

THE "BIAFRA LOBBY" AND U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

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The passionate "Biafra Lobby" in the United States is a perfect example of the moral and political pitfalls of organized pleading and pressure on particular international problems. The pro-Biafra crusade is an improbable conglomeration of the New Left and old right, idealists and hierlings, American citizens and foreigners, churchmen and secularists, isolationists and interventionists. Though no clear common concern unites these diverse persons, most of them agree that the United States Government should do more than it is now doing to feed starving Biafrans and many of them seem to believe that the U.S. hands-off policy toward the brutal civil war in Nigeria is immoral because it interferes with mercy measures and denies the Biafrans the "right of self-determination."

Even if the exclusive objective of the Biafra partisans were humanitarian, which it is not, their advice and pressure are of little help to the President (whether Mr. Johnson or Mr. Nixon) who is equally concerned with the alleviation of human suffering, but who is also concerned with other pressing issues of peace, justice, and security affected by his foreign policy decisions. Parenthetically, in these days when our Government is being loosely charged with inhumanity, it may be useful to remind ourselves that no great power in history has done more for the foreign victims of famine, earthquake, and war. As a military ally of South Vietnam in a cruel guerrilla war in which the adversary deliberately uses innocent civilians as targets and cover, the United States has done far more to protect the civilian population than in our war against Japan or Germany, and far more than any other belligerent in any war to provide medical care, food, and shelter for the civilian and military victims of war in the heat of battle. With this singular record of humane concern, it may seem a bit redundant for churchmen to urge the President to be humane. Everybody in our Government is committed to honoring civilians and respecting the rights of prisoners of war even in the politically and morally complicated terrain of Vietnam. (Whether U.S. military involvement in South Vietnam is just or unjust is an entirely different question than that of our behavior toward civilians in the present conflict which, as a matter of fact, the President, the Congress, and

the majority of the American people regard as just.)

Like all humane men, the President is deeply concerned about the tragic loss of innocent children in Biafra, but he is also concerned with justice, order, and security elsewhere in Nigeria, Africa, and the larger world. In the interests of maintaining peace, the President is committed to respecting the cardinal principle of international law — no state shall intervene coercively in another state without an invitation from a recognized host government or except in national or collective self-defense. This is the essence of the U.N. Charter.

As a score of African states tumbled into independence, Washington recognized them and has not interfered coercively in the internal affairs of any. When Katanga sought to split off from the Congo, the President supported the Central Government and at its request provided non-combat military assistance through the United Nations and directly so it could more effectively counter secessionist and rebel challenges. When Biafra sought to secede from Nigeria, under quite different circumstances to be sure, Washington continued diplomatic relations with the Central Government, a position which implied U.S. support for its claim of sovereignty over all of Nigeria. Lagos sought to purchase arms and aircraft from the United States, and it would have been entirely legal to provide such aid, but Washington decided not to do so. Deeply distressed, Nigeria then turned to the Soviet Union which sold weapons and planes below the normal commercial cost. Through a variety of diplomatic and other channels, our Government has tried to mediate the conflict and mitigate the suffering on both sides.

Washington could have taken the opposite course and recognized Biafra. Presumably this option is still open. This act would earn the hostility not only of Lagos but of the great majority of other African states whose leaders have persistently supported Lagos against the pretensions of Biafra. Short of this drastic and unlikely policy shift, which would breed a whole series of new problems, we are stuck with the unpleasant fact that even the powerful United States cannot end the civil war or the tragic starvation without violating the political integrity of Nigeria or U.S.

respect for the sovereignty of all states that are not threatening international (inter-state) peace.

The implicit advice of the Biafra partisans is that Washington should undertake humanitarian measures even if they force a diplomatic break with the Nigerian government. Are these people morally prepared for the consequences of their advice? Suppose President Nixon recognized Biafra and in response a dozen other African states broke diplomatic relations with Washington and turned to Moscow or Peking for economic and military aid? Suppose the success of Biafra, made possible by U.S. recognition, encouraged wars of secession by other tribal and regional groups, including Katanga whose previous abortive effort was so roundly condemned by many Biafra zealots? Suppose Washington's "humanitarian" decision would lead to further wars of attrition and mass starvation? The President must be concerned with these larger, though not wholly predictable consequences. He bears a heavy responsibility for his decisions that pressure groups do not for their advice.

In addition to overlooking these consequential matters, the Biafra partisans confuse and complicate their advice by non-humanitarian motives and objectives. Some American religious leaders appear to be primarily concerned with the fate of their missionary schools in the breakaway area, several going as far as to urge the Secretary of State to send in the Marines, on both sides if necessary, to protect mission property! American conservatives, reminiscent of the Katanga Lobby, see Biafra as a bulwark against communism because Lagos has accepted Soviet aid including several MIG fighters. Incidentally, the enthusiasm of these conservative partisans seems not to have been greatly dimmed by the apparently reliable report that Biafra is prepared to accept military aid from Red China.

Paul Connett, a Briton active in U.S. politics and a founder of the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive, takes the frankly political approach the name of his committee implies: "Recognition of Biafra as a separate state is the minimal thing this Government ought to do," he says, adding that the U.S. ought to send arms to Biafra. (" 'Biafra Lobby' Melds Left and Right," by William Chapman, *Washington Post*, January 19, 1969.) The Committee, spending at a rate of \$50,000 to \$100,000 a year, has received substantial help from Martin A. Peretz, a wealthy Harvard professor who contributes to various New Left enterprises.

Domestic foreign policy pressure groups motivated by a crusading zeal directed toward a particular place or issue tend to lose sight of the larger picture. The more comprehensive fabric of responsibility and the

multiple and often conflicting objectives of foreign policy tend to elude them. The advice of the zealots tends to be too narrow and too specific and often wrong — whether it be pressure on Washington to sell a dozen C-97 planes for mercy flights to Biafra or fifty F-4 Phantom jet fighters to a near-nuclear state that has repeatedly defied U.N. resolutions and whose unprecedented act of aggression against Lebanon last December, one day after Washington announced an agreement to sell the planes, was condemned by the governments of the world. (This is not the place to discuss the wisdom of the decision to provide the fifty Phantom jets to Israel. That question deserves careful research. The point here is simply that if the decision were made because of the persistent and powerful "domestic" pro-Israel pressures on the Congress, the White House, the State Department, and on Presidential candidates, rather than in terms of U.S. interests, including a stable balance of forces in the Middle East, the decision was made for the wrong reasons.)

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Under our system, domestic pressure groups have a right to organize and lobby for specific foreign policy objectives. Likewise, the President and Secretary of State have a right to ignore their advice, and indeed a duty to do so if accepting it would jeopardize U.S. interests or the larger interests of peace.

There have been occasions when the *specific advice* from a church or other special interest group has been helpful in clarifying an issue or in mobilizing support for a policy, but such instances are rare because outside groups and individuals simply lack the resources of information and insight available to the President and they usually focus too exclusively on one aspect of a complex problem to the neglect of other relevant elements.

Religious leaders and other concerned citizens make their most important contribution to the quality and direction of U.S. foreign policy not by giving day-by-day advice on specific questions, but by clarifying the national purpose, by creating a psychological and moral climate in which rational and informed dialogue can take place, and by participating in our free and open political system.

Paul H. Nitze, the former Deputy Secretary of Defense, put it well: "When our political leaders look to the public for guidance on tactical issues, or even on matters of strategy, I think they err and are delinquent in their duty. When they ignore the essential underlying values of the people in the formulation of strategy, or in deciding on specific tactics, I think they err even more seriously."