

# THE ROLE OF U.S AND HER MULTINATIONAL PRIVATE COMPANIES IN THE NIGERIA-BIAFRA WAR: BEYOND THE THRESHOLD OF NEUTRALITY

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## Abstract

This work is an attempt to show how the U.S covertly meddled into the Nigeria-Biafra War despite her much taunted ‘neutrality’ in the conflict. No doubt, the U.S did not grant any official arms sales to either Nigeria or the secessionist Biafra, and regarded the war as ‘internal conflict’ that should be resolved internally. Many a literature on the Nigeria-Biafra conflict had taken this to absolve U.S of any form of active political involvement in the thirty months war. However, a critical survey of policy actions and activities of the U.S State Department via its Embassy in Lagos and U.S multinational private companies in Nigeria during the war respectively, casts serious doubts on the propriety and correctness of the U.S neutrality in the conflict. Using the ‘linkage politics’ understanding of foreign policy as the most relevant conceptual framework of analysis, and hugely relying on secondary sources of information with available declassified document, the paper argues that the U.S was partisan, and indirectly supported Nigeria as against Biafra. Therefore, it belies, and refuses the contention that ‘U.S did not get politically involved and maintained neutrality throughout the conflict’.

**Keywords:** Neutrality, War, Internal conflict, Involvement, and Foreign policy

## Introduction

Unarguably, the Nigeria-Biafra War, on the external front, cropped up a number of vested interests: some political and material in nature, others psychological and morally humanitarian. It is pertinent to point out that the U.S was one of the major poles in the vortex of this interplay of interests, and as such preoccupied our focus here. Ogene (1983) posits, thus:

The issue of Nigeria-Biafra conflict in the U.S was both political and humanitarian: the political concerned the problem whether the U.S should support a 'united Nigeria' or the secessionist Biafra while the humanitarian argued whether a clear distinction between the political and relief issues could be made. Should the U.S exert all possible effort to help relieve the millions of refugees in Biafra dying from starvation? Should it subscribe to the British and Nigerian government opinion that relief question could not be separated from politics; that starvation was a legitimate weapon of warfare; and that U.S should, therefore, not make any relief effort that was not approved by the British and Nigerian government.

As the outbreak of the war produced realities that are political and humanitarian, the U.S was caught in the challenge of an unambiguous policy preference.

Although the U.S had taken a political stance of playing neutrality in the conflict, there was no clear and coherent policy guideline to that effect. As Stremlau (1986) would argue, 'the U.S government vacillated on a common policy on the Nigerian Civil War'. This, the State Department, a key agency in shaping external policies of the U.S government, as a consequence, saw as a superior advantage to pursue what it thought about as U.S national interest in the face of the conflict the way it deemed fit. Hence, any policy actions or inactions of this agency *inter alia* were regarded as having originated from the U.S government.

From the outset, the U.S proclaimed the Nigerian Civil War an internal conflict, thus, pretended her non-involvement. Dean Rusk, the then U.S Secretary of State, stated that Nigeria was a 'British baby' thus saw no justification for America's political involvement where he deemed fit British sphere of influence remained preponderant (Ohaegbulam, 2012:132). It is important to note that though the U.S refrained from direct sale of arms to either of the parties in the conflict, she never hide her belief in 'one united

Nigeria'. Forsyth (1978:236) posits that the U.S, guided by the dead hand of State Department, was steadfast in her belief in, and support for, 'one Nigeria' regardless of the cost of lives taken up by the war. Thus, American government ensured her tacit support for the Nigerian side in the conflict.

Perhaps, the U.S position on 'one indivisible Nigeria' was largely dictated by political and material interest. Many a scholar agree that the State Department in collaboration of the U.S Embassy in Nigeria often tried to state U.S national interest in the face of the protracted conflict in terms of protecting the lives and property investments of U.S nationals (Sklar, 1980; Okpoko, 1986; and Cronje, 1983). The U.S saw the size of a united Nigeria as a big external market; hence, her growing investment drive and volume of trade in an emerging commercial empire like Nigeria was crucial. As Ogene (1983) further states:

At the last count, before the civil war broke out, there were at least 85 American firms of different sizes with business concerns in Nigeria. The total U.S private investments stood at about \$800 million of which \$ 100 million is acquired by Gulf Oil and \$50 million by Mobil Oil Corporation. The main private investments in the Eastern parts, that were later to secede as Biafra, were made by Mobil, Texaco, and Indian Textile Mills which had a multimillion dollar plant in Aba.

In other words, U.S had gained a sort of growing robust economic presence in the Nigerian economy before the fall of Civil War in 1967.

Although American private companies in Nigeria initially appeared neutral and non-committal on the conflict, ceaseless pressure from the State Department in Washington and U.S Embassy in Lagos, coupled with damaging business prospects, made them to graciously buy in the 'thinking' of these two U.S government agencies. The thinking implied that the Nigerian government is the recognized legitimate entity in the conflict and should be

'justifiably' supported in her efforts to ensure military victory as short a time as possible against Biafra. And, if this faith is kept, the end of the war would guarantee more economic prospects and security for American companies in Nigeria. Therefore, the centrality of this study is to show how the policy actions and inactions of the State Department, in collaboration with the U.S Embassy in Lagos, influenced the attitude of U.S private multinational companies in Nigeria to support the Nigerian side, and brought the U.S on the strand of partisan involvement despite her proclaimed neutrality in the conflict. In this context, the explanation of 'neutrality in conflict; the actual position of U.S government on the conflict; and the rationale for the involvement and support of U.S private big businesses for Nigeria are imperatively captured.

### **'Neutrality' Defined**

The word 'neutrality' literally suggests 'impartiality' or 'not taking sides' in a dispute or over a contentious issue. However, as simple as it appears, neutrality is technical in its definition. As a practice among states in international system, it can be approached from two different perspectives that are not mutually exclusive. Wesler (2001:217) notes that the concept of neutrality may mean 'a political doctrine' for states, or a how state, non-committal, reacts to a given conflict. Thus, Umozuruike (2005:55) asserts:

Neutrality as a political doctrine means a policy of non-alignment with any of the big power blocs as a matter of policy. It means non-involvement in the quarrels of the big Powers or in their Cold War conflict. On the other hand, neutrality in a conflict means the actions or inactions of a state not taking sides in a given conflict outside its borders. It is that which a state is bound to observe in regard to a conflict in which it is not a party and does not wish to be.

In other words, neutrality implies 'non-involvement' and, to some degree, 'non-intervention'. As a matter of operational understanding,

neutrality in this study is seen from the perspective of 'neutrality in a conflict'. 'Neutrality', according to Northedge and Donelan (2002:118), 'is when a state does not seek to influence the course of a dispute outside its shores by words or actions'. Thus, it does amount to not taking sides in a given conflict. However, neutrality in a conflict does not mean passiveness in international affairs but rather taking stand on issues based on the merits of the case. State may be neutral in a given conflict and still intervene in it. Here, it becomes a strategic guise to a state response to developments of interest in her external environment. Thus, to Telletrand (1990:106), 'non-intervention is a metaphysical and political phrase meaning about the same as intervention'.

### **Conceptual Framework**

To better understand the dialectics of this discourse, the premise of 'linkage politics' of foreign policy analysis is crucial. The central idea is that state missions, nationals and their ownerships abroad are an indispensable extension of the entity of their home state in their host states; thus, the home state and its extensions abroad are inextricably linked in a chain of predictable but oftentimes unannounced relationship. Weber and Smith (2002:164) note that the individual interest and material pursuit of nationals abroad are always done in line with the prevailing national interest and ideological strand of their parent nations. That is to say that there is a common 'ground of convergence' in the views, interests, and dispositions of nationals abroad and their home government, especially as those impinge on the countries of their host. No matter the weight of regulations and laws existing within the borders of the host state, nationals abroad often seek to gratify their individual and group interest in a way to reinforce the primary objectives of their parent nations.

Morgenthau (2001) argues that the manner with which these interests and policy behaviour are interlinked and pursued is a matter of 'advantage' and 'strategy' at the disposal of both the parent and host nations, and could mar or make the sovereign political existence of either of them or both. Thus, for the goals of a state to be achieved in this light, the state must be preponderant and powerful in the

power calculations of the state playing host to it. In other words, its foreign missions, companies, and citizens in its host country must be credible and effective enough to defend its goals at all time. Richardson (2006:130) states that the personality components of a country's nationals abroad include: foreign missions, business investments, organized civil society groups and non-governmental organizations, and private citizens with voluntary resident status, amongst others. He further states that in the contemporary these components are a conduit through which powerful states carry out their foreign policy objectives in other states. In this garb, the place of the U.S Embassy and private business giants in the Nigerian Civil War could be better understood.

As a matter of relevance, the U.S government at the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War declared its neutrality in the conflict. But for some obvious reasons, perhaps, supported the British-led position of 'one united Nigeria'; thus, regarded the Nigerian government as the 'legitimate' party to the conflict. This position, the State Department pushed, via the U.S Embassy in Lagos, beyond mere policy statement with relentless vigor. It never ceased persuading the U.S big business in Nigeria to actively support the Nigerian side. As private investments and the political agencies representing the authority of their parent countries in their host countries are intricately interlinked, the U.S private conglomerates could not refuse the directives and steady persuasions from an agency holding for their parent government; thus, threw their support to Nigeria as against Biafra. Hence, the U.S neutrality in the war was a mere strategic rhetoric.

### **The U.S.A. Government and the Nigeria-Biafra War**

When the war broke out in 1967, the U.S government under President Lyndon B. Johnson officially announced its neutrality and non-political involvement, and regarded the war as 'internal conflict'; thus, did not qualify America's active involvement. Washington regarded Nigeria as a bastion of British influence. It is noted that President Johnson, in his usual style, showed little interest in Nigeria, and gave the career officials in the State Department a freehand in policy making on Africa (Akinyemi 1996). As a

consequence, this policy inaction on the part of White House created a big room for the 'sympathy-for-Nigeria' careerists in the State Department and the U.S Embassy in Nigeria which they saw as a huge advantage. In collaboration with these two key agencies, the Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Joseph Palmer, formulated and conducted U.S policy on the Nigerian Civil War with less influence from White House and the Congress. That is to say that predominating influence of these agencies, perhaps, resulted from the White House failure to suggest a practicable policy guideline.

The State Department and the U.S Embassy in Lagos tried to state the U.S policy on the conflict in the light of political and material interest rather than moral and humanitarian imperatives. Currey (2002:189) argues, thus:

The gist of the State Department attitude was that... respect for the preferences and sensitivities of the British and Nigerian Governments on the war should be given priority over the need for relief. This meant that the U.S should support the positions taken by Britain and Nigeria, and that the U.S be committed to the principle of 'one Nigeria' and opposed to the secession of Biafra. This meant, too, that the U.S, while leaving the supply of arms to Nigeria in the hands of Britain, should give political and diplomatic assistance possible to achieve the aims of Britain, her ally.

Thus, the insistence of the State Department on the British position that relief issues should not be separated from the politics of the conflict, and that the U.S should participate in humanitarian relief only to the extent and in such way as the Nigerian government approved could be better understood in this context. Okpoko (1986:55) observes:

Although the U.S relief to Nigeria did, in fact, begin in March 1968 when President Johnson authorized USAID to ship worth of P.L 480 food to Lagos, the

efforts were stalled by the officials in the State Department in Washington and U.S Embassy in Lagos. For instance, when Johnson sent Mr. Palmer to confer with the ICRC officials in Geneva on how to extend relief to Nigeria, the officials in State Department did not support the idea for an emergency airlift into Biafra. The argument being that American government would run into severe logistical problems... Even, when they grudgingly agreed to, they maintained that the only feasible alternative was a land route into Biafra where the Nigerian forces could supervise the process.

Nevertheless, critics are aware that what was the truth about the situation was: first, the Nigerian government resistance to an airlift of relief into Biafra, and not the logistics as advanced by the State Department. For instance, Senator McGovern, Democrat from South Dakota, pointed out that 'if America could find the logistical skill to drop weapons in Vietnam, why the logistic problem for relief airlift into Biafra' (Nwankwo, 1980). Secondly, the State Department and the U.S Embassy in Nigeria held strong belief that 'one Nigeria' had to be preserved at all cost, and the humane way of ending the starvation was for Lagos to effect 'quick kill'; thus, large scale relief prior to a Biafran surrender was self-defeating and would prolong the war. Larry Pepple, at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in an interview, confirmed that the U.S Ambassador to Nigeria, Elbert G. Mathews, on several occasions appealed to Washington to rescind its decision and grant sale of arms to Nigeria is intensify her war efforts against Biafra. Though, these appeals were not granted, it tells the length the Embassy in Lagos could go to ensure victory for the Nigerian side.

In another related account, Hyacinth Akuma, at the Nigeria's Foreign Service Desk, recalled that in 1968 Mr. Palmer made several trips to Europe and Africa canvassing for support for U.S.A. policies on the political and relief issues in the Nigeria-Biafra War. James Kwadoh of *WestAfrican Pilot* reported, thus:

Mr. Palmer tried to close up any European sources through which Biafra might buy arms on the black market. He also tried hard to persuade France not to allow arms deliveries to Biafra. Apart from being a regular visitor to many Heads of State in Africa before OAU meetings, Mr. Palmer succeeded in making the Cameroun government to close its border to any activities connected with the Nigerian Civil War; thus, denying Biafra the most logical airstrips for flying in relief.

Therefore, one could see the substance in Biafra's claim that Mr. Palmer and Britain used their agents to sabotage the transportation of relief and arms to Biafra.

The State Department and the U.S Embassy in Nigeria, also, for obvious material interest, traded the argument that the end of the war with victory for Nigeria as short a time as possible would lead to gradual and partial lifting of import restrictions, and guarantee more robust trade and steady lifting of Nigerian crude oil for the U.S multinational giants. In November 1967, U.S Ambassador in Lagos, Mr. Mathews, sent a letter to the Nigerian-American Chambers of Commerce in Lagos pleading America's complete support for 'one Nigeria' (Ezeani, 2013; and Achebe, 2012). Thus, there was intense and ceaseless pressure from State Department and U.S Embassy in Lagos on the part of U.S business community in Nigeria to support the Nigerian side in the conflict. As American big business in Nigeria had been making frantic efforts to lobby Washington for a policy that would guarantee their economic fortune and security, they, unarguably, saw in the policy stance of the State Department and the Embassy in Lagos the needed moral justification to support the Nigeria's war efforts against Biafra's political and material survival.

Nonetheless, President Nixon's review of U.S policy on the Nigeria Civil War in 1969 could not make any significant change. Though, the level of American relief supplies to Nigeria through the ICRC, USAID, and UNICEF, amongst others doubled, the attitude and policy positions of the State Department and the U.S Embassy in

Nigeria remained unwavering. Even, the new Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, David D. Newsom, and new U.S Ambassador to Nigeria, William Trueheart, continued the pro-Nigerian stance of their predecessors (Cronje,1983).

### **U.S.A. Multinational Companies in the Nigeria-Biafra War**

The role of American business companies in the Nigeria-Biafra war cannot be over-emphasized. No doubt, the burgeoning American private capital and its attendant investment drives had made a meaningful inroad into the Nigerian economy by the middle of the first decade after independence. Olukoshi (1998:28) observes:

Although, Britain was still dominant in the Nigerian political economy, the U.S has made some substantial progress in investments in the Nigerian economy. She invested in some of the key sectors of the Nigerian economy viz: oil, telecommunication, textile, agriculture, amongst others. Nigeria was playing host to a number of U.S multinationals before the outbreak of Civil War in 1967.

Therefore, U.S saw Nigeria as a huge external market, and a major economic power house within the African political geography that would be of immense benefit to her economic interest. Some of the major U.S multinational companies in Nigeria then include: Gulf Oil, Mobil Oil Corporation, Texaco Oil, in the oil sector; International Telecommunication Company (ITT), American Telephone Company (ATC) in the communication sector; Slumberger, RCC, in the building construction; Indian-American Textile Mills in Lagos, Aba and Kano; American agro-allied industries and processing companies, among others (Oluwole, 2000).

One thing is dear: at the beginning of the conflict, as earlier hinted, these American business companies were neutral. They did not make any statements that clearly showed their attitudes and policy preferences. In fact, these business conglomerates seemed genuinely uninvolved at the start of the war. They had an equal chance of being protected by either side-Nigeria or Biafra. For instance, foreign oil companies at outset defined their policy as one

of paying oil royalties to the government which physically controlled their assets.

However, things changed dramatically as the war dragged on. New realities surfaced to throw their neutral business stance overboard. First, the growing level of war destructions and insecurity of lives and property made business prospects very slim, and operations risky. Secondly, there were unceasing pressure from State Department in Washington and U.S Embassy in Lagos to support Nigeria's war efforts against secessionist Biafra. Bolarinwa (2001:104) recalls, thus:

There were short-run implications for U.S firms and exporters. Restrictions on imports by the Nigerian government together with falling level of capital expenditure hampered business activity... while the U.S share of Nigeria's import in 1966 was 16.2% and the U.S enjoyed a surplus in its trade with Nigeria, its share of that same import had declined to 12.8% in the first quarter of 1968. No new U.S investment was coming in, and her investments in the war zones were mostly inactive. Only Gulf Oil continued to exploit its off-shore oil wells, but not without war challenges.

Thus, the State Department and the officials in U.S Embassy in Lagos persuaded the firms, especially the oil giants, that the end of the conflict would bring a gradual and partial lifting of import restrictions, and that the increased export of crude oil and palm products from the war zone, when Biafra is defeated, would increase the availability of foreign exchange in Nigeria to pay for some long postponed imports. The assurance being that Nigerian side would win the war with ease, and as in a short time as possible.

Nonetheless, with opportunities for making profits damaged on both sides by the protracted war and with much of plants and machinery damaged, destroyed or commandeered by both sides, these firms have suffered, and still been blamed by both sides. As it was in the interest of these companies to exploit, trade, and make

profit, it was in their utmost interest that the war be short, and perhaps, not primarily that Biafra be crushed. Based on the foregoing realities, American 'big business' in Nigeria not only yielded to pressure from the State Department and the Embassy in Lagos, but rationalized their political and material support for the Nigerian side in the conflict. Yet, one may deem it necessary to enquire, 'how and, in what form, did these 'multinationals' show this support and defense for the Nigerian side?'

First, until the autumn of 1968, some companies, especially oil giants operating in the Biafra zones, paid a token of taxes and oil royalties to the Biafra war-time government. However, the new stance of these business investments, and their recognition of the Nigerian government as the 'legitimate government' meant that the taxes and oil royalties went to the coffers of the Nigerian government. In other words, American oil firms in the Biafra war zones became less operational, and stopped paying royalties and other kinds of taxes to the Biafra authorities. Thus, it was seen as the sole and legitimate responsibility of the Nigerian government. Nwankwo (1994:63) notes, thus:

The refusal of taxes and royalties to Biafra by foreign companies for the material benefit of Nigeria incapacitated Biafra's war efforts. It denied her the badly needed finances to exchange for arms and food supplies in the face of economic blockade while, on the other hand, enhanced Nigeria's effort in effecting the 'quick kill' of Biafra.

Therefore, oil royalties and taxes paid to Nigeria, and denied Biafra, must have aided Nigeria in prosecuting the war by providing much needed foreign exchange.

Secondly, it was possible that pro-Nigerian U.S companies gave material and logistic assistance to Nigerian forces. The Biafra intelligence had alleged, in a number of occasion, that the aircraft and ships of American private companies were used to transporting Nigerian soldiers and equipment to the war fronts. Though, the veracity or otherwise of this allegation may not be guaranteed, the

fact remains that U.S private companies did subsidize the material cost of the war for the Nigerian forces, and this may not be unconnected with the 'burning of headquarters and property of some foreign companies in Asaba, accused of aiding the Nigerian side by the Biafra soldiers, in April 1968' (Nwankwo,1994).

No doubt, American companies became more active in their support for Nigeria; many of them maintained lobbies in Washington and financed measures intended to consolidate pro-Nigerian policy positions. Garba (1991) observes that when President Nixon never relied on the briefings and routine correspondences from the State Department and the Embassy in Lagos on matters bordering on the Nigerian Civil War, the U.S private firms became the main contacts for the Nigerian government to the Nixon administration. It was reported that Mobile Oil Corporation sponsored the visits to the U.S of the Nigerian Commissioner for Transport and Communications, Mr. Joseph Tarka, in September 1968 and March 1969. The 1968 visit was scheduled for technical and commercial discussion while the 1969 visit was to offset the emerging Biafra sentiment (WeatAfrican Pilot, Sept., 1969). Declassified post-Nixon Probe Report shows that top U.S oil multinationals in Nigeria unduly enticed some senior White House officials and Congressmen to ensure a pro-Nigerian policy on Nigeria-Biafra conflict, between April 1968 and November 1969 (U.S Embassy Archives, Abuja). Thus, the U.S private companies' involvement in the politics of Nigerian Civil War reinforced the importance of their interest in Nigeria before the U.S foreign policy makers.

What is more, there was what appeared like a deliberate design by the U.S private business giants to frustrate organized relief and humanitarian assistance to the starving Biafra. Several appeals to them, on a moral ground, by concerned civil organizations around the world to help underwrite the costs of relief efforts to Nigeria, nonetheless, were blatantly disregarded. It was gathered that in one of the forums organized in New Hampshire, in December 1968, to see how interested American big business could help partner and finance humanitarian groups to save the lives of war victims in Nigeria, none of the American firms that have economic stake in

Nigeria ever showed up.<sup>30</sup> Even, when the relief was procured and airlifting becomes a difficulty, these conglomerates denied them aircrafts and cargo facilities. Perhaps, it might not be unfounded to argue that this attitude was demonstrated to show their unflinching support for Nigerian side in the war. Thus, the evidence adduced so far showed that U.S multinational companies in Nigeria, like the officials in State Department and U.S Embassy in Lagos, took a side in the Nigeria-Biafra conflict without having a recourse to the question of neutrality by supporting the Nigerian side.

### **Conclusion**

The discussion, in its findings, so far shows that the U.S government, contrary to the common view held by many, was partisan in the Nigeria-Biafra War despite her earlier proclaimed neutrality stance in the conflict. And, this she did through the instrumental partisan involvement of, and support for 'one Nigeria' by, the State Department with her Embassy in Lagos and the private multinational companies in Nigeria. Therefore, the U.S government actively sided and supported Nigeria in the Nigeria-Biafra conflict.

Despite how the U.S government tends to deny it, and dissociate herself from the policy positions of State Department, her Embassy in Lagos, and the private business conglomerates in Nigeria, she cannot deny the importance of these 'linkage institutions' as an integral part of her system. Therefore, any policy decisions or actions sanctioned by these institutions are, unarguably, the responsibility of U.S government; thus, should be judged to that effect in principle and practice. Aside this incontrovertible fact, it is important to point out that the State Department and U.S Embassies under its directives hold the key to U.S foreign policy formulations and implementations. Thus, for any sound judgment to be passed on the actual position and role of the U.S in the Nigeria-Biafra conflict, it should be rightly done in the context of what constituted policy actions and inactions of the State Department and its cohorts, and not necessarily on what the White House or the Congress wished, said or did. In other words, the much taunted U.S neutrality in the Nigerian Civil War largely suffered inherent contradictions and to that extent of inconsistency became non practicable. Hence,

‘neutrality’, as conceived by the U.S in the face of Nigeria-Biafra conflict, could be seen as a tactics to mask, and carry out, her ulterior but real agenda, with less or no international provocations and condemnation, in a strategic guise.

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