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THE PRESIDENT HAS SEEN *A*

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May 15, 1969

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

FROM: Henry A. Kissinger *HK*
SUBJECT: Status Report on Nigerian Civil War

Not surprisingly, the situation in Nigeria remains very fluid and uncertain in the wake of the latest Federal offensive. I thought it would be useful to keep you posted with another brief wrap-up of the major developments.

Military Action

The Federals' "final push" is now nearly a month old. They did succeed in capturing the Biafran capital of Umuahia, which was a diplomatic blow to the rebels. And the evacuation of the capital did temporarily hobble Biafra's internal administration, including food distribution. All our intelligence now suggests, however, that the Federal offensive has ground to an indecisive and even perilous halt after carving out a relatively small pocket in the secessionist enclave. The rebels are still contesting their losses with heavy fighting in and around Umuahia. Biafran forces may, in fact, be cutting the Federal supply line to the capital. The Federal offensive still had a numerical and logistical superiority, yet they seem to have driven to Umuahia only to be threatened with envelopment by rebel counter-attacks. At the very least, a rebel blockade or recapture of Umuahia would be a telling blow to Federal prestige.

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). They are now driving southward to pose some threat to the Federal hold on Port Harcourt, the main supply depot for the Federal forces and the most important single objective on any front of the war.

There is an added complication on the southern front because Biafran advances also threaten Nigerian oil production, which is a principal source of foreign exchange for the Federals. So far, the rebels have not sabotaged the big and vulnerable British Shell refineries or the crucial Trans-Niger pipeline -- probably in the hope of recapturing them intact. But they might do a token raid just to establish their capability for political reasons.

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Again, a credible Biafran threat to Port Harcourt or the oil production would be a blow to Federal morale and generally tarnish Nigeria's image among African and other supporters (such as the British and Soviets) who are increasingly impatient with the continuation of this war. (I am attaching two maps showing military deployment and the threat to the oil.)

The fact remains, as always, that the Federal side has the men and materiel 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 air lift to Biafra made possible largely through clandestine French support.

Diplomacy

The indecision on the battlefield is mirrored in a diplomatic stalemate between the two sides. As you may recall, the OAU -- with Haile Selassie and President Tubman the moving spirits -- tried again in late April to get talks started in Liberia. The Biafrans said they were ready to negotiate "without preconditions", yet held out for a cease-fire before sitting down. The Federals, optimistic about their offensive, sent a second-level delegation to Monrovia and didn't budge either.

There are several African initiatives awash following the Monrovia failure. Tubman and Houphouet-Boigny are trying to mount a concerted approach to each side by friendly parties. Brigadier Afrifa, the new Head of State in Ghana, plans a demarche to both sides to get talks started quietly in Accra.

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) Sooner or later, the majority bias for the Federal side shows through. In short, the Biafrans need some evidence of African pressure on the Feds to establish the credibility of the OAU as an authentic "mediator."

(2) Initiatives are left at pious pronouncements on "reconciliation" without getting to the core question of Biafran protection among her hostile tribal neighbors in the would-be Federation. The Africans should have grasped the nettle and proposed specific arrangements to flush out both sides on details. At least that would have cleared away some of the propaganda and ambiguity that so plagues the diplomatic scene.

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But then even the most energetic and imaginative initiative would still face the toughest obstacle to talks: both sides still think they can win on the battlefield what they might have to forego if they came now to the conference table. The course of this war is certainly capricious, and we should remember the two sides could always blossom over night with some unpredictable (and typically African) accommodation. But there is no hard sign of that at this point.

Federal Politics

Adding to his military troubles, General Gowon has now moved to replace his unsuccessful and allegedly corrupt commanders on the southern and western fronts. One of these -- Colonel Adekunle -- is still a popular figure and the ouster is shaking the delicate tribal and regional balance in the Federal coalition. Gowon can probably weather this crisis, but the long-run durability of the coalition and war effort is still open to doubt.

Among other things, the replacement of the Division Commanders rules out any Federal offensive in those sectors for several weeks, and may create enough disarray to allow substantial Biafran gains. That he took the political risk to make a switch, however, indicates Gowon's resignation to a prolonged fight.

Relief and U.S. Policy

Amid all this pulling and hauling, Clyde Ferguson is quietly trying to negotiate a surface corridor that could bring a major expansion of relief to Biafra. The route would run from Calabar on the coast up a navigable river and into the eastern half of the rebel enclave. Ferguson has done a good deal of preliminary work on logistics, and he leaves again for the area this weekend to nail down actual relief talks between the parties.

The nightly airlift of food continues to ward off massive starvation in Biafra, but the margin is close. The Ferguson corridor -- which probably has a 50-50 chance -- would help enormously. I'll keep you closely informed of Ferguson's mission as it enters the critical stage next week.

Meanwhile, State is working on contingency planning for the prospects of continuing stalemate, actual negotiations, collapse on either side etc. 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.

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