² Compounding these fears was the apparent lack of punishment meted out against the leaders of the Major's Coup by Ironsi's government. Months after the coup, Ironsi had imprisoned the majors but had done little else to punish them. Critics pointed out that Ironsi had not even revoked the majors' military rank. Ironsi's opponents found further evidence of his Igbo favoritism when he promoted twelve officers from major to lieutenant colonel, and eight of them were Igbos. This was most likely not a politically motivated selection of Igbos over other officers from other groups, but rather, these officers were the next in line for promotion and reflected the

⁵⁹ Ibid., 52-3.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 54.

⁶¹ Ibid., 58.

⁶² Ibid., 59.

preponderance of Igbo officers in the Nigerian army prior to the civil war.⁶³ In this period of heightened regional sensitivity, however, this inequality proved deadly.

The Lieutenant's Coup

On July 29, 1966, junior officers and non-commissioned officers from the north led a second military coup and assassinated General Ironsi and other Igbo officers. Robin Luckham believed a number of regionally related factors precipitated this second coup including: the failure of General Ironsi's government to punish the "January majors" from the January 1966 coup, the decreased distance between junior and senior military officers after the loss of so many mid-level officers in the January coup, the inequity of command positions given to officers of eastern descent, and the fear that Ironsi's decree #34 would increase the north's isolation from power.⁶⁴ This coup succeeded in removing many eastern officers from their positions in the army, and put the entire north and southwestern region of Nigeria under new military control. The southeastern region remained in the hands of the previous military governor, Lieutenant colonel Emeka Ojukwu. The coup leaders asked 31-year-old Lieutenant colonel Yakubu Gowon, the highest-ranking northern officer in the army, to lead the new government. Hard-line northerners wanted Murtala Mohammed to lead the new government. Mohammed and his supporters saw little advantage for Nigerian unity and desired a "de facto secession of the North from Nigeria."⁶⁵ Despite their wishes, Gowon assumed control of the new government. Gowon appealed to many moderate northerners because he was not an Igbo and wanted to maintain Nigerian unity. To the southerners, Gowon's more moderate

⁶³ Ibid., 55.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 57-58.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 67.

political position and regional identity as a member of a minority middle belt group made him the leader most likely to end the violence and restore order to the nation.⁶⁶

Gowon and Ojukwu Compared

The personalities of Ojukwu and Gowon are particularly important to the discussion of the Nigerian Civil War. Their personalities and background help explain how each approached the growing regional conflict in Nigeria. In 1966, Ojukwu was a 33-year-old Igbo and was the military governor of the eastern region. He was born in the north. Ojukwu like many other Igbos was a Catholic. He graduated from Oxford University and received his military training at Eaton Hall in England. De St. Jorre described him as an intelligent, clever and self-confident man.⁶⁷ Unlike other Nigerian officers who saw service in the military as a way to increase their personal wealth and social standing in Nigerian society, Luckham speculated that Ojukwu joined the military for political reasons.⁶⁸ In contrast, Gowon was born the son of a Christian minister in the Middle Belt of Nigeria from a minority group known as Angas. Gowon was a Sandhurst trained officer who De St. Jorre described as having “an abiding love for the military.” De St. Jorre also commented that Gowon appeared too immature to preside of a nation of 50 million people, but his understanding of how the Nigerian military worked and his willingness to accept advice from others provided him with the ability to govern.⁶⁹ Arguably Ojukwu’s self-confidence and political ambitions and Gowon’s straight-laced military outlook ultimately impacted the way each man approached the war. Gowon seemed ill prepared initially to confront the more politically savvy Ojukwu and Ojukwu

⁶⁶ De St Jorre, *Brother's War*, 74.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁶⁸ Luckham, *Nigerian Military*, 129.

⁶⁹ De St. Jorre, *Brother's War*, 73.

took advantage of his superior skills as a negotiator and diplomat. Ojukwu's confidence and political ambitions would ultimately cause his downfall as he placed his desire to govern ahead of the survival of the Igbo people.

The Road to Biafran Secession

By the end of August 1966 Gowon was the recognized head of the Nigerian government throughout the country except Ojukwu's eastern region. His first governmental priority was to restore order in Nigeria. To make this happen, Gowon called for an "Ad Hoc Constitutional Conference" in Lagos where political leaders representing every region in Nigeria would identify the future structure of Nigeria's political system. Gowon identified four different structural options for the new Nigerian government, two of the options called for a federal system with a strong or weak central government, the third option was a confederacy, and the fourth option was a system entirely unique to Nigeria's structure and composition. Despite calls for secession, political leaders throughout Nigeria saw many problems in a confederate form of government including the coordination of separate militaries, police, and national revenue sharing. Nigerians also received some pressure from British and American diplomats who favored the maintenance of the federation. Before the members of the conference could reach any decision, anti-Igbo violence flared again in northern Nigeria on September 19, 1966. The government did not sanction the violence, but did little to stop it. John de St. Jorre points to official radio broadcasts in Kaduna of the alleged murder of northerners in the east as evidence of governmental encouragement of the massacre of easterners in the north.⁷⁰ Though official numbers varied based on their source from

⁷⁰ Ibid., 83-84.

seven thousand to fifty thousand dead in the massacres, de St. Jorre believed that the actual number killed was around ten thousand.⁷¹

Ojukwu used these killings to consolidate his position in the east and called for the expulsion of all non-easterners from his region. At the same time, easterners and particularly Igbos fled the north for the safety of Ojukwu's eastern region. Ojukwu, who had never recognized Gowon's position as head of the Nigerian government or Gowon's superior position in the military, was setting the stage for a political and potentially military confrontation.⁷² In October 1966 Nigerians had evidence of Ojukwu's preparations to secede by force when they received a report that an airplane overloaded with weapons crashed in Cameroon enroute to eastern Nigeria. Gowon likewise made his stand on secession clear when he announced his willingness to maintain the unity of Nigeria's current boundaries by force.⁷³

In January 1967, Nigerian regional leaders met in Aburi, Ghana to settle their political differences. Ojukwu saw this as an opportunity to gain constitutional provisions that would legitimize the increased autonomy of the east. Gowon and the other regional military leaders naively saw this meeting as a chance to open a dialog among like-minded military men who, without the interference of civilian politicians, could resolve the growing crisis. Gowon agreed to most of Ojukwu's requests for increased autonomy for the regions within Nigeria and essentially a confederate system of administration. He also agreed to accept the less powerful title as Commander-in-Chief of the military instead of the Supreme Commander of a unified Nigerian military. Gowon had adopted

⁷¹ Ibid., 86.

⁷² Ibid., 81.

⁷³ Ibid., 88.

this more conciliatory position in hopes of placating the east and maintaining the unity of Nigeria.

Ojukwu took advantage of Gowon's position and publicly announced that Nigerian leaders had agreed to a weakening of the federation at the Aburi Conference as soon as he returned to eastern Nigeria. Instead of unifying the nation, Gowon's conciliatory position only strengthened Ojukwu's position in the eastern region. Secessionist hawks saw this announcement as a confirmation of their ability to secede and the unity doves saw it as a way to maintain unity without full independence.⁷⁴ Gowon, obviously angered over Ojukwu's announcement, responded by abandoning many of the conciliatory measures he had agreed to during the conference and reasserted himself as Supreme Commander of a unified Nigerian military.⁷⁵ The breakdown following the Aburi Conference marked the last face-to-face meeting of the two leaders, and characterized the intractable positions of both men that would continue throughout the remainder of the secession crisis.

Ojukwu announced on February 25, 1967 that unless the Nigerian government accepted the confederacy arrangement and implemented the terms of the Aburi agreement before March 31, 1967 he would implement them on his own. Gowon responded by calling a supreme military council meeting on March 10, 1967 in Benin. Ojukwu declined the invitations to the meeting. In his absence, the council enacted Gowon's Decree #8 that declared the Nigeria's new governmental organization would be a federal system with a weak central government. Gowon saw this decree as an acceptable compromise between the Aburi agreement's confederacy and northern hard-

⁷⁴ Ibid., 95.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 97.

liner's federal system with a strong central government.⁷⁶ Ojukwu refused to accept the decree, but stopped short of calling for immediate secession when asked by the foreign press corps. On March 31, 1967, Ojukwu still did not call for secession, but 'regionalized' key infrastructure nodes in the east including railways and ports.⁷⁷ Throughout the spring of 1967 secession seemed imminent in eastern Nigeria as Ojukwu issued a number of "survival edicts" putting formerly federally controlled assets into exclusive control of eastern hands. Gowon countered these moves with a blockade of the eastern region by land and sea. On May 27, 1967 Ojukwu finally announced the secession of the eastern region from Nigeria and proclaimed the independent Republic of Biafra.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Ibid., 102-103.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 105.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 121.

The Nigerian Civil War lasted from May 27, 1967 until January 12, 1970. Though the ultimate resolution of the war came from the actions of the two militaries, the diplomatic fight for international involvement in the conflict and the propaganda war waged by both sides prolonged the outcome of the war and had a profound impact on the way the U.S. approached its involvement. Nigeria and Biafra maintained different strategies throughout the conflict. The Federal Military Government (FMG) pursued a traditional military approach to force the break away east into the federation. The Biafrans realized from the outset of the war that their best hope for independence would come from an international recognition and an internationally enforced peace settlement. Though the Biafran secession was ultimately unsuccessful, their propaganda and their ability to gain some international recognition prolonged the conflict beyond the expectations of many outside observers. The description of the war in the following pages will chronologically trace the success and failures of the two approaches to the war, and discuss the major developments for both sides.

Prior to Nigerian Independence 70% of the officers in the Nigerian military were British, of the original 57 Nigerian officers only 23 were serving or alive in May 1967. Five of these 23 served under Gowon and the remaining eighteen under Ojukwu.⁷⁹ By January 1966, the military included 9,000 soldiers and 350 officers.⁸⁰ Of these 350, 17

⁷⁹ Stremmlau, *International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War*, 72.

⁸⁰ Raph Uwechue, *Reflections on the Nigerian Civil War* (New York: Africana Publishing Corporation, 1971), 101.

were lieutenant colonels or above.⁸¹ Seven of these senior officers died in the January coup, and 39 others died and 23 were missing after the July 1966 coup.⁸² As a result, there was a significant lack of experienced leadership for both the Nigerian and Biafran armies at the start of the war. These inexperienced officers led equally inexperienced soldiers whose numbers totaled approximately 7,000 men on each side. Compounding the disadvantages of their inexperienced officers and soldiers, the Nigerian army had limited equipment, only light armored cars, a few personnel carriers, and no tanks. The Nigerian navy had 6 small vessels to blockade two hundred miles of eastern Nigerian coastline. The Nigerian air force had no bombing or fighter capabilities at the beginning of the war. The Biafran military had similar equipment shortages but could boast 2, twenty-five year old, B-26 bombers and 6 French-made helicopters.⁸³

The “Phony War”

Ojukwu officially announced the secession of Biafra from Nigeria on May 27, 1967. The Nigerian Civil War lasted approximately thirty-one months; during the majority of the war, the two sides did little actual fighting. The war was essentially a Nigerian siege of Biafra with brief periods of offensive actions by both sides. The lack of fighting was evident in the first two months of the conflict. John St. de Jorre called the first two months after Biafra seceded from Nigeria the “Phony War” because there was only political posturing and no actual fighting between the two sides. Biafra and Nigeria were both waiting to see how the other would react, and both were rapidly recruiting and training their armies for eventual conflict. At the end of June and the beginning of July 1967 the Federal Military Government in Nigeria reached out to its allies in Great Britain

⁸¹ Luckham, *Nigerian Military*, 43.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 76.

⁸³ Stremmlau, *International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War*, 72-73.

and the United States for military equipment and munitions sales. Both Great Britain and the United States turned down these requests for military equipment assistance to the consternation of Nigerian officials.⁸⁴ Nigerians were confused with the U.S. reasoning for their withholding of critical war materials. Some initially believed that the U.S. government did not approve of Gowon as head of the FMG. The U.S. State Department repeated its position in a series of telegrams from Washington to its embassy in Lagos that the Nigerian Civil War was an internal problem and that they were not going to get involved. Nigerians pointed to U.S. support for the Congo during the Katangan Crisis in 1961-1962 where U.S. aircraft were given to prevent the break up of the Congo. The U.S. reply to these charges was that the Katangan situation was different because the Katanga crisis involved non-Congolese third party governments who wanted to destroy the Congo. The U.S. government saw the Katangan Crisis as an invasion of a sovereign nation by foreign powers. The Nigerian Civil War was, by definition, an internal war, and the U.S. respected the sovereignty of Nigeria. They further stated that the U.S. did not interfere in internal political disputes.⁸⁵

Throughout the Nigerian Civil War, the primary goal of the Biafran leadership was to receive international recognition of Biafran independence from Nigeria. Such recognition would allow the lawful intervention by third parties to negotiate a peace between the two sides.⁸⁶ One of the earliest attempts at garnering such recognition occurred during the Phony War period. In this case, Ojukwu claimed the right to receive the oil royalties for the oil extracted from inside their borders by foreign oil companies.

⁸⁴ U.S. Embassy in Lagos Telegram, to U.S. State Department, JUN. 11, 1967; Nigeria; Africa; NSC Country Files; Nixon Project; National Archives at College Park (NACP), MD.

⁸⁵ U.S. Embassy in Lagos Telegram, to U.S. State Department, JUL. 12, 1967; POL 27 June/July 1967, State Department Central Policy Files 1967-1969, Record Group 59; NACP.

⁸⁶ Stremlau, *International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War*, 67.

He gave foreign companies a deadline of July 10, 1967 to send their payments to his government or he would suspend oil shipments from Biafra.⁸⁷ Great Britain, the Netherlands, France, and the United States all had oil interests in Nigerian and Biafran oil fields. The leading oil producing company in Nigeria and Biafra was the British owned Shell/BP and therefore the rest of the involved nations looked towards the British reaction to the Biafran demand before they would commit to any payments. The British government refused to pay royalties to the Biafrans since they did not acknowledge Biafra's independence. The British government's approval for any payments was significant as they held a 49% interest in the company. Despite this controlling interest, Shell/BP officials agreed to a "token payment of £250,000"⁸⁸ to Biafra on the day of the deadline. The British High Commissioner in Lagos, Sir David Hunt, was furious at Shell/BP's payment without seeking the government's approval. Despite the British disapproval, the British Commonwealth Secretary of State George Thomas approved of the payment while telling the Nigerian government that their actions did not amount to official recognition of Biafra. At the same time, Thomas criticized the Nigerians for preventing oil tankers from leaving eastern Nigerian ports. The Nigerians remained skeptical about the British motives for sanctioning the payment, and refused to lift the naval blockade. This was to be the last battle of the Phony War, and actual armed conflict began five days later on July 6, 1967.⁸⁹

The "Shooting War" Begins

It is unclear whether the fighting occurred at this time due to FMG fears of growing Biafran support within the international community or simply because Nigeria's

⁸⁷ Ibid., 75.

⁸⁸ De St. Jorre, *Brother's War*, 140.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 140.

military was finally prepared to attack. De St. Jorre believed that the Nigerians planned their attack for July 7th and that a border skirmish the day before caused the change to the timeline. U.S. Embassy sources indicated that the Biafran defensive perimeter repulsed the initial Nigerian offensives.⁹⁰ The telegram did not indicate any surprise at the Biafran's military abilities by the U.S. government. A previous memorandum sent to Washington reflected the old British stereotypes about the military characteristics dominant in particular Nigerian groups. The memorandum described northerners as better soldiers because they came from a more authoritarian tradition where people were used to obeying orders from superiors without question. While easterners and Igbos in particular, were more intelligent but lacked the courage of the northern fighters.⁹¹ The U.S. Embassy in Lagos explained to the Secretary of State that this was a long held belief among the British during the colonial period. Though they tended to discredit the idea as a biased generalization, they still included it in their assessment of the current military situation in Nigeria. This indicated how little independent intelligence the United States possessed at the time about Nigeria, and how reliant they were on British intelligence summaries. The U.S. increasingly replaced the British lead in ensuring the post-colonial territorial integrity of African nations, but they still relied heavily on British models and policy to guide their decisions. The Biafran resistance was short lived in the areas of initial fighting. FMG forces occupied the towns of Ogoja, Nsukka, and Bonny Island within the first twenty days of fighting. These victories were both symbolically and strategically significant to the war. Igbos saw Nsukka as the heart of traditional Igboland,

⁹⁰ American Consul in Enugu to Secretary of State Telegram, "Lagos 212 ", JUL. 8, 1967; POL 27 Biafra-Nigeria 1967 June-July, NACP.

⁹¹ American Consul in Kaduna (sic) to Department of State Telegram "Citizen of Northeast State Reviews Current Events", JUL. 13, 1967; POL 27 Biafra-Nigeria 7/11/67; NACP.

and Bonny Island was the major oil terminal and largest potential source of revenue in Biafra.⁹²

Biafran Counter-Attack

FMG victories did not seem to affect the Biafran military or their leadership's continued willingness to fight. Despite the presence of Nigerian forces in the north and south of their country, Ojukwu decided to launch its own offensive into the mid-west region on August 9th.⁹³ The mid-west had long supported the Nigerian federal system and saw their region as a microcosm of Nigeria. The mid-west had numerous small political groups within it, and their government shared power without the 'ethnic' tensions present in the other regions. Brigadier General David Ejoor, the military governor of the Mid-West region attempted to remain neutral at the beginning of the conflict while supporting the concept of a unified Nigeria. Ojukwu did not attack the mid-west because of its pro-unity position, because he believed that he could turn the war into a north versus south conflict. Ojukwu believed that he was "liberating" the mid-west from Nigerian domination. From a practical point of view, the mid-west was lightly defended and did include many Igbos who were potentially sympathetic to Ojukwu's cause. These two factors allowed him to take the entire mid-west region including the cities of Benin, Sapele, Warri, and Ughelli with an 'army' of one thousand poorly trained soldiers and almost no shots fired.⁹⁴ The FMG forces finally halted the Biafran offensive on the outskirts of Ore on the eastern border of the western region. Nigerian forces blocked the Biafran entrance to Ore with the destruction of two bridges into the city.⁹⁵

⁹² De St. Jorre, *Brother's War*, 148, 151.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 161-162.

Stopping the Biafran offensive into Ore turned the tide of the war in Nigeria's favor. From that point on, the Biafrans never mounted a significant offensive or threatened the boundaries of Nigeria. The resulting FMG counter-offensive succeeded in capturing the Biafran capital city of Enugu and the coastal city of Calabar in the first two weeks of October 1967.⁹⁶

Historians cite several reasons for Ojukwu's short-lived campaign in the mid-west, the obvious ones were their lack of trained soldiers, weapons, and small numbers compared to the Nigerian army. Additionally, though there were Igbo speakers in the mid-western region, the majority of mid-westerners did not see the Biafran invasion as a liberating movement. Non-Igbos did not want 'liberation' from the Nigerian federation or the subsequent "cultural extinction they would face under the Igbos."⁹⁷ Ojukwu's attack into the west caught the FMG by surprise, though this surprise was the key to the initial Biafran military success, it also opened a third front in the war. De St. Jorre described this offensive as typical of Ojukwu's preference of tactical victories in lieu of more long lasting strategic ones.⁹⁸ This is possible because Ojukwu believed that quick and decisive Biafran successes would win him the international recognition that was so vital to Biafra's cause. He knew that Biafra's best chance at a lasting independence could not come from the force of arms. Eventually the size and numeric advantages of Nigeria would overwhelm the Biafrans. By gaining international recognition as an independent nation would allow him to call for UN peacekeepers or overt foreign military support to protect his borders. Without this support, Biafran independence was doomed.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 173.

⁹⁷ Craig W. McLuckie, "Literary Memoirs and Diaries: Soyinka, Amadi, and Saro-Wiwa," in *Ken Saro-Wiwa*, ed. Craig W. McLuckie and Aubrey McPhail, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000), 37.

⁹⁸ De St. Jorre, *Brother's War*, 247.

The Diplomatic War

Breaking the united support of the OAU states for Nigeria became one of the first priorities of Ojukwu's government at the time of the Biafran secession. He realized the OAU's support would be difficult to win based on the six founding principles of the organization adopted at the first pan-African summit in May 1963. At this meeting, all of the attending states agreed on the following: (1) equality of all states regardless of size, (2) non-interference in internal problems of member states, (3) respect for international boundaries, (4) seek peaceful solutions to disputes between states, (5) cooperation in African development, and (6) dedication to seeking independence for the remaining African colonies.⁹⁹ Based on these principles, Gowon and the FMG never seriously considered any OAU involvement or resolution against their side.¹⁰⁰ Ojukwu was not convinced of the solidarity within the OAU. He attempted to fracture the OAU solidarity and sent envoys to the East African Summit on July 6, 1967. These Biafran diplomats were partially successful persuading member states at the summit of the need for OAU intervention in Nigeria. Both the Tanzania and Zambia delegations voted in favor of supporting the Biafrans. Kenya and Uganda (who had potentially similar 'ethnic' conflicts within their own boundaries) cautioned against taking sides in Nigeria's internal conflict.¹⁰¹

Though the Biafrans received no formal support for their cause at this summit, other diplomatic efforts by the Biafrans persuaded Mobutu to suggest adding Biafran secession to the agenda of the Kinshasa meeting of the OAU in September 1967.

Nigerian officials feared that allowing Biafra to have a voice in the OAU would amount

⁹⁹ Stremlau, *International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War*, 16.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 83-84.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 85.

to international recognition of Biafran independence. Legitimizing Biafra might lead to the Nigerian's greatest fear, the recognition of Biafra by the United States. The United States had already turned down Nigerian requests to purchase American arms, and was becoming nervous about Nigerian arms deals made with the Soviets.¹⁰² Due to behind the scenes negotiations by Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie, Nigerian fears of Biafran recognition at the Kinshasa meeting were relieved when the group agreed to respect Nigeria's sovereignty and allow them to handle the secession crisis internally.¹⁰³

Historian Raph Uwechue criticized the OAU for treating the Nigerian Civil War as a minor issue at the Kinshasa conference, and cited this as evidence of the OAU's lack of will to do more than rubber stamp any member state's actions.¹⁰⁴ Though Biafra did not get a seat at the table or a chance to voice their complaints before the OAU, Ojukwu saw the heated debate surrounding Biafran participation as a victory and sign that many leaders saw the war as an African issue, not just a Nigerian one.¹⁰⁵

As an alternative to OAU involvement in the Nigerian Civil War, Six African heads of state present at the Kinshasa summit formed the OAU Consultative Committee to help Nigeria negotiate an end to the war with Biafra. The members of the committee included Joseph Mobutu of the Congo, William Tubman of Liberia, Joseph Ankrah of Ghana, Ahmaou Ahidjo of Cameroon, Hamani Diori of Niger, and Haile Selassie of Ethiopia. They planned to travel to Nigeria immediately following the summit. Despite delays, the group eventually arrived in Nigeria and offered to assist the Nigerian government. Biafran propaganda announced the group was coming to negotiate a peace

¹⁰² Ibid., 86.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 93.

¹⁰⁴ Uwechue, *Reflections on the Nigerian Civil War*, 87.

¹⁰⁵ Stremlau, *International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War*, 95.

between the two sides. The committee silenced these rumors when they declared their support of Nigeria and called for the renouncement of secession in eastern Nigeria and the east's acceptance of the FMG.¹⁰⁶ Uwechue further highlighted the fact that the OAU Consultative Committee did not visit Biafra during their first official trip to Nigeria as evidence of their lack willingness to take any action contrary to Nigerian desires.¹⁰⁷

The OAU Charter agreement of 1963, to preserve the territorial integrity of post-colonial African states, ensured that the OAU would never play a significant role in settling the Nigerian Civil War. They compromised their ability to play the role of peacemakers by taking sides from the start of the war. Despite the inability of the OAU to broker an agreement between the two sides, the United States continued to rely on the OAU to resolve the crisis. Raph Uwechue argued that African heads of state were concerned that support of Biafran independence would set a dangerous precedent for member states like Ethiopia, Sudan, Cameroon, Kenya, the Congo, and others. He further criticized the OAU leaders, charging that they were more interested in not hurting one another's feelings than solving any real African issues.¹⁰⁸ Political scientist Emmanuel N. Amadife also believed that the OAU lacked the neutrality to resolve the Nigerian War in peace talks between both sides due to their public disapproval of secession. He argued that the United States maintained their position that the Nigerian Civil War was an African problem that would be handled best by the OAU. This policy

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 99.

¹⁰⁷ Uwechue, *Reflections on the Nigerian Civil War*, 87.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 87.

was especially easy to maintain early on in the war, as it appeared not to have “a Cold War dimension.”¹⁰⁹

Progress in the war continued more slowly in 1968. The ever-shrinking perimeter of Biafra shortened the lines of communication and resupply for the Biafrans providing an advantage for the determined Biafrans against the overstretched Nigerian military. Gowon’s prediction of victory by March 1968 came and went with few results. Though the Biafran army could not defeat the Nigerians in set piece battles, they were able to take advantages of localized numeric advantages and attack isolated Nigerian forces. When the Nigerian army responded with coordinated attacks using artillery, mortars, and armored cars, the Biafrans simply faded into the countryside and out of contact.¹¹⁰

In contrast to ineffectual Nigerian military attacks, Gowon struck a more serious blow to the Biafran economy and their ability to fund their arms purchases. He achieved this by changing the Nigerian currency in January 1968. This move forced the Biafrans to dump their Nigerian currency reserves on the international market for a fraction of its worth and left the Biafran government holding stacks of worthless outdated Nigerian currency.¹¹¹

International Recognition for Biafra

Though staggering from military and economic pressure by the Nigerians, the Biafran diplomatic campaign won a tremendously important political victory in the spring of 1968. Biafran foreign affairs officials saw international recognition by African nations of Biafra’s independence as critical to their efforts to persuade the United States

¹⁰⁹ Emmanuel N. Amadife, *Pre-Theories and Theories of Foreign Policy-Making* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1999), 45.

¹¹⁰ De St. Jorre, *Brother’s War*, 188.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 187.

and France to support more openly their cause. The U.S. deferred all Biafran requests for greater diplomatic involvement in the war to the OAU. Biafran diplomats believed that if they could divide the OAU's solidarity, they could show the U.S. that the OAU was incapable of negotiating a settlement without increased U.S. involvement. Similarly, the French were reluctant to support overtly the Biafrans unless they believed Francophone African nations also supported Biafran independence.¹¹² Based on these considerations, Biafran diplomatic efforts targeted Senegal, Cote d'Ivoire, Tanzania, Zambia, and Uganda, who despite their political differences had previously expressed concern over the starvation of Biafran women and children.

The Biafran government opened an information office in Tanzania at the start of the war. Tanzania and Zambia appeared likely to sympathize with the Biafran cause. At this time neither nation faced significant secessionist movements within their own borders and therefore could support the Biafrans without encouraging similar conflicts at home. Additionally, the anti-Igbo violence that preceded the war "seemed to confirm Nyerere's and Kaunda's deep suspicions about the viability and justice inherent in any federation that was a creation of imperial Britain."¹¹³ The failure of Nyerere and Kaunda's attempts to negotiate a settlement between the two sides prior to the war, and the failure of the OAU Consultative Committee to settle the conflict caused Nyerere to travel to Cote d'Ivoire to discuss diplomatic recognition with Houphouet-Boigny.

Biafran diplomats saw support from Cote d'Ivoire as significant to their cause due to the size of its military, its economic strength in West Africa, and its close ties with France. Biafrans believed Houphouet-Boigny might support their independence based on

¹¹² Stremlau, *International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War*, 130.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 133.

his public stances against communism, his personal Catholic religious faith, and “the traditional fear among coastal West African leaders of Moslem domination from the northern hinterland.”¹¹⁴ Biafran diplomats also believed they might be able to appeal to Houphouet-Boigny’s desire to weaken Nigeria’s power in West Africa by dividing Nigeria’s oil producing region. In addition to his discussions with Nyerere, Houphouet-Boigny spoke with French officials during this time about recognition. He eventually agreed to recognize Biafra, but believed an Anglophone African nation should be the first to recognize publicly Biafra to deflect any criticism of French or Francophone motivations to divide Nigeria.¹¹⁵

Nyerere announced Tanzania’s recognition of Biafra on April 13, 1968 but Cote d’Ivoire waited for four weeks before making his own announcement. International expectations of Houphouet-Boigny’s recognition increased when Gabon’s President Albert Bongo recognized Biafra on May 8, 1968. This action was significant because of Bongo’s close association with Houphouet-Boigny. Since Biafra had not sent any diplomats to Gabon to discuss recognition, it appeared likely that Houphouet-Boigny had influenced Bongo’s decision. Houphouet-Boigny likely wanted another West African nation to recognize Biafra to further separate the involvement of the French influence on his decision. One week later, Cote d’Ivoire announced its recognition of Biafra on May 14, 1968. Kaunda and Nyerere agreed that Tanzania would recognize Biafra and then Zambia would wait until a West African nation announced its recognition before Zambia would make its move. They also agreed to have Zambia’s announcement coincide with

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 135.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 136.

the Commonwealth peace talks in Uganda in order to improve the Biafran negotiation position with Nigeria. On May 20, 1968 Zambia recognized Biafra.

The four African recognitions failed to convince the French government or any African leaders to officially recognize Biafra. The recognitions also failed improve Biafra's bargaining position with the Nigerian government in future peace talks. Though the four recognitions did not immediately internationalize the Nigerian Civil War, they did change the conditions of the debate on western non-intervention. As long as the OAU remained united in their support for the continued unity of Nigeria, the U.S. could argue that Africans opposed intervention into the domestic affairs of African nations based on the 1963 OAU charter. Once the united African front fractured, the U.S. position lost its credibility and forced the U.S. foreign policy makers to reevaluate their pro-Nigerian neutrality.¹¹⁶

Political and Military Exploitation of Starvation

Though the recognitions were important morale victories for Biafra, they only served to prolong the conflict. As the war continued in the spring of 1968, the Nigerian blockade and the ever-decreasing boundaries of Biafra led to a massive refugee crisis and starvation within the region. The effects of the military actions compounded the population and malnutrition issues that predated the war. Eastern Nigeria had always been a highly populated area of Africa; at the time of the war it was the fourth populous region in Africa behind Rwanda, Burundi, and the Nile Valley. The large population and the lack of high protein foodstuffs made a low level malnutrition a fact of life in Biafra. Adding to these natural problems, refugees from northern Nigeria prior to the war and

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 140.

civilians fleeing the war's frontlines concentrated the population even more making massive starvation inevitable.¹¹⁷

In this war, starvation was more than a peripheral issue involving only civilians. Starvation was a central component of the military and political strategy of the two sides. Both sides believed the starvation of civilians would eventually result in an end of the war. The Nigerians saw starvation as a weapon of war. After months of indecisive military action, the Nigerian military leaders viewed starvation as a legitimate weapon against the Biafrans. The blockade of the Biafrans made coordination and logistical operations difficult for the inexperienced Nigerian army. If the Nigerians could not swiftly crush the Biafran resistance, they were confident they could out wait their opponents.¹¹⁸ The Biafrans recognized the power that images of starving women and children in their country had on public opinion. As a result, they encouraged photographs, video footage, and news stories from the western media in hopes of winning sympathy and support from the international community. As a result of Ojukwu's overarching war aim to win international support and recognition of the legitimacy of their secession, propaganda was always a key aspect of the Biafran war effort.¹¹⁹ Both sides were correct in their belief in the power of starvation in the war. Starvation greatly influenced the U.S. response to the war, and ultimately led to the collapse of the Biafran resistance.

Ojukwu's propaganda targeted both domestic and international populations with its messages. The domestic message was simply that if Biafrans did not continue to fight the Nigerians, the victorious Nigerian army would kill all Igbos left in Biafra. The

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 237.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 237.

¹¹⁹ De St. Jorre, *Brother's War*, 241.

international propaganda played on similar themes of Nigerian violence against Igbos prior to the war and added photographs and news footage of the starving bodies of Biafran children. The Biafrans hired public relations firms to spread these messages to the world with shocking effectiveness. Mark Press owned by an American in Switzerland served as the main conduit of Biafran propaganda to the world. Mark Press struggled to get its message into the international consciousness before the spring of 1968 when the first photos of starving children appeared.¹²⁰

Gowon's war plan did not originally include any propaganda aspect. He wanted to wage a more conventional war and did not want to fight the war in the press. Initially he resisted employing a public relations firm until the last year of the war. His eventual decision to publicize his side of the war succeeded in countering the Biafran propaganda. Pro-Nigerian press releases gained important credibility by the multiple reports written by a UN observer team including representatives from Great Britain, Canada, Poland, and OAU members.¹²¹ Though the team never entered Biafran territory, over the course of sixteen months the team regularly sent reports from newly-occupied Nigerian territory to the United Nations. In every report, the team repeatedly denied any evidence of genocide or mistreatment of eastern refugees by the Nigerian military.

In the spring of 1968, however, only Biafran propaganda began to reach sectors of the American public. The stories elicited popular outcries against the United States' pro-Nigerian neutrality grew louder from special interest groups, relief agencies, and members of Congress. These groups demanded some intervention by the U.S. into the conflict to stop the growing humanitarian disaster. The number of newspaper articles in

¹²⁰ Ibid., 307.

¹²¹ Ibid., 283.

the *New York Times* increased from a pre-war average between January 1966 and June 1967 of 9 articles per month to 19 articles per month from July 1967 to June 1968. That number more than doubled in July 1968 and nearly quadrupled in August 1968.¹²²

Despite these calls for action, the Johnson Administration refused to do more than attach greater emphasis on the OAU consultative committee peace talks in Kampala (May 23-31, 1968) and in Niamey (July 15-26, 1968). In a written address to the OAU Summit in Algiers on September 13, 1968, Johnson reiterated his support for an OAU resolution.

He told the members of the summit, "It is you -- the Assembly of the OAU as the conscience of Africa --that the world now looks to break that Nigerian deadlock."¹²³

Given the U.S. desires for an OAU solution, historian Amadife pointed to Johnson's written message delivered at the OAU Summit in Algiers (September 13, 1968) as evidence of the American president's growing disenchantment with the OAU's progress. According to Walt Rostow, the address was meant as a warning to the African leaders that unless they made progress, the United States would have no choice other than to become more involved.¹²⁴

Unfortunately for the Johnson Administration, neither round of peace talks resulted in any movement by either Gowon or Ojukwu towards reconciliation. Both sides believed that they could still win the war without compromising on the central issue of independence. Recent Nigerian military success against the Biafrans in the Rivers State prevented Gowon from accepting any proposal that did not include the full re-integration of Biafra into Nigeria. At the same time, official recognition of Biafra by four African

¹²² New York Times Company, *New York Times Index 1966-1970, vols. 54- 58* (New York: New York Times Company, 1967-1971). See Appendix 1 for complete monthly newspaper totals in the New York Times.

¹²³ Amadife, *Pre-Theories and Theories of Foreign Policy-Making*, 47.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 47-8.

states hardened Ojukwu's resolve. Ojukwu believed negotiations would discourage other nations from recognizing Biafra's independence. Thus the two conferences resulted in no change to Nigeria, Biafra, or the OAU's negotiating position and further illustrated the unlikelihood that the OAU was capable of negotiating any sort of agreement.¹²⁵

The Civil War's Second Year

Militarily, the war also progressed slowly despite Gowon announcement of the army's 'final offensive' in August 1968. In addition to the logistical and training issues that hindered the Nigerian's progress, the leaders of the Army's three divisions were also divided. The commanding generals of the three Nigerian army divisions competed against each other for the political spotlight and over the limited number of supplies and soldiers instead of coordinating their efforts against the Biafran forces. De St. Jorre described the three men as competent and experienced leaders, trained by the British at Sandhurst (the British Military Academy). Their biggest obstacle was that they lacked the trained armies with whom Sandhurst officers assumed they would use to fight British wars.¹²⁶ The Nigerian generals also lacked trained junior officers to lead the soldiers. Many of the former Nigerian officers had returned to their homes in Biafra prior to the war or died in the assassinations of 1966. Even without these problems, the increased size of the Nigerian army greatly exceeded the number of trained officers in Nigeria's peacetime army. As a result, the Nigerian army failed to coordinate Gowon's final assault, with one of the three divisions blatantly defying Gowon's order by failing to move from their defensive positions. Thus the final assault remained yet another failed

¹²⁵ Ibid., 48.

¹²⁶ De St. Jorre, *Brother's War*, 280.

attempt by the FMG to defeat the Biafrans, and the war would drag on for another year and a half.¹²⁷

Diplomatically and militarily the war stagnated, but Biafran propaganda efforts finally began to gain the United States public's attention. By summer's end in 1968, images from the Nigerian Civil War made their way into the homes of average Americans in *Life* magazine and on their televisions.¹²⁸ This mainstream coverage of the humanitarian crisis increased the U.S. public's concern over their nation's position on the war. This growing concern was not lost on Republican presidential candidate Richard Nixon; in two separate campaign speeches he mentioned the Nigerian Civil War. In these speeches, Nixon criticized the Johnson administration for their handling of the Nigerian crisis and vowed to review the U.S. position on the war if he was elected. President Johnson was guilty of neglecting African affairs. Roger Morris explained that the Cold War had a brief appearance in the early 1960's in the Congo. It had become increasingly clear to the U.S.; however, that Soviet and Chinese interest in the continent had waned. This realization allowed President Johnson to discount the importance of African affairs for much of his presidency in favor of African-American civil rights and the Vietnam War.¹²⁹ The Nigerian Civil War was no exception to this rule. Johnson paid little attention to Nigeria throughout 1967, but apparently the constant pictures from Biafra eventually drew his attention as well. Johnson saw the Nigerian Civil War as a distraction from other more important items on his personal agenda. The President's lack of sincere concern for the Biafrans as well as his acknowledgement of the increasing domestic pressure on his administration caused by the Biafran media campaign was

¹²⁷ Ibid., 266-267.

¹²⁸ Thompson, *American Policy and African Famine*, 63.

¹²⁹ Morris, *Uncertain Greatness*, 17.

evident in his order in the late fall of 1967 to Under-Secretary of State Nicholas Katzenbach “to get those nigger babies off of my television set.”¹³⁰ Despite his personal feelings, Johnson obviously saw the need to take some public action to placate the American public. The Biafran propaganda won a small victory with the U.S. government and forced them to address the issue of the Nigerian Civil War. Johnson’s creation of a Biafran relief task force marked the first time since the war began that the U.S. broke with British policy in Nigeria. Until this point, the U.S. had followed Great Britain’s lead in the conflict. Johnson’s administration no longer believed they could support a British policy whose basic premise was that aiding Biafran civilians “might cause few deaths but at the end save millions.”¹³¹ Despite the formation of the relief task force, the U.S. made no moves to intervene in the conflict outside of financially supporting various international relief organizations.

The Civil War’s Final Year

The OAU Consultative Committee met again in Monrovia in March and April 1969 with similar results from their previous meetings. Stremlau argued that Gowon felt the OAU’s involvement in Nigeria’s internal affairs was inappropriate, he realized as long as the OAU stayed engaged the United States would remain on the sidelines. He knew the OAU would not be able to force a peace on either side of the war. If involved, the U.S. would seek to end rapidly the humanitarian crisis by forcing a peace between the two sides. At the same time Ojukwu realized that outside nations would not intervene unless they believed that Biafra’s cause was not completely lost. As a result, Ojukwu launched a counter-offensive across the entire Biafran/Nigerian front. Biafran forces

¹³⁰ Ibid., 42.

¹³¹ Ibid., 42.

succeeded in retaking Owerri on April 25, 1969 from the Nigerians. Ojukwu combined this military attack with Biafran mercenary air force strikes against mid-western oil facilities. This was the second and last significant Biafran attempt to use military force to generate international support for his cause. Despite their limited military successes against the Nigerians, attacks against the oil facilities and their western employees only served to alienate Biafra from the west.

In October 1969, Gowon launched his final 'final assault' of the war. This campaign unlike its predecessors was initiated with no formal announcement. In the spring of that year, Gowon had grown tired of his army's lack of progress and relieved all three of Nigeria's division commanders.¹³² This move most likely had less effect on the conclusion of the war than the ever-worsening situation within Biafra. By the fall of 1969, the Biafran army was suffering from a lack of weapons, ammunition, food, and morale. In January 1970, Biafran resistance simply melted away into the countryside as the Nigerian army advanced across the remainder of Biafran territory. Ojukwu realized the war was over and his staff convinced him that he should leave Biafra so they could surrender. He left Biafra on a relief plane on January 11, 1970 for the Cote d'Ivoire and his chief of staff Phillip Effiong made a radio announcement telling his soldiers to lay down their arms the next day.¹³³ Even the Nigerians seemed surprised by the lack of Biafran resistance at the end of the war. They appeared unprepared to assume control of the relief efforts in eastern Nigeria. Despite this lack of preparation the Nigerians refused support from the religious relief agencies that they accused of prolonging Nigeria's suffering.

¹³² De St. Jorre, *Brother's War*, 344.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 413.

The preceding chapter focused on the Nigerian Civil War and the role of the international community in its resolution. Based on this background, the following chapter will focus solely on the formulation of the Nixon Administration's policy in the Nigerian Civil War in 1969. In the course of this investigation we will see how the humanitarian crisis in Biafra forced the U.S. to change their role from neutral bystander to active participants in the resolution of the conflict. As 1969 progressed, the Nixon Administration considered their foreign policy options in the Nigerian Civil War on four separate occasions. The first was within the first two months of Nixon's presidency, the second in late spring after months of continued military and diplomatic stalemate, the third was after the shooting of a Red Cross relief aircraft, and the fourth was after the Biafrans failed to agree to daylight relief flights.

Key Figures in the Development of U.S./Nigerian Foreign Policy

The four main characters in the formulation of the Nixon Administration's position on the Nigerian Civil War were President Nixon, National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, Secretary of State, William Rogers, and National Security Council African Affairs Specialist, Roger Morris.

According to Stremmler, Shepard, and Morris's accounts, President Nixon sympathized with the Biafran people. Shepard believed Nixon was the only one in his Administration who favored supporting Biafra.¹³⁴ He also indicated Nixon's policy was strongly influenced by Henry Kissinger who "never shared Nixon's enthusiasm for the

¹³⁴ Robert B. Shepard, *Nigeria, Africa, and the United States* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), 46.

Biafran cause.”¹³⁵ Even after Nixon told Kissinger he wanted to recognize Biafra, Kissinger simply ignored the President’s request. Morris also described Nixon as weak and “wavering within himself”¹³⁶ on the issue of the U.S. policy in the Nigerian Civil War. In Kissinger’s book, *The White House Years*, he explained the motive behind Nixon’s support for the Biafrans as a way to put his opponents on the wrong side of a popular issue.¹³⁷

As previously described, Henry Kissinger had a great deal of influence over Nixon’s foreign policy decisions. Morris described Kissinger’s role in certain foreign policy circumstances as the “defacto President.”¹³⁸ As Shepard described, Kissinger never seemed interested in supporting Biafran independence. Kissinger believed support for Nigeria was the best course of action for the “long-term interests” of the United States.¹³⁹ Anecdotally, Kissinger’s decision to dedicate only two pages out of 1,476 in his book, *The White House Years*, to describing the Nigerian Civil War as an indication of his lack of interest in the conflict.

Secretary of State William Rogers fully supported the Nigerian Federal Military Government. He viewed any increased involvement by the Nixon Administration as interfering in Nigerian politics and internal affairs. He believed the U.S. maintained no influence over either side in the war and any position other than the Johnson Administration’s pro-Nigerian neutrality would only result in greater Soviet involvement.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁵ Morris, *Uncertain Greatness*, 35.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹³⁷ Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979), 417.

¹³⁸ Morris, *Uncertain Greatness*, 147.

¹³⁹ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 417.

¹⁴⁰ Shepard, *Nigeria, Africa, and the United States*, 46.

Roger Morris acted as a foil to the State Department's pro-Nigerian sentiment. He doggedly supported the Biafrans throughout the remainder of the war, injecting doubts about the Nigerian military's ability to defeat the Biafrans in his memorandums to Kissinger. The strength of his support for the Biafrans might have been motivated by his concern for their survival as a group. Perhaps just as likely, his support for Biafra might have been motivated by his belief that the State Department's support for Nigerian served its own goals (and not those of President Nixon). Whatever his motivation, Morris played a large role in preventing the Nixon Administration from following the State Department's desired foreign policy in Nigeria.

The interaction of these four men and the actions of the American public shaped the Administration's foreign policy in Nigeria through the course of 1969. They also had to deal with the legacy of the Johnson Administration in the war prior to Nixon's inauguration.

Growing U.S. Concern over Biafran Starvation

As described earlier, images of starving Biafran children made a significant impact on the American public's interest in the civil war. During the first year of the war, Americans showed little interest in the political situation in Nigeria. As the humanitarian crisis grew in late 1968, Americans wanted their government to do something to stop the starvation of innocents in Biafra. At the same time, the White House and the U.S. State Department did not want to alienate Gowon and the Nigerian government. By the time the Nigerian Civil War became a mainstream issue with the U.S. public, President Johnson had already announced his decision not to run for re-election. As a result, Johnson did little to change the U.S. policy towards either side of the Nigerian Civil War. Johnson was not immune to the mounting political pressure at

the end of his presidency in 1968. This pressure led Johnson to the break from his administration's policy of strict neutrality in the Nigerian Civil War.

The most significant outcome of this political pressure was the sale of U.S. aircraft to international relief organizations. In the fall of 1968 relief supporters had discovered the availability of surplus U.S. Air Force cargo planes suitable for conducting relief operations. This group found support from Senator Ted Kennedy and House Speaker John McCormack for their plan to sell these aircraft to relief agencies. Kennedy and McCormack then approached President Johnson with the plan. In November 1968, Johnson asked his Secretaries of State and Defense to "explore the possibility of using C-97"¹⁴¹ cargo planes in relief operations. According to Emmanuel Amadife, the Secretaries understood the President's request as an order and sold eight surplus C-97G cargo planes to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and U.S. based relief organizations to support the airlift of relief supplies to the starving Biafran people.¹⁴²

Nixon made two campaign speeches in the summer of 1968 where he criticized the Johnson Administration's failure to stop the growing humanitarian crisis in Nigeria and described them as doing little more than "wringing their hands" while civilians starved to death. He stated that "genocide is what is taking place right now--and starvation is the grim reaper."¹⁴³ He went on to say that, "America is not without enormous material wealth and power and ability. There is no better cause in which we might invest that power than in saving lives of innocent men, women and children who

¹⁴¹ Amadife, *Pre-Theories and Theories of Foreign Policy-Making*, 79.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 80.

¹⁴³ Stremlau, *International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War*, 289.

otherwise are doomed.”¹⁴⁴ He promised to take a new look the U.S. neutrality policy in the region. The Nixon Administration viewed their development of a Nigerian Civil War policy from a domestic perspective rather than from a foreign policy angle. Making the American public believe Nixon cared about the Igbos was more important to the Administration than actually doing anything to stop the cause of their suffering. Nixon’s Administration saw the president’s involvement in the war as a way to show his compassionate side to the American public. The Igbo people were a compelling group for Americans. They were characterized as a highly educated and largely Christian group who identified strongly with the U.S. ideals of capitalism and democracy. The Biafrans’ adroit use of propaganda reinforced these points and made their plight the cause celebre throughout the western world. The Nixon Administration was well aware of the popularity of the Biafran cause among U.S. citizens, members of Congress, the black community, and even among White House officials including Roger Morris and President Nixon. Despite these feelings, the reality of the situation demanded that the Administration walk a fine line between alienating the Federal Military Government of Nigeria and providing relief to the starving Biafrans.

Neither Nixon nor Kissinger trusted the career governmental officials at the State Department. According to William Bundy, they both believed the career officers in the State Department maintained “liberal tendencies verging on disloyalty...and resistant to change.”¹⁴⁵ Roger Morris described them as a group of insulated elites who believed they knew what was best for the nation. Morris also believed the State Department’s close relationship with foreign governments rendered them incapable of recommending the

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 289.

¹⁴⁵ William Bundy, *A Tangled Web* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), 58.

best U.S. foreign policy options to the President. He thought members of the State Department became clients of the foreign governments they worked with and refused to admit the faults of these governments. Morris concluded this was because the officials closely associated their own future with that of their client. To remedy this problem, Kissinger wanted to direct the Administration's foreign policy decisions through his office. He reasoned this would streamline the foreign policy decision-making process, and mitigate the compromised influence of the State Department.¹⁴⁶ This competition between Kissinger and the State Department would continue throughout the duration of the Nigerian Civil War policy discussion, and influence President Nixon's decision process.

The Development of Nixon's Initial Nigerian Policy

Prior to his inauguration, Nixon's foreign policy staff received copies of State Department situation report memorandums and policy recommendations from the U.S. Embassy in Lagos. These memorandums showed the lack of support from the State Department and the Embassy in Lagos for any change in U.S. foreign policy toward Nigeria. They also highlighted many of the problems the new administration would face if they tried to alter the current foreign policy.

The first such telegram from the embassy staff in Lagos came in late December 1968. It outlined the options available to the United States according to embassy officials. The telegram explained that the U.S. would likely not be able to exert much pressure on the Nigerian government because of the U.S. arms embargo placed on Nigeria. The U.S. could not count on successfully leading an international embargo on foreign weapons to either side. The memorandum explained the U.S. could only

¹⁴⁶ Morris, *Uncertain Greatness*, 47.

convince the British to stop selling arms to the Nigerians, but the Soviets would not give up their influence with the Nigerians. By forcing the British to remain neutral, the U.S. would force Nigeria further into the Soviet's arms. Similarly, the French would not likely halt their arms sales to the Biafrans either. The result would be a conflict that would increasingly become one between east and west, U.S.SR and France. The end result of such a conflict would likely be a continuation of the civil war and continued suffering by the Biafran civilians.¹⁴⁷

Increasing relief avenues was not easily accomplished either; one side or the other rejected plans to conduct daylight relief flights, or open land relief or a riverine relief corridors. The Biafrans relied on night relief flights for food shipments, and arms shipments. Each night, planes carrying arms flew with the planes carrying relief supplies to the airstrip in Uli, Biafra. Keeping the Uli airstrip open during the war was critical to the Biafran's ability to continue their fight for independence. From the Biafran perspective, daylight relief flights would certainly allow more food to reach the starving Biafran civilians, but they feared Nigerian planes would follow the relief flights to the airstrip and bomb the supplies on the ground. Since the older Soviet aircraft had limited night capabilities, the airstrip and the arms shipments were relatively safe from attack at night. Daylight relief flights for Biafra would mean that all relief could be forced during the day, and only arms flights would fly at night. This would cripple the Biafran ability to import arms and ultimately force them to surrender. Similarly the Biafrans rejected the land relief route into their territory. They argued Nigerian forces would also use the route as a high-speed avenue into the heart of Biafra. The FMG did not support a water route

¹⁴⁷ U.S. Embassy in Lagos Telegram, to U.S. State Department, DEC. 27, 1968; Nigeria; Africa; NSC Country Files; Nixon Project; National Archives at College Park, MD.

into Biafra, as they feared it would increase the flow of weapons into Biafra from the outside world.¹⁴⁸

The State Department telegram also addressed the probable result of U.S. recognition of Biafra. U.S. recognition they believed would lead to some form of independence for Biafra. The telegram explained how the Biafrans might be satisfied with some sort of limited independence arrangement, and Nigeria might also allow a portion of Biafra to remain independent. State Department officials believed that the Nigerians would only grant independence to the Igbo portions of eastern Nigeria, an area smaller than the original boundaries of the eastern region. While these possibilities seemed positive, they believed a more likely result would be continued fighting by the Biafrans until they regained their original eastern regional boundaries. The FMG also would continue to contest any Biafran aggrandizement and request more military support from the Soviets. The effect of these actions would be a continuation of the war and the suffering of civilians. Another possible, though admittedly less likely outcome of U.S. recognition of Biafra would be the complete collapse of Nigeria along regional lines. Another problem with U.S. recognition would be the loss of support from many nations within Africa who had similar minority issues of their own. The last negative outcome of recognition would be the increased risk the U.S. would place the 5,000 U.S. citizens (primarily working in the Nigerian oil industry) living in Nigeria. According to the officials in Lagos, Nigerians were already skeptical of U.S. intentions based on their lack of support so far in the war, and recognition might turn the skepticism into violence.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ U.S. Embassy in Lagos Telegram, to U.S. State Department, DEC. 27, 1968.

¹⁴⁹ U.S. Embassy in Lagos Telegram, to U.S. State Department, DEC. 27, 1968.

The same memorandum explained the key to ending the civil war was determining how to get France to agree to suspend its support for Biafra. Specifically the telegram advised the U.S. and British government should “try to ascertain whether French price for cooperation in bringing war to end is one we can pay.” The embassy officials also wrote that the FMG greatly respected Haile Selassie and appreciated his efforts on their behalf, but he was never going to be able to broker any peace agreement between the two sides. The U.S. would be better off placing less pressure on Haile Selassie personally and focus on the OAU. In their opinion, the FMG would have a harder time turning down the entire OAU than the head of one state despite the relations between the two governments.

The telegram ends with a statement directed to both the Johnson and Nixon Administrations: “I (Ambassador Matthews) can only express fervent hope administration, present and incoming, will take firm stand against any US military involvement.”¹⁵⁰ The telegram warned that any involvement would result in casualties and would only result in an escalation of the overall conflict. The war would not immediately end as a result of U.S. intervention and the U.S. government would then have to decide to increase its involvement or unceremoniously withdraw.¹⁵¹

The honeymoon period for the Nixon Administration’s Nigerian Civil War policy was non-existent. On January 22, 1969 Roger Morris wrote Henry Kissinger a memorandum that included speeches from Senators Robert C. Byrd (D, West Virginia), Richard B. Russell (D, Georgia), Edward M. Kennedy (D, Massachusetts), James B. Pearson (R, Kansas), and Charles E. Goodell (R, New York) arguing for increased U.S.

¹⁵⁰ U.S. Embassy in Lagos Telegram, to U.S. State Department, DEC. 27, 1968.

¹⁵¹ U.S. Embassy in Lagos Telegram, to U.S. State Department, DEC. 27, 1968.

involvement in Nigeria. Morris explained to Kissinger, "I think these statements should be seen as the opening salvo of Congressional pressure that is likely to become more insistent and -- depending on our movement -- less indulgent toward the new Administration."¹⁵² The next day the *Washington Post* ran a story stating that a majority of the Senate called on President Nixon to provide more aid and aircraft for the starving people caught in the Nigerian civil war. In the margins of the article Kissinger wrote, "It's time to spur State to get some action on this."¹⁵³ President Nixon had promised a review of the nation's policy regarding the Nigerian Civil War and the Senate appeared to be holding them to that promise. The Administration quickly assembled the following response to the reoccurring question about their solution to the continuing crisis in Nigeria. The draft response to this question outlined the starting position for the administration. It expressed the President's deep concern for the humanitarian disaster occurring in Eastern Nigeria. The draft continued to explain their respect for the sovereignty of the Nigerian government, and how they would do everything possible to assist the people on both sides of the conflict. The statement concluded that the Administration was reviewing their options for any future U.S. policy changes but had not made any decisions yet.¹⁵⁴

The Biafran foreign policy review was one of the first projects initiated by Kissinger's National Security staff.¹⁵⁵ They quickly put together a briefing on the Nigerian Civil War for the President that described the war thus far, the position of each side, the possibility of genocide, the politics of international relief, and other outside

¹⁵² Roger Morris, National Security Staff Member to Henry Kissinger, Presidential Assistant for National Security; Memorandum "Nigeria on the Hill", JAN. 22, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

¹⁵³ Morris to Kissinger; "Nigeria on the Hill", JAN. 22, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

¹⁵⁴ Morris to Kissinger; "Nigeria on the Hill", JAN. 22, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

¹⁵⁵ Morris, *Uncertain Greatness*, 121.

influences on the conflict. This memorandum outlined how Kissinger's staff portrayed the war and the "tribal" nature of Nigerian politics to the President.¹⁵⁶

"The tribal implications of that coup triggered in turn a sequence of assassinations, tribal atrocities and polarization culminating in Eastern Nigeria's secession as "Biafra" and the outbreak of a war 19 months ago. The war is now stalemated with Federal Military Government (FMG) troops surrounding a 7,000 square mile Biafran enclave, or about ¼ the 30,000 square miles the rebels began with. Little chance of a FMG victory within 6 months as long as arms continue to come into the Biafran enclave."¹⁵⁷

The National Security staff described the FMG as maintaining fragile alliance that protracted war was not helping. They believed that a long war might cause Gowon's removal from power, and his replacement with a less moderate head who would be "less concerned about international opinion." The memorandum explained how the more hawkish elements in the FMG had grown increasingly weary of the lack of military progress shown thus far, and blamed the predominantly white relief operations for their military inadequacy. They saw the relief agencies as sustaining the enemy with arms and food.¹⁵⁸

The staff sympathized more with the Biafran cause. They believed that Ojukwu maintained the full support of his people, and as a result, morale was high enough to continue to fight. They explained that the Biafrans were convinced that FMG victory equals Igbo massacres/genocide and therefore they would be unlikely to surrender.

¹⁵⁶ "NSC Interdepartmental Group for Africa - Background Paper on Nigeria/Biafra" FEB. 6, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

¹⁵⁷ "NSC - Background Paper on Nigeria/Biafra" FEB. 6, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

¹⁵⁸ "NSC - Background Paper on Nigeria/Biafra" FEB. 6, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

Furthermore, the NSA staff pointed to the Biafran's effective use of propaganda to win international sympathy for their cause and portray themselves as the victims of the war.¹⁵⁹

Negotiating a settlement between the two sides had proven impossible thus far in the war because neither was willing to agree to the preconditions the other demanded prior to any peace negotiations. The FMG demanded a unified Nigeria and a return to the old Federal system prior to the war. The Biafrans saw sovereignty as non-negotiable, and Ojukwu demanded a ceasefire before he would leave the country for talks. The U.S. reiterated that the FMG leadership would not survive a cease-fire or protracted war. The paper summed up the diplomatic situation as "irreconcilable".¹⁶⁰

The paper addressed the issue of genocide and explained that it was not a legitimate issue in the war. The paper cited reports from the UN Observer team that showed no evidence of genocide occurring after FMG has occupied Biafran territory. The paper explained Igbos feared Nigerians reprisal killings because of the previous slaughter of as many as 30,000 Igbos in Northern Nigeria prior to the war.¹⁶¹

The next issue covered by the paper was Biafran starvation. International relief agencies, according to U.S. estimates, fed an estimated 850,000 Nigerians and another 2,000,000 in Biafra. The paper covered the same alternative relief method issues as the State Department telegram from December 1968, adding the primary reason that the Biafrans had refused other relief options was because "they know the suffering is a political asset".¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹ "NSC - Background Paper on Nigeria/Biafra" FEB. 6, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

¹⁶⁰ "NSC - Background Paper on Nigeria/Biafra" FEB. 6, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

¹⁶¹ "NSC - Background Paper on Nigeria/Biafra" FEB. 6, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

¹⁶² "NSC - Background Paper on Nigeria/Biafra" FEB. 6, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

The role of international parties in the Nigerian civil war was another focus of the NSA background paper. They looked at the British, Soviets, French, Africans, and the UN describing the degree of their involvement and the degree of influence each had on the Nigerians and Biafrans. The British supported their former colony with small arms and ammunition, denying the sale of planes and more sophisticated weaponry. By withholding advanced weaponry from the FMG, the British limited their influence over the FMG's actions in the war and simultaneously alienated the Biafrans. As a result, none of the British peace negotiation initiatives during the war succeeded.¹⁶³ The Soviets were the major arms suppliers to the FMG during the war selling the heavy weapons and aircraft that the British were unwilling to sell. Despite these sales, the FMG denied that they were under the influence of the Soviets. They repeatedly stated that the Soviet involvement "was only a matter of wartime necessity and portends no political realignment of Nigeria's traditional pro-Western stance." Though the NSA paper seemed to believe these statements, they did report that there had been an increase in Soviet prestige and presence in Nigeria. The National Security staff was not certain of the Soviet's ultimate goals in their relationship with the Nigerians. The Soviets had limited their involvement to arms sales and had refused to send soldiers, advisors, or pilots to fight with the FMG.¹⁶⁴ According to the National Security staff, French clandestine arms sales to Biafra had allowed the Biafrans to continue the war. They believed that French President Charles De Gaulle had two major motivations: a desire to break up the Commonwealth's strong influences in West Africa and the desire to gain the U.S. and

¹⁶³ "NSC - Background Paper on Nigeria/Biafra" FEB. 6, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

¹⁶⁴ "NSC - Background Paper on Nigeria/Biafra" FEB. 6, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

British oil concessions in eastern Nigeria.¹⁶⁵ African leaders generally saw Nigeria's problems resulting from colonial boundaries that enclosed diverse populations under a single polity. The NSA attributed the near unanimous support for the FMG to African fears of secession within their own nations. The OAU consultative committee had been unsuccessful in their attempts to resolve the conflict, but was still trying to achieve results. The NSA staff concluded that the African states as a collective whole or individually did not have much leverage over either side.¹⁶⁶ The United Nations played no real role in the war. It had shown no interest in getting involved in the war, arguing that it was an internal conflict outside of its mandate.¹⁶⁷

The Johnson Administration policy had increased only food aid to Biafra without risking further involvement. Up to that point, the U.S. had provided 60% of all relief support given to the Biafrans. The official stance of the U.S. government on the need for U.S. political involvement in Nigeria was that the civil war was an internal conflict that foreign powers should only intervene to prevent civilian starvation. So far the U.S. had not recognized the Biafrans as a sovereign nation, had embargoed arms to both sides, and contributed money to the relief funds. The U.S. looked to the OAU and the British to assume the lead the peace process and the ICRC to lead the relief efforts.¹⁶⁸

This National Security Staff background paper illustrated what Kissinger and his staff knew about the civil war in Nigeria and the problems they believed they faced in crafting a new foreign policy. The paper essentially echoed the sentiment of the State Department with few exceptions. This account was a little more critical of the FMG but

¹⁶⁵ "NSC - Background Paper on Nigeria/Biafra" FEB. 6, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

¹⁶⁶ "NSC - Background Paper on Nigeria/Biafra" FEB. 6, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

¹⁶⁷ "NSC - Background Paper on Nigeria/Biafra" FEB. 6, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

¹⁶⁸ "NSC - Background Paper on Nigeria/Biafra" FEB. 6, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

acknowledged that increased U.S. involvement in the war would likely yield few positive results for the U.S. or the people in Nigeria.

Roger Morris drafted a memorandum to Kissinger on February 12, 1969 that outlined the problems and options for the President's policy towards the Nigerian Civil War. Morris saw "presidential interest in this problem as a limited two-fold aim: 1. Answer and relieve domestic pressure by demonstrating (a) the President's serious concern for suffering, and (b) that the Administration is carrying on a fresh and top priority search for practical solutions. 2. A credible try to get more food without (a) greater political involvement on either side, or (b) risk to American lives, property, and long-range political interests."¹⁶⁹

With these two general criteria the NSA staff developed six distinct U.S. policy options based on the need to increase U.S. involvement in relief operations. The first option was to increase relief efforts with the agreement of both sides. This policy would not increase U.S. political involvement in the conflict, and would maintain their ability to claim neutrality. The downside of this policy was that since neither side seemed willing to compromise on the relief options, this option was not likely to help any of the civilian victims of the war. The second option was to increase relief operations with the at least the agreement of the FMG. The U.S. would have to be willing to give greater support for the FMG (politically and/or militarily) in exchange for an agreement to daylight relief flights. The U.S. would ask for Biafran or OAU support for the plan, but would not wait on their approval. The problem with this option was that if the FMG would not agree, the Biafrans would score a major propaganda victory and the civilians would continue to

¹⁶⁹ Roger Morris to Henry Kissinger Memorandum, "The Biafran Relief Decision", FEB. 12, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

suffer. The third option called for all out support for the FMG and forcing aid on the Biafrans through airdrops of relief supplies. This option would get relief to the Biafrans and would help end the war more rapidly. The liability of this option was that the American public generally supported the Biafran cause and would not approve of an American policy obviously aimed at crushing the Biafran military. The fourth option would increase relief to the Biafrans without the support of the FMG. This would appeal to the Biafran supporters within the United States, but would put all of the relief flights at risk from Nigerian military intervention. This plan would also do nothing to help the civilians in Nigeria effected by the war and would hurt the future U.S. relationship with the Nigerian government. The fifth option called for increasing relief to Biafra without FMG agreement, while the U.S. would claim full neutrality. This plan differed from the fourth option only in the call for neutrality. While this would appeal greatly to critics in the Congress, the FMG would view it as hostile to them and public support for the Biafrans. The sixth and final option was offering full diplomatic recognition and perhaps arming the Biafrans. This action would allow the U.S. to gain another client state in the region, but might only serve to expand the conflict with increased involvement of the Soviets.¹⁷⁰

Morris explained to Kissinger the pitfalls of any of the decisions for the President. He believed that all of the decisions would indicate the administration's support for one side of the conflict or the other with the associated advantages and disadvantages that their support would entail. The State and Defense departments widely supported the

¹⁷⁰ "NSC Meeting - Biafra Relief: Principal (sic) Policy Options Summary"; FEB. 7, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

Federal side of the conflict, and they pushed the Administration to pursue option 2, expanding relief with the consent of the FMG despite potential Biafran objections.

According to Morris, the State and Defense departments believed that option 2 would require more overt support for the FMG, a step they were more than ready to take. Morris, who opposed the recommendations of the State department throughout the crisis, agreed with the pursuit of option 2 for a different reason. In his opinion this option allowed the U.S. to follow the most neutral path to a solution in the war. His advice for Kissinger was to approach both sides with a plan to set up a land relief corridor into Biafra. He saw publicizing resistance by either side as the only leverage to force compliance with a U.S. led plan. Morris pointed out that if either side balked at such an agreement, the Administration could “brand the obstructor and disengage, continuing present levels of relief with a clear conscience.”¹⁷¹ The major considerations within this plan according to Morris were that the FMG would want greater political support for their demand for one Nigeria and that our future relations with Nigeria prevent the U.S. from stigmatizing them with the rest of the world.

Morris summed up his argument by saying that the U.S. should try to remain as neutral as possible during the war. He told Kissinger that he should reconsider fully backing the “Feds at a time when the odds are at least even that they’re the wrong horse to back. My own (minority) view right now is that Biafra is going to make it one way or another.” He concluded by telling Kissinger that whatever happens in Nigeria, the U.S. will have to deal with less palatable nation run not by “the English-mannered elite we’ve known since 1960, but rather the bloated and fresh-from-the-bush Federal army, which has put automatic weapons at the service of fractious tribal loyalties.” Whether he truly

¹⁷¹ Morris to Kissinger, FEB. 12, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

believed the Biafrans would win is hard to say, but it was apparent from his concluding statements that he distrusted the Nigerians and personally wanted to see the Biafrans succeed.¹⁷²

Throughout the remainder of the war, Roger Morris continued to provide Kissinger with similar advice supporting the Biafran cause. He distrusted the motivations of the State Department officials who supported the FMG and he probably knew Kissinger's personal position on the war was more closely aligned with the pragmatists in the State Department than Morris' pro-Biafran stance. Morris most likely played on Kissinger's own distrust of the State Department and recommended neutrality as a way to prevent Kissinger from adopting the State Department's more FMG friendly position.

Domestic politics had perhaps the largest role in the determination of the proper policy choice for the Nixon Administration in the Nigerian Civil War. The two biggest domestic considerations of the Administration's policy in Nigeria according to Robert Brown (one of Nixon's Special Assistants) were the reactions of the black Americans and the creation of an urban platform issue to use against the Administration. Brown's memorandum explained that African Americans saw the current policy towards Nigeria/Biafra as unconcerned about a war that was just "blacks killing blacks."¹⁷³ Brown believed that radical black activists would pick up this as a rallying point because of its simplicity and emotional appeal. Similarly, urban politicians would use the sympathetic plight of the Biafrans to rally support like they had among "the three I's,

¹⁷² Morris to Kissinger, FEB. 12, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

¹⁷³ Robert J. Brown, (Special Assistant to the President) to Richard Nixon, (President of the United States) memorandum "Biafran and American Domestic Politics -- Proposals for Action", FEB. 18, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

Italians, Irish, and Israelis.”¹⁷⁴ Both of these groups would only serve to heighten racial and minority tensions within the country. Brown recommended appointing a high level commission to publicize U.S. relief efforts and add a more human face to the Administration’s policy. This group would also be able to provide a template for future actions in African crises. In addition to these steps, the Administration should discourage the numerous high level trips to Nigeria. He argued the multitude of visits to Nigeria sent mixed messages to the Nigerians about U.S. policy intentions, and exacerbated domestic criticisms. The final recommendation was to appoint more black officials in the State Department.¹⁷⁵

Based on this early analysis of the situation in Nigeria and at home, Kissinger and his staff persuaded President Nixon that the best course to chart for the U.S. policy in Nigeria was to appear concerned with the crisis by taking a few high profile steps like appointing a new Ambassador to Nigeria and creation of a U.S. Special Coordinator for Relief. These steps would appease the Administration’s critics temporarily, but also give the Administration time to let the situation in Nigeria develop without having to take sides. Replacing Ambassador Elbert G. Matthews appeared to be an expedient way for the Administration to distance itself from the Johnson Administration’s Nigerian policy. Critics of U.S. policy and the Biafrans associated Matthews with the “worst publicity on the Johnson policy” and believed him to be little more than a yes man for Lagos.¹⁷⁶ Matthews had served for four years as ambassador and was due to rotate out anyway, so

¹⁷⁴ Brown to Nixon, “Biafran and American Domestic Politics -- Proposals for Action”, FEB. 18, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

¹⁷⁵ Brown to Nixon, “Biafran and American Domestic Politics -- Proposals for Action”, FEB. 18, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

¹⁷⁶ Brown to Nixon, “Biafran and American Domestic Politics -- Proposals for Action”, FEB. 18, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

the move could be justified to Nigerian and Biafran supporters. Furthermore, creating a relief coordinator position would allow the President to appear to change the U.S. policy towards Nigeria without taking sides in the conflict. Morris agreed that appointing a black commissioner on relief would be a good move domestically, for the reasons Robert Brown had mentioned, and also would play well in Lagos. Morris explained that political figures in Nigeria see western relief increasingly through a racial lens. Morris summarized the feeling in Nigeria that the white relief operations and white visitors to their country all wanted to tell them how to run their country and “a negro ambassador might be very good local politics in Lagos.”¹⁷⁷

President Nixon took the advice of his National Security staff and publicly announced his appointment of Clyde Ferguson to the position of U.S. Special Coordinator for Relief on February 26, 1969.¹⁷⁸ The Nixon Administration believed Ferguson was a good fit for the job. He was distinguished law professor at Rutgers University and an outsider to Washington politics. Perhaps politically his greatest qualification for the job was his skin color. “When asked why Ferguson headed the State Department list of recommended coordinators, a senior diplomat replied, ‘What could be better than giving Teddy (Senator Edward Kennedy) a black man to lean on?’”¹⁷⁹

Administration Evaluates their Nigerian Policy

The nomination of Clyde Ferguson ended the first phase of the Nixon Administration’s involvement in the Nigerian Civil War. The general plan recommended to and accepted by President Nixon was to increase public demonstrations of White

¹⁷⁷ Brown to Nixon, “Biafran and American Domestic Politics -- Proposals for Action”, FEB. 18, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

¹⁷⁸ “Nigerian Situation Report”, FEB. 26, 1969; NSC Country Files, NACP.

¹⁷⁹ Morris, *Uncertain Greatness*, 121.

House concern and involvement while continuing the Johnson policy of pro-Federal neutrality in practice. With the immediate policy critics mollified by the Administration's initial response, the State Department and Kissinger's staff continued to monitor the diplomatic and military developments in Nigeria during the spring of 1969.

According to the State Department and the National Security Staff, the international diplomatic situation seemed to have changed little. The U.S. Embassy in Lagos sent a telegram on February 19, 1969 that more Soviet bombers (IL-28s) arrived in Nigeria and they were potentially equipped with radar to conduct night missions.¹⁸⁰ The second telegram, sent on March 10, 1969 from the U.S. Embassy in Lagos to the State Department, described the current assessment of Soviet influence in Nigeria. The telegram downplayed the importance of the Soviet influence in Nigeria despite an increased Soviet presence in Lagos, and the March 1969 port call by the Soviet fleet in Nigeria. The embassy added that Gowon had reassured the Ambassador that his relationship with the Soviets "was not ideological but rather dictated by necessity of obtaining arms which FMG cannot get from UK, U.S., or other western nations."¹⁸¹

The telegram cited an increased number of anti-western and anti-U.S. newspaper articles mostly due to frustration with the progress of the war. The embassy believed these articles might have some influence on political leaders in Nigeria, but their influence in general among the population was minimal. Despite these reassurances, the telegram did mention the minority view among some senior officials at the embassy who warned of the increased friendliness between the Nigerians and the Soviets. They also

¹⁸⁰ U.S. Embassy in Lagos to U.S. Secretary of State telegram "Nigerian Situation Report", FEB. 19, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

¹⁸¹ U.S. Embassy in Lagos to U.S. Secretary of State telegram "Current Assessment of Soviet Influence in Nigeria", MAR. 10, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

pointed to the increased size of the Soviet Embassy in Lagos as further evidence of the increased efforts by the U.S.S.R. to gain influence with the Nigerians. The bottom line of the report was that Soviet influence in Nigeria was small, and economically the Soviets were still a small part of the equation.¹⁸²

Henry Kissinger summed up the diplomatic and military situations in Nigeria to the President in two memoranda dated April 12, 1969 and May 15, 1969. Kissinger saw little evidence of movement towards a negotiated settlement of the war. He wrote that British Prime Minister Harold Wilson's visit to Nigeria went nowhere with the Nigerians. Wilson's position was equally as unpopular in the U.K. for his support of the FMG. Houphouet-Boigny of Cote d'Ivoire was not making much progress either because the Federal government did not trust him. The OAU was trying to set up peace talks in Monrovia, but neither side would come without preconditions unacceptable to the other. Kissinger added his opinion that Clyde Ferguson was not doing much either with the exception of quieting U.S. domestic criticism of the Administration's policy. Kissinger warned that if the FMG did not win soon the war would continue until at least the late summer. "One general prospect at least seems clear: every passing day increases the war weariness and political unrest on the Federal side, while it strengthens Biafran morale. And though there is no real sign of it now, a lengthening war is also bound to give Federal backers--the Soviets as well as the harried British--second thoughts. The least vulnerable party in the Nigerian tangle is the one who has invested less and influenced more than any other--General de Gaulle."¹⁸³

¹⁸² U.S. Embassy in Lagos to U.S. Secretary of State telegram "Current Assessment of Soviet Influence in Nigeria", MAR. 10, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

¹⁸³ Henry Kissinger to Richard Nixon memorandum "Status Report on the Nigerian Civil War", APR. 12, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

As predicted, the OAU peace talks in Monrovia ended without achieving any results. The Biafrans explained the reason for breaking off negotiations was the OAU's failure to describe what 'Nigerian unity' meant in terms of the future governmental relationship between Biafra and Nigeria to the satisfaction of the Biafran delegation. As they left the talks, the Biafrans called for another party to mediate future peace talks because they believed the OAU had "neither the ability or desire to bring about a peace."¹⁸⁴

In his second memorandum in May 1969, Kissinger repeated many of the Biafran criticisms of the OAU and their lack of neutrality in the negotiation process. Kissinger minimized the importance of the OAU talks. "African peace-making in this war, however, has been more talk than action. Much as the OAU parades its special mandate (and expects outsiders to accept it), they have failed on two important counts: (1) OAU bias towards the FMG is apparent, denying them any credibility as a neutral mediator of the conflict, and (2) talk of reconciliation is never coupled with realistic guarantees of Ibo safety. To their credit, even in the best of circumstances, neither side is willing to concede anything because both believe that they can win."¹⁸⁵

Kissinger's memoranda also painted a bleak picture of the Nigerian progress thus far in the war. He wrote that the Nigerian army was on the move again, but they were fighting to retake terrain they had already taken before, just to lose it to the Biafrans. Biafra was getting sufficient arms from airlift to continue to resist the Nigerians. Two of the three Nigerian divisions had yet to move in the west and south, and Kissinger

¹⁸⁴ U.S. Embassy in Lagos to U.S. Secretary of State "Nigerian Situation Report", APR. 21, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

¹⁸⁵ Kissinger to Nixon "Status Report on the Nigerian Civil War", APR. 12, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

believed that even taking the Biafran capital would likely do nothing to end the war. During the lull in the war, U.S. Embassy officials reported an increase in French arms shipments to the highest levels so far in the war.¹⁸⁶

Kissinger began his May 1969 Nigerian Civil War military situation summary with a sarcastic description the most recent ‘final push’ of the Federal military campaign as continuing for over a month. He reported that the FMG’s success in capturing the capital of Umuahia hurt the Biafrans administratively, but they were conducting a counter-attack on the city at the present. He continued his depreciating account of the Federal progress writing; “meanwhile (and equally ironic in light of the talk of a ‘final push’) the Biafrans have scored impressive victories on the southern front. They have recaptured the town of Owerri (normally a much more important possession than Umuahia).”¹⁸⁷ They have continued progress towards Port Harcourt, which in Kissinger’s opinion was the most important prize in the war. He explained that Nigerian oil facilities would seem a likely target to capture, or disable (though the Biafrans haven’t yet but might strike at them to send a message). He believed the FMG retained the advantage in the war despite their lack of overwhelming battlefield success. He explained,

The fact remains, as always, that the Federal side has the men and the material to prevail militarily in the end. Logistically, Biafra cannot win a war of attrition. But rebel resilience and staying power, embellished by Federal ineptitude, could still prolong the fighting to the point of political, if not material exhaustion on the Federal side. The key military factor is still the continuation of the arms airlift to Biafra made possible largely through clandestine French support.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶ U.S. Embassy in Lagos to U.S. Secretary of State “Nigerian Situation Report”, APR. 29, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

¹⁸⁷ Henry Kissinger to Richard Nixon memorandum “Status Report on Nigerian Civil War”, MAY 15, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

¹⁸⁸ Kissinger to Nixon “Status Report on Nigerian Civil War”, MAY 15, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP..

Within the Federal Military Government the political situation was still tenuous. Gowon replaced his corrupt division commanders despite the likelihood of tribal and regional objections. “That he took the political risk to make a switch, however, indicates Gowon’s resignation to a prolonged fight.”¹⁸⁹ It also showed that his position in power was stronger than his detractors had admitted.

The relief situation seemed no better during this same time. Despite Clyde Ferguson’s announcement that the total U.S. public and private contributions for relief operations exceeded \$31 million, relief supplies were still only arriving in Biafra through night flights.¹⁹⁰ During the spring Ferguson conducted preliminary meetings with Gowon on the subject of daylight relief flights and the establishment of a land and river relief corridors. His initial report indicated Gowon’s willingness to allow both daylight flights and the establishment of a land relief corridor.¹⁹¹ The increased spending on relief and initial agreement to the expansion of the relief corridor did little to appease the American public’s desire to stop the starvation of Biafran children. The White House reported a doubling of the number of letters sent to the State Department supporting increased involvement in the Nigerian civil war doubled, and a tripling of the same type of letters to the White House.¹⁹²

The combination of lack of Nigerian progress in the war and the public demand for increased action despite the increased U.S. funding for relief operations weighed heavily on President Nixon. Nixon began to see little value in guaranteeing the unity of

¹⁸⁹ Kissinger to Nixon “Status Report on Nigerian Civil War”, MAY 15, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

¹⁹⁰ U.S. Embassy in Lagos to U.S. Secretary of State telegram “Nigeria Situation Report”, MAR 13, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

¹⁹¹ U.S. Embassy in Lagos to U.S. Secretary of State telegram “Nigeria Situation Report”, MAR 19, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

¹⁹² U.S. Secretary of State to U.S. Embassy in Lagos telegram “Nigeria Situation Report”, APR. 2, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

Nigeria at the expense of the Biafran people. The President shared his personal feelings with Kissinger on the front of both the April and May memorandums. In the margin of Kissinger's April 1969 memorandum Nixon wrote, "I have decided that our policy supporting the Feds is wrong. They can't make it. Let's begin to get State off this kick."¹⁹³ He reiterated his support for the Biafrans on the front of the May 1969 memorandum when he wrote, "I hope the Biafrans survive!"¹⁹⁴

According to Roger Morris' account of the period and historian John Strelau's depiction of Kissinger's practical approach to the Nigerian Civil War; Kissinger probably did not share Nixon's opinions about the Biafrans. Kissinger did not believe either side was close to winning the war in Nigeria. The diplomatic attempts from the British and African were doomed to fail because of their lack of neutrality, and neither side seemed willing to sacrifice military advantage to save the lives of innocent children in Biafra. The only certainty in the war seemed to be the growing disenchantment of the U.S. public with their government's inability to feed the Biafrans. Kissinger concluded his May 1969 memorandum with the following statement:

I am satisfied thus far that our policy is being carried out with the political non-involvement and basic neutrality (standing clear of the Federals), which you instructed. It may be useful later in the summer, however, to take another look at our options -- primarily to ensure they remain open, but also to examine any new possibility that we could or should play a more active role in helping to bring this war to an end.¹⁹⁵

Given Kissinger's reluctance to become involved in the Nigerian Civil War, he obviously realized that the Administration's current policy was not satisfying its critics or

¹⁹³ U.S. Secretary of State to U.S. Embassy in Lagos telegram "Nigeria Situation Report", APR. 2, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

¹⁹⁴ Henry Kissinger to Richard Nixon memorandum "Status Report on Nigerian Civil War", MAY 15, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

¹⁹⁵ Kissinger to Nixon "Status Report on Nigerian Civil War", MAY 15, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

helping to stop the war. Events in Nigeria in early June 1969 forced the Nixon Administration to begin its policy review earlier than Kissinger had predicted.

VII Nixon Considers Increased Involvement

On June 6, 1969, a FMG aircraft shot down an ICRC relief airplane enroute to Biafra. In response to this action the ICRC suspended all of its relief flights into Biafra.¹⁹⁶ This action, and Kissinger's earlier prediction that the President would likely have to reconsider the current U.S. policy in Nigeria led to the first serious discussions about greater U.S. involvement in finding a peaceful solution to the war. The ICRC was the only relief organization operating in the region with the official sanction of the FMG. According to the Nigerians, the other religious-based relief organizations operated 'illegally' in Nigeria. Though the U.S. had given financial support and even provided some religious-based organizations with aircraft in December 1968, the U.S. had depended on the ICRC to distribute the bulk of the relief supplies that the U.S. purchased for Nigeria.

Now the U.S. would have to decide whether to shift their support to the religious organizations despite Nigerian objections or stop U.S. relief efforts completely. Neither was an appealing option for an administration that still wanted to maintain its neutrality. The only other option was to increase the efforts to negotiate alternative means for relief supplies to enter Biafra. This option meant increased U.S. political involvement in the conflict to bring both sides to the negotiating table. Such an attempt had proven elusive

¹⁹⁶ U.S. Embassy in Lagos to U.S. Secretary of State "Nigeria Situation Report", JUN. 6, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

in other diplomatic attempts, and the U.S. could not assume any greater chance of success than its predecessors.¹⁹⁷

Administration Considers the Options

On July 3, 1969 Roger Morris sent Kissinger a memorandum outlining the possible next steps in Nigeria for the Administration. He identified four broad policy choices. 1) Stay the course. A policy with little or no chance of success but required no greater involvement. 2) Walk away; and support relief when both sides agree to a relief option, but not before. Essentially tell them that the U.S. could not help those who cannot help themselves. This policy would receive criticism, but Morris thought the Administration could weather it if they remained resolute in their decision. 3) Support relief with or without Federal approval. This option would satisfy critics, but would destroy hopes of any future relationship with the Nigerians and threatened the welfare of the 5,000 U.S. citizens in Nigeria. 4) Engage in serious diplomatic efforts to end the war. Morris felt that it might work, or might not. If it did not then he said the U.S. could end their involvement and say they tried. He believed that the chances were slim that option would work. His recommendation to Kissinger was, "Frankly, I would recommend your support for a diplomatic effort to stop the war."¹⁹⁸

Four days later, Kissinger sent another status report on the Nigerian civil war to President Nixon and included his own recommendation on the next steps for the U.S. policy. He told the President that there was no plausible alternative to daylight flights. The progress on the other relief corridors had not gained support from either side of the

¹⁹⁷ Roger Morris to Henry Kissinger memorandum "Federal Nigeria and the Relief Airlift", JUN. 13, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

¹⁹⁸ Roger Morris to Henry Kissinger memorandum "Next Steps in Nigeria", JUL. 3, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

conflict. Kissinger explained that neither side trusted Clyde Ferguson. The Federals saw him as soft on the Biafrans, and the Biafrans believed he was too closely associated with the U.S. State Department. Hawks within the FMG renewed their rhetoric about the legitimacy of starvation as a weapon of war. Statements such as these had dimmed the world's opinion of the Federal side and added credence to the Biafrans' fears of the FMG's genocidal intentions. Kissinger explained that, "our present policy--limited largely to exhortation by both sides--seems at the end of its usefulness. The heart of the relief problem is clearly the war itself. So long as the fighting continues, both sides will have reasons to reject relief and more Biafrans will starve."¹⁹⁹ Kissinger offered the President two basic policy options 1) stay the course and accept the current futility of U.S. actions, or 2) make a serious attempt to end the war.²⁰⁰

He discounted the first basic option as unrealistic given the current state of relief in Biafra, and offered three options (that could be enacted not necessarily to the exclusion of one another) to break the impasse. The first option was contesting the FMG relief embargo. This option would anger the Nigerians, but would allow the U.S. to appear less compliant towards FMG demands. The second option was to ask the UN to provide the guarantee of safety for daylight flights. This would eliminate the Biafran excuse that the FMG air force would use daylight flights to attack their airfields and force them either to agree to the daylight flights or look like they were denying relief to their own people. The third option was to separate the Administration's relief efforts and their pro-Federal stance. Kissinger explained, "We can reasonably expect dramatic window dressing of this kind to soften the domestic critics for a while. But your greater involvement also

¹⁹⁹ Henry Kissinger to Richard Nixon memorandum "Next Steps in Nigeria/Biafra", JUL. 7, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

²⁰⁰ Kissinger to Nixon "Next Steps in Nigeria/Biafra", JUL. 7, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

raises expectations of tangible progress.”²⁰¹ This was not an action memorandum and did not recommend one action over another. It is likely that Kissinger was merely giving the President some advanced warning that he would need to make a policy decision soon.

A week later Nixon realized that he needed to make that decision. On July 14, 1969, an ad appeared in the *New York Times* explaining that the Nigerian Civil War was killing more children than soldiers. It asked why the President of the United States, the most powerful man in the world, was not doing anything. According to a memorandum from Kissinger, the President read the ad and told him: “Henry, I agree with this. Moreover, I have decided that I (not State) should try to do something to conciliate the situation. Haile Selassie agrees. * Please give me a plan.”²⁰² Kissinger’s staff produced another situation update for the President outlining the following topics: “where we stand”, “our choices”, “disengagement”, “trying a settlement”, and a “summary” with a recommendation.

The paragraph describing, “where we stand,” explained the current state of relief operations in Nigeria. Kissinger opened with a description of the political climate within the Nigerian government. He said that hardliners were in charge of the government and that these elements were frustrated with the stalemate. The recent downing of the ICRC flight was an example of how these hardliners were taking their frustrations out on the international relief operations. He also explained that he expected the daylight flight talks to drag out, and that the FMG would not agree to airdrops. This effectively ruled

²⁰¹ Kissinger to Nixon “Next Steps in Nigeria/Biafra”, JUL. 7, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

* President and Emperor Haile Selassie met at the White House in July 1969. Nixon asked him which side was to blame for the failure to reach an agreement in the Nigerian civil war. The emperor said that he believed the Biafrans were 80% at fault and the FMG the remaining 20%. He also told Nixon that he thought US involvement would be helpful in getting both sides to the negotiating table.

²⁰² Alexander Butterfield to Henry Kissinger memorandum “American’s for Biafran Relief”, JUL. 14, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

out increasing relief operations through the most neutral channels. Kissinger concluded this section with a summary of the likely courses of action of the other international participants in the conflict. In his opinion, the U.S. could no longer count on any of these third parties to take the lead in brokering a political settlement. “Nobody else will bail us out. Moscow can bide its time. Paris will wait to be courted. London will take the public heat. Unguided, the Africans are hopeless.”²⁰³

Kissinger stated that the president had to make a policy change. The current policy was a failure both in Nigeria and in the U.S. Domestic critics and both sides in Nigeria doubted the sincerity of U.S. neutrality. The Nigerians had taken advantage of the current policy and were, in Kissinger’s words, “slapping us and getting away with it.”²⁰⁴

Disengagement, according to the memorandum would not be popular at home. Such a move would cripple the relief operations that would lose about half of their financial backing. The move would also sour the already tenuous relationship between the U.S. and the FMG. The only certain result of withdrawal would be the continued starvation of the Nigerian and Biafran people.²⁰⁵

At this point, Kissinger agreed with Roger Morris’s suggestion to try and negotiate a settlement between the two sides. The benefits to a settlement according to Kissinger were twofold: it would provide the Administration with credibility at home and abroad, and would prevent three possible negative outcomes, stalemate and the complete victory by either side. The disadvantages of a stalemate were the increased reliance on

²⁰³ Henry Kissinger to Richard Nixon memorandum “Nigerian-Biafran Peace Initiative”, AUG. 7, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

²⁰⁴ Kissinger to Nixon “Nigerian-Biafran Peace Initiative”, AUG. 7, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

²⁰⁵ Kissinger to Nixon “Nigerian-Biafran Peace Initiative”, AUG. 7, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

foreigners and the rising likelihood of a new east versus west conflict in Africa. There were three problems with a FMG victory: the possibility of genocide against the Igbos, potential damage to oil infrastructure by Igbo guerilla action, and the rise of a repressive regime in Lagos who would likely spark further regional conflict among other minority groups. An independent Biafra on the other hand, would encourage the disintegration of Nigeria and encourage more involvement of great powers as had occurred in the Middle East. Simply put, U.S. interests rested in a unified Nigeria. Kissinger continued to try and follow a neutral route by justifying that settling the war did not necessarily mean that the U.S. was pro-Biafra. In Kissinger's opinion, settlement was the best interests of the west. A prolonged war was only a good thing for the Soviets, who would increase their influence over the Nigerians through continued arms sales. The British influence in the country would continue to decrease at the same time. Kissinger believed that the U.S. should act like a world power and act decisively to stop the war.²⁰⁶

The U.S. could not create a peace without the help of other nations. Kissinger explained that the U.S. needed the support of the French to get the Biafrans' attention. Kissinger predicted that the French wanted to get out of the war, but they would not simply abandon the Biafrans. The support of the Canadians would also assist in the process because of their negotiating skills. Prime Minister Trudeau would likely agree to help if he could receive some credit for solving the crisis. In Africa, the Ghanaians would gladly assume the role as front men in the settlement process. Finally, Kissinger felt that the British should be left out. He explained that they would at best, take too much of the credit for any peace deal, and at worst, might sabotage the agreement. Furthermore they were far too involved to appear neutral in any negotiation. The best

²⁰⁶ Kissinger to Nixon "Nigerian-Biafran Peace Initiative", AUG. 7, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

role for them would be to coach the FMG negotiators so they could attempt to equal the abilities of the Biafrans.²⁰⁷

Kissinger summarized his recommendation stating: “Trying a political settlement is the only defensible basis for disengagement. It is in our interests. It may be possible. Its costs -- even in failure -- are less than those of inaction. Our dilemma is not in the selection of a client. The Feds must clearly be our choice. The problem is heading right now towards a disastrous result for both of us.”²⁰⁸

Despite Nixon’s request for a plan of action, Kissinger had not brought a decision memorandum to the President where he asked for definitive guidance on a policy change. Kissinger was still trying to keep the U.S. from choosing sides and getting involved. He had thus far only updated the President on the changing situation in Nigeria, but did not want the President to commit to any particular action. On August 7, 1969, Kissinger finally sent a decision memorandum to President Nixon that marked something of a half step toward U.S. political involvement in the Nigerian civil war.

Thus far, all of the peace initiatives from third parties had failed. Kissinger believed that Nixon’s prestige would force a peace talk between the two sides. At this point negotiations might be more appealing to both sides because the war was again stalemated and both could see value in serious negotiations. The problem was not getting the two sides to the table; it was keeping them there that had always proven difficult. The Federal government was particularly wary of any peace talks since the Biafrans had out negotiated them several times in the past. International reaction to the talks would be mixed. The British would want to take an active role, but Kissinger advised against any

²⁰⁷ Kissinger to Nixon “Nigerian-Biafran Peace Initiative”, AUG. 7, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

²⁰⁸ Kissinger to Nixon “Nigerian-Biafran Peace Initiative”, AUG. 7, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

British involvement for previously discussed bias reasons. He repeated that the French might welcome a way to get out of supporting the Biafrans in this war, but would still be on the look out for a pro-federalist bias. The Soviets would not be enthusiastic of a U.S. brokered peace because they had nothing to gain with peace talks and much to gain with a prolonged war. The Africans were “probably resigned to their impotence and would quietly welcome a serious U.S. initiative.”²⁰⁹ They would not have the support of all African leaders and would cry “neo-colonialism” if it didn’t work out.²¹⁰

Kissinger outlined four separate formats for the peace talks: 1) Four power discussions (U.S., UK, U.S.S.R, France). The problems with this option were that French would see it as 3 against 1, and Africans would see it as a reminder of their subordinate status. 2) U.S.-Canadian led talks. The Canadians would bring shrewd and practiced negotiators to assist in the agreement, but it would place them in an awkward position between Great Britain and France. 3) U.S.-Ethiopian led talks. This option would cover the African flank, but the Biafrans did not trust the Ethiopians and the Ethiopians were not skilled negotiators. 4) U.S. good offices, U.S. independent talks. The benefit was that the Administration would have the freedom to do what it thought was right without having to consult or respect the wishes of others. The significant negative was if it failed the Administration would have no one else to blame.²¹¹

Taking his usual careful path, Kissinger recommended that there was no need to decide on one of the four options immediately. He advised that his staff could do some behind the scenes work with each side to see what would work. This way the White House could exclude the State Department from involvement. This would give the secret

²⁰⁹ Kissinger to Nixon “Nigerian-Biafran Peace Initiative”, AUG. 7, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

²¹⁰ Kissinger to Nixon “Nigerian-Biafran Peace Initiative”, AUG. 7, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

²¹¹ Kissinger to Nixon “Nigerian-Biafran Peace Initiative”, AUG. 7, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

negotiations more credibility with the Biafrans who distrusted the State Department as pro-Federal. Kissinger believed this process had a fair chance of working, and saw few of the grave pitfalls of the immediate action. He further explained that since there were no other peace initiatives in progress at the present time, their efforts would not spoil any other peace negotiations. Kissinger asked for the President's approval for Kissinger's staff to allow Norman Cousins (the editor of *Saturday Review* in New York City) to travel to Biafra and organize a meeting with Biafran representatives and members of Kissinger's staff in New York. Nixon approved these meetings at the bottom of the memorandum.

Meanwhile, the ICRC had imposed a deadline on September 1, 1969 for the FMG to negotiate some type of agreement to daylight relief flights into Biafra. On August 30, 1969, Roger Morris wrote Kissinger a memorandum on the situation. Morris's explanation of the situation indicated an ICRC pullout from Nigeria would leave the U.S. with only the 'illegally operating' religious-based relief groups or pulling all relief out of Nigeria.²¹² Kissinger never had to address this issue because the Nigerians reached an agreement with the ICRC with two stipulations on daylight relief. These stipulations were: 1) The relief organizations had to mark any aircraft remaining on ground at night on the Biafran airfields so the Nigerian air force pilots could distinguish them and 2) The Nigerians would agree to the flights as long as they did not interfere with Nigerian military objectives.²¹³

²¹² Roger Morris to Henry Kissinger memorandum "Biafran Relief", AUG. 30, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

²¹³ U.S. Embassy in Lagos to U.S. Secretary of State telegram "ICRC Daylight Flight Agreement", SEP. 3, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

U.S. Actively Seeks Daylight Relief Flight Resolution

After the Nigerians had agreed to ICRC daylight relief flights, Kissinger sent a decision memorandum to the President on September 20, 1969 recommending he push more openly for a bilateral agreement on daylight relief flights. The U.S. initiative would have the ICRC propose internationally inspected daylight relief flights that neither side could use for military advantage. The FMG had already agreed to such an action for a three-week trial period. The biggest hurdle would be getting the Biafrans to agree as well. They would still be worried about the FMG using the flights to attack their airfields. Kissinger pointed to two major motives for the Biafran's demand for FMG guarantees to allow the daylight flights safe passage: the first was their fear that the FMG would abuse the route while the world did nothing to stop them, and the second, and more cynical reason, was the Biafrans wanted to stall the process so they would not look bad by refusing the help. Kissinger said the U.S. could eliminate these considerations by giving the ICRC more sophisticated communications equipment and get Canadian aircraft to escort the relief flights. These two steps would prevent any potential Nigerian abuses and eliminate any legitimate Biafran excuses.²¹⁴

Kissinger told the President, "I believe that the initiative here is worth seizing."²¹⁵ He saw no other alternative to increasing U.S. involvement in Nigeria. Doing nothing would cause more Biafran starvation, the continued decline of U.S. Nigerian relations, and the total reliance nighttime airlift by Church voluntary agencies to deliver aid into Biafra. These agencies were operating illegally and Kissinger feared that since most of

²¹⁴ Henry Kissinger to Richard Nixon memorandum "Presidential Initiative in Nigeria/Biafra Relief Impasse", SEP. 20, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

²¹⁵ Kissinger to Nixon "Presidential Initiative in Nigeria/Biafra Relief Impasse", SEP. 20, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

them were using U.S. planes and pilots, their eventual interdiction by Nigerian aircraft would bring the two countries into political conflict with each other. He saw daylight flights as “the only real remedy to these considerable risks.”²¹⁶ Nixon approved the memorandum and wrote “good work!” below his initials.²¹⁷

Kissinger’s recommendation to President Nixon to negotiate a peace settlement in Nigeria without the State Department was part of a growing pattern of centralization of the Administration’s Nigeria policy. Three days prior, one of Kissinger’s NSC staff members, William Watts sent the Secretary of State’s Executive Secretary, Theodore Eliot a memorandum giving him the President’s instruction “that all policy telegrams and major public statements concerning the Nigerian Civil War should receive a White House clearance.”²¹⁸ Kissinger and Morris long believed that the State Department’s obvious bias towards the FMG prevented them from implementing the President’s intent to pursue a neutral policy in Nigeria.

An example of the disagreement between the National Security staff’s position and that of the State Department was evident in a memorandum from Morris to Kissinger describing the State Department’s proposed comments for the incoming U.S. Ambassador in Lagos, William C. Trueheart. The State Department comments, according to Morris were completely “contrary to the President’s policy as I understand it.”²¹⁹ Morris highlighted one passage in the text that exemplified the deliberate modification of the President’s neutrality policy. The offending passage would have had

²¹⁶ Kissinger to Nixon “Presidential Initiative in Nigeria/Biafra Relief Impasse”, SEP. 20, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

²¹⁷ Kissinger to Nixon “Presidential Initiative in Nigeria/Biafra Relief Impasse”, SEP. 20, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

²¹⁸ William Watts to Theodore Eliot memorandum “Memorandum for Theodore Eliot”, SEP. 9, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

²¹⁹ Roger Morris to Henry Kissinger memorandum “For HAK”, SEP. 22, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

the new U.S. Ambassador tell General Gowon that the United States “has made it clear that it supports the concept of ‘One Nigeria’.”²²⁰ Morris also told Kissinger that the State Department wanted the President to send Gowon a “love letter” in their words, “conveying our admiration (not appreciation) for Gowon’s handling of ICRC negotiations.”²²¹

Despite his reservations about the State Department’s biases, Morris recommended to Kissinger in a later memorandum that they include Under-Secretary Elliot Richardson in their covert Cousins peace talk initiative. Morris felt that greater White House and State Department/African Bureau dialog would produce a more unified U.S. approach to the Nigeria/Biafra policy. He argued that the current circumvention of the State Department was hindering the President’s daylight flight initiative.²²² Kissinger obviously disagreed with Morris because he never involved anyone from the State Department in any of his secret negotiation plans.

Daylight relief flight negotiations with Ojukwu and the Biafran government had not gone as smoothly as those with the FMG. The Administration had suspected that convincing Biafra to accept the daylight flights would not be easy. Norman Cousins sent Kissinger a memorandum outlining the Biafran responses to the Administration’s questions about the Biafran view on U.S. brokered peace talks and daylight relief flights. Biafran Traveling Foreign Affairs Minister G.A. Onyegbula expressed a willingness to have the U.S. begin peace negotiations either privately or publicly. He told Cousins that the U.S. could serve in any capacity either as the principle in the talks or merely to bring

²²⁰ Roger Morris to Henry Kissinger memorandum “For HAK”, SEP. 22, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

²²¹ Roger Morris to Henry Kissinger memorandum “For HAK”, SEP. 22, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

²²² Roger Morris to Henry Kissinger memorandum “Nigeria/Biafra Initiatives”, SEP. 30, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

the two sides to the table. He explained that the two sides did not need a third party to facilitate the negotiations, but the prestige of the United States would guarantee that neither side would refuse the invitation to the talks. Cousins asked how specific and direct the U.S. proposal for talks should be, Onyegbula said that there was no need to be too specific, but talks should begin before the first of November 1969. Finally, Onyegbula said the Biafrans would be willing to negotiate without any preconditions so long as the FMG agreed to do the same.²²³

Obviously satisfied with the Biafrans' willingness to compromise, the Administration increased their direct involvement and sent Roger Morris to Norman Cousins' New York apartment to speak directly with Onyegbula. He also scheduled a separate meeting with Nigerian Foreign Minister Okoi Arikpo. The meeting with the Biafran delegation occurred on September 25, 1969. Morris explained to Kissinger in his memorandum of conversation that he spoke little in the meeting, but wanted to hear what the Biafrans had to say and ask some questions.

Similar to the conversation with Cousins, the Biafrans agreed to "preliminary meetings without a cease-fire."²²⁴ They added that Ojukwu could not attend any meeting without a ceasefire because it would be militarily disadvantageous for him to leave his army during the fighting. The Biafrans also modified their previous statement, which had denied the need for a neutral third party to mediate any peace talks. They explained that though the U.S. did not have to serve in that role, the U.S. would be the best country to fill the position since other nations had shown themselves too biased in the past. They

²²³ G.A. Onyegbula, Biafran Traveling Foreign Affairs Minister, to Henry Kissinger Letter "Norman Cousins' meeting", SEP. 24, 1969

²²⁴ Memorandum of Conversation at Norman Cousins' home in NY City between a Biafran delegation and Roger Morris and Charles Hermann (NSC Staff), SEP. 25, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

agreed to OAU participation in the talks as long as their allies (Tanzania, Cote d'Ivoire, Gabon, and Zambia) were among those countries participating.

The Biafran delegation probed Morris on the Administration's continued desire for OAU involvement in the civil war. Morris explained the U.S. reasoning as three fold. 1) U.S. did not want the settlement to appear to be imposed from the outside. 2) The Administration believed a lasting settlement would require the involvement of and enforcement by an external authority. 3) The U.S. believed in encouraging regional responsibility in the developing world. The Biafrans explained that their most important consideration in any peace agreement was the security of the Igbo people.

When asked by Morris about their feelings of the involvement outside parties in the peace talks, the Biafrans believed the Soviets would sabotage any peace efforts, but the British were integral in bringing the FMG to the table. They also warned that the longer the war continued, the greater the Soviet influence would be in Nigeria.

On the subject of relief, the Biafrans said that the ICRC agreement with the FMG for daylight relief flights was unacceptable and differed from the original agreement. They explained that the Nigerian's had only agreed to the arrangement as long as it did not prejudice military operations by the FMG. This exception essentially allowed the Nigerians to interdict the airfield whenever they desired and could use the excuse of military necessity to justify their actions. As a result, the Biafrans could not accept the agreement, leaving night flights as the only acceptable solution to the situation. The Biafrans indicated that daylight flights would be more acceptable if the U.S. promised to take action against the FMG if they violated their part of the agreement.

The delegation's bottom line in the meeting was that they would not accept any peace resolution that called for a return to the political pre-war status quo. They stated that they had fought too long and suffered too much at this point to give it all up to the Nigerians.²²⁵

Kissinger met with Nigerian Foreign Minister Arikpo at the Nigerian Ambassador's residence in Washington D.C. on October 15, 1969 to discuss the Nigerian position on peace negotiations. Morris advised Kissinger to approach the Biafrans with a statement from the President guaranteeing the inviolability of the Red Cross daylight flights, and to lock the FMG into an agreement on the same. Morris also advised Kissinger to let Arikpo do the talking in his meeting, but Morris gave him a few questions to ask the foreign minister: Were the Federals willing to negotiate? What they needed from Biafra to get started? How could the U.S. help in the process? He also asked Kissinger to explain to Arikpo that the U.S. was trying to get the Biafrans to accept daylight relief flights.²²⁶

The Nigerian delegation opened the meeting with a summary of the military situation in their country. Ambassador Iyalla said that the Biafrans were divided and weak and that "Nigerian victory was imminent."²²⁷ Arikpo said that Biafran high "morale was an illusion."²²⁸ He explained that the only reason Ojukwu was not facing serious challenges was that the various tribal groups within the region could not agree

²²⁵ Memorandum of Conversation Biafran delegation and Morris, SEP. 25, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

²²⁶ Roger Morris to Henry Kissinger memorandum "Meeting with Foreign Minister Arikpo of Nigeria Today, 4:00 pm", OCT. 15, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

²²⁷ Morris to Kissinger "Meeting with Minister Arikpo", OCT. 15, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

²²⁸ Morris to Kissinger "Meeting with Minister Arikpo", OCT. 15, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

among themselves. He told Kissinger that the Igbos were a charismatic and savvy group who had led the rest of the unsophisticated people in the east into disaster.²²⁹

Iyalla criticized the U.S. for its criticism of the FMG and the support of illegal relief flights. He said the U.S. acted like Nigeria's enemy instead of as their friend. He felt the U.S. should support the FMG because a rebellion would have disastrous effects on Nigeria as well as the whole of Africa. Kissinger countered these criticisms with a question of his own about why the FMG continued to be so hard on the U.S. yet treated the French with kid gloves despite their obvious support of the Biafrans? "Arikpo replied that Nigeria would 'have their pound of flesh' from the French sooner or later."²³⁰ They did not want to anger the French at this point in the conflict fearing that such a move might encourage greater French intervention that would prolong the war.

Kissinger asked the delegation if the FMG interdict the airstrip at Uli to stop arms shipments. Arikpo said that they could not because the Brits were unwilling to give them the type of military assistance they required and unwilling to ask for it from the Soviets. Kissinger then asked what kind of position was Gowon in within his own government? Arikpo explained that Gowon often stood alone as a voice of moderation against his own Executive Council. An example of this was his unilateral agreement to daylight flights. "As for Gowon's position, Arikpo said simply that a coup d'etat could 'never be ruled out' in a military regime." Baba Gana (the Nigerian permanent secretary for External Affairs) reiterated that Gowon's agreement to daylight flights had been a bold and

²²⁹ Morris to Kissinger "Meeting with Minister Arikpo", OCT. 15, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

²³⁰ Morris to Kissinger "Meeting with Minister Arikpo", OCT. 15, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

generous move, and that the U.S. should publicly give them credit for it. He also suggested that the rebels should have to “account for their refusal.”²³¹

Arikpo said, “General Gowon had often reflected... that the U.S. had no real interest in Nigeria. Thus it was futile to expect any positive help from us.”²³² Arikpo, obviously trying to remind Kissinger of the importance of Nigerian oil to the U.S., said that the U.S. did have a significant interest in Nigeria. Arikpo added a veiled threat to Kissinger, in hopes of persuading him to give Nigeria more support, that “if we (the U.S.) did (have interests in Nigeria), we should be willing to take a hand in preserving that interest.”²³³

The meeting ended with a discussion of a serious discussion of how the U.S. could assist in ending the war. Specifically, Arikpo wondered if the U.S. would be willing to tell the French that the time had come to end this dangerous civil war. He believed there was no question that the Biafran secession was quite simply an adventure conceived and sustained from the Elysee Palace. He told Kissinger the French were the key to everything.

If President Nixon is truly interested in ending the suffering and fighting, the U.S. would go to the French, make our own position clear on the preservation of Nigeria and offer, in effect, to act as a go-between among Paris and Lagos to help the FMG find out “the necessary price”. The FMG was prepared, Arikpo said, to examine “what’s the deal.”²³⁴

Neither side still seemed willing to move from their original bargaining position. The Biafrans insisted on a ceasefire before beginning peace talks and the Nigerians demanded the preservation of Nigeria’s pre-war boundaries. Both sides saw the value in

²³¹ Morris to Kissinger “Meeting with Minister Arikpo”, OCT. 15, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

²³² Morris to Kissinger “Meeting with Minister Arikpo”, OCT. 15, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

²³³ Morris to Kissinger “Meeting with Minister Arikpo”, OCT. 15, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

²³⁴ Morris to Kissinger “Meeting with Minister Arikpo”, OCT. 15, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

a U.S. brokered peace agreement, because both believed the U.S. would support their side of the conflict. At this point the Administration must have realized their peace negotiations would do nothing more than those attempted by the OAU.

Roger Morris continued to support the Biafrans even in light of their recent refusal to agree to daylight relief flights. Morris continued to try and prevent Kissinger from siding with the State Department and ending the peace talk and expanded relief negotiations. On October 24, 1969, Morris warned Kissinger in another memorandum that the State Department was obstructing the President's peace plan. Though the State Department had agreed to develop a policy to meet the President's wishes for an unbiased approach to the Nigerian peace process, Morris complained that they took six weeks and produced a plan "opposite to the President's intentions."²³⁵ He included a "bootleg copy" of a State Department memorandum from David Newsome to the Secretary of State outlining the situation in Nigeria. Morris highlighted sections of the memorandum that he disagreed with and added editorial comments for Kissinger's review. Newsome's assessment of the political situation in Nigeria he explained the two sticking points in the talks. According to Newsome, Gowon insisted on Nigerian unity and Ojukwu demanded an unconditional ceasefire before talks. Morris wrote, "Wrong for both!" in the margin of the page. Another passage emphasized the futility of negotiations stating the "asking prices are irreconcilable." Again, Morris wrote, "NO!" in the margin. Obviously from Morris' conversations with the Biafrans and Nigerians, he believed that both sides were more flexible than the memorandum suggested.

²³⁵ Roger Morris to Henry Kissinger memorandum "Nigeria/Biafra Peace Initiative", OCT. 24, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

It appears that Morris believed Newsome was using inaccurate information to inject doubts in the Secretary of State's mind on the subject of peace negotiations. The memorandum concluded with two statements on the possibilities of negotiations with which Morris indicated his agreement. The first stated, "While it is not our place to speculate * on the terms of settlement, we believe a basis for exploratory discussions exists."²³⁶ The second addressed the role of outsiders in the conflict resolution. Newsome wrote he felt "direct U.S. mediating role is unwise and that we should confine ourselves to private, diplomatic support for American mediations efforts."²³⁷

Kissinger never sent a memorandum to Under-Secretary of State Elliot Richardson disclosing his staff's secret negotiations with both sides in Nigeria. Kissinger most likely did this to provide the White House with a cover in case their secret plans failed. By allowing the State Department to continue its pro-Federal stance, Kissinger could assume that the U.S. would retain the sympathies of the Nigerian government. Regardless of his intentions, the State Department and the U.S. Embassy in Lagos continued to push for greater support of the FMG. In a telegram from the Ambassador to the Assistant Secretary of State, David Newsome pushed for a public statement from the U.S. government announcing Biafra's unwillingness to accept the daylight relief flight agreement. He told Newsome that such a statement could potentially help the relief situation by forcing the Biafrans to accept the agreement. From a diplomatic perspective, such an action would let all of the parties involved know that if the U.S. threatened to take an action (like their threats to make a public statement in case of disagreement to a

* (Underlined portions reflect similar markings by Morris to the original document.)

²³⁶ David Newsome to the Under Secretary of State memorandum "Nigeria -- Recommendations of African Interdepartmental Group -- Information Memorandum", OCT. 24, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

²³⁷ Newsome to the Under Secretary of State "Nigeria -- Recommendations of African Interdepartmental Group -- Information Memorandum", OCT. 24, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

plan) they would follow through. Newsome's last point, the point he believed was the most important, was that forcing daylight relief flights would prevent other expensive relief schemes from developing. He was referring specifically to Clyde Ferguson's latest plan for the U.S. deployment of an aircraft carrier and helicopters to the region to airlift relief supplies into Biafra. He viewed this plan as cost prohibitive and explained it would drastically increase U.S. involvement in the conflict.²³⁸

U.S. Halts Diplomatic Efforts

With the Biafran official refusal to allow daylight relief flights into their territory despite Presidential assurances for their safety, even pro-Biafran Roger Morris recognized the need to distance the Administration from the Biafran cause. He sent a memorandum to Kissinger prior to Kissinger's lunch meeting with Elliot Richardson recommending the U.S. should "bring the Biafrans to public account eventually for their rejection (if it sticks) simply to protect the President."²³⁹ While Morris recognized the futility of negotiating the daylight relief flight plan, he did not give up on the peace negotiation possibilities. Morris recommended that Kissinger "suggest to Richardson that he take a very flexible, even-handed approach on the problem in his talks with the British and the French."²⁴⁰ Morris believed the State Department should not overly defer to British demands in any peace negotiations, and "should not turn a deaf ear to the

²³⁸ Newsome to the Under Secretary of State "Nigeria -- Recommendations of African Interdepartmental Group -- Information Memorandum", OCT. 24, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

²³⁹ Roger Morris to Henry Kissinger memorandum "Nigeria/Biafra at your lunch with Elliot Richardson today", OCT. 30, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

²⁴⁰ Morris to Kissinger "Nigeria/Biafra at your lunch with Elliot Richardson today", OCT. 30, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

overtures from the French, when the Federalists are asking us to have a dialogue with the Quai on ending the war.”²⁴¹

Kissinger must have agreed with Morris’ recommendation on exposing Biafra’s unwillingness to agree to the daylight relief plan because two weeks later the State Department issued a statement on the state of U.S. relief efforts in the Nigerian Civil War. The State Department’s press release discussed the steps the U.S. had taken to assist the relief operations including the appointment of Clyde Ferguson, \$65 million in U.S. relief donations, and failed attempts to arrange bi-lateral peace agreements. The statement explained that current relief efforts were not enough at this time to end the suffering. The ICRC had suspended night relief flights, and the remaining flights were also used to bring weapons into Biafra. The statement highlighted the FMG agreement to daylight flights on 13 September 1969 but added that the Biafrans had not approved the plan and cited security concerns. Though the President had worked to ensure security for the flights with the FMG and UN observers, the Biafrans refused to accept this vital relief option. The Biafrans had shifted their attention to a waterborne relief operation on the Cross River, despite the fact that water levels in the River would not be high enough for months to support large-scale river traffic. During the intervening months people would starve. The press statement concluded that daylight flights were the only way to get food in sufficient quantities now.²⁴²

At this point, Henry Kissinger and President Nixon seemed to have washed their hands of the whole affair. Kissinger did not send Nixon any further status reports or

²⁴¹ Morris to Kissinger “Nigeria/Biafra at your lunch with Elliot Richardson today”, OCT. 30, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

²⁴² Copy of State Department Press Release “Status of US Relief Efforts”, NOV. 11, 1969; NSC Country Files; NACP.

pursue any more secret negotiations. Even with reports of the continued starvation crisis in Eastern Nigeria after the war ended, Nixon asked Kissinger, ““They’re going to let them starve, aren’t they Henry?’...‘Yes’, came the almost perfunctory answer, and the two men went on to discuss foreign policy passages in the coming speech.”²⁴³ The State Department press release had obviously provided the Administration with a way to publicly discredit the Biafrans and justify their disengagement with the Nigerian Civil War to the American public.

At the same time, public interest in the Nigerian Civil War had also begun to wane in the U.S. The number of *New York Times* articles about Nigeria or Biafra had dropped in half from an average of 29 articles throughout Nixon’s first nine months in office to an average of 16 between October and December 1969.²⁴⁴ Meanwhile, the ICRC halted all relief operations for the duration of the war. The U.S. continued to send relief donations through the religious-based relief organizations, but the White House stopped all senior level attempts to negotiate alternative relief methods. By January 12, 1970, Biafra had surrendered and the Nixon White House could finally turn its attention elsewhere.

²⁴³ Morris, *Uncertain Greatness*, 129.

²⁴⁴ New York Times Company, *New York Times Index 1969*, vol. 57 (New York: New York Times Company, 1970).

VIII Conclusions

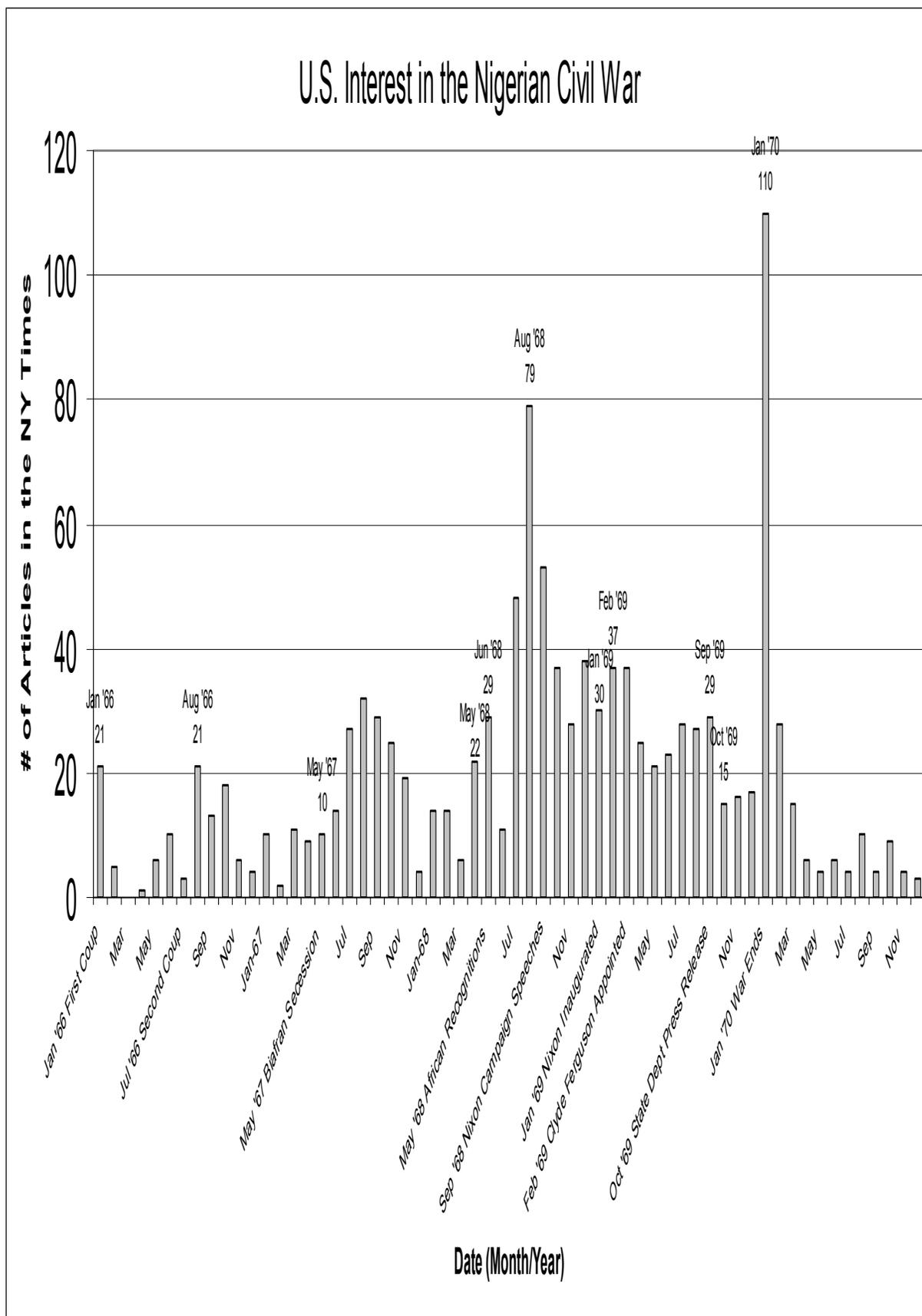
Biafran images of starving children increased the interest of the American people and their Presidents in the conduct of the Nigerian Civil War. Both Presidents focused most of their concern for the starving people caught in between the warring sides. With few exceptions, neither Johnson nor Nixon was ever particularly interested in the survival of an independent Biafra. Most Americans did not understand who the Biafrans were or why they had chosen to secede, and most politicians saw a unified Nigeria as best serving the interests of the United States. Given these general feelings, the Nixon Administration needed to craft a foreign policy towards Nigeria that provided the maximum amount of relief to the civilian victims of the war without endangering the U.S. relationship with Nigeria.

The Johnson Administration had attempted to follow a neutral course that acknowledged the conflict as an internal Nigerian problem. Biafran propaganda highlighting the problems of this policy to the American public, forced the Nixon Administration to differentiate its position. Despite an original inclination to support the Biafrans, Kissinger eventually convinced Nixon to pursue a policy that highly publicized relief efforts while doing little diplomatically to solve the war. As the humanitarian crisis continued into the late spring 1969, and the ICRC halted its relief flights in to Biafra after the downing of one of their aircraft, the American public demanded more U.S. action. Kissinger advised Nixon on a second policy option; aggressively pursue additional relief operations while secretly testing each side's willingness to compromise. This action

would placate the U.S. public and protect the Administration from publicly attempting to negotiate an end to the war.

Though the U.S. negotiation attempts were never successful at devising a peaceful solution to the war, it was able to do what no other negotiation attempts had been able to achieve before: insinuate Ojukwu's complicity in the starvation of his own people. In previous negotiations, both Gowon and Ojukwu had either refused part or all of any proposed agreement. The Nixon Administration's efforts to gain Gowon's support of daylight relief flights proved, at least to the satisfaction of the Administration, that Biafran secession was about Ojukwu's desire for power and not the safety of the Igbo people. Once the Nixon Administration had discredited Ojukwu publicly in the State Department press release outlining the Biafran unwillingness to allow relief flights to their own people, all U.S. attempts to intervene in the war ceased. Compared to the near monthly updates drafted by Kissinger for the President, the Archives contained no such memorandums after October 1969. There was also no evidence the Administration simply believed the war would end soon and further efforts were futile. On the contrary, it would appear that no one involved in the conflict, except perhaps the Biafran soldiers realized how soon the war would end in the fall of 1969. Perhaps predictably, while Ojukwu's propaganda kept his dream of an independent Biafra alive for nearly three years against incredible odds, the eventual failure of his propaganda message hastened its ultimate downfall.

Appendix I Chart indicating increases and decreases in U.S. public interest in the Nigerian Civil War based on the number of articles appearing in the *New York Times*



(Raw data showing the number of articles in the *New York Times* about Nigeria/Biafra by month and year*.)

<u>Date</u>	<u># of Articles</u>		
January 1966	21	January 1969	30
February	5	February	37
March	0	March	37
April	1	April	25
May	6	May	21
June	10	June	23
July	3	July	28
August	21	August	27
September	13	September	29
October	18	October	15
November	6	November	16
December	4	December	17
January 1967	10	January 1970	110
February	2	February	28
March	11	March	15
April	9	April	6
May	10	May	4
June	14	June	6
July	27	July	4
August	32	August	10
September	29	September	4
October	25	October	9
November	19	November	4
December	4	December	3
January 1968	14		
February	14		
March	6		
April	22		
May	29		
June	11		
July	48		
August	79		
September	53		
October	37		
November	28		
December	38		

* New York Times Company, *New York Times Index*, 1966-1970, vols. 54-58. (New York: New York Times Company, 1967-1971).

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