

**‘Black America Cares’:
The Response of African Americans to the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970**

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Statement of Originality

This thesis contains no material that has been extracted in whole or in part from a thesis that I have submitted towards the award of any other degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

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Abstract

Far from having only marginal significance and generating a ‘subdued’ response among African Americans, as some historians have argued, the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) collided at full velocity with the conflicting discourses and ideas by which black Americans sought to understand their place in the United States and the world in the late 1960s. Black liberal civil rights leaders leapt to offer their service as agents of direct diplomacy during the conflict, seeking to preserve Nigerian unity; grassroots activists from New York to Kansas organised food-drives, concerts and awareness campaigns in support of humanitarian aid for Biafran victims of starvation; while other pro-Biafran black activists warned of links between black ‘genocide’ in Biafra and the US alike. This thesis is the first to recover and analyse at length the extent, complexity and character of such African American responses to the Nigerian Civil War. Drawing on extensive use of private papers, activist literature, government records and especially the black press, it charts the way African Americans conceptualised, over time and in complex ways, their varied understandings of issues such as black internationalist solidarities, territorial sovereignty and political viability, humanitarian compassion and great power *realpolitik*, as well as colonial and neo-colonial influence in Africa.

The thesis initially explores the longer twentieth century history of African American engagement with Nigeria by way of establishing context, before providing in-depth analysis of the key initiatives and events that comprised African American engagement with the civil war. Chapters move chronologically and thematically to discuss direct diplomatic efforts to broker peace, African American responses to alleged genocide in Biafra, the rise and fall of pro-Biafran political support, and the latter’s loss to what emerged as a stronger political bloc of those supporting Nigerian political unity. Situated methodologically and historiographically at the intersection of scholarship on black internationalism and the international history of the Nigerian Civil War, this thesis demonstrates the way the civil war not only provoked intense activism, but did so in ways that fundamentally connected with the central ideas, themes and concerns of the black freedom struggle in the United States.

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Abbreviations

AAAR – African Academy of Arts and Research

ACOA – American Committee on Africa

ACKBA – American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive

ACRC- American Council on African Education

AFL-CIO – American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organisations

AG – Action Group

AJC – American Jewish Committee

AMEZ – American Methodist Episcopal Zion Church

AMSAC – American Society on African Culture

ANLCA – American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa

ANP – Associated Negro Press

ASA – African Student Association

BAATAS – Black American Aid to African Starvation

BBA – British-Biafra Association

BPP – Black Panther Party

CAA – Council on African Affairs

CDU/CSU – Christian Democratic Union of Germany

CIA – Central Intelligence Agency

CORE – Congress on Racial Equality

CRC – Civil Rights Congress

DAD – Daughters of African Descent

FEPC – Federal Employment Practices Committee

FMG – Federal Military Government of Nigeria

ICA – International Cooperation Administration

ICRC – International Committee of the Red Cross

IOT – International Observation Teams

JACB – Joint Afro Committee on Biafra

NAACP – National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

NBL – National (Negro) Business League

NCBWA - National Congress of British West Africa
NCNC- National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons
NCNW – National Council of Negro Women
NNA – Nigerian National Alliance
NOI – Nation of Islam
NPC – Northern People’s Congress
NSA – National Security Advisor
NSC – National Security Council
OAAU – Organisation of Afro American Unity
OAU – Organisation of African Unity
SCLC – Southern Christian Leadership Conference
SNCC – Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee
TANU – Tanganyika African National Union
UDHR – Universal Declaration on Human Rights
UDI – Unilateral Declaration of Independence (Rhodesia)
UN – United Nations
UNIA - Universal Negro Improvement Association
UNICEF – United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund
UPGA – United Progressive Grand Alliance
USAID – United States Agency for International Development
WCC – World Council of Churches
YIA – Youth In Action
YMCA – Young Men’s Christian Association

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Introduction

On a balmy evening on 10 August 1968, thousands marched towards the United Nations Plaza in New York. The crowd – which included African-American and Puerto Rican children from East Harlem – radiated melancholy as it sang dirges and held flickering candles. The marchers were venting their frustration at the lack of international action to address the ongoing civil war in Nigeria. Though only a year old at this point, the war between the Nigerian Federal Military government and the secessionist movement in the Eastern Region of Nigeria, the so-called Republic of Biafra, had produced devastating effects. An estimated 50,000 people had died, millions had been forced to flee their homes, and thousands, many of them children, were now facing starvation.¹

Organised by the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive – a committee established to support humanitarian relief for starving Biafrans – the march was addressed by the black American civil rights leader, James Farmer, at the Ralph Bunche Park directly across from the United Nations Plaza. The co-founder of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), Farmer was not the only civil rights activist to speak with urgency about the situation in Nigeria.² At the corner of First Avenue and East 42nd Street, James Meredith, the man responsible for heroically desegregating the University of Mississippi in 1962, addressed a counter-demonstration of mainly Nigerian students sympathetic to the Nigerian government. The two Jameses, Farmer and Meredith, had both been integral to the struggle to end segregation in the American South, but when it came to the Nigerian Civil War they were literally on opposite sides of the street.

The conflicting views of Farmer and Meredith symbolised how African Americans responded to the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970). Farmer's and Meredith's clash in the shadow of the United Nations symbolised the fault lines in black internationalist thought created by the civil war. Farmer called on protestors to lobby the Johnson Administration to fly food and medical supplies into Biafra – in order to save the starving black men, women and children – even if it undermined Nigerian sovereignty and called for an 'immediate

¹ In its 12 July edition, the front cover of *Life* magazine carried graphic images of two emaciated Nigerian children, "collateral damage", in the war between the two sides. The figure of 50,000 comes from the article from the 12 July edition; see "Biafra: a war of starvation and extinction," *Life*, July 12, 1968, 20-21.

² "Biafra drawing attention", *New York Amsterdam News*, August 17, 1968, 24.

ceasefire' between the warring parties. Meredith countered with a vitriolic denunciation of the Biafran leadership as tools of foreign powers intent on undermining Nigerian unity.

This thesis, “‘Black America Cares’: the response of African Americans to the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970”, explores the largely unexamined interactions of the black community with the themes, issues, and events that defined the conflict. Between July 1967 and January 1970, the Federal Republic of Nigeria, perhaps the most significant nation-state in West Africa – due to its parliamentary democracy, economic potential, and leadership role on the African continent – was torn apart by a bloody ethnic and tribal conflict, which drew global attention with reports of starvation and claims of genocide.

My thesis challenges the marginal position historians have, to date, afforded African American engagements with the Nigerian Civil War. For example, historian Brenda Plummer’s most recent book, *In Search of Power: African Americans in the era of decolonization, 1956-1974*, briefly notes the ‘diverse’ but what she sees as limited level of black engagement with the Nigerian Civil War, compared to African American engagement with anti-colonial liberation struggles in the late 1950s and 1960s.³ Utilising a variety of untapped primary sources, including private papers, government documents and the black press, I demonstrate that the response of African Americans was more extensive and sophisticated than previously understood, and was deeply connected to concerns related to the future of Pan-Africanism and black internationalism. This thesis deepens and expands scholarly understandings of these discourses by exploring how they intersected with alternative black humanitarianism and direct diplomacy during the civil war, as well as how the collapse of the Nigerian polity caused serious discussion and debate around the future of postcolonial Nigeria and its ramifications for the broader black diaspora.

Historians of the African American experience have long acknowledged the importance of global and transnational dimensions in shaping the black freedom struggle in the United States. Likewise, they have noted the impact of African Americans in the broader black diaspora, particularly in Africa. In the mid-twentieth century contemporary African American scholars such as W.E.B DuBois and Rayford W. Logan, as well as writers including James Baldwin and Richard Wright, acknowledged the significant international dimensions of the African American experience. In the twenty-first century, an era self-conscious about

³ Brenda Gayle Plummer, *In Search of Power: African Americans in the Era of Decolonization, 1956-1974* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 194-199.

globalisation, historians have continued the work of analysing black American history through international and transnational lenses. In 2006, the historian of black internationalism Gerald Horne noted the importance of the ‘global’ in understanding the African American experience as both interconnected and interdependent with developments outside the United States.⁴ Consistent with and building upon these wider historiographical, methodological and thematic currents, this thesis makes a fresh and overdue contribution by directing such inquiry into a focus on African American engagements with the Nigerian Civil War. Previous historians have noted the importance of African national liberation struggles in inspiring African Americans in their campaign for civil and human rights in the United States, and how African American individuals, groups and organisations sought to assist in these struggles across the Atlantic. The Nigerian Civil War, neither a conflict associated with colonial liberation nor one shaped by race has received limited attention from scholars of black internationalism. This thesis reveals the multifaceted level of black engagement with the conflict that expanded and redefined existing ideas associated with black internationalism itself.

The collapse of Nigeria’s post-independence polity and the outbreak of civil war was a major rupture in modern African history whose relation to the African American experience has not received sufficient attention. Because African Americans had viewed African affairs primarily through the lens of race, finding linkages between the Jim Crow experience at home and European colonial rule abroad, the nature of the Nigerian conflict, having its roots in ethnic and tribal divisions, challenged many established worldviews in the black community. By exploring how black Americans – ranging from civil rights leaders, politicians, intellectuals, journalists, black power activists, to ordinary citizens – responded to the crisis, this thesis sheds new light on how African Americans understood questions related to democracy, human rights, nation-building, the viability of post-colonial states in Africa – as well as how African Americans thought about their own position within US society. One major claim I make is that African Americans were all along more deeply engaged with the Nigerian Civil War than has previously been acknowledged. Nigeria, as perhaps the most internationally significant postcolonial state in West Africa, had drawn the attention of African Americans for decades. If African liberation from colonial rule had been an inspiration for African Americans in their domestic struggles, the collapse of this optimism,

⁴ Gerald Horne, “Towards a Transnational Research Agenda for African American History in the 21st century”, *The Journal of African American History* 91, No.3 (2006), 288-303.

as exemplified in Nigeria, caused serious misgivings about the viability and trajectory of the transnational black struggle for equality. As the civil war unfolded, African Americans interpreted the conflict through the lens of their position within U.S society and their ongoing struggle for freedom, equality and justice. African Americans sought to understand the Nigerian Civil War through the language, ideas, and movements that defined the black freedom struggle in the late 1960s, only to find the coherence of those ideas were in tension with the complex situation that unfolded in Nigeria. Many of these concepts and ideas – for example, non-violence and black power – did not neatly mesh with the dynamics of the civil war. Nonetheless, the actions, campaigns, discussions, and debates that took place reveal that African Americans saw themselves as having a direct stake in the civil war and its outcome.

The neglect of the Nigerian Civil War in African-American historiography is surprising considering the significance of the African continent to the black American community throughout much of the mid-twentieth century. Historians of the African American freedom struggle, as noted above, have paid attention to the multifaceted and rich engagement between African Americans and Africa. Exchanges of ideas, organisational methods, tactics, and inspiration helped inform and shape the struggle for civil and human rights in the United States and the battle against European colonialism in Africa. Historians have explored how Africans throughout the continent, from South Africa to Ghana and throughout Francophone Africa, engaged in a rich dialogue with African Americans over ideas concerning race and citizenship, the importance of non-violent resistance to colonialism, and how the struggles against Jim Crow and Apartheid shared common as well as diverging elements.⁵

Certain nation-states in Africa, such as Algeria, Ghana and Tanzania, as well as anti-colonial resistance groups in Portuguese Africa, became sources of inspiration and ideas for black Americans in their own struggle for racial and economic justice.⁶ In addition to serving as a source of inspiration to Africans, African Americans also assisted in practical nation-

⁵ See Jake Hodder, "Towards a Geography of Black Internationalism: Bayard Rustin, Nonviolence, and the Promise of Africa", *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 106, No.6 (2016), 1360-1377; Sarah Claire Dunstan, "A Tale of Two Republics: Race, Rights, and Revolution, 1919-1963" (PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2017); Nicholas Grant, *Winning Our Freedom Together: African Americans and Apartheid, 1945-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

⁶ See Kevin K. Gaines, *American Africans in Ghana: Black Expatriates and the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Sean Markle, *A Motorcycle on Hell Run: Tanzania, Black Power, and the Uncertain future of Pan-Africanism, 1964-1974* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2017); Elaine Mokhtefi, *Algiers, Third World Capital: Freedom Fighters, Revolutionaries, Black Panthers* (London: Verso Books, 2018); Robert Joseph Parrott, "A Luta Continua: Radical Filmmaking, Pan-African Liberation and Communal Empowerment", *Race and Class* 57, No.1 (2015), 20-38.

building efforts in many of these new African states, helping to develop constitutions, educational facilities, publishing houses, journals, and newspapers.⁷ As members of resistance movements against colonial regimes increasingly adopted armed insurrection as a method of resistance, African Americans debated the morality of this approach not only in terms of Africa, but also in the context of their black freedom struggle at home.⁸ From the mid-1960s, facing a backlash against the evolving civil rights movement, and believing that American liberalism had reached the limits of its effectiveness in addressing racial and economic injustice, many African Americans looked to the Third World and particularly Africa for concrete examples of societies that had dealt with – or were effectively dealing with – racial discrimination and economic injustice.⁹

The richness of the scholarship on African American engagement with Africa during the post-World War II era has not extended to the Nigerian Civil War. This raises an interesting paradox considering the significance of Nigeria in the African American community and the global implications of the Nigerian Civil War. Contemporary African American observers and scholars of black internationalism have acknowledged that the nature of the conflict – an internecine struggle between rival ethnic and tribal groups to define the Nigerian polity – presented serious challenges for African Americans trying to interpret and make sense of it. As historian Robert Joseph Parrott noted in his study of African American engagement with anticolonial movements in Portuguese Africa: ‘[a]s it had been in the 1950s, race was the

⁷ See Mary Dudziak, *Exporting American Dreams: Thurgood Marshall's African Journey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Sean Markle, *A Motorcycle on Hell Run: Tanzania, Black Power, and the Uncertain Future of Pan-Africanism, 1964-1974* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2017).

⁸ For discussions about the Mau Mau insurgents' adoption of armed resistance in the African American community see Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be Africans*, 124-149; Gerald Horne, *Mau Mau in Harlem? The U.S. and the Liberation of Kenya* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000); and Fanon Che Wilkins, “Beyond Bandung: The Critical Nationalism of Lorraine Hansberry, 1950-1965”, *Radical History Review*, Issue. 95 (2006), 191-210.

⁹ For works exploring African American connections to revolutionary Third World regimes and movements in Africa see Chapter Five of Robert Joseph Parrott, “Struggle for Solidarity: The New Left, Portuguese African Decolonization, and the end of the Cold War Consensus” (PhD diss., University of Texas, 2016); Elaine Mokhtefi, *Algiers, Third World Capital: Freedom Fighters, Revolutionaries, Black Panthers* (London: Verso Books, 2018); Sean L. Malloy, *Out of Oakland: Black Panther Part Internationalism during the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017); Sean Markle, *A motorcycle on Hell Run: Tanzania, Black Power, and the Uncertain future of Pan-Africanism, 1964-1974* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2017); Chapter Seventeen of Clayborne Carson, *In struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); Fanon Che Wilkins, “‘In the belly of the beast’: Black Power, Anti-Imperialism, and the African Liberation Solidarity Movement, 1968-1975,” (PhD diss., New York University, 2001); Russell Rickford, “‘Kazi is the Blackest of All’: Pan-African Nationalism and the Making of the ‘New Man’, 1969-1975”, *The Journal of African American History*, 101, No. 1-2 (2016), 97-125.

most accessible identity for cutting across national borders since colour was what demarcated African Americans as second-class citizens in the United States'.¹⁰

The scholars who have acknowledged, but not seriously explored, how African Americans responded to the Nigerian Civil War, have had two differing approaches. The first approach suggests that, due to the conflict being related to state collapse and ethnic tensions, African Americans were unable to make sense of the conflict, and therefore limited their involvement.¹¹ The second approach suggests that African Americans were only concerned about race when viewing the conflict, and that, consequently, their primary concern was supporting Nigerian unity and ensuring the survival of the largest and most significant black majority state in Africa.¹² Neither of these explanations put forward is entirely adequate. Race did not simply mean standing on the sidelines in a 'black on black' conflict or giving carte blanche support for Nigerian political unity. In fact, it meant the emergence of a significant humanitarian campaign in the black community, attempts at reaching a diplomatic settlement through the mediation of senior African American civil rights figures, and significant discussions and debates about the future of Nigerian unity and the viability of the Republic of Biafra.

Racial solidarity for African Americans during the Nigerian Civil War was more multifaceted than scholars have hitherto acknowledged. It did, to be sure, encompass support for the Nigerian state. African Americans deliberated on how the Nigerian political system could be improved to ensure the nation-state could be stable and successful. Through the American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa (ANLCA) peace mission, which was organised by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, A. Philip Randolph, Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young and Theodore E. Brown, African American civil rights leaders built support for a negotiated settlement, while stressing the need for the Igbo to be reincorporated peacefully into Nigeria. Yet racial solidarity also expressed itself in African American advocacy for, and direct action

¹⁰ Robert Joseph Parrott, "A Luta Continua: Radical Filmmaking, Pan-African Liberation and Communal Empowerment", *Race and Class*, 57, No.1 (2015), 23.

¹¹ See Bayard Rustin, "How Black Americans see Black Africa – and vice versa", in *Time of Two Crosses: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin*, eds., Devon W. Carbado and Donald Weise (San Francisco: Cleis Press Inc, 2003), 314-317; John A. Davis, "Black Americans and United States Policy towards Africa", *Journal of International Affairs* 23, No. 2 (1969), 242-243; Brenda Plummer, *In Search of Power: African Americans in the Era of Decolonization, 1956-1974* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 199; Meriweather, *Proudly we can be African*, 240.

¹² See Roy M. Melbourne, "The American Response to the Nigerian conflict, 1968", *Issue: A Journal of Opinion* 3, No. 2 (1973), 39; Lasse Heerten, *The Biafran War and Postcolonial Humanitarianism: Spectacles of Suffering* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 239; Martin Staniland, *American Intellectuals and African Nationalists, 1955-1970* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 204-209.

in, humanitarian assistance to the victims of the civil war. As the following chapters show, such efforts ranged from grassroots events, to music concerts and fundraising campaigns, including the Black American Aid to African Starvation (BAATAS) campaign in Kansas to protest rallies organised by black ad-hoc organisations. Meanwhile prominent African American leaders petitioned the US government, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and United Nations (UN), while elsewhere, individuals involved in direct action risked their lives to breach the Nigerian military blockade.

As aid workers, journalists, and international organisations warned of ‘genocide’ in Biafra, the use of this term directly resonated on racial and human rights grounds with significant segments of the African American community. Genocide was not just a concept of industrialised slaughter associated with Nazi terror in Europe; it was also an idea that many felt directly resonated with the African American experience in the United States. As reports circulated about the deaths of black men, women and children in the besieged Biafran enclave, African Americans saw a level of suffering that they could relate to as fellow members of the black diaspora. While some scholars have seen Nigerian unity as the issue that galvanised a significant cross-section of African Americans, there was in fact also praise and support for the efforts of the Republic of Biafra and its people to sustain themselves in trying circumstances.

As this thesis shows, for a vocal minority, Biafrans, rather than being victims, were in fact in the vanguard of attempts to renew post-colonial Africa and the broader black diaspora through their fight for independence. At a time when some African Americans were looking for alternatives to American liberalism to alleviate racial and economic injustice, Biafra, according to this line of argument, offered a model of hope and self-determination. However, the appeal of this case was limited due to the importance that African Americans – ranging from civil rights leaders to black nationalists – attached to Nigerian unity. Praising Nigerian unity, however, was not simply an expression of knee-jerk support for a black-majority nation-state; it was also linked to broader geopolitical concerns that intersected with the civil war in Nigeria. At a time when decolonisation had stalled in Southern Africa, and the Apartheid regime in Pretoria seemed stronger than ever, Nigeria became, for African Americans, a crucial front in the struggle against colonialism and white supremacist regimes in Africa. For many African American observers, the disintegration of Nigeria threatened to vindicate the colonial and white supremacist regimes of Portugal, Rhodesia and South Africa,

who claimed that Africans were incapable of managing and maintaining a modern nation-state.

Since the military surrender of the Republic of Biafra in January 1970, international historians, political scientists and journalists have been cognisant of the international and transnational dimensions of the civil war.¹³ While the civil war started as a localised secessionist struggle, by the anniversary of the commencement of hostilities in July 1968 it had become a conflict that caused deep unease throughout Africa, North America and Western Europe: the growing political, tribal and social dysfunction of the post-colonial Nigerian polity was undeniable. Charges of genocide levelled at the Nigerian FMG by Biafran officials, by Christian missionaries in the besieged enclave, by journalists in the warzone, and by supporters of the Biafran cause across the globe, were too serious to ignore. Mere decades on from the horrors of the Holocaust, the images of skeletal children and adults dying in their thousands, and claims of a deliberate policy of starvation, shocked the world. Genocide, a crime of such horror that the international community had developed not only a new word but international legal covenants to prevent its reoccurrence after World War II, had become, it seemed, a potential reality in West Africa in the summer of 1968.

‘At the core of the Biafran Holocaust comparisons’, wrote historian Lasse Heerten, ‘was the creed against remaining silent in view of the suffering of others. This belief system was couched in universal terms, but is firmly entrenched in particular systems of thought and evocations of a shared civilization’.¹⁴ Genocide in Biafra, as a crime that transcended the ambit of national sovereignty, combined with improved telecommunication technology and media distribution technology to make the civil war in Nigeria a real-time issue for people throughout the world; a Holocaust in the Age of Aquarius. In response to warnings of genocide and images of suffering that resembled Auschwitz and Dachau, a transnational movement, operating in many cases below the level of the nation-state, mobilised to support the starving masses besieged in the shrinking Biafran enclave. The airlift of humanitarian supplies – as well as arms for the Biafran war effort – by ad-hoc organisations and charities

¹³ Three early works that capture the international dimensions of the Nigerian Civil War are Frederick Forsyth, *The Biafra Story: The Making of a African Legend* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2015). The *Biafra Story* was originally published in 1969. See Also Suzanne Cronje, *The World and Nigeria: The Diplomatic History of the Biafra War 1967-1970* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1972); John de St. Jorre, *The Brothers War: Biafra and Nigeria* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1972).

¹⁴ Heerten, *The Biafran War*, 201.

from the United States and Western Europe became an essential lifeline for the survival of civilians in the warzone, and for Biafra's struggle for independence.

Over two-hundred pro-Biafran support committees emerged in the United States and had a decisive impact on shaping public opinion.¹⁵ For both the Johnson and Nixon Administrations, the public outcry over Biafra became a pressing domestic issue that became increasingly difficult for officials in the White House and the State Department to ignore.¹⁶ Airfields such as the one at Uli – one of the few operational airports in Biafra – became hubs of transnational activism as aid workers, missionaries, celebrities, politicians, journalists, intellectuals, mercenaries, and intrigued foreigners flocked to provide aid and assistance. The scope of this mobilisation made the secessionist republic, in the words of historian Daniel Sargent, 'a ward of the international community'.¹⁷

Yet, while there has been a growing level of interest in Biafra in fields such as International History and the histories of human rights and humanitarianism, such scholarship has not yet reckoned with the scope and significance of African American engagement with the civil war. The potential and need for cross-pollination remains.¹⁸ For example, Kevin O'Sullivan, Matthew Hilton and Juliano Fiori have suggested that recent works on the history of humanitarianism 'allow us to think about the intersections between humanitarianism and identity. Non-state actors played an important role in shaping individual and collective senses of belonging by blurring the lines between humanitarianism's local, regional, imperial and international contexts'.¹⁹ Such interconnections between international engagement and domestic identity were central to the ways in which African Americans interacted with post-colonial Africa. In a civil war that left between 1 million and 3 million dead (the majority civilians), devastated one of the most important black-majority nation-states in West Africa,

¹⁵ The figure of two-hundred Biafra support committees in the United States is quoted in Brian McNeil, "'And Starvation is the Grim Reaper': The American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive and the Genocide Question During the Nigerian Civil War, 1968-1970", in *Postcolonial Conflict and the Question of Genocide: The Nigeria-Biafra War, 1967-1970*, eds. A. Dirk Moses and Lasse Heerten (New York: Routledge, 2018), 279.

¹⁶ See Roy M. Melbourne, "The American Response to the Nigerian Conflict, 1968", *Issue: A Journal of Opinion* 3, no. 2 (1973): 33-42.

¹⁷ Daniel Sargent, *A Superpower Transformed: The Remaking of American foreign policy in the 1970s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 73.

¹⁸ Lasse Heerten and A. Dirk Moses, two leading scholars of the conflict, argue that the Nigerian civil war was not only a 'genuinely global event' but 'a watershed for the postcolonial global order.' See Lasse Heerten and A. Dirk Moses, "The Nigeria-Biafra War: Postcolonial Conflict and the Question of Genocide", in *Postcolonial Conflict and the question of Genocide: The Nigeria-Biafra War, 1967-1970*, eds A. Dirk Moses and Lasse Heerten (New York: Routledge, 2018), 3.

¹⁹ Kevin O'Sullivan, Matthew Hilton, Juliano Fiori, "Humanitarianism in Context," *European Review of History* 23(2016): 10.

and sparked a major global humanitarian campaign, the voices and attitudes of African Americans are a missing piece in the broader international history of the conflict.²⁰

In excavating and highlighting the dynamic and complex world of African American interactions with the Nigerian Civil War, this thesis engages simultaneously with the fields of International History and African American History, highlighting new points of intersection between the respective fields. The Nigerian Civil War reached its peak in terms of violence and global attention when the African American freedom struggle was reaching a point of inflection. In studying the response of African Americans to the civil war in Nigeria, this thesis also explores the diverging attitudes and opinions of the civil rights movements as it began to fracture. The disintegration of Nigeria came at a time when the African American freedom struggle itself was imploding.

“Black America Cares” is structured chronologically. The chronological structure reflects not only the evolution of African American engagement with Nigeria, but also shows how the shifting dynamics during the civil war affected the views and opinions of African Americans. Chapter One explores the development of the relationship between African Americans and Nigerians from 1919 to 1960, to provide crucial historical context for understanding the key issues and challenges of the late 1960s. The year 1919 was a critical year in the history of anti-colonial movements and organisations throughout the Global South – what historian Erez Manela has called the ‘Wilsonian moment’.²¹ For movements of colonial liberation in what would become independent Nigeria, 1919 was not only the beginning of the long march towards independence, but a point of growing transnational activism across the black Atlantic that drew African Americans and Nigerians into dialogue. The chapter examines the growing connections that were forged between the two peoples through various institutions and organisations in the black community, and through personal interactions and intellectual engagements, particularly through books and articles. These dynamic relations led to a growing sense that the struggle for civil and human rights in America and the question for colonial liberation in Nigeria were interlinked. It was these connections that led to importance being attached to Nigeria in the African American community, a significant factor in shaping black Americans’ attitudes and approaches to the civil war.

²⁰ Ibid, 3-5.

²¹ See introduction of Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3-13.

Chapter Two covers the period from Nigerian independence in October 1960 to the first military coup in January 1966, which shattered the political foundations of the young state. The chapter will examine how African Americans – ranging from civil rights leaders and black politicians, to business leaders and educators – saw Nigeria as a symbol and practical example of how those of African-descent were more than capable in shaping their own destiny. However, amidst the celebrations of Nigerian achievement, troubling signs were emerging. The political structure of the Nigerian polity and growing ethnic tensions between the largest religious and tribal groups were sources of increasing concern for many black Americans. This provoked intense debate, particularly in the black press in America. Some wondered, were the increased political and ethnic tensions in Nigeria merely the growing pains of a young nation, or did they in fact signal serious systemic problems that could tear the country apart?

Chapter Three discusses how the growing ethnic tensions within Nigeria and the eventual outbreak of civil war between the Federal Military Government and the Republic of Biafra prompted the intervention of the American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa (ANLCA) – an organisation founded by senior civil rights leaders in 1962 that focused on building dialogue between black Americans and Africa. Following a second military coup in July 1966, ethnic and tribal tensions within the Nigerian army spilled over into broader Nigerian society. African Americans expressed shock as the black press reported on mass violence and ethnic pogroms aimed at the Igbo tribal group, which left tens of thousands dead and forced millions to flee their homes. Responding to these disturbing reports and ominous rumblings of civil war, the ANLCA interceded in the hope that its leadership could act as neutral mediators between the Nigerian military government and rebels in the Igbo-dominated Eastern region of Nigeria. The chapter documents the diplomatic campaign of the ANLCA, which took place between March 1967 and April 1968, through a close study of the organisation's private papers and coverage in the black press. It also explores the understudied role of ANLCA director, Theodore E. Brown, who crisscrossed the African continent, discussing the Nigerian crisis with various African heads of state and diplomats in an effort to find a durable peaceful settlement. While the ANLCA mission was deeply concerned about the situation in Nigeria, this chapter also places the mission within a domestic US context. For the moderate civil rights leaders who were part of ANLCA, the attempt to build a peace dialogue in Nigeria was a way not only for them to burnish their reputations, but to show a commitment to black internationalism equal to that shown by more

radical black power activists. The civil war that the ANLCA hoped to find a peaceful solution for proved to be beyond their powers to stop.

Chapter Four examines how African Americans responded to reports emerging from the warzone of widespread famine and claims of genocide. These reports, assisted by heart-wrenching images and television footage of starving and dying children, caused global consternation. The chapter will consider, among other things, the humanitarian aid effort that African Americans organised between May 1968 and January 1970. This aid effort, which encompassed both grassroots activism and campaigns organised by established African American organisations, has been either overlooked or underestimated by historians. By providing a granular analysis of these activists and initiatives in the black community, this chapter will reveal how domestic questions about genocide, black power and racial uplift intersected with the crisis in Nigeria at a micro, community level.

Chapter Five documents the campaign of the Joint Afro Committee on Biafra (JACB) – an eclectic mix of civil rights activists, black nationalist militants, and other African Americans with experience of Nigeria – that hoped to convince broad sections of the black community that Biafra was a political project worth supporting. The JACB attempted to cast Biafra as a ‘nation-state’ that would renew post-colonial Africa and embody Black Power on the continent. At a time when many African Americans were looking to the Third World for models to challenge racial injustice at home, the JACB proposed Biafra as the best model. However, the extent of the JACB appeal among African Americans was limited; for many, including civil rights leaders and black nationalists, a politically unified Nigeria continued to be the preferred option.

Chapter Six argues that such support for Nigerian unity was not only related to the shifting circumstances of the civil war, but also to broader African American concerns about post-colonial Africa and the ongoing struggle against colonial and white supremacist regimes in Southern Africa. The chapter documents how African American journalists such as Ethel Payne and Lillian Wiggins and black politicians, including Senator Edward Brookes and Congressman Charles Diggs, increasingly supported Nigerian unity. Through a close study of key organs of the black press, this chapter will document a growing consensus that, although not without its critics, saw Nigerian unity as not only benefiting Africa but the broader black diaspora.

“‘Black America Cares’” draws on an array of primary sources to develop a comprehensive picture of the varying attitudes and opinions within the black American community during the conflict. These sources include the official papers of the ANLCA, the private papers of NAACP executive director Roy Wilkins, the private papers of Reverend James H. Robinson, the papers of the Nigeria-Biafra Clearing House, oral histories of key participants in the African American community, the private papers of the Joint Afro Committee on Biafra, the W.E. B DuBois online collection, relevant State Department and White House documentation, and the black press in the United States.

The black press – which includes major metropolitan newspapers, magazines, and periodicals of major black organisations such as the NAACP – forms a particularly significant source base for this thesis. Along with the black church, the black press was one of the two pivotal institutions through which activist goals were articulated in the African American community throughout the twentieth century. Not only was the black press a source of vital information and key debates surrounding the black freedom struggle in the mid-twentieth century, it was also a forum to discuss and debate global events, particularly the significance of Africa for the black American community. As African Americans campaigned for freedom and equality at home, the black press played a significant role in linking this struggle to broader global events. ‘[I]n order to get a better idea of how African Americans interacted with Africa in recent decades’, wrote Gerald Horne, ‘particularly in the context of the latter’s struggle for national liberation, there needs to be a systematic scouring of the African American press’.²² This thesis is, in this sense, one contribution among others needed to heed Horne’s call. From the 1940s, the black press became a vital forum for discussions of Nigerian self-determination and provided detailed commentary and debate around the significance of an independent Nigeria for the broader black diaspora. During the civil war, questions related to the disintegration of the Nigerian polity, genocide, humanitarian intervention, and the significance of Nigerian unity became the source of significant discussion, and in some cases fractious debate, in the black press. This thesis is the first to engage the black press in order to closely study the response of this key black institution to the Nigerian Civil War, and its implications for African Americans. I will be using a variety of African American publications, including major weekly newspapers as well as smaller regional and city-orientated papers, such as the *New York Amsterdam News*.

²² Horne, “Towards a Transnational Research Agenda”, 299-300.

Besides articles and editorials related to the civil war, I have also garnered information from letters to the editor, speeches, cartoons, photo essays, petitions, and even food menus.

In pursuing these threads, “Black America Cares” illuminates an aspect of African American engagement with Africa that has been understudied by historians, and in doing so, it goes beyond the filling of a vital gap to providing new interpretations of black internationalism and African American history.

Chapter One

‘The rich vigorous flood of Africa as she rises in Strength and Beauty’: Nigerian and African American interactions across the Black Atlantic, 1919-1960

On the afternoon of 19 July 1959, the summer rain spluttering down on the 23,000 people gathered at the Polo Ground in Upper Manhattan failed to dampen the electric atmosphere that permeated the mammoth stadium. The audience was there to witness the closing rally of the fiftieth annual meeting of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the leading liberal African American civil rights organisation in the United States. Just after 4pm, a robed, bespectacled figure took to the stage to address the crowd. The figure was fifty-four year old Nnamdi Azikiwe, the Premier of the Eastern Region of Nigeria and one of the key movers in Nigeria’s struggle for independence from British colonial rule. Writing in 1958, the political scientist James Coleman noted that, ‘during the fifteen-year period between 1934-1949, Nnamdi Azikiwe was undoubtedly the most important and celebrated nationalist leader on the West Coast of Africa, if not in all tropical Africa. To the outside world “Zikism” [a reference to Azikiwe’s nickname, Zik] and African nationalism appeared to be synonymous’.¹ Introduced to the crowd by the African American academic and diplomat Ralph Bunche, Azikiwe began his speech by praising the fifty year campaign of the NAACP to ensure ‘the attainment of equal rights for people of African descent and other peoples of color who are citizens of this great bastion of democracy’.² For Azikiwe, the significance of the NAACP was not confined to the United States; its influence extended across the Atlantic Ocean to West Africa. ‘In Africa’, intoned Azikiwe:

[T]he NAACP spirit of active resistance to the forces which are inconsistent with democratic principles has fired our imagination. We have relentlessly fought any attempt to foist upon us the horrible stigma of racial inferiority. We have successfully challenged cant and hypocrisy among

¹ James S. Coleman, *Nigeria: Background to Nationalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 220.

² Louis Lautier, “NAACP A ‘Light’ in Africa”, *Afro-American*, August 1, 1959, 9.

those who pay lip service to democracy. And we have severed forever the chains of autocracy in many African countries where millions of Africans were held in political bondage.³

The struggle of the NAACP in the United States and the fight against colonial rule in Nigeria were, for Azikiwe, movements bound together in challenging racial discrimination, economic exploitation, and political and legal subordination. Ralph Bunche captured this sentiment when he declared before the crowd at the Polo Ground that '[a]ll of the non-white peoples are today properly insisting on their right to traverse the highways and byways of the world in equality with all other men, with dignity and self-respect, with their heads held high, and they cannot fail in this, just as we cannot fail in America.'⁴

In the summer of 1959, as the wave of decolonisation approached its crest, few could have envisaged the horrors of political assassinations, ethnic pogroms, and war and famine that would engulf post-colonial Nigeria only eight years later. To understand how African Americans responded to the Nigerian Civil War, it is first essential to understand the deep political, personal, educational and intellectual connections that bound African Americans and Nigerians from the end of the First World War to Nigerian independence in 1960. These connections are the subject of this chapter. The chapter begins at the end of the First World War, a moment that saw the emergence of an assertive form of Nigerian nationalism, inspired by the Wilsonian rhetoric of self-determination and growing frustration with colonial rule. This was the embryo of a political movement that eventually led to independence forty-one years later.

The cause of independence for Nigeria was aided by Nigerian leaders' many connections with key individuals and institutions in the African American community. 'The first skirmishes in the struggle for political freedom of 21 million people of Nigeria are being fought today – in the colleges of the United States', wrote Prince Okechukwu Ikejiani, a Nigerian medical student studying in America, in a 1946 article 'Nigeria's Made-in-America Revolution'. He continued: 'When this freedom comes, as it inevitably must, it will be born of the strangest and most "modern" revolution in the long striving for liberty by the oppressed people of the world: a revolt won by books instead of bullets, by words instead of battles'. For Prince Ikejiani, the 'Nigerian Revolution' began when Nnamdi Azikiwe first set

³ Nnamdi Azikiwe, "Nnamdi Azikiwe addresses the NAACP convention on the organization's 50th anniversary", *Black Past*, https://www.blackpast.org/major_speeches/1959-nnamdi-azikiwe-addresses-national-association-advancement-colored-people-organizations-50th-ann/, (accessed 7 November 2018).

⁴ Lautier "NAACP A 'Light'", 9.

foot on American soil in 1925 to begin his higher education. As a result of his studies in the United States, Azikiwe's 'interest in political freedom for his people grew to encompass all other Africans as well'.⁵ By the time the article was published Azikiwe and the political party he co-founded with Herbert Macaulay in 1944, the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon (NCNC), was at the centre of anti-colonial resistance to British-rule.⁶

This struggle for national liberation was distinctly shaped by the interactions between Nigerian activists and organisations and the African American community in the United States, especially interactions fostered within and by historically black universities and colleges. Ikejiani noted that Azikiwe attended both Howard University and Lincoln University, two of the most significant historically black university colleges (HBUC) in the country. Historian Jason C. Parker has written that between the 1920s and 1960s black institutions of higher education – employing the best of the African American intelligentsia – became 'a kind of intellectual hothouse and safe house, as African and diaspora activists used this forum for comparatively free inquiry – unimaginable for such activists in white America or colonial Africa – to debate the black future'.⁷

This chapter, divided into two parts, will survey this dynamic relationship between African Americans and Nigerians from 1919 to the independence of Nigeria in 1960. Between 1919 and 1941 the relationship between African Americans and Nigerians was relatively weak, with few personal or major political interactions. However, I will argue that Nigerian nationalists were inspired by the theories and ideas of major African American scholars, including W.E.B. DuBois, Alain Locke and Leo Hansberry, and by organisations such as the Garveyite movement in the 1920s that enjoyed strong support in the African American community. The second part of the chapter will explore the thickening of the relationship between African Americans and Nigerians as a result of the Second World War and its aftermath. During the war, African Americans and Nigerians joined forces in arguing that the Atlantic Charter of 1941 should be a document orientated towards colonial freedom globally as well as for European states under Nazi domination. During the war years Nigerian students inspired to study in the United States by Azikiwe formed a vanguard that in alliance

⁵ Prince Okechukwu Ikejani, "Nigeria's Made-in-America Revolution," *Magazine Digest*, January 10, 1946, 57

⁶ For the role of Azikiwe in the 1945 general strike see Oliver Coates, "'His telegrams appear to be hysterical, but he is very astute': Azikiwe's Spectacular Self and the 1945 General Strike in Nigeria", *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 30, No.3(2018), 227-242.

⁷ Jason C. Parker, "'Made-in-America Revolutions'? The 'Black University' and the American role in the Decolonization of the Black Atlantic", *The Journal of American History*, 96, No.3 (2009), 729.

with members of the African American community lobbied for Nigerian independence. These students and budding nationalist leaders – through the black press, books and organisations such as the American Council on African Education (ACAE) and the African Academy of Arts and Research (AAAR) – built support in the African American community and broader American society for eventual independence.

The connections forged in war continued throughout the 1940s and into the 1950s. This chapter draws on a variety of primary sources including the major organs of the black press – the periodicals of African American organisations such as the *Crisis*, *Opportunity* and *New Africa*, and the papers of W.E.B DuBois – to chart the growing dialogue and interactions across the Atlantic during this period. It argues that, throughout these years, the black press played a significant role in highlighting the ongoing struggle for African American civil rights and Nigerian self-determination alike, complementing the activities of the NAACP and the Council on African Affairs (CAA). As African Americans increasingly challenged their second-class citizenship in the United States, the gradual evolution of Nigerian self-government became a source of inspiration and pride to many.

In June 1940, W.E.B DuBois, writing in the *New York Amsterdam News*, lamented that ‘[R]elations between British West Africa and American Negroes have never been as thorough as they should be. The West Africans are usually educated in England and imbibe some of the contempt for American Negroes, while we in turn know very little about the great nation of Nigeria’.⁸ DuBois’ observations were pertinent in describing the interactions between African Americans and Nigerians between 1919 and the entry of the United States into the Second World War. The relationship was relatively limited in terms of personal interactions and organisational efforts. Instead, the relationship over these decades would be forged through ideas and intellectual engagement that would crisscross the Black Atlantic, particularly with regards to the formation of a Nigerian territorial entity free from colonial rule.

While the First World War was pivotal in the development of Nigerian nationalism, its origins can be traced to the mid-nineteenth century, before the political entity ‘Nigeria’

⁸ W.E.B DuBois, “As the crow flies”, *New York Amsterdam News*, June 22, 1940, 1.

existed. This tradition of Nigerian nationalism had throughout its development drawn on connections to ideas, organisations, institutions, and individuals in the African American community. Up until the First World War, Nigerian national consciousness had developed in isolation from any significant intellectual influences from the African American community. Rather, it was heavily influenced by the role of Islam in Northern Nigerian, particularly the Fulani *jihad* and the through the first-generation of Africans educated through various Christian missionary societies.⁹

In the aftermath of the First World War, world leaders gathered in Paris to build the foundations of what they hoped would be a new era in global politics. Meanwhile, at a hotel on the Boulevard des Capucines, delegates from Africa, and members of the black diaspora from the United Kingdom and United States attended the First Pan-African Congress (not to be confused with the first Pan-African conference held in London in 1900). Organised by the Pan-Africanist historian and civil rights activist, W.E.B DuBois, with crucial assistance from Blaise Diagne, the French Senegalese Commissioner General of the Ministry of Colonies, the conference aimed to place issues related to Africa and the African diaspora on the agenda of the Allied world leaders. Although their demands were ignored by world leaders, historian Sarah Dunstan perceptively noted that, while many of the goals of the conference were more ‘conservative’ or ‘pro-colonial’ than demands for a complete political break with the European metropolitan powers, the delegates to the conference ‘sought to ensure rights for the black African population through the frameworks they knew best: nation-state belonging and citizenship’.¹⁰ While the ‘Wilsonian moment’ was in one sense fleeting, and European colonial empires were more robust than many anti-colonial nationalists perceived, historian Ezra Manela noted that ‘[i]n its wake, however, political programs and organizations committed to self-determination became more powerful and more pervasive than before’.¹¹

⁹For an overview of the origins of Nigerian nationalism in the nineteenth century see J.F. Ade Ajayi, “Nineteenth Century Origins of Nigerian Nationalism”, *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 2, No.2 (1961), 196-210; For a scholarly overview of the varying interpretations of the Fulani jihad see Marilyn Robinson Waldman, “The Fulani Jihad: A Reassessment”, *The Journal of African History*, 6, No.3 (1965), 333-355.

¹⁰ Sarah Claire Dunstan, “Conflicts of Interest: The 1919 Pan-African Congress and the Wilsonian Moment”, *Callaloo* 39, Issue.1 (2016), 145-146.

¹¹ Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 292.

Like many other parts of the colonial world, the British crown colony of Nigeria was affected by the changed international environment created by the war and its aftermath.¹² Although there were no Nigerian delegates at the Pan-African Conference in 1919, the ideals and reports of the proceedings of the conference caused some Nigerians to question the nature of colonial rule. The colony's burgeoning newspaper industry, primarily concentrated in the largest city, Lagos, as well as the rapid spread of information through the telegraph, ensured that discussions in Paris on self-determination and African governance permeated Nigeria. The National Congress of British West Africa (NCBWA), established in 1920, drew directly on the ideas and themes of the Pan African Congress regarding growing frustration with colonial rule and the need for Africans to have a greater role in governing British West Africa. Writing in the *African Studies Review* in 1971, G.I.C Eluwa described the founding of the NCBWA as a significant political awakening as its leaders sought to create a political movement that would cover the four British colonies in West Africa. '[I]t was the educated Africans' frustrations in the colonial system', noted Eluwu, 'and their keen sense of the injustices of the colonial regime which perhaps was the most crucial contributory factor to the emergence of the Congress movement'.¹³ In throwing down the gauntlet to colonial authorities, the NCBWA tapped into a variety of influences, including indigenous resistance leaders, voluntary societies dedicated to the well-being of Africans, West African nationalist scholars such as Edward Wilmot Blyden, secessionist African churches such as the African Baptist Church, and 'DuBois' Pan-African Congress movement'.¹⁴ James S. Coleman corroborates this point, noting that 'partly by these developments among Negro groups [the 1919 Pan-African Congress and Garveyism] elsewhere, inspired by the example of the Indian Congress party, and stimulated by the climate of idealism generated by the war, a few educated Africans in the British West African territories organized the National Congress of British West Africa [NCBWA]'.¹⁵

Besides the intellectual influence of DuBois and the 1919 Pan-African Congress, both Coleman and Eluwu noted the significance of Garveyism in the founding of the NCBWA and

¹² See James K. Matthews, "World War I and the Rise of African Nationalism: Nigerian Veterans as Catalysts of Change", *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 20, No.3 (1982), 500.

¹³ G.I.C Eluwa, "Background to the emergence of the National Congress of British West Africa", *African Studies Review*, 14, No.2 (1971), 216.

¹⁴ Ibid, 213.

¹⁵ Coleman, *Nigeria: Background to Nationalism*, 191.

in the development of Nigerian nationalism.¹⁶ Marcus Garvey, the Jamaican-born founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), captured the attention of millions in the United States, the Caribbean and West Africa with his vision of Pan-Africanism, racial uplift, and self-determination.¹⁷ Historian R. L. Okonko wrote that ‘the Garvey movement in Nigeria was more developed and active than any other British West African colony’.¹⁸ Lagos emerged as a hub for Garveyite activities in the immediate aftermath of the war, with the establishment of an office of the Black Star Line Corporation as well as an office of the UNIA. Akinbami Agbebi, founder of the Lagos branch of the Black Star Line, was a firm believer in the importance of native entrepreneurs in Nigeria being supported to counteract the dominance of European businesses in the colony. The Garveyite movement, as it developed in Nigeria, led to a series of personal and intellectual interactions between African Americans and Nigerian colonial subjects. Agbebi, whose father had developed strong ties to the United States during his time as a leader of the independent African church movement in Nigeria, furthered his education under the tutelage of the African American journalist, Pan-Africanist intellectual and key advisor to Marcus Garvey, John E. Bruce. Thomas Horatio Jackson, editor of the *Lagos Weekly Record* and a keen supporter of the Garveyite movement in Lagos, was a prominent supporter of the need for unity between African Americans and Africans in the British Nigerian colony.¹⁹

The most significant impact of Garveyism on the development of relations between African Americans and Nigerians was through the person of Nnamdi Azikiwe. As a high school student in 1920, he came in to possession of a copy of Garvey’s newspaper *The Negro World*. The newspaper, according to historian Erik McDuffie, ‘changed Azikiwe’s life’. ‘Azikiwe concluded that Garvey provided Africans with a roadmap for a “new way of life” of dignity and freedom’.²⁰ *The Negro World* and *Philosophies and Opinions of Marcus Garvey* (1923) were foundational in shaping Azikiwe’s vision of a new Africa, a continent liberated from European colonial rule. ‘Garvey’, wrote R. L. Okonkwo, ‘was one of the first to speak

¹⁶ For the connection between the NCBWA and the UNIA see Yekutiel Gershoni, “Common Goals, Different Ways: The UNIA and the NCBWA in West Africa – 1920-1930”, *Journal of Third World Studies* 18, No.2 (2001), 171-185.

¹⁷ Adam Ewing, *The Age of Garvey: How a Jamaican Activist Created a Mass Movement and Changed Global Black Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 77.

¹⁸ R.L. Okonkwo, “The Garvey Movement in British West Africa”, *The Journal of African History* 21, No.1(1980), 110.

¹⁹ Ibid, 115-116.

²⁰ Erik S. McDuffie, ““A new day has dawned for the UNIA’: Garveyism, the Diasporic Midwest, and West Africa, 1920-1980”, *Journal of West African History* 2, No.1 (2016), 84-85.

out boldly for freedom from colonialism'.²¹ Azikiwe would carry these convictions with him across the Atlantic to the United States to undertake further studies at Howard and Lincoln. In time Azikiwe emerged as the key node in a trans-Atlantic alliance between African Americans and Nigerians. Born in 1904 in Zungeru in Northern Nigeria, to an Igbo clerk serving the British-led Nigerian Regiment, Azikiwe was a product of the non-European administrator class that, according to historian Odd Arne Westad, would become central to the nationalist eruptions in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and the Caribbean from the mid-twentieth century.²² However, it was his studies in the United States, starting in 1925, that would forge his future as Nigeria's preeminent independence figure.

Azikiwe was initially inspired by the Gold Coast (modern Ghana)-born missionary and educator James Aggrey's message of African advancement through education in the United States. Aggrey's assertion that 'nothing but the best was good enough for Africa' resonated with the young Azikiwe.²³ However, Azikiwe's initial enthusiasm for the United States was tempered by his experience of the racial discrimination and economic insecurity that circumscribed the lives of African Americans in the 1920s. Following his graduation from Storer College, a black preparatory college in West Virginia, his academic achievements allowed him to enter Howard University, one of the premier black universities in the United States.

It cannot be overstated how significant Azikiwe's time at Howard – and subsequently Lincoln University – was in shaping his political thought and leadership. Speaking in 1954 before the Board of Trustees at Howard, he noted that:

As a crusader in the cause of human freedom in Africa, I am very grateful to Howard University for helping mould [sic] my outlook at the formative stage of my intellectual and physical development....Tunnell, Locke, Harris, Bunche and Hansberry were among my teachers. They

²¹ R.L. Okonkwo, "The Garvey Movement", 117.

²² Odd Arne Westad, *Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 75

²³ Nnamdi Azikiwe, *My Odyssey: An Autobiography* (London: C.Hurst & Company, 1970), 3. On the significance of Dr. James Aggrey as a supporter of African advancement through education see Leonard S. Kenworthy, "James K. Aggrey: Reconciler of Races", *The Journal of Negro Education* 15, No. 2 (1946), 181-190. See also Sylvia M. Jacobs, "James Emman Kwegyir Aggrey: An African Intellectual in the United States", *The Journal of Negro History* 81, No.1/4 (1996), 47-61.

gave me an insight into the complex problems of human nature....Having been armed mentally...I was ready to take my place in the romance called life.²⁴

Historian Jason Parker described Azikiwe as ‘student zero’ because ‘unlike previous foreign students [at historically black colleges] who returned home as religious, and to a lesser extent political, leaders but did little to recruit others to follow their transatlantic lead, Zik exhorted his fellows to go to black American colleges’. In this capacity, Azikiwe was ‘making a key contribution to the transnational discourse on freedom: the recruitment of the nationalist generation of black Atlantic leaders, from political figures to functionaries, to the black campus’.²⁵ Azikiwe would be instrumental in encouraging his fellow Nigerian anti-colonial activists, along with activists from across West Africa, to study at black institutions in the United States rather than at European institutions. One of his protégés was Kwame Nkrumah, future president of an independent Ghana, and one of the most influential proponents of Pan-Africanism.

Azikiwe himself was deeply influenced by some of the greatest African American intellectuals of the era, who proved vital in shaping attitudes towards self-determination, race, and Africa. Alain Locke, the philosopher and first African American Rhodes Scholar, was Azikiwe’s main patron at Howard. In *My Odyssey* Azikiwe expressed his debt to Locke:

I mused that if I was willing to become an intellectual revolutionary for the mental emancipation of Liberia and Africa, then there was no reason why I should not formulate a philosophy towards the crystallization of this dream of a new Africa....It took a course of lectures in the subject of social philosophy under Professor Locke to guide me towards constructive and systematic thinking.²⁶

Locke came to prominence in the African American community when he guest edited the March 1925 edition of *Survey Graphic* titled *Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro*. The collection of essays eventually evolved into an anthology titled *The New Negro*. According to Locke’s biographers, his scholarly works contributed to the ideal that:

[I]nstead of being the end product of some else’s social beliefs, or existing only through identification according to a fixed list of characteristics, the New Negro would be able to achieve

²⁴ Nnamdi Azikiwe, “An address delivered during the banquet arranged by the Board of Trustees of Howard University to honour the recipients of honorary degrees of that university, on June 4, 1954” in *Zik: A Selection from the Speeches of Nnamdi Azikiwe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 12-14.

²⁵ Parker, ““Made-in-America Revolutions””, 731-733.

²⁶ Azikiwe, *My Odyssey*, 140.

autonomy. Such a redefining of the racial experience would allow Negroes greater scope and authority.²⁷

The *New Negro* called on African Americans to embrace Africa in the quest for racial uplift. Locke wrote that, '[I]n terms of the race question as a world problem, the Negro mind has leapt so to speak, upon the parapets of prejudice and extends its cramped horizons. In so doing it has linked up with the growing group consciousness of the dark-peoples and is gradually learning their common interest'.²⁸ Historian Clare Corbould has noted that Locke was on the frontlines in the struggle to institutionalise the study of African history at a tertiary level in the United States as a way to overcome racial discrimination. 'Slavery', Locke acknowledged, had 'cut the Negro off almost completely from his roots. Its greatest damage was not the bondage of those generations that bore the physical brunt of it, but the damage to the group tradition, the self-esteem and morals of these people'.²⁹ The English literature scholar, Obi Nwakanma, declared that 'it is safe to say now that no one accounts for the trajectory of Azikiwe's intellectual development more than Alain Locke, whose influence can be seen even in Zik's political gestures.' Azikiwe's 1937 work *Renascent Africa*, according to Nwakanma, 'draws upon the ideological stimulus and mood of Locke's *New Negro*....[I]t is possible to suggest that the intellectual and ideological congruence between the Harlem Renaissance and the African nationalist movement was convergent and osmotic'.³⁰

Another African American scholar who deeply influenced Azikiwe at Howard was William Hansberry. At Howard, Hansberry lectured in African history and civilisation, a subject that fascinated the young Azikiwe. As he recounted:

He [Hansberry] offered courses to show the role of persons of African descent in ancient, medieval and modern history....He emphasized the humanitarian influence of Ethiopian warriors, and demonstrated how it might have affected the development of the international law of war. Then he opened a new world to us in medieval history, pinpointing the role of Ghana, Mali, Melle, and Songhay in the history of Africa.³¹

²⁷ Leonard Harris & Charles Molesworth, *Alain L. Locke: The Biography of a Philosopher* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 217.

²⁸ Ibid, 210.

²⁹ Quoted in Claire Corbould, *Becoming African American: Black Public Life in Harlem, 1919-1939* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 119.

³⁰ Obi Nwakanma, "Harlem, the "New Negro," and the cultural roots of Azikiwe's nationalists politics", *History Compass*, 15(2017), 6-7.

³¹ Ibid, 118

Hansberry, according to historian Robin Kelley, was part of a group of black scholars who challenged global ideals of white supremacy and African inferiority by 'portraying African people as world-historical actors, to turn on its head the Hegelian or Toynbee-esque image of Africa as having no history'. By reclaiming the history of the African continent and members of its diaspora, these black historians were 'essentially making a claim for black people's humanity'.³² Azikiwe's interactions with these black institutions, individuals and ideas would continue to shape his intellectual and political development once he returned to West Africa. Locke and Hansberry, and to a lesser extent Ralph Bunche, Abraham Harris and the theologian William Victor Tunnell, provided him with the intellectual 'equipment for the battle of life'.³³

Azikiwe returned to Africa in 1935 and two years later founded the *West African Pilot* newspaper in Lagos following a brief period editing the *African Morning Star* in Accra. Azikiwe, noted the historian Sam O. Idemili, 'founded his newspaper for two reasons: to serve the nationalist struggle against colonialism and as a business venture'. As one of the first newspapers in the colony to have a mass circulation beyond Lagos, the *West African Pilot* became a forum for further nationalist agitation and a thorn in the side of British colonial authorities. Prior to the establishment of the *Pilot* there had been three other Nigerian-owned newspapers in Lagos, but 'none was so critical of the colonial government as the *Pilot* was to be'.³⁴ While Azikiwe and the *Pilot* were at the forefront of a growing nationalist discourse in Nigeria, the outbreak of the Second World War in Europe in September 1939 took the debate regarding Nigerian self-government to a new level. During the war years African Americans assumed a significant role as vital allies for Nigerians in their quest for liberation.

On 17 June 1940, as the forces of Hitler's Third Reich continued their conquest of Western Europe, Elmer A. Carter, the African American editor of *Opportunity*, the periodical of the National Urban League, issued a dire warning to both African Americans and African colonial subjects. Carter wrote that:

³² Robin E. Kelley, "'But a Local Phase of a World Problem': Black History's Global Vision, 1883-1950," *The Journal of American History* 86, Issue. 3(1999): 1062.

³³ Azikiwe, *My Odyssey*, 121.

³⁴ Sam O. Idemili, "What the West African Pilot Did in the Movement for Nigerian Nationalism between 1937 and 1957", *Black American Literature Forum* 12, No.3 (1978), 85-86.

[The idea that] the triumph of Hitler over the so-called democracies of Europe is of no importance to the Negro is fallacious and short-sighted. "The destruction of the democracies of Europe means the triumph not only of Nazi armies but also of the Nazi ideology...[that] relegates the Negro to perpetual serfdom and denies him every semblance of legal status".³⁵

African Americans joined the battle to defend American democracy – however flawed – against Nazi Germany and its allies; their goal was to extinguish the racial menace of fascism, *and* to secure equality at home through the overthrow of the Jim Crow system of racial segregation.³⁶ The 'Double V campaign' first articulated by *The Pittsburgh Courier* in February 1942 became central to African American rhetoric and protest actions during the war. Nigerians also threw themselves into a war-effort against a foe whose racial policies made the British Empire seem almost palatable. As Nigerian manpower and economic resources boosted the sinews of the United Nations war effort, Nigerian politicians, anti-colonial activists and students increasingly used the language and ideals of the Allies, much like earlier activists used Wilsonian ideas and rhetoric, to challenge British colonial rule.³⁷

In their efforts Nigerians received encouragement across the Black Atlantic, particularly in the African American press and from key black individuals who, according to historian Nico Slate, identified this notion of anti-colonialism being interlinked with racial justice in the United States as a 'global double victory'. As Slate notes, this notion was an expansion of the idea espoused in the pages of *The Pittsburgh Courier* of 'linking victory overseas against the Axis with victory at home against racial oppression'.³⁸ The war would change this state of affairs as African Americans and Nigerians became allies in the struggle against fascism abroad and racial injustice espoused in the American South and in the British colonial empire. Historian Jonathan Rosenberg has written that during the war African American civil rights leaders, activists, and journalists 'used developments in... [Africa and India] to inspire their supporters with the notion that theirs was a shared crusade [against racial injustice and exploitation]'.³⁹

³⁵ "Hitler victory will mean bitter struggle for Negro", *Atlanta Daily World*, July 17, 1940, 1.

³⁶ "Victory at home, victory at abroad sweeps nation: all Americans can rally around the "Double V" slogan at home, abroad", *The Pittsburgh Courier*, March 21, 1942, 12.

³⁷ The scope of Nigeria's wartime mobilisation is covered in Ashley Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006), 171-268.

³⁸ Nico Slate, *Colored Cosmopolitanism: The Shared Struggle for Freedom in the United States and India* (Cumberland: Harvard University Press, 2012), 126.

³⁹ Jonathan Rosenberg, *How Far the Promised Land? World Affairs and the American Civil Rights Movement from the First World War to Vietnam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 144.

The Atlantic Charter, a joint declaration outlining the war aims of the United States and Great Britain, became a vessel for anti-colonial individuals and groups, as well as their supporters in the African American community, to challenge the edifice of colonial rule. The Charter itself was a product of lengthy diplomatic wrangling. On 14 August 1941, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and President Franklin Delano Roosevelt put their signatures to the joint declaration of the two Great Powers.⁴⁰ While the future of colonialism was not discussed in the document, Point Three of the Charter had great significance for the question of empire. Point Three stated that Britain and the United States wished ‘to see sovereign rights and self-government for all peoples, including those forcibly deprived of them’. Historian Elizabeth Borgwardt identified two distinct aspirational agendas behind the Charter, the first associated with Churchill, the second which would have made Nelson Mandela proud. According to Borgwardt:

Churchill’s charter was an ephemeral press release intended for European ears only, intended to shore up Britain’s sagging morale and hopes of the invaded countries of Europe. Mandela’s charter was a global statement of principle with an anti-colonial as well as an anti-Nazi message, promising freedom and equality to individuals worldwide, unconstrained by sovereign states or imperialist prerogatives.⁴¹

Mandela’s model of interpretation of the Charter, according to Borgwardt, inspired Nigerian nationalists, in particular Nnamdi Azikiwe and his acolytes, to demand independence from the British Empire. African Americans also adopted the wider-reaching, ‘Mandela interpretation’ of the Charter. W.E.B DuBois, reflecting on the African American experience with Woodrow Wilson during World War I, remained circumspect about the Churchill interpretation of the Charter. ‘I do not like the Roosevelt-Churchill manifesto’, he wrote: ‘[t]hey wish to see rights and self-government restored...[d]oes this include Zululand, Natal, Nigeria, the Dutch Indies, the Gold Coast and a hundred other lands of the Blacks?’ DuBois reinterpreted the Charter, placing the freedom and dignity of ‘the colored world’ at the centre:

The first step to reform, uplift and peace, is not merely to seek the end of war among European nations, but to revise and control and rationalize the fundamental attitude of the white towards the

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World: America’s Vision for Human Rights* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 37.

⁴¹ Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World*, 34.

colored world. When men of all races and colors are recognized as equal in the rights and aspirations, then the beginning[s] of world peace are in sight!⁴²

Nnamdi Azikiwe emerged as one of the leading voices in advocating for a universal, Mandela-style anticolonial interpretation of the Charter. Historian Bonny Ibhawoh describes Azikiwe as typifying a ‘new generation of West African nationalist political leaders who had grown impatient with the reformist agenda of an older generation of conservative African political leaders’. Frustrated with ‘imperial restructuring and gradual progression towards self-government’, Azikiwe demanded immediate independence for Nigeria.⁴³ While an ardent supporter of the Allied war effort, Azikiwe led a delegation of West African journalists to London to clarify the position of the British government on Point Three of the Charter after Churchill’s statement in the House of Commons in September 1941.⁴⁴ Churchill’s view that the Atlantic Charter should only be applicable in Europe prompted Azikiwe to outline his own vision of self-determination for Nigeria in 1943, in a book titled *Political Blueprint of Nigeria*. The *Blueprint* combined the principles of self-determination presented in the Atlantic Charter with a uniquely ‘anti-colonial human rights agenda’. The book called for expansive rights for Nigerian colonial subjects from health and education, to religious freedom and free speech.⁴⁵

Some of the leading African American newspaper mastheads in the United States meanwhile covered a cablegram entitled ‘The Atlantic Charter and British West Africa’ that Azikiwe sent through the *West Africa Pilot* to the British Secretary of State for the Colonies. In that cablegram he sought clarification on the status of self-government for Nigeria.⁴⁶ The Trinidadian journalist and Pan-African intellectual George Padmore wrote in March 1942 that ‘[a]larmed by the news that the British government had refused to grant democracy and

⁴² W.E.B DuBois, “As the Crow flies,” *New York Amsterdam News*, August 30, 1941, 14.

⁴³ Bonny Ibhawoh, “Human Rights and National Liberation: The Anti-Colonial Politics of Nnamdi Azikiwe,” in *Leadership in Colonial Africa*, ed. B.G. Jallow (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 60.

⁴⁴ Winston S. Churchill, “War situation”, (speech, London, September 9, 1941), Hansard, https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1941/sep/09/war-situation#S5CV0374P0_19410909_HOC_289 (accessed July 15 2019).

⁴⁵ Bonny Ibhawoh, “Testing the Atlantic Charter: Linking Anticolonialism, Self-Determination and Universal Human Rights,” *The International Journal of Human Rights* 18(2014), 850-851.

⁴⁶ “Nigerians want to know how they fit in post-war picture,” *Atlanta Daily World*, January 16, 1942, 1; “Churchill and White House won’t touch Nigeria issue,” *Afro-American*, January 17, 1942, 3 ; “Africans want to know how they fit in post-war picture,” *Cleveland Call and Post*, January 17, 1942, 2B.

self-government to the natives of India and Burma, the Africans wanted to know if Point Three of the Charter would apply to them after the war'.⁴⁷ Azikiwe's cablegram stated that:

On behalf of the protectorate and colony of Nigeria we respectfully request clarification of the Atlantic charter [sic] regarding Nigeria to enable us to appreciate the correct bearing of 21 million Nigerians in the sea of international politics.⁴⁸

The *West Africa Pilot* called upon the services of the US black press, asking 'the Associated Negro Press to obtain from the chief executive [President Roosevelt] his views on whether the Atlantic charter [sic] is applicable to West Africans'.⁴⁹ This appeal not only reflected the growing importance of the United States in international debate on the ongoing legitimacy of colonialism, but also the importance of the African American community as a vital ally in the anti-colonial cause. In their solidarity with Nigeria, the black press was particularly damning of how the British government handled Azikiwe's memorandum. A blistering editorial in *The Chicago Defender* proclaimed that:

There can therefore be no "harmony" between England's "high conception of freedom and justice" for white Englishmen and Africa's hope for political redemption and economic salvation which can only come through a removal of the oppressive, inhuman British yoke so tightly fastened upon the necks of the natives of the Dark Continent.⁵⁰

The NAACP, for its part, threw its support behind the notion that 'the human rights battle against the Axis could not be solely about European liberation'. Indeed, historian Carol Anderson has written that during the war years the NAACP annual conferences became venues where 'the issue of independence for colonial peoples in India, Malaysia, Burma, and throughout Africa echoed around the assembly halls'.⁵¹ The Jamaican-born publisher Wendall Malliet wrote that ' [i]t is because the future of Africa is now hanging in the balance regardless of who the victors are, that it is of the utmost importance that voices be raised in the New World and the Old on behalf of Africa'.⁵² The July issue of *The Crisis* featured an

⁴⁷ George Padmore, "Churchill still not specific in replying to Nigeria charter query," *The Chicago Defender*, March 7, 1942, 12.

⁴⁸ "U.S. and Churchill Dodge Nigerian query concerning post war status," *The Chicago Defender*, January 17, 1942, 1.

⁴⁹ "Africans want to know how they fit in postwar picture", *Cleveland Call and Post*, January 17, 1942, 2B.

⁵⁰ "Britain's reply to Africa," *The Chicago Defender*, March 14, 1942, 14.

⁵¹ Carol Anderson, *Bourgeois Radicals: The NAACP and the Struggle for Colonial Liberation, 1941-1960* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 22.

⁵² A. M. Wendall Malliet, "Status of Colored Race After Conflict Explored," *New York Amsterdam News*, January 31, 1942, 13.

extended article on the Nigerian memorandum. It stated that the purely European orientation of Churchill's interpretation of the Charter was a betrayal of the loyal Nigerian natives:

Mr Churchill has not answered the question, he has merely postponed it. Imperialism has always tried to stave off an answer to this question, but history is demanding and will continue to demand its answer.⁵³

Walter White, national secretary of the NAACP, during a worldwide tour in early 1944, informed members of West African Student Union (WASU) in London that there was an unbroken 'bond with peoples of Africa [and African Americans] in the struggle for economic, political, and social betterment'.⁵⁴ The eminent African American historian, Carter G. Woodson also emphasised the linkage between black Americans and Africa's past, present, and future in an article in the *Atlanta Daily World*. Woodson viewed Azikiwe (and his followers) as embodying 'a new thought as to the position of the Negro in the world', and a figure utilising 'the exterminating conflict which is now destroying the world... [to develop] new opportunities to those who heretofore have been eliminated from the drama'.⁵⁵

While African American individuals, organisations, and newspapers were key in providing information about Nigeria to the black American community, native Nigerians also added their voices to debates and discussions on the political future of Nigeria and the relationship between African Americans and Nigerians. Three individuals were particularly active on this front: Kingsley Mbadiwe, Mazi Mbonu Ojike, and Prince Abyssinia Akweke Nwafor Orizu. Besides being proteges of Nnamdi Azikiwe, both Mbadiwe and Ojike also started their education in the United States at Lincoln University, Azikiwe's alma mater. Orizu started at Ohio State before transferring to Columbia University. In New York he quickly established himself within the vibrant African American intellectual and cultural community in Harlem. According to James Coleman, '[t]he wartime activity of Nigerian students across the Atlantic was perhaps of even greater [importance] in the development of the nationalist movement [than student activities in Britain]'. Coleman continued:

Three of the Nigerian students ([Mazi] Mbonu Ojike, Nwafor Orizu, and [Kingsley]Ozuomba Mbadiwe – all Ibos) made lecture tours of the United States, and published one or more books each. Their writings were the first contribution to Nigerian nationalist literature since Azikiwe's

⁵³ George Padmore, "Crisis in the British Empire," *The Crisis*, July edition, 1942, 236-237.

⁵⁴ George Padmore, "British Against Color Bar, Says Walter White," *The Chicago Defender*, March 18, 1944, 2.

⁵⁵ Carter G. Woodson, "The Negro as a factor in world war number II," *Atlanta Daily World*, February 1, 1942, 4.

‘Renascent Africa’ [in 1937]. Upon their return to Nigeria these three became crusaders for American practical – or what Orizu called ‘horizontal’ – education, as contrasted to the British literary (‘vertical’) tradition.⁵⁶

Historian Hollis R. Lynch, in his biography of Kingsley Mbadiwe, wrote that:

Azikiwe knew that the United States offered unparalleled opportunities for study at the university level for African students. He also believed that it was a better training ground than England for future African leaders; Americans encouraged initiative and enterprise, and the opportunity for African students to collaborate with African Americans – who were struggling for their own civil rights – would enhance the African students sense of nationalism.⁵⁷

What united the three relatively young men during the war years was their emergence as public intellectuals who advocated for Nigerian independence from British rule while also stressing the importance of understanding developments in contemporary Africa and working with African Americans to achieve their goals.⁵⁸ The black American community was vital in promoting the ideas of the three, through publishing their work in major black newspapers, supporting their major book projects, and through the sponsorship of organisations such as the African Student Association (founded in 1941) and African Academy of Arts and Research (founded in 1943), both of which were established by Mbadiwe to support greater understanding of Africa in the United States.

The wartime conditions gave these ardently anti-colonialist men an opening to challenge the hypocrisy of European colonial powers. Mbadiwe, in his book *British and Axis Aims in Africa* – published in March 1942 by A.M. Wendell Mallet, one of the few black publishers of commercial books in the United States – sought to provide a detailed analysis of ‘the problems of Africa and their relation to the present conflict’.⁵⁹ Launched at a lavish ceremony in New York organised by the African Student Association and the Ethiopian World Federation, the book was lauded in the black press. The *New Journal and Guide* described that book as ‘the only one written by a native African on the problems of the Dark Continent and published in this decade’. The article went on to state that:

⁵⁶ Coleman, *Nigeria*, 242-243.

⁵⁷ Hollis R. Lynch, *K. O. Mbadiwe : A Nigerian Political Biography, 1915–1990* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 24.

⁵⁸ For understanding the role of the Nigerian students as public intellectuals in the 1940s, I have drawn from the methodology of Czech activist and intellectual Vaclav Havel see Vaclav Havel, “The Responsibilities of Intellectuals”, *New York Review of Books*, June 22, 1995.

⁵⁹ “Native Book Deals On African Problem,” *New Journal and Guide*, March 28, 1942, B15.

The book contains a prophecy [sic] and a warning, especially to the statesmen of Europe, not to repeat the same errors which they made and repeated during and after the last war by disregarding the aspirations and general welfare of the colonies and transferring them to new masters and exploiters.⁶⁰

The only way the errors of the past could be avoided by European colonial powers, according to Mbadiwe, was through radical reform of the British imperial system through ‘fostering a common citizen [sic] within the Empire, with equal responsibilities, equal rights and privileges, and equal duties to all Empire citizens’.⁶¹ Speaking alongside African American historian and archivist Dr. Lawrence Reddick in May 1942 at City College, New York, Mbadiwe launched a blistering attack on British policy towards its African colonies. He proclaimed that ‘Africa does not want to survive under a totalitarian system [of colonial rule], and endorsed the application of the Atlantic Charter for ‘Africa as well as the rest of the world’.⁶² In a speech at Columbia University, reported on by Austin Briggs-Hall for the *Atlanta Daily World*, Mbadiwe drew parallels between the Nigerian experience of the First World War and the experience of African Americans in that war. He pointed out that ‘Africa took arms 28 years ago in order [sic] to help save the world for democracy....Africa came back home not only to find individual and family disorganization, but also had to summon courage to face foes of democracy at home....’⁶³

Mbadiwe’s growing reputation as an African nationalist figure and public intellectual in the United States brought him to the attention of the White House, in particular First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. In May 1943, he was invited to meet Mrs. Roosevelt and discuss the West African role in supporting the Allied war effort. *The Chicago Defender* reported that Mbadiwe called on the United States to extend its ‘good neighbor policy’ from Latin America to West Africa and extolled the Nigerian contribution to the allied war effort in terms of soldiers, money, and raw materials.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Ibid

⁶¹ Ibid

⁶² “African Criticizes Churchill and Charter,” *New York Amsterdam News*, May 30, 1942, 7.

⁶³ Austin Briggs-Hall, “Declares African Must Have Freedom,” *Atlanta Daily World*, August 12, 1942, 1.

⁶⁴ “African Prince Visits First Lady In White House Parlay,” *The Chicago Defender*, May 22, 1943, 5. Throughout this period the African American press linked the Roosevelt Administration’s Good Neighbor Policy to anti-colonialism and to anti-racism. “[T]he Roosevelt good-neighbor policy that has made this nation unique since 1932. Haiti has been evacuated of Marines and left to work out her destiny. Nicaragua has likewise been freed of American surveillance and direction, as have Cuba and Santo Domingo. Statehood is being considered for Puerto Rico and independence for the Philippines is on the way. This is remarkable for a great power, considering the attitude of the other powers. If one can visualize Japan freeing Korea or England moving her troops out of Egypt or France giving Dahomey its independence, the one can understand the unselfishness of

Mazi Mbonu Ojike became a proponent of developing greater understanding of contemporary Africa within the African American community. Insisting on using the term ‘Afro-Americans’ instead of ‘American Negroes’ in an interview with *The Chicago Defender*, Ojike told journalist George Moore that ‘we Africans consider you our kinsmen and are anxious to develop closer relationships between us’.⁶⁵ Ojike saw himself as a ‘new Nigerian’ analogous to the ‘new Negro’. He outlined the purpose of his studies in the United States by declaring: ‘My objective is to see the republicanization of Nigeria, the breaking down of the present unorganized system of government. As a progressive, young Nigerian, I seek the establishment of a constructive, well-guided government in my homeland’.⁶⁶

In a speech before the African Academy of Arts and Research, Ojike stated that Africans had a significant contribution to make in tackling Jim Crow. ‘The race problem in America cannot be tackled in any one way.... There are many sides that need attention. We Africans have a contribution to make. We Africans can let the white men in America know that Africans have a place in the world’.⁶⁷ In his 1945 book *My Africa*, Ojike challenged preconceived ideals of Africa (and subsequently of Nigeria) that shaped black American and broader American attitudes towards the continent. Thomas Dabney described Ojike’s work as the ‘revelation of a native son who has experienced the aspirations, difficulties, and problems [of contemporary Africa]’.⁶⁸ A review of the book that appeared in the *New York Amsterdam News* captured Ojike’s contribution as follows:

[T]he foundation of the struggle for integrity that is one of the first things taken from a conquered people. Ojike speaks even in his boyhood for the new Africa, which will be a blending of two cultures rather than the shucking off of the African way as though it had no value. He will accept much that the white man has to offer, but he has not forgotten that his people are among the world’s greatest also.⁶⁹

America’s good-neighbor policy.” See “Liberia and the Good-Neighbor Policy”, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, June 22, 1935, 10. African Americans also linked Latin American states concerns about U.S race relations to the broader struggle against Jim Crow. See “Guest editorial: Lynching and the Good Neighbor policy”, *New York Amsterdam News*, April 20, 1940, 14.

⁶⁵ George Coleman Moore, “Nigerian Scholar Says Africans Want Independence from British,” *The Chicago Defender*, August 22, 1942, 6.

⁶⁶ Lucy, “Master’s Degree”, 2.

⁶⁷ “Asserts Africans can help make U.S. democratic nation,” *Atlanta Daily World*, May 13, 1945, 5.

⁶⁸ Thomas Dabney, “Guide Book Shelf,” *New Journal and Guide*, November 10, 1945, A11.

⁶⁹ Constance Curtis, “About Books and Authors: Reviews,” *New York Amsterdam News*, November 17, 1945, 23.

The editor of the *Chicago Daily Defender*, Lucius C. Harper, reflected on the way writers such as Ojike opened up new vistas for African Americans to view developments in Nigeria and more broadly in Africa. Reviewing *My Africa*, he described the book as showing ‘Africa in a new light.... The curtain of a new day is rising there, and we are finding here in America that we have been deceived almost without end on what the black man has been long struggling to bring before the eyes of the world on what’s taking place behind the scenes on this vast stage of human actions. Thanks again to World War II’. ‘[C]olored Americans’, Harper continued, have viewed Africa ‘through the eyes of the [black] church. Here we are told of its poverty and backwardness; its nakedness and ignorance’. Harper wrote that:

Africans have long pleaded with colored Americans to look upon their continent as a vineyard of opportunity, not a land to be pitied and scorned. Light is now breaking through the darkness of the European’s well-planned and highly organized propaganda that has kept the blacks of Africa and the black people in other parts of the world so distantly apart.⁷⁰

Ojike, through his writing and community engagement, offered African Americans a vision of racial solidarity and uplift that had direct correlations to the black experience in the United States.

Prince A. A. Nwafor Orizu published in 1944 his monograph *Without Bitterness*, an exploration of the future of postwar Africa. The book, although at times hindered by its clumsy prose and confused train of thought, still crackled with urgency regarding European colonial rule in Africa. For Orizu, the era of colonialism was fast approaching its end and if no alternative was found quickly, the whole continent was on the verge of revolutionary upheaval. To prevent this disorder and bloodshed, which Africans could unleash due to their deep sense of discontent, the international community needed to embrace the notion of Africans governing themselves. African American commentators in the black press were particularly impressed by the intensity and scope of Orizu’s work. A. M. Wendall Mallet extolled the scope and ambition of the young man’s project. He noted that:

the constructive influence of American [and black American] institutions on the African mind.... The sweeping reforms effected and the awakening of the African mind as a result of the travels, studies, and programs of men like Dr Aggrey and Nnamdi Azikiwe (Zik) give an idea of what the New Africa is likely to mean to one world.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Lucius C. Harper, “Dustin’ off the News: We have just begun to learn about Africa,” *The Chicago Defender*, March 30, 1946, 1.

⁷¹ Wendell A. M. Mallet, “World Fronts,” *New York Amsterdam News*, December 2, 1944, 14A.

Ethel L. Williams of the *Afro-American* wrote that Orizu viewed ‘intermarriage, exchange of students, exchange of publications of cultural organisations, and exchange of newspapers’ as the best practical ways to expand the relationship between Nigerians and black Americans in the future.⁷² George Schuyler, the African American journalist and essayist, reinforced these sentiments:

[His book] is at once an explanation of Africa’s glorious past, an analysis of her present position and a guidepost to her political, social and economic future. In a few short years... [he] has mastered the learning of the white world, digested it, rejected the spurious and accepting the sound and constructive, and evolved a philosophy which, greatly influenced by Azikiwe, is a political treatment for the Africa of tomorrow.⁷³

The books by Mbadiwe, Ojike and Orizu attacked the nature of European colonial rule in Africa. As followers of Nnamdi Azikiwe’s political philosophy, Pan-Africanism and Nigerian nationalism were axiomatic. Freeing Africa from imperialism and freeing Nigeria from British rule were identical objectives. For the African American journalists and scholars who reviewed their works, the readers of black newspapers, and the black audience members who listened to their public lectures across the country, these men offered a vision of Africa that was compelling at a time of global transformation. With their Western dress, American education, and in the case of Ojike, a plummy Oxbridge accent, the three symbolised the potential of an independent African future, a future aided by allies among the African American communities in the United States.

On 20 November 1943, *The Chicago Defender* announced the formation of a new organisation, AAAR, dedicated to enhancing knowledge of Africa in the United States through cultural events and lectures. The article noted that the head of the board of directors was Kingsley Mbadiwe of Nigeria, a ‘student, writer and speaker on African subjects in this country for the past two years’.⁷⁴ Mbadiwe saw a key role for Africans in the United States in shaping perceptions of a region of the world ignored until recently by American policy-makers and the general public. An editorial in *New Africa* proclaimed that ‘[M]illions of dollars’ worth of American war goods sent to Africa – tens of thousands of American soldiers on African soil! This is a measure of our country’s new relation to the African continent and

⁷² Ethel Williams, “About Books,” *Afro-American*, January 20, 1945, 3.

⁷³ George S. Schuyler, “Looks at Books: An African King speaks,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 7, 1945, 6.

⁷⁴ “African Academy Organized in N.Y.,” *The Chicago Defender*, November 20, 1943, 8.

people'.⁷⁵ In his meeting with Eleanor Roosevelt in May of 1943, Mbadiwe had outlined his vision of greater understanding between Africans (and specifically Nigerians) and Americans: 'through such cultural approaches [for example, African music] the peoples of the two countries might more easily come to know each other better'.⁷⁶ In outlining the importance of building cultural links between the United States and Africa, Mbadiwe's ideas interlinked with what historian Akira Iriye called 'cultural internationalism', the effort 'to link countries and peoples through the exchange of ideas and persons, through scholarly cooperation, or through efforts at facilitating cross-national understanding'.⁷⁷ Although Iriye's scholarship mainly focused on the inter-war period, ideas around 'cultural internationalism' continued in increasing measure to infuse key aspects of the Roosevelt Administration's foreign policy in the 1940s, particularly the Good Neighbor Policy towards Latin America.⁷⁸ In raising this idea with Eleanor Roosevelt, he was speaking to one of its foremost champions.

From its founding in November 1943, prominent African Americans signed up to be members of the AAAR's board of directors. The *Afro-American* reported that a distinguished group of African Americans were involved, including historian L.D Reddick, philosopher Alain Locke, editor of the National Urban League periodical *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*, Elmer A. Carter; executive secretary of the NAACP, Walter White; and the pastor at Harlem's Morningside Presbyterian Church, Reverend James H. Robinson, who would go on to found 'Operation Crossroads' in 1958 – the progenitor of the Peace Corps.⁷⁹ While DuBois declined to become an honoured sponsor, he lent his intellectual heft through a series of speeches organised by the AAAR.⁸⁰ Mary McLeod Bethune, president of the National Council of Negro Women, was an honoured sponsor of the first festival in December 1943. Long dedicated to black internationalism,⁸¹ in August 1943 Bethune was quoted in *New Africa*:

⁷⁵ "Editorial", *New Africa*, August 1943, DuBois Papers, <https://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums312-b100-i011>, (accessed 17 September 2017).

⁷⁶ "African Prince visits First Lady in White House parlay," *The Chicago Defender*, May 22, 1943, 5.

⁷⁷ Akira Iriye, *Cultural Internationalism and World Order* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997) 3.

⁷⁸ See Darlene J. Sadlier, *Americans All: Good Neighbor Cultural Diplomacy in World War II* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012).

⁷⁹ "African Research Academy started," *Afro-American*, November 20, 1943, 11.

⁸⁰ Lynch, *K.O Mbadiwe*, 42.

⁸¹ See Ashley N. Robinson, "'The Drums of Africa Still Beat in my Heart': The Internationalism of Mary McLeod Bethune and the National Council of Negro Women (1895-1960)," (PhD diss., Howard University, 2013).

Innately, I am deeply interested in Africa. We realized that progress in one country should stimulate progress in another. The world is fast becoming a melting pot for races. It is, therefore, vitally important that some constructive action and thought be employed through which the people of Africa may have a chance for self-improvement made possible by a closer relationship with us here in America.⁸²

The Chicago Defender, just prior to the first African dance festival at Carnegie Hall in December 1943, published a letter from Eleanor Roosevelt to Mbadiwe expressing her pleasure at being a sponsor of the event. She wrote that:

The future of the world depends on our knowing more about each other and on our developing mutual cultural and economic interests. The arts are the best bridge between peoples of different races and we must hope that the African Academy of Arts and Research, through [sic] a new organization will be very successful in building that bridge.⁸³

The *Atlanta Daily World* praised the festival as a ‘thrilling’ event and endorsed Roosevelt’s speech as promoting ‘understanding among peoples of the world if we are to have lasting peace’.⁸⁴ At the second annual festival in April 1945, guests at Carnegie Hall were treated to a star-studded cast of performers with the theme of festivities being ‘World Brotherhood’. The future of colonialism and racial justice were the focus of speeches by Kingsley Mbadiwe and Lawrence Reddick, according to the *Afro-American*. Indeed, Mbadiwe declared to the audience that ‘[W]e must act today.... The time is ripe to create a better world for those coming after us. The black man is in this world to live, and the white man has not been able to exterminate him. We must learn to live and work together in a world of everlasting peace’. Reddick stressed the urgent necessity to challenge racial inequality both globally and in the United States, stating bluntly that ‘[T]he time is coming...and soon, when the colored people will pass judgement on those who profess to be their champions’.⁸⁵

The centerpiece of the festival was the announcement of the Willkie Award, named after the recently deceased Republican Party presidential candidate Wendell Willkie. Willkie became a globally recognised figure for his outspoken support for a new multilateral organisation to replace the League of Nations and his fervent opposition to the continuation of colonialism. Much of this vision received widespread coverage through his best-selling

⁸² “Said...”, *New Africa*, August 1943, DuBois Papers, <https://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums312-b100-i011> (accessed 4 November 2017).

⁸³ “Mrs. FDR Sponsors Dance Festival,” *The Chicago Defender*, December 11, 1943, 2.

⁸⁴ “Dance Festival by Africans thrilling,” *Atlanta Daily World*, December 25, 1943, 14.

⁸⁵ Louis Dyson, “World brotherhood theme of African Dance Festival,” *Afro-American*, April 14, 1945, 10.

book *One World*, published in April 1943.⁸⁶ Mbadiwe described Willkie as ‘a man of great vision who realized that the people of one world cannot remain one-half free and one-half slave’.⁸⁷ Here Mbadiwe aligned his black internationalism with the broader currents of internationalism that permeated the United States during the war years.⁸⁸ In awarding the prize to the Secretary of Commerce, Henry Wallace, for ‘his contribution to international leadership and international association based upon the principles of equal justice for all’, the AAAR was sending a powerful message.⁸⁹ Still at that point an influential New Dealer, Former Vice President Wallace was one of the Democratic Party’s staunchest advocates for a progressive American foreign policy aimed at the gradual end of European colonial rule.⁹⁰

While the AAAR aimed to build greater understanding between African Americans and Africans through cultural events and joint platforms decrying colonialism, the American Council on African Education (ACAE) sought to enhance this level of engagement through practical educational initiatives. On 13 January 1945 the *Afro-American* reported on the formation of the ACAE under the leadership of Prince A.A. Nwafor Orizu. The goal of the American Council on African Education, Orizu declared, was the ‘dissemination of sound education among the African peoples as a realistic means of increasing the standard of living in Africa’. This would be achieved through a four-point program with strong emphasis on securing scholarships, building cultural and intellectual networks, establishing centers or hostels for African students in the United States, and establishing reciprocal institutions in Africa. ‘By opening up a large country like Nigeria’, noted Orizu, ‘which is the largest black populated country in the world and potentially the richest in natural resources and future possibilities, the colored American will have the opportunity to demonstrate his ingenuity’.⁹¹

Orizu had raised the idea of establishing the ACAE the previous year in a speech at Harvard University. The shifting political and economic dynamics as a result of the war meant that ‘it is not safe for Americans to remain isolated from the events of Africa because

⁸⁶ See Wendell L. Willkie, *One World* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1943).

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ See Robert A. Devine, *Second Chance: The Triumph of Internationalism in America during World War II* (New York: Atheneum, 1967). On Wendell Willkie’s internationalism during the Second World War see Samuel Zipp, “Dilemmas of World-Wide Thinking: Popular Geographies and the Problem of Empire in Wendell Willkie’s Search for *One World*”, *Modern American History* 1, Issue 3 (2018), 295-319.

⁸⁹ Venice T. Spraggs, “Wallace gets first Willkie award from Africans: Wallace receives African award,” *The Chicago Defender*, November 10, 1945, 3.

⁹⁰ For Wallace’s complex attitude to race and colonialism see Kevin Y. Kim, “From century of the common man to yellow peril”, *Pacific Historical Review* 87, No.3 (2018), 405-438.

⁹¹ “Form American Council on African Education in NYC”, *Afro-American*, January 13, 1945, 7.

that country is a great potential market for American goods after the war'. However, this future economic relationship was predicated on further developing the educational capabilities and resources of African students.⁹² For a relatively modest organisation, the ACAE had an impressive array of financial supporters and over one hundred universities including Yale, Harvard and Ohio State, promised their co-operation with the program.

'One of the most significant international projects today', wrote African American journalist George S. Schuyler, 'is the American Council on African Education'. 'American Negroes', according to Schuyler, were the 'most logical persons' to ensure that 'Africa...[gets] the kind of trained leaders it must have'. Schuyler's eager support for the program and desire to see it succeed was reinforced by the moral and financial support provided by other prominent African Americans, including Roy Wilkins of the NAACP, Henry K. Craft of the Harlem YMCA, the philosopher Alain Locke, publisher of *Ebony*, John H. Johnson, and the President of Howard University Dr. Mordecai Johnson. '[H]ere is a project', wrote Schuyler, 'in which every intelligent colored person in this country should be interested. The stronger Africa becomes, the better our position in this country'.⁹³

Orizu echoed Schuyler's sentiments regarding the ACAE when he wrote that the 'cooperation of the black Americans...is invaluable, their feelings for us is genuine, their interest in us is deep, their wish to visit Nigeria needs no proof, and their mental and physical equality with the white is something conclusive'.⁹⁴ A cartoon in the *Pittsburgh Courier* encapsulated this growing trans-Atlantic connection with a suited African American reaching out across the ocean to an African student, wearing glasses, bearing a document titled 'scholarship'. An article published alongside the cartoon noted that '[t]hroughout this period American Negroes have avidly interested themselves in the WELFARE of their brethren in the so-called Dark Continent from whence they came so long ago'.⁹⁵ In being actively involved in the running of the program and in providing financial support, African Americans

⁹² "Africa seen as important to the future of America", *Afro-American*, October 7, 1944, 20; "Harvard faculty club hears Orizu, Nigerian Prince", *The Chicago Defender*, October 7, 1944, 16.

⁹³ George S. Schuyler, "Views and reviews", *The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 26, 1945, 7. On the importance of black YMCA branches (and the YMCA more generally) as vessels for black internationalism see the works of Sarah Azaransky, *This Worldwide Struggle: Religion and the International Roots of the Civil Rights Movement, 1935-1959* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 6-7. See also Michael G. Thompson, *For God and Globe: Christian Internationalism in the United States between the Great War and the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), Chapter 1.

⁹⁴ Prince A.A. Nwafor Orizu, "Africa speaks: native Africans are jubilant when they learn of American Negro interest in them", *The Pittsburgh Courier*, February 23, 1946, 6.

⁹⁵ "Helping Hand", *The Pittsburgh Courier*, July 21, 1945, 6.

were aiding the broader anti-colonial struggle in Africa, particularly in Nigeria. Indeed, one editorial in the *New York Amsterdam News* reported that '[t]he Council is following the path blazed by the Japanese, Chinese, Indians and others, who sought the "know-how" of Western nations to be applied to the wheels of reform and progress in their own countries'.

The goals of the ACAE and its broader ambitions not only in Nigeria but on the wider continent aroused concern among British authorities. On 10 August 1946, George Padmore reported from London about the growing unease within British diplomatic circles and in the House of Commons regarding the role of the ACAE in providing educational opportunities to Nigerian students. With anti-colonial unrest growing in the colony, led by Nnamdi Azikiwe, 'Mr Ozoru's [sic] mission to West Africa is causing much uneasiness in certain imperialist circles who would like to see the fast-growing nationalist movement headed by Mr Azikiwe, secretary of the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroons, suppressed'.⁹⁶ S.A Haynes, writing in the *Afro-American*, noted that colonial officials in Lagos were flooding London with confidential reports on how the nationalist movement and trade unions in Nigeria were under 'the leadership and guidance of native scholars educated in American colleges and universities'. 'These administrators are distressed', wrote Haynes, 'that returning graduates and scholars from American institutions are revolutionizing the mind and spirit of the once docile and subservient tribal chiefs and unorganized masses, while English-trained graduates are eclipsed in the bid for the people's confidence'.⁹⁷

The *Philadelphia Tribune* reported with relish the complaints of British colonial authorities that 'these American educated Africans return to West Africa and develop highly explosive ideas of racial patriotism, Jeffersonian democracy and trade unionism'.⁹⁸ The African American press reporting on the ACAE was indicative of the mindset of the black community and their desire to support the ongoing struggle of Nigeria towards self-government. With the end of hostilities in August 1945 and the dawn of a new and uncertain era in global politics, African Americans were to become key allies and supporters of Nigeria's drive towards independence.

⁹⁶ George Padmore, "London Correspondent: Interesting Development", *The Chicago Defender*, August 10, 1946, 15.

⁹⁷ S.A Haynes, "Battle for Freedom: British fear colonials trained in U.S. Colleges", *Afro-American*, September 7, 1946, 5.

⁹⁸ "English oppose natives coming to US schools", *The Philadelphia Tribune*, September 10, 1946, 5.

Over buttered toast and tea in London in December 1945, W.E.B DuBois and the science fiction novelist, H.G Wells contemplated the seismic shifts in world affairs ushered in by the end of the war. ‘In word and silence we saw the world’, ruminated DuBois, ‘the extraordinary developments of the day when both our lives had been culminating’.⁹⁹ For the relationship between African Americans and Nigerian anti-colonial activists, the end of the war, rather than marking a pause, saw not only the continuation of wartime cooperation but its intensification. Historian John Munro noted that ‘World War II had also drawn the world system more tightly together, thus bringing multiple strands of transnational anti-colonialism into more direct contact’.¹⁰⁰

Only three months prior to DuBois’ and Wells’ meeting thousands of Nigerians were in the streets as part of a general strike. The strike, that involved over 150,000 public sector workers, had its roots in the evolution of Nigeria’s wartime economy.¹⁰¹ The general strike became interconnected with the broader Nigerian struggle for self-determination. On the release of veteran labour activist Michael Imoudu from British custody, following his imprisonment under wartime defense regulations, the veteran nationalist politician and leader of the NCNC declared in a speech that ‘[t]here is not the slightest doubt that the liberation of this country is very near’.¹⁰² As British authorities clamped down on the Nigerian press, Nigerian nationalists argued that this type of action was inimical to the values and ideas the Allies fought for. In a pamphlet written by Nnamdi Azikiwe, the nationalist leader rebuked colonial authorities for their hypocrisy:

Amongst a section, especially the official section of the European community in Nigeria, we have been accused of being anti-European. The accusation is based on a wrong interpretation of our policy. Our policy is to give the mass of Nigerians hope to live in a new and better Nigeria. We maintain that our European leaders should live up to the standards which they profess. We believe in efficiency and pay according to a person’s worth. We are opposed to privilege in any form,

⁹⁹ W.E.B DuBois, “Winds of Time”, November 19, 1945, DuBois Papers, <https://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums312-b216-i090> (accessed 19 January 2018).

¹⁰⁰ John Munro, *The Anti-Colonial Front: The African American Freedom Struggle and Global Decolonisation, 1945-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 37.

¹⁰¹ Wale Oyemakinde, “The Nigerian General Strike of 1945”, *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 7, No. 4 (1974), 693-710.

¹⁰² Ibid, 698.

whether among Africans or Europeans. If that is what they call being anti-European then we remain unrepentant.¹⁰³

African Americans were also deeply involved in supporting the striking Nigerian workers. In a letter to DuBois the Reverend James H. Robinson, chairman of the AAAR, reported that Nnamdi Azikiwe's life had reportedly been threatened as a result of his support for the strikers – although Robinson made no reference to the specific source of the threat. 'If this report is true', warned Robinson, 'I feel it has serious import for those of us who feel freedom of expression is one of the basic rights of humans.... It is important that some effective measure of protest be made by progressive peoples in order that the forces of oppression be discouraged from continuous transgressions of human freedom'.¹⁰⁴ In reply to Robinson, DuBois wrote that he would raise 'the question of Nigeria' at the Fifth Pan-African Congress that was to meet in Manchester, England in October 1945.¹⁰⁵

The Nigerian general strike became an issue that provoked significant coverage in the African American press. Speaking before local members of the AAAR, Kingsley Mbadiwe highlighted the scope and significance of '150,000 workers in Nigeria' taking industrial action and linked the strike to 'the necessity for Africans to form a closer alliance with American Negroes and Negroes in other parts of the world'.¹⁰⁶ In an interview published in the *Afro-American*, W. Alphaeus Hunton, the educational director at the Council of African Affairs, informed readers that '[t]he temper of the people of Nigeria, is such that it will be impossible for colonial authorities to force the people back to their pre-war status and hold them there without the use of the most extreme repressive measures, including armed force'. The post-war international environment, according to Dr. Hunton, meant that '[t]he task and responsibility of the British Labour Party, therefore, in securing speeding correction of the deplorable state of affairs in Nigeria and in instituting advances, in the rest of the colonial empire is clear and inescapable'.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ Nnamdi Azikiwe, *Suppression of the Press in British West Africa*, December 31, 1945, DuBois Papers, <https://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums312-b111-i459> (accessed 10 May 2018).

¹⁰⁴ Letter from James H. Robinson to W.E.B DuBois, July 20, 1945, DuBois Papers, <https://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums312-b108-i113> (accessed 11 February 2019).

¹⁰⁵ Letter from W.E.B DuBois to James H. Robinson, October 5, 1945, DuBois Papers, <https://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums312-b108-i114> (accessed 2 March 2019).

¹⁰⁶ "Mbadiwe tells of strike in West Africa; explains academy program", *New Journal and Guide*, August 11, 1945, A10.

¹⁰⁷ "Labor Party must act in Nigeria, says Dr. Hunton", *Afro-American*, August 11, 1945, 3.

As the general strike roiled the colony, voices in the black press called on African Americans to support the striking Nigerian workers. George Padmore, writing in the *Chicago Daily Defender*, quoted Azikiwe who called for action by black Americans to aid Nigerian workers: '[p]lease treat this appeal as urgent, and appeal to American Negroes and progressive public opinion on my behalf and the workers cause'.¹⁰⁸ 'In all of these colonies', wrote journalist and trade unionist George McCray in the *Atlanta Daily World*, 'particularly Jamaica, Nigeria and the Gold Coast Negroes not only have won the right to participate increasingly in responsible self-government, but through organized unions are effectively resisting the exploitation.... An example of this progress is the present strike of some 150,000 Negro workers in Nigeria, West Africa'. McCray continued: 'American Negroes and progressive labor circles in America and in England are hoping that in settling the strikes in Nigeria, Prime Minister Attlee and the British Labour government will reveal that a New Deal is in store for the colonies'.¹⁰⁹ In invoking the 'New Deal' of President Roosevelt, McCray was calling upon the Attlee Labour government to improve the conditions of Nigerian workers in line with the radical labour reforms in the United States, such as the 1935 National Labor Relations (Wagner) Act. Harold Preece, writing in *The Crisis* at the successful conclusion of the general strike, noted that '[w]hat happened in Nigeria is proof that a new age is upon us, the age when empires no longer conquer but crumble'.¹¹⁰

On 1 June 1946, *The Chicago Defender* reported that over one-hundred thousand people had attended the funeral in Lagos of the Nigerian nationalist leader and co-founder of the NCNC, Herbert Macauley. His death at the age of eighty-two, which was widely reported in the black press, sparked an intense outpouring of grief at the loss of a figure of such stature both in West Africa and around the world.¹¹¹ L.D. Reddick, curator of the Schomburg Collection of Negro Literature at the New York Public Library, lamented that '[t]he passing of Herbert Macauley is an irreparable loss to the cause of colonial freedom. Many young warriors are moving forward to the front ranks with vision and courage, but no one can replace Macauley'.¹¹² The central 'young warrior' in the struggle for Nigerian independence,

¹⁰⁸ George Padmore, "Nigerian Dailies suppressed, editor's life threatened", *The Chicago Defender*, July 21, 1945, 18.

¹⁰⁹ George McCray, "Labor views: Negroes and British politics", *Atlanta Daily World*, August 12, 1945, 4.

¹¹⁰ Harold Preece, "Africa awakes", *The Crisis*, December 1945, 364.

¹¹¹ "Africans mourn death of Nigerian patriot, 82", *The Chicago Defender*, June 1, 1946, 9.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

who had won his spurs during the Second World War and the general strike, was the American-educated Nnamdi Azikiwe, now the leader of Macauley's NCNC.

As Nigeria was convulsed by growing anti-colonial protests throughout the late 1940s, led by Azikiwe and the NCNC, African Americans, building on the relationships and alliances forged during the Second World War, paid close attention to the unfolding events in West Africa. Azikiwe and his followers were increasingly aware that the United States and the African American community were an essential component in pushing British colonial authorities toward self-governance and eventual independence. In May 1947, Azikiwe arrived in the United States to deliver the commencement address at his alma mater Storer College. Prior to his arrival, the black press had feted his recent election to the new national assembly formed under the aegis of the Richards constitutional reforms.¹¹³ The Richards reforms – named after the British colonial governor Sir Arthur Richards – allowed for the creation of a House of Assembly for each of the three administrative regions, and the ability of each Assembly to send delegates to the Central Legislature in Lagos.¹¹⁴ Although Azikiwe had bitterly denounced the Richards reforms as being too timid in regards to self-government, his seat in the national assembly had, according to *The Chicago Defender*, given ‘him a national platform from which to arouse provincial chieftains and representatives to the support of his fight for full internal self-government immediately’.¹¹⁵

As Azikiwe travelled throughout the United States speaking before a variety of audiences, leading figures in the African American community and in the black press lavished praise on his campaign for Nigerian freedom. Wendell Malliet described Azikiwe in the *New York Amsterdam News* as ‘[t]he “Nehru” of West Africa’. ‘Fearless patriot, courageous leader, incorruptible statesman, Nnamdi Azikiwe’, wrote Malliet:

Has come to the West as the head of a seven-man delegation with a purse of \$40,000 to fight for Nigerian freedom on British soil for 12 months if necessary....We wish him every success; we shall put our shoulder to his shoulder: we shall support him in every way until Black Africa is free.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ “Nigeria holds elections under new constitution”, *The Chicago Defender*, March 1, 1947, 2; Azikiwe sweeps Nigeria election”, *The Chicago Defender*, March 8, 1947, 19B.

¹¹⁴ Toyin Falola, *The History of Nigeria* (London: Greenwood Press, 1999), 69.

¹¹⁵ “Azikiwe sweeps”, 19B.

¹¹⁶ A.M. Wendell, “World Fronts”, *New York Amsterdam News*, June 7, 1947, 10.

In a speech before students and staff at Howard University Azikiwe linked the sacrifices made by Nigerian soldiers in the defeat of the Axis to the drive for independence from British-rule. 'We seek freedom because it is a just aspiration for any people', intoned Azikiwe, 'Nigeria played her part in the last war with the allies, hoping that afterwards she might enjoy the four freedoms'.¹¹⁷ In an appearance before Negro Newspaper Publishers Association, Azikiwe appealed to gathered black journalists and publishers 'to further expose the sham and hypocrisy of British policy in the colonies, and to apply pressure on American representatives in the UN to assist in winning dominion status for the natives of Nigeria and West Africa'.¹¹⁸ This call for further press engagement was actualised in the extensive coverage given to Azikiwe's mission to London to lobby the British government, particularly the Secretary of State for Colonies, to modify its approach to self-governance in Nigeria.

The mission, although fruitless since British officials rejected the scope and timetable of self-government proposed by Azikiwe and his colleagues, nonetheless provoked extensive commentary and discussion in the black press. An editorial in the *New York Amsterdam News* noted that Nigeria, 'the largest and wealthiest possession of Britain, now that India has become two independent dominions', was at the forefront of the broader struggle against exploitation and racism that encompassed African Americans. 'The rise of the non-European nations', stated the editorial, 'should mean not only a forth-right challenge to white superiority and supremacy, but the elimination of such racial nonsense from the community of democratic nations. It should mean the administration of world affairs on a world-wide basis and the development of true democracy'.¹¹⁹ In a speech in December 1949, which W.E.D DuBois entitled 'The role of West Africa', the Pan-Africanist declared that:

[w]e all unite to congratulate Mr. Azikiwe and his fellow workers on the new role they are playing in the world of planning The Emancipation and Autonomy of Africa. Perhaps most of us fail to appreciate the difficulties which have faced them. The prestige of the British Empire has been and still is such, that it balked criticism. For Black men in West Africa successfully to carry their grievances to the British people, much less to the larger world, has long been impossible.... We appreciate the courage behind the current fight for rights in West Africa.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ "Nigerian independence from Britain is urged", *New York Amsterdam News*, June 28, 1947, 14.

¹¹⁸ Charles Loeb, "African editor tells NNPA publishers how British imperialism denies free press to African subjects", *Cleveland Call and Post*, June 28, 1947, 1A.

¹¹⁹ "An African abroad", *New York Amsterdam News*, August 23, 1947, 8.

¹²⁰ W.E.B DuBois, "The role of West Africa", December 27, 1949, DuBois Papers, <https://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums312-b200-i016> (accessed 18 July 2019).

DuBois also figured prominently in the fierce reaction following the massacre of twenty-one striking miners at the Iva Valley Mine in Enugu in South-eastern Nigeria. The massacre, which occurred on 18 November 1949, was one of the defining moments in the push towards independence and caused shock and consternation across the Atlantic. The miners had been participating in a sit-down strike to protest the decision of the government-run mine not to negotiate on wage increases. Aware that Enugu was a hub of labour and independence militancy, the colonial police were on high alert. In the midst of a heated confrontation with the miners, the officer in charge of the troops confronting the miners panicked and ordered the forces under his command to open fire.¹²¹ The CAA journal *New Africa*, in the aftermath of the massacre, called on its readers to send letters of condemnation to British authorities over the killings. In a published statement directed at M.A. O Imodu, the President of the Nigerian National Federation of Labor, the CAA declared that:

We wish you to know that we stand with you in your fight for freedom, human rights and justice, recognizing that we in America cannot wipe out Jim-crowism and unemployment or ensure world peace as long as our brothers in Africa are held in slavery and denied democratic rights and self-determination.¹²²

New Africa also reported on the leadership role played by DuBois in organising financial aid to the families of the victims through the African Aid Committee (AAC), a progressive organisation established by over one hundred prominent Americans dedicated to supporting African self-determination. In presenting Nnamdi Azikiwe with a cheque for \$200 in financial aid, DuBois noted that while the donation was relatively modest, it was symbolic of the broader current in the African American community and American society in favour of the anti-colonial struggle. DuBois described the cheque as:

a tangible token of the concern of progressive Americans over the inhuman and shocking answer of the Nigerian authorities to the rightful demands of African workers for a decent living wage.... We are sure that if the American people can be fully acquainted with the real meaning of colonial exploitation in Africa – and we are doing our best to spread this understanding – they will respond generously to your appeal and to similar ones received from other sections of Africa.¹²³

¹²¹ For scholarly overview of the massacre see: S.O Jaja, "The Enugu Colliery Massacre in Retrospect: an Episode in British Administration of Nigeria", *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 11, No.3/4 (1982), 86-106.

¹²² "Pledge to Nigerian workers", *New Africa*, December 1949, DuBois Papers, <https://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums312-b124-i135>, (accessed 5 August 2018).

¹²³ "African aid committee sends help to Nigerian strike victims", *New Africa*, January 1950, DuBois Papers, <https://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums312-b124-i135> (accessed 5 August 2018).

The massacre was reported in key organs of the black press, including the *Atlanta Daily World*, *New York Amsterdam News* and *The Pittsburgh Courier*.¹²⁴ In *The Chicago Defender*, Azikiwe, who had returned to the United States, warned that the massacre could lead to ‘guerilla warfare after the fashion of Palestine’ erupting in the colony unless the British adopted a clear roadmap toward self-governance and independence.¹²⁵

While the massacre at Enugu became a rallying point for Nigerian nationalists intent on securing further self-government and eventual independence, British colonial policy was already moving towards granting a greater role for Nigerians in local and regional government. Policymakers in London were even pondering eventual independence. Senior officials in Whitehall and in Lagos acknowledged that the growing nationalist agitation in the colony needed to be accommodated and some form of limited self-determination adopted.¹²⁶ However, full independence was viewed as something that would take at least another generation to deliver. Facing major labour unrest and growing nationalist militancy in the aftermath of the Second World War in both Ghana and Nigeria, the Attlee government, according to historian Wm. Roger Lewis, hoped to develop critical areas of the Nigerian economy to ameliorate Britain’s serious trade deficits that was putting immense pressure on the Sterling, and to grant further self-governance to the local population.¹²⁷ Historian Ronald Hyam noted that:

In Attlee’s world-picture too, Africa presented the same duality of concern: economically it was immoral not to develop its ‘great estates’, while politically the Cold War pointed to the necessity of an increasing reliance on African manpower, as well as coming to terms with African nationalism.¹²⁸

The development of the Richards constitution of 1947 and the MacPherson constitution of 1951 (both named after respective British governors) had increased the amount of Nigerians serving in the colonial civil service, expanded access to higher education, developed regional legislatures with increased powers and given Nigerian politicians a voice within the executive

¹²⁴ “Nigeria police shoot striking coal miners”, *Atlanta Daily World*, November 26, 1949, 2; “All’s not quiet down in Nigeria”, *New York Amsterdam News*, December 3, 1949, 32; “Wild riots sweep Nigeria, Police”, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, December 10, 1949, 6.

¹²⁵ “Says Africans set to bolt from British yoke”, *The Chicago Defender*, January 7, 1950, 2.

¹²⁶ Toyin Falola and A.D. Roberts, “West Africa” in *The Oxford History of the British Empire: The Twentieth Century*, eds. Judith M. Brown and Wm. Roger Louis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 524.

¹²⁷ W.M Roger Louis & Ronald Robinson, “The Imperialism of Decolonization”, *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 22, No.3 (1994), 469-470.

¹²⁸ Ronald Hyam, “Africa and the Labour Government, 1945-1951”, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 16, No.3 (1988), 149.

government of the colony that had once been the primary prerogative of the colonial governor. However, independence remained a distant proposition. Events in the Gold Coast (Ghana) in 1948 and within Nigeria in 1953 pushed British colonial authorities to revise the timeframe for independence from decades to within years. Riots in February 1948, that started due to economic concerns but morphed into a broader nationalist challenge, tore through the colonial capital of the Gold Coast, Accra, and spread throughout the south of the colony, revealed that British colonial officials were unwilling to use force to suppress nationalism in West Africa.

As Nigeria inched towards growing levels of self-government and eventual independence, African American observers marveled at the pace and achievements of this process. As Africans gradually gained control of the levers of power from their colonial masters, African Americans were keenly aware of how this monumental shift would have a potentially decisive impact on their place in American society and in the position of the black diaspora in global politics. While historians have acknowledged the impact of Ghana's path towards self-government and independence in 1957, African Americans were also keen observers of that country's larger neighbor Nigeria. As Nigeria approached independence, an editorial in the *Cleveland Call and Post* in February 1959 captured the excitement of this historical moment. 'With the growth of old Negro nations and the birth of new ones', noted the editorial, 'the Negro is achieving a new status in the world. The voice of the Negro in international affairs has become that of the African. The American Negro must now hold on to his African brother's coattails for his ride into prominence'.¹²⁹ The same year an editorial in the *Chicago Daily Defender* declared that 'Nigeria should take its place proudly among the free nations of the world, secure in the belief that it too has a contribution to make to civilized mankind'.¹³⁰ The black press played a critical role in highlighting the significance of Nigeria to race relations in the US.

The black press also published accounts of African Americans who had first-hand experience of the emerging nation-state. On 13 October 1949, Horace Mann Bond, President of Lincoln University, landed in Lagos to an enthusiastic welcome from almost 100,000 Nigerians. In Enugu, the capital of the Eastern Region, Bond, according to the *Afro-American*, rode on horseback into the city accompanied by drummers, dancers and singers and a crowd of 50,000. Bond had been invited to Nigeria by Kingsley Mbadiwe of the

¹²⁹ "The emergence of Africa", *Cleveland Call and Post*, February 28, 1959, 2D.

¹³⁰ "Western Nigeria move ahead", *Chicago Daily Defender*, November 19, 1959, 12.

AAAR, as part of a wider visit to West Africa ‘to survey educational progress and trends’.¹³¹ The *Cleveland Call and Post* noted that the visit was ‘the first time in history that an American educator has been invited to Africa by the Africans themselves, as all of the many previous surveys have been made under the sponsorship of European or American foundations sponsored by the Colonial Governments affected’.¹³² Bond believed the African American community was essential in providing financial and moral support for these students, and would reap the rewards of Africans gaining greater educational opportunities. In the *Atlanta Daily World*, Bond stated that ‘a greater interest in African students be promoted among Negro people of America, to foster the students’ hope for improving conditions of health and education in their countries at all levels’.¹³³

Besides the enthusiastic greetings and public events that characterised Dr. Bond’s lightning tour of Nigeria, he was deeply impressed by the educational achievements of the colonies and progress towards self-governance. This, Bond believed, had direct correlations to how the wider world understood the significance of Africa. In an interview reported in the *New York Amsterdam News*, Bond expressed his admiration for the educational achievements of Nigerian schoolchildren. He asserted that:

What I did see and what pleased me mightily was the children. Their acute acquisitiveness, their capacity for assimilating Western culture with the greatest ease, in spite of language and other difficulties. These made me proud of them, and greatly encouraged for their future, for the African future throughout the world and for the contribution their cultivated abilities will mean to the world.¹³⁴

Speaking at a YMCA branch meeting in Philadelphia on his return, Bond noted that the visit had revealed ‘the mighty spirit of nationalism among the peoples of Nigeria and the Gold Coast and that he was happy to see many things which exploded the propaganda myths about Africans through English and American literature’. ‘[I]nstead of the natives being immodest and degenerate’, noted Bond:

¹³¹ “100,000 greet Dr. Bond in Nigeria”, *Afro-American*, November 19, 1949, A19.

¹³² “Lincoln President accepts offer to make African survey”, *Cleveland Call and Post*, May 14, 1949, 5B.

¹³³ “Lincoln President asks more aid to African students”, *Atlanta Daily World*, February 17, 1948, 3.

¹³⁴ “West Africa greets head of Lincoln U: Dr. Bond in Nigeria”, *New York Amsterdam News*, November 19, 1949, 4.

They exhibited the highest degree of learning, intelligence and dignity. In place of the falsely touted absence of any kinship to American Negroes, Africans are very fond of us and feel that we are a common race in a struggle for human rights.¹³⁵

Three years after Bond's visit, the civil rights activist and pacifist Bayard Rustin travelled to Nigeria to witness the struggle for independence firsthand, and to understand how non-violent strategies used by Azikiwe and the NCNC against colonial authorities might be applicable in the American context. Rustin, according to historian Jake Hodder, viewed the trip through the lens of the black freedom struggle in the United States.¹³⁶ Through a series of articles published in the *Afro-American* in November 1952, Rustin, according to Hodder, 'traversed the ideological terrain of internationalism, drawing eclectically from a range of competing perspectives that fused together pan-African, (African) American, and Pacifist traditions'.¹³⁷ Rustin's visit to Nigeria revealed the two-way influence between Nigeria and the black community in the United States. In both Ghana and Nigeria, Rustin found leaders whose studies at African American educational institutions, engagement with key black thinkers and first-hand experience of segregation had forged them into leaders that would define Africa's future. 'In America' wrote Rustin:

They came face to face with jim crow, and they saw him countered by men skilled in struggling for freedom and justice. Men like Walter White, A. Philip Randolph and W.E.B DuBois inspired and encouraged the college boys, who now, mature men, will set Africa free. They returned home with both the vision and skill equal to that task. They had seen black men overcome oppression. They told the people it could be done in Africa. Not only did the people act, they also remembered the names of the men set before them as examples.¹³⁸

In his meetings with Azikiwe, Rustin found a nationalist leader whose ideas and liberal political philosophies had the potential to resonate in the African American community. Rustin was particularly taken with his commitment to challenging the racial exclusion of Nigerians from British recreational facilities and his commitment to women's liberation. In taking up this battle, Rustin noted, Azikiwe 'is not only against British injustice but the

¹³⁵ "Myth of Africa disproved by visit, Dr. Bond states", *Philadelphia Tribune*, December 10, 1949, 9.

¹³⁶ Jake Hodder, "Towards a Geography of Black Internationalism: Bayard Rustin, Nonviolence, and the Promise of Africa", *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 106, No.6 (2016), 1361.

¹³⁷ Ibid, 1366.

¹³⁸ Bayard Rustin, "Africa looks to colored America: natives regard DuBois, Joe Louis, Mrs. FDR as heroes. Africans ask for an NAACP like ours", *Afro-American*, November 29, 1952, A6.

intolerance of Africans'.¹³⁹ In the campaigns for self-government and eventual independence that had been waged by Azikiwe and the NCNC – campaigns that had used tactics ranging from boycotts, to general strikes and civil disobedience – Rustin saw a model that transcended the Atlantic and offered a new vision of black internationalism built around non-violence.

The optimism Bond and Rustin shared concerning the impact Nigeria would have on Africa and the broader black diaspora belied political and ethnic challenges at the heart of colonial Nigeria. As Nigeria moved gradually towards further self-governance and eventual independence, the regional political structure at the heart of this process showed signs of fragmenting the colony along tribal, religious and ethnic lines. While commentators in the African American community concentrated on the potential of Nigeria's independence, the black press also noted that these divisions within the colony could prove to be a challenge once Nigeria gained independence in 1960. The *Atlanta Daily World* reported in April 1957 on the growing ethnic and tribal divisions between political parties within the colony and queried how these divisions would affect the establishment of a viable Nigerian nation-state.¹⁴⁰ Reflecting on the tribal and ethnic divisions within the colony, the *Philadelphia Tribune* declared that 'this is the crux of the entire matter of freedom and independence, Nigeria is confronted with a challenge, a test, and, most of all, a supreme opportunity to rise above small and petty differences and to show bigness and vision. Here is the chance, like Ghana, to become a member of the world's community'.¹⁴¹

The voices of concern in the African American community and divisions within Nigeria were drowned out by a sense that the new nation-state could overcome these myriad challenges. The Kenyan nationalist leader Tom Mboya declared that Nigeria is 'a continent within a continent which has leaders whose dedication to freedom is an inspiration to all. It has a future that gives confidence to the whole of Africa'.¹⁴² 'We're betting on "Zeke" [Azikiwe's nickname]', announced an editorial in the *Afro-American*.¹⁴³ A further editorial in *The Chicago Defender* marveled at the establishment of a television service in Western Nigeria, a pioneering development on the African continent and a sign of the potential of

¹³⁹ Bayard Rustin, "Man called 'Zik' is Nigeria's hope: Bayard Rustin talks to Azikiwe, the African leader; finds him a fighter for peace like Nehru, who spurns violence, employs reason", *Afro-American*, November 8, 1952, A5.

¹⁴⁰ "Nigerian tells of coming freedom", *Atlanta Daily World*, April 18, 1957, 4.

¹⁴¹ "Nigerian leaders challenged to show bigness and vision", *Philadelphia Tribune*, April 12, 1958, 9.

¹⁴² "Mboya likens free African states to U.S colonies", *Afro-American*, November 28, 1959, 17.

¹⁴³ "We're betting on 'Zeke'". *Afro-American*, February 2, 1957, 6.

Nigeria to grasp modernity and stand at the forefront of worldwide technological developments. ‘Television has caught the imagination of Africa’, noted the editorial, ‘much as local airlines became the rage in Middle Eastern states. But it may be more significant, because African TV involves the import of culture. It is now a very relevant question whose culture and whose image will be put over to Africans in the years ahead’.¹⁴⁴

In just over forty years from the end of the First World War to the advent of Nigerian independence in October 1960, the relationship forged between African Americans and Nigerians evolved as a result of the intermingling of global, national and local political, social and economic forces. As W.E.B DuBois wrote in 1940, prior to the Second World War the relationship predominantly existed in the abstract, primarily defined by the movement of ideals and organising principles across what historian Paul Gilroy termed the ‘Black Atlantic’.¹⁴⁵ The arrival of Nnamdi Azikiwe in the United States in 1925 laid the groundwork for the fundamental transformation of the relationship. In seeking out a higher education at some of the most prestigious black universities in America, Azikiwe gained not only critical insights from some of the leading contemporary black scholars on the history of Africa, notions of racial solidarity, and ideas of self-determination, but also forged key professional and personal relationships that would be critical in the future. On Azikiwe’s return to Africa, his encouragement of talented Nigerian colonial subjects to seek their education in the United States further transformed the relationship. The Second World War led to a thickening of the relationship, as African Americans saw their struggle for racial equality and civil rights as interlinked with anti-colonial struggles abroad – and the surge of internationalist sentiment in the US – and Nigerians saw African Americans as vital allies in the ongoing campaign to gain independence. The black press and established African American organisations such as the NAACP, the NCNW, the AAAR and ACAE became key institutions that developed further personal, intellectual, cultural, organisational, and political links across the Atlantic.

These bonds continued into the postwar era and up until Nigerian independence. African Americans remained vocal supporters of Nigerian self-determination and saw Nigeria’s struggle as inspiration for their own fight against racial inequality and economic injustice. Nigerians continued to see the United States, and African Americans in particular, as critical allies, providing forums for discussions about Nigeria’s independence struggle, sources of

¹⁴⁴ “Television service for Africa”, *The Chicago Defender*, October 24, 1959, 10.

¹⁴⁵ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

fundraising, and advocates that would vocally denounce British colonialism. As Nigeria entered a new age as an independent nation-state, the bonds between black America and the new nation were strong and evolving. The varying responses of African Americans to the civil war that would tear this promising nation apart in 1967 can only properly be understood against the backdrop of this *longue durée* of early-mid twentieth century engagement.

Chapter Two

‘The Crop of Destiny’:

African Americans and Nigeria, 1960-1966

On 14 November 1960, US civil rights leader, Dr Martin Luther King Jr, touched down in Lagos, Nigeria, to attend the inauguration of Nnamdi Azikiwe as the first black Governor-General of an independent Nigeria. King’s visit to Africa’s largest state came at an auspicious time for Africa, as seventeen new countries became independent of European colonial powers in what the UN dubbed ‘The Year of Africa’.¹ The emergence of so many independent states from European colonial rule signaled that the normative legitimacy of colonialism, as a system of racial hierarchy and imperial domination, was no longer tenable. Since coming to national and international attention during the Montgomery bus boycotts in 1955, King had been explicit in linking demands for equality in the American South with events in Africa. ‘I am absolutely convinced’, King intoned to guests at the ‘African Freedom Dinner’ in honour of Kenyan leader Tom Mboya, ‘that there is no basic difference between colonialism and segregation. They are both based on a contempt for life, and a tragic doctrine of white supremacy. So our struggles are not only similar; they are in a real sense one’.² Witnessing Nnamdi Azikiwe, a close friend of many prominent black civil rights leaders in the United States, become the head of state of one of the most consequential states in Africa was of tremendous importance. On his return to the United States, King described the significance of his visit:

I went to Nigeria to attend...the inauguration of the new Governor-General of Nigeria, Governor-General Azikiwe. As I got off the plane in Africa I thought of the fact that today there are twenty-seven independent countries in Africa. Within less than three years, more than eighteen countries have received independence in Africa. They are looking over here. The wind of change is blowing all about, all through Africa and Asia. They want to know what we are doing about democracy,

¹ “For the United Nations, Dr. Bunche said, 1960 will be the ‘year of Africa’ because at least four, and maybe seven or eight, new member states will come from the continent. He cited the “well nigh explosive rapidity with which the peoples of Africa in all sectors are emerging from colonialism”. He also stressed the fact that the entire continent was undergoing revolution and urgent transition “for the most part peaceably” Paul Hoffmann, “Bunche says ‘60 is year of Africa: symposium finds new unity in anti-colonialism – U.N. membership rise seen”, *New York Times*, February 17, 1960, 15.

² Quoted in David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: Harper Collins, 1986), 118.

and they are making it clear that racism and colonialism must go. I tell you that the hour is late. The crop of destiny is peeking out.³

Nigerian independence was a unique ‘crop of destiny’ for African Americans in the struggle for equality in the United States. At independence in October 1960, observers were cognisant of the significance of Nigeria’s potential role not only on the African continent but globally. The *New York Times* described Nigeria as ‘destined to become a major force in the political and economic development of the continent’ under the leadership of ‘mature and relatively experienced political leaders’.⁴ ‘Nigeria, the world’s largest Negro nation’, proclaimed the monthly African American magazine *Ebony*, ‘is free’.⁵ Journalist Arch Parsons contrasted the arrival of Nigeria on the world stage with the explosive crisis in the Congo:

For, precisely because of Nigeria’s population [45 million] and potential, it is no exaggeration to say that Africa’s role in world affairs, particularly its ability to gain and hold the confidence of other nations, depends to a considerable extent on this country’s ability to succeed where the Congo thus far has failed.⁶

Ezekiel Mphahlele, the South African writer and anti-Apartheid activist, wrote in *Africa Today* that ‘Nigeria owes it to herself and to the rest of the continent to make a go of it [independence] so as to help liberate, in a Pan-African movement, the rest of the African peoples’.⁷

This chapter explores how Nigeria became a model of self-government in Africa in the eyes of many within the African American community during its formative years of independence between 1960 and 1967. Individuals such as civil rights activists, black educators, black politicians and business leaders, and institutions such as the National [Negro] Business League (NBL) and the black press – whose reporting on developments in Nigeria form the source base of this chapter – were deeply interested in the Nigerian political experiment. While African Americans were inspired by Nigerian independence, this chapter

³ Martin Luther King Jr., “‘The Negro and the American Dream’ Emancipation Day address delivered at municipal auditorium, Savannah, Georgia”, January 2, 1961, in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr., Volume VII: To save the soul of America*, eds. Clayborne Carson and Tenisha Hart Armstrong (Oakland: University of California Press, 2014), 114.

⁴ “Nigeria, 1960”, *New York Times*, October 1, 1960, 18.

⁵ “Nigeria Unshackled: World’s largest Negro nation joins sovereign states”, *Ebony*, October 1, 1960, 25.

⁶ Arch Parsons, “Nigeria: Contrast to the Congo: The latest state to achieve independence in “Africa’s year”, it has had a course of practical training in self-government”, *New York Times*, October 2, 1960, SM10.

⁷ Ezekiel Mphahlele, “Nigeria on the Eve of Independence”, *Africa Today* 7, No.6 (1960): 4-6.

will also explore how they provided practical support to ensure the viability of the Nigerian state, particularly in the fields of higher education, business and culture.

The admiration and support African Americans expressed and showed to the new Nigerian state and its people were not enough to mask the severe internal challenges that provoked a series of political crises, which eventually spiraled into a devastating civil war. Writing in 1964, as Nigerians prepared to go to the polls in a Federal election marred by bribery, violence, ethnic tensions, and the recruiting of paramilitaries by major political parties,⁸ the African American sociologist and anthropologist St. Clair Drake wrote in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* on the future of democracy in Africa following independence. For many nation-states transitioning from colonial-rule to independence, the challenge of governance, according to Drake, had the potential of tempering the initial optimism of liberation. Specifically, Drake wrote that:

With the unifying force of the “imperialist enemy” gone, national unity is jeopardized after independence by cleavages inherited from the past – tribalism and regionalism – and new ones released by the development process – union versus government, radical versus conservatives, politicians versus the “mass,” ins versus outs.⁹

As the Nigerian nation-state veered from one political crisis to another, denting the optimism about independence that had excited so many in the African American community, many observers in the black community were left to wonder what the future held for Nigeria. Would these growing crises be a temporary blip in the forward trajectory of the largest black-majority state in Africa, or were its political, tribal and religious fissures destined to doom this experiment in black self-government?

The beginning of the 1960s marked a historical moment when the struggle for citizenship and equality for African Americans in the United States, and colonial subjects in Africa coalesced. ‘Now history overwhelms us’ declared an editorial in the *Afro-American* on 16 July 1960:

[t]wo movements astonish Afro readers who think. One is the startling speed with which the sitdown movement spread through the country this year. As a result, students previously barred

⁸ On election conditions, see Falola, *The History of Nigeria*, 105.

⁹ St Clair Drake, “Democracy of Trial in Africa”, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 354, Issue. 1 (1964), 119.

from public places like restaurants, libraries and theatres, quickly won concessions their elders had not been able to secure over many years. The other world-shaking event is the speed with which European colonies have proclaimed their independence in Africa.¹⁰

1960 was a year that accelerated not only the civil rights revolution in the United States but also the demise of European colonial-rule throughout much of sub-Saharan Africa. Historian Jason Parker described this historical epoch as the arrival of the ‘post-Columbian era’ as European empires crumbled. He wrote that:

[a]s colonized people seized self-rule, ethnic minorities led a parallel fight for equality in the West. In both cases the basic mission was the same. In the colonized lands creating nations meant delineating “imagined communities” and sovereign states to house them. In the metropolises the fight for civil rights meant redefining existing nationalities to encompass ethnic minorities and to fulfill a long-denied promise of equal citizenship. The chronological coincidence of these struggles in retrospect, was not mere coincidence. Both hark back to fundamental, constitutive questions of citizenship and nationhood, questions long disallowed under both imperial and segregationist rule.¹¹

The ‘sitdown movement’ reported on by the *Afro-American* was part of this new era in which local struggles for racial equality became inextricable with broader global movements for decolonisation.

In a speech in Ghana, the black poet and writer Langston Hughes connected the revolt against segregation to the emergence of independent African states, including Nigeria. ‘America is seeking a bolstering of her *own* basic dreams’, intoned Hughes, ‘and finding here in Africa a new strengthening of the old concepts of freedom in your liberated lands.... Black Africa today is sending rejuvenated currents of liberty over all the earth reaching even as far as Little Rock, Birmingham, and Jackson, Mississippi’.¹² In an article in the *New Journal and Guide* titled ‘[T]he Miracle of Africa’, journalist Hugh Waterfield described Nigeria as a nation-state with the potential to challenge the political and economic hegemony of the white-supremacist Union of South Africa. ‘Up to now’ wrote Waterfield, ‘the leading state in

¹⁰ “Now history overwhelms us”, *Afro-American*, July 16, 1960, 4.

¹¹ Parker, ““Made-in-America Revolutions?””, 727. The works of historians Nicholas Grant and Christopher Tinson also show the civil rights struggle in the United States was part of a ‘globalised’ movement against racial injustice and colonialism that achieved a stunning victory with the emergence of independent nation-states in Africa. See Nicholas Grant, *Winning Our Freedom Together: African Americans and Apartheid, 1945-1960* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2017); Christopher Tinson, *Radical Intellect: Liberator Magazine and Black Activism in the 1960s* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

¹² Quoted in Michael Krenn, *Black Diplomacy: African Americans and the State Department, 1945-1969* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 116.

Africa has been the white-ruled Union of South Africa. But Nigeria with a population three times that of the Union and with its vast mineral resources, wealth in oil, and expanding industries, is expected to wield considerable power in Africa'.¹³ *The Crisis* noted the significance of Nigeria for the African American community by stating that:

[t]he sympathy and support of Negro America go out to the newly independent state of Nigeria. Many of our forefathers came from this section of Africa, from Bonny and Benin and Bornu and Kontagora. We want Nigeria to win the respect and regard of other nations of the world. We know she will do this through self-respect and self-realization.¹⁴

Nigeria, a much larger and wealthier territory than Ghana, with highly experienced and pragmatic leaders, seemed to many African American observers to offer a model for the continent in harnessing modernity.¹⁵ James Farmer, the director of the Congress of Race Equality (CORE), in a press conference with Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, acknowledged that 'American Negroes now winning their full freedom look with pride at the peoples of Africa who are successfully claiming their independence'. When asked whether African American interest in Africa was a recent phenomenon, Farmer responded: 'at least on the part of the Negro masses'. He then elaborated on this point:

Most American Negroes in the past have been given a distorted image of Africa...we read about Africans and saw them depicted in movies as half-naked savages dancing around a boiling pot deep in the jungle. Because of this distortion, most Negroes wanted to forget their African heritage. Fortunately this image began to change as formerly colonial areas gained their independence.... This new identity [sic] with Africa has given added impetus to the civil rights movement in the United States. Negroes are saying, if our brothers in Africa are gaining their freedom, then we can too.¹⁶

Nigeria's arrival on the world stage, and its seemingly unique attributes, made it a focus for black Americans interested in Africa and freedom.

¹³ Hugh Waterfield, "The Miracle of Africa: Fastest drive for freedom in all history role in world organization will be great", *New Journal and Guide*, July 2, 1960, A1.

¹⁴ "Greetings to Nigeria", *The Crisis*, November 1960, 595.

¹⁵ For a definition of "modernity" I refer to Jeremy Friedman: "[T]he struggle for modernization was a struggle of those peoples who had been left behind economically, oppressed politically, and repressed culturally to attain not only living standards that approximated those of the most industrialized countries, but also a certain dignity and influence in the international arena that they had been denied. The quest for this sort of modernity often focused on alternative paths from those well-trodden by the industrialized countries, paths that seemed quicker, easier, and maybe even superior". See Jeremy Friedman, *Shadow Cold War: The Sino-Soviet Competition for the Third World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 3.

¹⁶ Beth McKenty, "Farmer seeks new ties for Negroes, Africans," *The Chicago Defender*, February 13, 1965, 6.

At independence, Nigeria's political structure resembled that of Great Britain, with a Westminster-style parliamentary system. For many African American observers in the black press, the moderation and supposed stability of this system – a direct contrast with Ghana, which had become increasingly authoritarian, and the Congo, which had descended into civil war – prompted widespread praise and admiration. Further afield, in the leading foreign policy journal, *Foreign Affairs*, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, the first prime minister of Nigeria, declared his quiet confidence in Nigeria's political structures:

A federal system of government is always full of problems and difficulties, but so is democracy, because the art of persuasion is much more difficult than a dictatorship though in the long run more rewarding and satisfying. We are also fortunate in having a system of government with freedom of expression to provide a check on executive authority. Above all, we believe in the rule of law, and in an independent judiciary as an arbiter in disputes. The ready acceptance of both our government and peoples of the decisions of courts of law even when against them is perhaps our greatest claim to maturity and confidence in our institutions and unity.¹⁷

Writers in the black press echoed the sort of optimism about governance expressed by Balewa. In February 1962, for example, Wilbur G. Landrey of the *Chicago Daily Defender* called Nigeria 'the key to the future of democracy in black Africa'. He further noted that '[i]f democracy and the freedoms nurtured in the West can grow and flourish here in the same soil with impatient nationalism, regionalism and under-development, then they have a chance elsewhere in black Africa as well'. The sentiments expressed by Landrey were reflective of the esteem many observers in the African American community had for political developments in Nigeria.¹⁸ Metz T. Lochard, the influential editor of *The Chicago Defender*, described Nigeria as moving with 'almost majestic calm and self-confidence towards its date with national destiny'. Lochard praised Nigeria as 'Africa's greatest democracy that is anchored in Federalism'. He elaborated:

Three stable political parties all entrenched in their respective regions and so balanced in the Federal Parliament that none can rule there alone. One party forms the basic safeguard of liberty and outlet for popular discontent, a substantial, ambitious and vote-hungry parliamentary opposition. This is, of course, in vivid contrast to almost every other African state, where the party

¹⁷ Abubkar Tafawa Balewa, "Nigeria Looks Ahead", *Foreign Affairs*, 41(1962): 131-132.

¹⁸ Wilbur G. Landrey, "Nigeria Looms as Key Nation of Black Africa's Bid for Democracy", *Chicago Daily Defender (Daily Edition)*, November 21, 1961, 19.

in power tends always to dictatorship and opposition withers away on the older Latin American pattern.¹⁹

African American commentators, in observing Nigeria's emergent democracy and relatively peaceful transition from colonial rule to independence, linked these developments to the black freedom struggle currently roiling through the American South. A *Cleveland Call and Post* article, under the title 'Africans are leading freedom's vanguard', extolled the connection in a profile of the visiting Nigerian politician Adebisi O. Adebisi. The article stated that:

For while American Negroes are fighting tooth and nail to win recognition as a party of an established democracy, this man is welding together a democracy of his own. This man, with his growing number of counterparts, in the swift avalanche of African freedom, is demonstrating democracy's workability on the Dark Continent.²⁰

If Nigerians could make democracy function on the 'Dark Continent', then it was self-evident that African Americans were more than capable of fully participating in American democracy.

On 23 April 1960, Louis E. Martin, the editor-in-chief of *The Chicago Defender* and publisher of the *Michigan Chronicle*, reported on the outbreak of mass protests in Lagos. For the predominantly black readers of his newspaper, unrest and political protests in Nigeria were not uncommon in the ongoing process of decolonisation. However, what had drawn thousands of Lagos residents into the streets was not the colonial policies of the British government, but the bloody massacre of sixty-nine unarmed protestors thousands of miles away in Sharpsville, South Africa, by the security forces of the Apartheid regime. Even though Nigeria was still technically ruled as a colony from London, protestors gathered outside the Nigerian prime minister's residence demanding that the leaders of the embryonic Nigerian state speak out against the Union of South Africa.²¹ The protestors demanded that vigorous steps be taken in reprisal for the cold-blooded killings, including the boycott of South African goods and the repatriation of South Africans living in Nigeria. The *Afro-American* reported that those attending the rally 'urged Nigerians to join forces to redeem all

¹⁹ Metz T. P. Lochard, "Nigeria Seen As Greatest Democracy on Continent", *Chicago Daily Defender (Daily Edition)*, October 29, 1962, 9.

²⁰ "Africans are leading freedom's vanguard", *Cleveland Call and Post*, July 29, 1961, 2C.

²¹ Louis E. Martin, "Dope and Data", *The Chicago Defender*, April 23, 1960, 10.

people of Africa descent “from the oppression they now suffer in many parts of the world as a result of racial discrimination”²².

Nigerian anti-colonial politicians, reflecting the passion and anger of the protestors, issued damning indictments against the Apartheid regime. Nnamdi Azikiwe of the NCNC ‘urged all African nationalists to register their protest and questioned the sincerity of the Western democracies in the struggles against racial discrimination’. According to Martin, the most sweeping demands came from another powerful independence figure, Chief Obafemi Awolowo. The leader of the Action Group political party in Western Nigeria, where Martin was currently working on developing a West African news service, declared that:

Nigerians on the threshold of independence must demonstrate a drastic reaction to the carnage of their defenseless fellows Africans now taking place in South Africa. Apart from the boycott of South African goods by our people, the Federal Government must amend our laws forthwith to make importation and exportation of goods from and to South Africa illegal.²³

However, Awolowo went even further in calling into question whether ‘Nigeria and any other African state’ could continue to participate in the British Commonwealth while the Union of South Africa remained a member. Due to Awolowo’s stature in Nigerian society and the international community, where he was feted as a friend of the West, Martin wrote that ‘[h]is strong language therefore indicates the depth of feeling among Nigerians with respect to South Africa’. Martin concluded his observations on a prophetic note, stating that ‘[w]hen independence comes on October 1, 1960, you can be sure that Nigeria will not only tell Verwoerd [Prime Minister of the Union of South Africa] of South Africa where to go, but they will help send him there’.

As Nigeria asserted itself in the world following the end of British-rule, the demands of the protestors in Lagos and the declarations of Awolowo and Azikiwe would define Nigerian foreign policy. African Americans, cognisant that their own struggle against segregation was part of a global campaign against colonialism, economic exploitation and racism, paid careful attention to Nigeria’s role in the world. They cheered on, but also debated, Nigeria’s approach to colonialism, Apartheid and racial discrimination. While African Americans celebrated the significance of Nigeria’s new role in the world, Nigerian politicians and

²² “Nigeria to bar South Africans”, *Afro-American*, May 7, 1960, 5.

²³ Louis E. Martin, “Dope and Data”, *The Chicago Defender*, April 16, 1960, 10.

diplomats made it explicit that their new nation-state would challenge the forces of racism throughout the world.

‘Nigeria’, according to its first foreign minister Jaja Wachuku, ‘as the country with the largest concentration of black peoples anywhere in the world, owes a duty to all the black people of the earth to do everything possible to eradicate the humiliation of the black man anywhere in the world. Whether Nigeria likes it or not, it is its duty; it is part of Nigeria’s destiny; if Nigeria does not do this then it has failed in its mission’.²⁴ In a speech before the Nigerian House of Representatives that was reported by Simon Anekwe of the *New York Amsterdam News*, the Prime Minister Abubakar Tafawa Balewa outlined his vision of Nigerian foreign policy:

We shall not, however allow our direct and primary interest in African affairs to blind us to the grave and vital issues which darken the wider international scene...we shall maintain cordial relations with all the other nations of the world, firmly opposing all forms of aggression and striving always to obtain the observance everywhere of those human rights which all parties in Nigeria have agreed upon as fundamental, in particular freedom from racial and religious discrimination.²⁵

For African Americans, the most significant impact of Nigerian foreign policy was felt in terms of U.S race relations. Visiting Atlanta, Georgia, in July 1960, Jaja Wachuku spoke at Atlanta University and the Atlanta Life Insurance Company of the shared history between Nigerians and African Americans. When questioned by a local newspaper editor about the prospects of Nigeria turning towards the Communist bloc, Wachuku informed him ‘that America’s minority group was the largest number of “my people” (Negroes) of any country outside of Nigeria itself. “With 20 million of my kinsmen here, how could we not afford to be friends with America?”’. The *Atlanta Daily World*, one of the largest African American newspapers in the American South, seized on Wachuku’s statement, declaring that:

We must do everything possible to retain the friendship of the black people of the world. Much of this depends on how America treats their “kinsmen” here. All vestiges of discrimination must be wiped out if the world is really to be impressed.²⁶

The ties of kinship between African Americans and Nigerians meant that Nigerian politicians and diplomats emerged as harsh critics of U.S race relations, even as the Kennedy

²⁴ “End of Colonialism sought by Nigerians”, *Atlanta Daily World*, October 14, 1961, 1.

²⁵ Simon Anekwe, “How Africans feel about South’s riots”, *New York Amsterdam News*, June 3, 1961, 5.

²⁶ “Mr Wachuku comes to town”, *Atlanta Daily World*, July 9, 1960, 6.

Administration attempted to woo Nigeria in its contest for supremacy with the Communist bloc in Africa and the broader Third World. An incident at a restaurant in Charlottesville, Virginia in January 1961, exemplified the linkage between global race relations and Nigerian foreign policy. C.C Uchuno, the second secretary at the newly-established Nigerian embassy in Washington D.C, was refused service and forced to eat his breakfast outside the premises from a paper bag due to Virginia's state segregation laws. The humiliating episode, dubbed 'America's "Paper Bag" Democracy' in an article in the *Philadelphia Tribune*, was an example of American hypocrisy in trying to 'win the hearts and minds of the Afro-Asian nations'. While the article railed against America's lack of commitment to basic human rights, it applauded Nigeria's dedication to challenging racial discrimination throughout the world. It quoted approvingly from Nnamdi Azikiwe's inaugural address from November 1960:

Nigerians believe passionately in the fundamental human rights. We regard all races of the human family as equal. Under no circumstances will we accept the idea that the black race is inferior to any other race.... In fact, we must regard it as a mark of disrespect and an unfriendly act if any country with which we have friendly relations indulges in race prejudice in any shape or form, no matter how it may be legally clocked.²⁷

African American individuals and organisations were willing seize upon Nigeria's stance against racial discrimination to force the Federal government's hand in terms of civil rights. The NAACP leadership met with Prime Minister Balewa and Foreign Minister Wachuku, a meeting the Nigerians requested through the State Department. The Prime Minister and his colleagues praised the NAACP leadership for its pragmatic approach to tackling racial segregation, with Balewa indicating that 'the goals of the colored people in the U.S can be achieved without resorting to extremism'.²⁸ Arthur B. Spingarn, the president of the NAACP, matched the Prime Minister in extolling the NAACP's commitment to Pan-Africanism, noting 'the pride and interest of Negro Americans in the rapidly developing African nations'.²⁹

While African Americans praised Nigeria and its leaders for their unyielding position of racial discrimination in the United States, they also looked favourably on Nigeria's growing

²⁷ "Government of Nigeria insulted by America's paper bag democracy", *Philadelphia Tribune*, January 10, 1961, 4.

²⁸ "NAACP's 52-year struggle for Negroes Nigerian Prime Minister told of", *The Chicago Defender*, August 12, 1961, 8; "Nigerian Prime Minister Receives NAACP leaders", *Atlanta Daily World*, August 3, 1961, 1.

²⁹ Ibid.

international stature as a leading opponent of colonialism in Africa and of Apartheid South Africa. The black press played a significant role in highlighting Nigeria's use of forums such as the UN and the British Commonwealth of Nations to highlight ongoing injustices in Southern Africa. In the *Cleveland Call and Post*, journalist Louis Lautier praised Prime Minister Balewa for his 'extremely strong stand in moving for the expulsion of the Union of South Africa from the Commonwealth' during the British Commonwealth Prime Ministers' conference in London in March 1961. Lautier noted that '[The Prime Minister] felt that any Commonwealth that professes to be a free association of people of different racial origins could not continue to have in its midst a country that had the rigid racial policies of the Union of South Africa'.³⁰ Historian Frank Hayes has written that Nigeria, alongside Malaya, India and Ghana were the most uncompromising in terms of South Africa's domestic racial policy and were willing to apply 'an embargo against the import of South African goods until the Union undertook some progressive legislation'.³¹

Nigeria not only spearheaded the calls for expulsion of Apartheid South Africa from the Commonwealth, it was also a forceful supporter and key founder of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). While leading the resistance to the more radical vision of Pan-Africanism espoused by the Casablanca bloc of African states led by Ghana, Nigeria made sure that decolonisation was at the forefront of the future of the OAU. Nigerian diplomats helped establish the Liberation Fund for Southern Africa, managed by the African Liberation Coordinating Committee. Nigeria was not only prompt in its payments to the Liberation Fund, but emerged as its largest contributor – in some cases taxing Nigerian cinema-goers – to contribute to the anti-colonial struggle. While African American commentators on African affairs, such as Charles Howard and Metz Lochard, have been dismissive of Nigeria's conservative posture, they were keenly aware that due to Nigeria's distinct advantages, its choices in foreign affairs would affect the rest of Africa.³²

³⁰ Louis Lautier, "A friend of U.S in changing Africa", *Cleveland Call and Post*, August 12, 1961, 1C.

³¹ Frank Hayes, "South Africa's Departure from the Commonwealth, 1960-1961", *The International History Review* 2, No.3 (1980), 469.

³² Howard wrote that "[the] size and the numbers you represent are important in Africa as elsewhere, hence, Nigeria has certain natural advantages with size and numbers, but Ghana's longer independence status gives President Nkrumah certain seniority advantages.... The Monrovia Group formerly was taking the leadership of Liberia and President Tubman. Their critics say this was a holding action awaiting the independence and leadership of Nigeria and Azikiwe. These critics also say that the Tubman policies seemed more concerned with being anti-Nkrumah than being pro-African, that these policies were too little and too slow" Charles P. Howard Sr., "Nkrumah, Azikiwe duel for African leadership", *Afro-American*, April 14, 1962, 9; Lochard wrote that "Nigeria...which gained it's autonomy two years ago, though yet conservative is being swept into the current of African nationalism by the pressure of enlightened public opinion at home and elsewhere on the black

To African American observers, Nigeria at independence not only represented the possibility of Africa's largest state being a successful liberal democracy, but also a successful modernised economy. One week after Nigeria formally gained its independence from Great Britain, a cablegram was published in the pages of *The Chicago Defender* signed by more than a dozen prominent black business and industry leaders from Chicago. 'All of us have watched with great interest and pride in our African ancestry, the amazing progress made by you [Prime Minister Balewa] and other citizens of Nigeria in your struggle for independence'. With its abundance of diverse natural resources, well-educated population, and highly developed infrastructure, Nigeria had the capability for economic 'take-off' once independence had been achieved.³³ Eddie L. Madison Jr., writing in the *Atlanta Daily World*, listed Nigeria's natural resources and infrastructure capabilities including:

palm oil, palm kernels, ground nut, timber, bananas, hides and skins, rubber, coffee and ginger....tin and lead industries of considered value...oil exports approaching 1,885,000 barrels annually....Nigeria has 1,1750 route miles of narrow gauge railways. A 400-mile extension is in the process of construction. The country has 37,000 miles of roads and 24 aerodromes, two of which are international.³⁴

The associate editor at the *Pittsburgh Courier*, George Schuyler, described Nigeria as '[a] land of opportunity for U.S Negroes'. With Nigeria being a predominantly agricultural country 'with 80 per cent of the laboring population engaged in some kind of farming, and agriculture produces 85 percent of its exports', Schuyler reported that 'U.S Negroes trained in agriculture, animal husbandry and forestry will have no difficulty in making a good living' in the 'most economically viable and politically stable country in Africa'.³⁵ The discovery of crude oil in the muddy creeks and steaming mangroves of the Niger Delta had by 1961, according to *The Chicago Defender*, yielded almost 300,000 tons of oil, the essential ingredient that had helped create the dramatic economy growth in the United States, Western Europe and Japan since the end of the war. Although nothing compared to the 350,000,000

continent" Metz Lochard, "Pan-African trend influences Nigeria", *Chicago Daily Defender*, November 8, 1962, 15.

³³ Some African American commentators and intellectuals shared with the economist Walt Rostow that with tailored aid assistance from the United States, Nigeria would emerge as an economic powerhouse. *The New Nigerian Elite* by the African American scholars Hugh and Mabel Smythe (published in 1960), according to Brenda Plummer "is important as a historical marker not only because it faithfully reproduced certain modernizationist assumptions, but also because it traces the beginning of where some African Americans stumbled in their appraisal of African societies". See Plummer, *In Search of Power*, 66-68.

³⁴ Eddie L. Madison Jr., "What's ahead for Nigeria?", *Atlanta Daily World*, October 4, 1961, 1.

³⁵ George S. Schuyler, "Nigeria: A Land of Opportunity for U.S Negroes", *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 4, 1961, A17.

tons produced by the United States in 1960 alone, the article noted that ‘the outlook is bright for Nigeria whose economy is already far ahead of that of the other states on the African continent’.³⁶

The November 1962 edition of *Ebony* featured a first-hand account of a visit to Nigeria by John Bowles, President of the Rexall drug company. Bowles, who confessed to believing he was landing in ‘a backward country, [inhabited by] a backward people’ was struck not only by humidity and high temperature, but the ‘surprising’ entrepreneurial spirit of the Nigerians he encountered. Lagos, in Bowles’ eyes, was a city bursting with consumers and merchants, trading in vast quantities of consumer goods, and with business practices comparable to the United States. These qualities, in the context of the Cold War, according to Bowles, ensured that Nigeria ‘will probably be one of the last countries in the world to go communistic’. With this capitalistic mindset, Bowles noted that, ‘[n]ot once during my visit with Nigerians did anyone ever hint at the subject of economic aid by the U.S to Nigeria. They were interested only in having American industry invest capital in Nigeria, thus creating jobs for Nigerians’.³⁷ Bowles’ optimistic report published in one of the leading black mass publications of the era, *Ebony*, signified a growing level of interest by African American business people in opportunities in Nigeria. In the years immediately following independence, Nigerian businesspeople and politicians courted the African American business community to highlight the potential that Nigeria held. Organisations such as the National [Negro] Business League were also keen to look for potential profits in newly-independent Africa. In addition to the economic and commercial opportunities, what bound African Americans and Nigerians together in these exciting years was the sense that cooperation could benefit the larger black diaspora.

Nigerian political leaders were keen to build support in the United States and saw in the African American community a potential source for further investment in Nigeria’s economic future. The West Nigerian Premier, Chief S.L Akintola, extolled the merits of foreign investment into the Nigerian economy. ‘The seeds of economic growth’, declared Akintola in an address to the Overseas Press Club, ‘which foreign capital and technical knowhow have helped to nurture in Nigeria are flowering where all Nigerians enjoy them’. Strengthening the sinews of Nigeria’s economy (although Akintola was primarily talking about the Western part of the country) through investment and technical aid for projects from universities, to

³⁶ “Nigeria’s Black Gold”, *Chicago Daily Defender*, May 2, 1962, 11.

³⁷ John Bowles, “Market report from Nigeria”, *Ebony*, November 1, 1962, 78-87.

primary schools, and piped water was essential if Nigeria was to be ‘an anchor of democracy and a keystone of peace on the Continent of Africa’.³⁸ In an address to the Nigerian Chamber of Commerce, reported in the *New York Amsterdam News*, Dr M.I. Okpara, Premier of the Eastern Region, described Nigeria as ‘the gateway into an emerging Africa’, for American investors.³⁹ In a speech before seventy-five African American business leaders, Chief Ayotunde Rosiji, a leading Nigerian businessman and member of parliament, announced that his country would happily welcome ‘American Negro investors’. ‘[B]oth individual and group investors who can contribute to his country’s progress... [and] the [Nigerian] government and himself, personally, will do all within their power to assure success for these investors’.⁴⁰

The National Business League (NBL), formerly known as the National Negro Business League, was the main organisation that sought to develop serious business and economic ties with Nigeria. The NBL was founded in 1900 in Boston by the black conservative leader Booker T. Washington, although according to historian Louis R. Harlan, Washington’s great rival, W.E. DuBois, also envisioned some type of African American businessmen’s league.⁴¹ In December 1960, Frederick Patterson, president of the NBL, organised a meeting between its board of directors and African delegates at the UN. The meeting, reported the *Atlanta Daily World*, ‘was to encourage Afro-American cooperation in the field of business and to encourage American investment in Africa by having American businessmen and African leaders become better acquainted’. One member of the board of directors of the NBL was so enthused by opportunities for small business that ‘he is participating in a corporation which will begin exporting manufactured goods to Nigeria’.⁴²

Such a push to engage with the post-colonial states of Africa was also driven by concerns about growing competition faced by African American businesses. In a paper delivered at the National Conference on Small Business – a conference organised with the support and assistance of President Kennedy’s Secretary of Commerce Luther Hodges and designed ‘to

³⁸ “Nigeria does not want to depend on ‘hand-out’ Premier declares: Chief Akintola says people self-reliant”, *Atlanta Daily World*, November 1, 1961, 2.

³⁹ “Premier Urges U.S. Investment in Nigeria”, *New York Amsterdam News*, November 10, 1962, 42.

⁴⁰ A.S. ‘Doc’ Young, “Build Big Business here – African Chief: Wanly Worlds of Wisdom as Nigeria’s Chief Rosiji Meets Press”, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, July 14, 1960, A7.

⁴¹ Louis R. Harlan, “Booker T. Washington and the National Negro Business League”, in *Booker T. Washington in Perspective: Essays of Louis R. Harlan*, ed. Raymond W. Smock (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1988), 91.

⁴² “Business League entertains delegates”, *New York Amsterdam News*, December 10, 1960, 7.

identify deficiencies that plague the colored business man and to point the way towards solutions’ – economist Stanley Sumlin of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York highlighted the significance of Africa for black business leaders.⁴³ Historians Robert E. Weems and Lewis A. Randolph have written that ‘[a]lthough they were increasingly losing the battle with their white counterparts for the patronage of black consumers, black businessmen were told that the African marketplace would both enhance their profitability and enable them to play an important role in the international battle against communism’.⁴⁴ For the Kennedy Administration, Nigeria was a critical state in the battle against communism in the Third World. Although the activities of the Soviet Union, Communist China and indigenous communist parties were negligible, a strong and viable Nigeria was a potential bridgehead for Western interests in West Africa and a potential beacon of political and economic development along non-communist lines.

Nigeria, due to its perceived advantages in terms of skilled workers, its highly educated population, and rich economic resources, was immensely appealing to members of the NBL. Enoch P. Waters, editor of the Associate Negro Press (ANP), wrote in October 1960 from Ibadan that the ‘coca rich and trade conscious Western Region of Nigeria is what Marcus Garvey dreamed of and preached of 40 years ago and never lived to see’. ‘It is the land that Elijah Muhammad [leader of the Nation of Islam] promises for those who follow him’, mused Waters, although ‘he probably doesn’t realize it already exists in varying degrees of several places in Free Africa’. Waters was particularly struck by the business and entrepreneurial environment fostered in newly-independent Nigeria:

First, the government is willing to lend capital to local businessmen entering into partnership with foreign interests on sound projects, and secondly, whenever foreign interests are unable initially to find the right local partner for an approved project, the government, agencies, [sic] is prepared to consider taking up shares in the new project and hold them in trust until such time as suitable private enterprise is attracted. The progress and prosperity of the Western Region springs partly from natural accident, partly from fortunate benefactions.

This new business frontier was suitable for ‘American Negroes’ with initiative and daring since ‘in all of independent Africa there is no more prosperous areas [sic], nor one so ripe

⁴³ Robert E. Weems and Lewis A. Randolph, *Business in Black and White – American Presidents and Black Entrepreneurs in the Twentieth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 71.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

[sic] further development'.⁴⁵ In a commencement address at the Tuskegee Institute in June 1961, that was reported in the *Afro-American*, Frederick Patterson, the African American president of the Phelps-Stokes Fund for Education in New York, applauded the courage of the young sit-in protests challenging segregation across the American South, and linked this struggle to the search for concrete civil rights in terms of voting, education and economic stability. Patterson also saw in Africa the opportunity for African Americans to gain economic stability through business engagement. He declared that 'Africa – at this time, but not for long – presents to colored Americans the opportunity to pioneer in business ventures which have been and continue largely to be denied in the U.S'.⁴⁶

African Americans were not, however, mere cheerleaders for Nigeria. Nor was African American opinion monolithic. The period between 1960 and 1966 witnessed a vibrant exchange of individuals, institutions, and ideas between black America and Nigeria in terms of education, culture, business, and the press. Black educators, journalists, businessmen, civil rights leaders and politicians worked alongside Nigerian colleagues to help develop the sinews of a modern nation-state as Nigeria transitioned from colonial rule to independence. Historian Brenda Gayle Plummer has written that '[t]he desire of black leaders in the United States to align themselves with decolonization underlay much African-American interest in Africa at midcentury'. Plummer further noted that in the context of African independence 'U.S blacks [could] act as a modernizing vanguard' to spur on African development.⁴⁷

Some black leaders such as W.E.B DuBois were wary of uncritical Nigerian adoption of the liberal capitalist economic model, and critical of the business-oriented vision of the likes of Bowles and the NBL. In his pamphlet *Path for Nigeria*, DuBois, warned his readers to be circumspect about some African Americans coming to Nigeria preaching the virtues of modernity, liberal democracy, and self-determination. As someone who had come to believe in the merits of organising modern society along socialist lines to tackle the unequal accumulation of capital and racial inequality, DuBois posited that Nigeria, 'the largest black nation of the world', needed to embrace socialism in terms of developing a planned economy,

⁴⁵ Enoch. P. Waters, "Land Marcus Garvey dreamed about: Rich Western Nigeria runs its own business", *New Journal and Guide*, October 22, 1960, 9.

⁴⁶ "Mobs strengthen demand for justice, Dr. Patterson says", *Afro-American*, June 3, 1961, 20.

⁴⁷ Plummer, *In Search of Power*, 66.

particularly in crucial agricultural and industrial sectors, and seek aid from states including Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union, and Communist China – although he still encouraged Nigerian students to travel to Britain for tertiary education. If Nigeria failed to take this course, DuBois feared that the country would become the prey of big business and industrialists, and the ‘malevolent’ activities of the United States and its agents (including well-meaning but naïve black Americans) seeking to draw the new African nation-state into its hegemonic embrace.⁴⁸ ‘[T]here begins a new visiting of Africa by American Negroes [,]’ wrote DuBois:

Many of these Negroes seem to insist that they are really quite well off in America; that racial segregation and color discrimination has almost disappeared, and that American Negroes are ready to join white folks as investors in African industry, and as guides in American skills and methods.... [M]ost of the black Americans who spread these pleasant stories are paid to do so by the State Department of the Government of the United States!’⁴⁹

While DuBois’ advice to the leaders and people of the new Nigerian state was theoretical and had limited appeal within a political and economic elite that was relatively pro-Western, he was one of many who believed that African Americans could provide assistance to a nation-state that held so much promise for the future of Africa. Many of these figures such as Horace Mann Bond, George M. Johnson, and Louis Martin, were not fellow-travellers of DuBois (in fact they were all liberal anti-communists), but they shared with DuBois the view that African Americans had a unique role to play in assisting in the development of a stable, prosperous and viable Nigerian nation-state. This sentiment was captured by a black Peace Corp organiser in Sierra Leone, Joseph C. Kennedy, who travelled extensively through Nigeria, Ghana, and Liberia. He wrote in the *New York Times* that:

[T]he American Negro has a particular role in Africa, a role which only he can fill for all America and which America cannot afford to deny him. Sensitive, honest, understanding relationships are

⁴⁸ In a speech in January 1950, DuBois had warned Nigerian nationalist leader Nnamdi Azikiwe “That the Africans, in their struggle for independence, should not “ape” the exploiting, class-conscious capitalism of their white masters. [T]here would be little gain for the masses of African people if the freedom movement meant only the substitution of black masters for white masters” see “DuBois urges African caution”, *Atlanta Daily World*, January 4, 1950, 4.

⁴⁹ Path for Nigeria, 1961, DuBois papers, <https://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums312-b228-i003> (accessed 18 August 2017).

essential to building goodwill between America and emerging Africa, and in this America's greatest asset is the American Negro.⁵⁰

A Nigerian who Kennedy met on his travels wrote to him describing their future hopes for further interactions between Nigerians and African Americans:

We did [studied] a lot about our African brothers in the U.S.A. How they were treated in olden days and all other stories about them. But now we learnt some of them are high government officials and lecturers in the universities. In fact, people in Africa admire the great progress that our African brothers are making in the U.S.A. I hope that you people [black Americans] will create such tendency in us.⁵¹

The sentiment that Kennedy captured – that African Americans had the potential to be key allies in Nigeria's future development as a viable and progressive nation-state – would be exemplified in the assistance provided by key individuals in the black community in supporting the establishment and operations of the new University of Nigeria.

In addition to the economy, the growing Nigerian educational sector was an area in which African American and Nigerian leaders cooperated. The African American educator Horace Mann Bond, who had developed personal and educational ties to Nigeria during the 1940s and 1950s, reveled in the pageantry and potential of Nigerian independence. In a speech at Atlanta University on 1 February 1961 to commemorate National Freedom Day – the anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's signing of the joint resolution that proposed a thirteenth amendment to the U.S constitution abolishing slavery – Bond, the President of Lincoln University, reported on his experiences in Ghana and Nigeria. He started his speech by reciting a section of the Quaker and Abolitionist poet John Greenleaf Whittier's 1869 piece 'Howard at Atlanta':

O brave men and fair women!

Ill comes of hate and scorning:

Shall the dark faces only

⁵⁰ Joseph C. Kennedy, "The American Negro's key role in Africa: One who spent a year there reports on some of the special associations he discovered and assays their potential", *New York Times*, February 4, 1962, 193.

⁵¹ Ibid.

Be turned to morning? —

Make Time your sole avenger,

All-healing, all-redressing;

Meet Fate half-way, and make it

A joy and blessing!

The poem, a celebration of the possibilities of black freedom after the abolition of slavery in the United States, resonated for Bond in the context of Nigerian independence and the tide of decolonisation that was reshaping the globe. ‘I say, the black faces turned, in the United States; and I say further, that the black faces everywhere in the world, have now, and irreversibly, turned to Morning.... I was in Ghana last July, and Nigeria in October. I say to you, that it is a good thing to see dark faces turned to Morning.’⁵² For Bond, the educator, Nigerian achievements in education were particularly inspiring:

In Nigeria I saw five million children in school, one university fully matured, and Dr Azikiwe’s university, magnificently equipped with fine buildings, open its doors to 300 eager scholars. Within the next three years there will be three more universities in Nigeria.... In spite of the troubles in the Congo: and troubles that are bound to come, elsewhere, in Africa: the faces of the people, I tell you, are turned to morning. Give those children, now in school, twenty more years; and I warrant you, that you will be proud to call yourself “a person of African descent”.⁵³

Education remained one of the key factors forging a closer relationship between the two peoples. As previously noted, it had been the intellectual and personal relationships that Nnamdi Azikiwe had built at Howard and Lincoln universities, that had developed his political philosophy for an independent Nigeria. A striking example of the educational linkage that drew African Americans and Nigerians together during this period was the establishment of the University of Nigeria in October 1960. Described by journalist Wilber Landrey in *The Chicago Defender* as ‘the dream of one man and the work of a devoted group of Americans’, the opening of the university in the city of Nsukka, in Eastern Nigeria, was a

⁵² “‘Tell them we are rising!’: Africa’s great educational strides impressed Dr. Bond”, *Philadelphia Tribune*, February 11, 1961,9.

⁵³ Ibid.

practical symbol of this link across the Black Atlantic. The ‘one man’ in question was, of course, Nnamdi Azikiwe.⁵⁴

For Azikiwe and his acolytes who had studied in the United States, the determination of African Americans to overcome racial discrimination through educational uplift proved to be inspiring. Historian Michael Omolewa wrote that the Nigerian students learnt ‘some lessons from how African Americans responded to their treatment, especially in seeing ‘education [as] a means of social progress’.⁵⁵ This educated Nigerian elite was convinced of the importance of tertiary education, due to their own personal experiences in the United States, in uplifting Nigerians from colonial rule by creating new generations of teachers, lawyers, journalists, writers, poets, and industrialists. The American tertiary system, in the eyes of these men, offered unique advantages over any British inspired system since it ‘offered more choices of subjects, enrolled larger numbers of students, and operated a more flexible system of examinations and accreditation’. Azikiwe was the most strident in his criticism of the quality of the British educational model, describing it as ‘not the essential education that could put Nigeria on the right pedestal for development’.⁵⁶ The establishment of an institution that could meet both the political and educational needs of a new generation of Nigerians liberated from British rule became Azikiwe’s *idée fixe*.

Funding for the project to build a new university began in 1955, with \$7.5 million provided by the Eastern Region Government through the sale of palm oil and copra. The university also received assistance from education experts in the United Kingdom and United States.⁵⁷ This assistance was provided under the auspice of the International Cooperation Administration (ICA), the progenitor of United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the British Inter-University Council for Higher Education Overseas.⁵⁸ Michigan State University provided a team of thirteen professors and consultants, through the ICA, to organise the university and held key jobs within the faculty. Once the Peace

⁵⁴ Wilbur G. Landrey, “African University, 1 Man’s Dream, Makes History”, *The Chicago Defender*, December 16, 1961, 9.

⁵⁵ Michael Omolewa, “The Impact Of U.S.-Educated African Students on Educational Developments in Africa, 1898–1955,” *Journal of African American History* 100, No.2(2015), 278

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ “Dr Azikiwe to Establish a University”, *New York Amsterdam News*, July 18, 1959, 7.

⁵⁸ According to Martin Kolinsky, The Inter-University Council for Higher Education in the Colonies (then changed to Overseas) was established in 1946 to “promote the foundation and expansion of universities in the British colonial territories as comprehensive institutions offering both liberal education and professional training”. See Martin Kolinsky, “The Demise of the Inter-University for Higher Education Overseas: A Chapter in the History of the Idea of the University,” *Minerva* 21, No. 1, (March 1983): 37-38.

Corps had been established in 1961, the University of Nigeria became the twelfth project announced by the Kennedy Administration, with thirty-five volunteers being trained at Michigan State University to undertake teaching and research assistance roles in a variety of subjects, including English, teacher training, vocational education, political science, history, home economics, agriculture, and the natural sciences.⁵⁹ As a project, the University of Nigeria was not only a symbol of international cooperation in higher education, but also of the potential of the new Nigerian state on its path to modernity.⁶⁰ Horace Mann Bond, writing in 1963, described the university as ‘the creation of Azikiwe’s genius’. ‘Americans’ according to Bond, ‘have no conception of the rapidity with which Africa is changing: nor of the gigantic strides it is taking. The university [of Nigeria] is an example’.⁶¹

In the case of the University of Nigeria, African Americans performed pivotal roles that were essential to the functioning of the university. The most prominent was George M. Johnson, a professor of law at Howard University. Johnson was not only one of the leading African American legal experts of this time, but also a vocal advocate for civil rights. During the Second World War he was general counsel for the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) established to monitor President Roosevelt’s executive order banning discrimination in the defense industries, and a centerpiece of the New Deal’s small steps towards undoing Jim Crow. During the *Brown vs Board of Education* case in the Supreme Court in 1954, Johnson helped write the civil rights brief for the NAACP. He also served as the only African American commissioner on the U.S Civil Rights Commission established by President Eisenhower following the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1957.⁶²

Johnson was initially appointed to a professorship at Michigan State University to assist in the establishment of the University of Nigeria. However, once he arrived he was appointed Vice-Chancellor by Governor-General Azikiwe. In an interview with the *New Journal and Guide*, Johnson outlined the challenges facing the institution:

⁵⁹ “Nigeria – Michigan state peace project underway”, *Atlanta Daily World*, September 20, 1961, 7; George Weeks, “U.S., Britain, African Educators combine best for Nigerian schools”, *Chicago Daily Defender*, May 23, 1962, 21.

⁶⁰ The faculty at the university was relatively international. Besides Nigerians (55% of faculty), there were British, Iranian, Indian, American, and African American staff. Overall 31 Americans (black and white) were at the university as of December 1961.

⁶¹ Horace Mann Bond, “Forgotten scholar’ honored by Modern Africa”, *Afro-American*, October 19, 1963, 20.

⁶² “‘Right’ Commissioner Takes MSU post: Will join Nigeria operation”, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, October 6, 1960, A8.

This will be an effort to create a university and eventually an educational system geared to the special needs of Nigeria.... In order that Nigerians will effectively perform roles of leadership which they are increasingly assuming and will assume to an even greater degree with the coming of independence...there is very great interest in the country for founding a university, and subsequently a broader educational system rooted in African life.⁶³

Johnson was not the only African American appointed to a senior position at the university. Alvin Loving, the first African American appointed to faculty at the University of Michigan-Flint, served as Dean of Student Affairs as well as acting principal for several months prior to its official opening in October 1960. Richard C. Davis, originally from the historically black Grambling College, served as Dean of the Faculty of Technology. On returning to the United States in October 1963 after three years in Nigeria, he recalled to the *Atlanta Daily World* that ‘this new concept of higher education in Nigeria will present a wider vista, and introduce a new era of human dignity in the whole of West Africa’.⁶⁴ Teaching English and linguistics was Paul Diggs from Howard University and a former colleague of George Johnson.⁶⁵ Mal Whitfield, the African American track gold medalist at the London and Helsinki Olympic Games, was appointed as the university’s athletics director. Whitfield, nicknamed ‘Marvelous Mal’, had a serious interest in the development of athletics in Africa since touring several countries there in 1954-1955 and delivering lectures and conducting coaching seminars. In an interview with *Jet* magazine, Whitfield stated that ‘[N]o one was serious about the blacks’ welfare’. Recreational programs often were devised by the colonial masters simply to keep Africans occupied – with no real emphasis on physical development’.⁶⁶

The most high-profile African American appointment at the university occurred in October 1963 when William Leo Hansberry, the highly regarded Africanist scholar, formerly of Howard University, was appointed inaugural Dean and Director of the William Leo Hansberry College of West African Studies. The study of African history and culture had

⁶³ “Heading Mission to Nigeria: Dr Johnson Quits Howard for Michigan Law School”, *New Journal and Guide*, October 1, 1960, 12.

⁶⁴ “University of Nigeria stressing vocations”, *Atlanta Daily World*, October 30, 1963, 2.

⁶⁵ “To teach Nigerians”, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, August 24, 1961, B13.

⁶⁶ Bernard Garnett, “U.S ex-Olympian trained African Olympic stars,” *Jet*, October 31, 1968, p. 58. The article also stated: “In the 1960s, most African nations won their independence and their new rulers looked to physical fitness programs and strong international competitions as an avenue to world stature, establishment of pride in the motherland in their youths, and internal solitary (ending tribal warfare). They sought technical and coaching assistance from the U.S on a large scale, persuaded foreign businessmen to furnish elaborate practice facilities, and reaped added benefits, when Peace Corps volunteers lent their services to the athletics campaigns”.

figured prominently in the intellectual trajectory of the university prior to Hansberry's arrival. Staff, black and white, even donned the colourful traditional Agabada robes to cope with the hot dry season. Hansberry had been Azikiwe's teacher at Howard; as previously noted, the two men had developed a deep intellectual and personal relationship. While the focus of Hansberry's scholarly interest was on ancient African history, particularly the Ethiopian Empire, contemporary Africa also attracted his attention. Besides teaching numerous students from Africa, including Azikiwe and Kwame Nkrumah at Howard, he also provided financial support from his own pocket to support African students studying in the United States, and was a significant supporter of the establishment of African House and the Africa-America Institute, two institutions dedicated to supporting the studies of African students.⁶⁷

On his retirement from Howard in 1961, Governor-General Azikiwe offered to underwrite the costs of the publication of Hansberry's magnum opus *The Rise and Decline of the Ethiopian Empire*, so it could become 'the standard text' at the new University of Nigeria.⁶⁸ In a letter from Azikiwe to Hansberry, the former student wrote that '[I] am obliged to write to you today in order to find out from you what is responsible for the non-publication of what all of us have studied under you, and have been inspired by you, regard as your magnum opus.... I feel that your book is now an imperative necessity'.⁶⁹ The relationship between Hansberry and the University of Nigeria would grow over the years. At the ceremony marking the installation of Azikiwe as the first Chancellor of the University in January 1962, Hansberry was granted an honorary degree alongside John Hannah, the President of Michigan State University. Marguerite Cartwright, a correspondent for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, described Hansberry's recognition as 'very appropriate' for a public figure 'who had long been guide, friend, father-confessor, and teacher to scores upon scores of African students'. 'There was a lump in my throat,' Cartwright admitted as Hansberry received his degree. Many others in the audience were misty-eyed or bursting into spontaneous cheering.⁷⁰

On the founding of the eponymous William Hansberry College, with Hansberry as Dean and Director of Studies in October 1963, Horace Mann Bond wrote in the *Afro-American* that Hansberry's scholarly achievements had finally been vindicated:

⁶⁷ "Center for visiting black men in U.S.: Africa House – like Africa, undergoing great change", *New Journal and Guide*, August 19, 1961, 9.

⁶⁸ Marc Crawford, "The scholar nobody knows: Unsung Howard U. Professor is world's best African authority", *Ebony*, February 1961, 64

⁶⁹ Quoted in Crawford, "The scholar nobody knows", *Ebony*, February 1961, 64.

⁷⁰ Marguerite Cartwright, "World Backdrop: University of Nigeria", *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 20, 1962, A24.

Now the years of scholarship have found their reward in the fantastic story of how a lifetime of patient perseverance actually pays off; for today, Africa's newest and fastest growing university, honoured him as no American has ever been honoured before – or is likely to be so honoured.⁷¹

Hansberry died in 1965, so was never able to witness the tragedy that was to afflict the University of Nigeria. The university and town of Nsukka would become part of the Republic of Biafra following secession in May 1967, and the university would be briefly renamed 'University of Biafra'. In the early stages of the fighting between Nigerian federal forces and Biafran troops, the university and Nsukka would become a battlefield, with much of the campus badly damaged or destroyed. For African Americans who had been vocal supporters of the new Nigerian nation-state, the destruction of this institution that held so much potential for Nigeria's future was a bitter blow.

In February 1966, one month after the first military coup rocked the political foundations of the Nigerian nation-state, the highly regarded Africanist Stanley Diamond wrote in the pages of *Africa Today* that 'Nigeria has been a prime example of our denial of African realities'. The reality, according to Diamond, was that 'Nigeria was the very model of colonial failure.... The federation was imagined to be a colonial success, an example of how well-intentioned power, sober and lofty design, can create a nation and move a people, with minimum displacement, from a position of tutelage to one of "independence", through which the best interests of the ruler and ruled are harmoniously united'.⁷² The Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe, author of the widely-acclaimed 1958 novel *Things Fall Apart*, wrote in his memoirs of the political turmoil in 1966:

The problems of the Nigerian Federation were well-known, but I somehow had felt that perhaps this was part of a nation's maturation, and that given time we would solve our problems. Then suddenly this incredible, horrific experience happened – not just to a few people but to millions, together.⁷³

It was not just Nigerians like Achebe who expressed doubts about the stability and viability of Nigerian political institutions. Writing in *Commentary* in 1963, the British

⁷¹ Horace Mann Bond, "'Forgotten scholar' honoured by modern Africa", *Afro-American*, October 19, 1963, 20.

⁷² Stanley Diamond, "The End of the First Republic", *Africa Today*, 13, No.2 (1966), 7.

⁷³ Chinua Achebe, *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 71.

political commentator and academic John Mander bleakly noted that Nigeria had more in common with ‘Latin America after liberation’ in the early nineteenth century than the hopeful vision articulated by many at the beginning of the 1960s. ‘Nigeria was launched in 1960 with high hopes’, wrote Mander, ‘yet already the Action Group, the progressive West Nigeria party of Chief Awolowo, has been suppressed and its leaders jailed. Here in Lagos, the press is timid; there is no real public opinion; politics is run on traditional Tammany Hall lines. All this looks pretty black’.⁷⁴ In 1962 the African American novelist James Baldwin was interviewed on his latest novel *Another Country* and his recent visit to Africa. Although Baldwin did not visit Nigeria, in his discussion with Studs Terkel he outlined the challenge of nation-building in post-colonial Africa and the incorporation of tribal and ethnic identities into a modern nation-state. ‘One begins to realise’, noted Baldwin:

The idea of nations is really a very new idea, you know.... But most of the people in Africa as far as I could tell...don’t really seriously think of themselves as being Ghanaian or Guinean, or whatever, you know, or still less as African, but as tribal people. [T]he problem in all these nations really is somehow you know to inculcate in the populations a sense of a new identity really because it is precisely what they, you know what they are on the threshold of. But it’s not so easy, you know, it’s not so easy to achieve this.⁷⁵

For Diamond, Achebe, Mander and Baldwin, the realities of Nigerian statehood and the complexities of post-colonial nation-building in Africa were not in alignment with the hopes that independence had offered. For African Americans who had viewed Nigeria as an inspiration to the rest of the African continent and to the broader black diaspora, and had worked to try and make Nigeria a viable political and economic entity, the roll-call of crises that rocked Nigeria and the first military coup in January 1966, were confusing and disconcerting. ‘The invention of Nigeria’, wrote Brenda Plummer, ‘based on the geographic assumptions and predilections of British administrators resulted in a nation of more than one hundred ethnic groups and languages. No parallel existed in the United States. Such fundamental variations in the history and political status of African Americans as a national

⁷⁴ John Mander, “West African Diary”, *Commentary*, December 1963, 459.

⁷⁵ James Baldwin, “James Baldwin discusses his book “Another Country” and his travels through Africa”, Interview by Studs Terkel, *Wax Museum*, Studs Terkel Radio Archive, September 29, 1962. Audio, 47.08. <https://studsterkel.wfmt.com/programs/james-baldwin-discusses-his-book-another-country-and-his-travels-through-africa>.

minority, and Nigerians, respectively, were often overlooked in racially essentialist discourses'.⁷⁶

While cheering on the emergence of the largest black-majority state in sub-Saharan Africa, African Americans who followed events in Nigeria remained circumspect about its growing political and ethnic instability. For some, the erosion of parliamentary democracy was an omen that spelled serious problems for the future stability of the Nigerian state. For others, while the growing political instability was troubling, it was an organic part of the nation-building process that other states (including the United States) had gone through in their history. To cast doubt on the viability of Nigerian political institutions, in the eyes of these African American commentators, was to adopt a colonial mentality that saw Western countries as the only ones capable of embracing political traditions and ideas that originated in Europe. This was particularly galling for African Americans who were engaged in an ongoing civil rights struggle challenging the deficits in American liberal democracy. The military coup of January 1966 that swept aside the leaders and institutions of the First Nigerian Republic, led some African Americans to offer cautious support for the coup as it provided an opportunity to reinvigorate the ideals and hopes that proved so inspiring when Nigeria gained independence in 1960.

The origins of the crisis of 1966 are complex and multifaceted. While not comprehensive, this section of the chapter will provide an overview of the growing political turmoil. Nigeria was a heterogenous colonial construct created by Lord Lugard in 1914 that included hundreds of different tribal and ethnic groups, with the three predominant ethnic groups being the Hausa and Fulani in the Northern region, the Igbo in the Eastern region, and the Yoruba in the Western region. The origins of the coup of January 1966 and the subsequent coup of July that same year lie in the turbulent power dynamics that afflicted the relationships between Hausa and Fulani, Igbo, and Yoruba in post-colonial Nigeria. The crisis of 1966 and the advent of civil war in 1967 were not inevitable. While tribal and ethnic conflict were aspects of the history of the territory known as Nigeria, the crisis that exploded in 1966 had its roots

⁷⁶ Plummer, *In Search of Power*, 68.

in the failure of Nigerian politicians and society to craft a united political entity that would ensure the safety and prosperity of its ethnically heterogeneous population.

Historian Michael Gould attributed the problems of post-independence politics in Nigeria to a fear that the Western and Eastern regions would be dominated by the more populous Northern region. Between the end of the Second World War and the advent of independence in 1960, regionalism came to dominate Nigerian national politics. The Richards Constitution of 1948 and the MacPherson Constitution of 1951 embedded the politics of region into the body politic of the colony.⁷⁷ The Richards constitutional reforms aimed to encourage the development of regional governance at the expense of the central government in Lagos. Historian Brian McNeil wrote that:

While laws passed by the Legislative Council in Lagos trumped those adopted by the Regional Houses, political power in Nigeria started at the regional level and worked its way to the center. Richards did not view this process of legislative devolution as troublesome for a nation struggling for unity, but in the end the Richards Constitution served paradoxical purposes of promoting both national unity and regionalism in the colony.⁷⁸

The development of the regions as the core of latent political power, due to British constitutional arrangements, encouraged ‘the instrumentalization of ethnicity by emerging politicians seeking the fastest means to mobilize support. Regional feelings eventually led to the emergence of regionally based political parties’.⁷⁹

The three largest political parties that would dominate Nigerian politics between 1960 and 1966 reflected this reality. In the predominantly Muslim Northern region, the Northern People’s Congress (NPC), founded in 1949, aimed to protect the unique cultural, political, and religious institutions of the region. The NPC emphasised the role of Islam and memories of the Sokoto Caliphate (crushed by the British in 1903) to build political unity in the North. In the Western region, the Action Group (AG), led by Obafemi Awolowo, transformed itself from a Yoruba cultural organisation into an exclusively Yoruba political party. The National Council of Nigerian and the Cameroons (NCNC), had initially been a political organisation that hoped to achieve trans-regional appeal in the struggle against British rule and for self-

⁷⁷ Michael Gould, *The Struggle for Modern Nigeria: the Biafran War, 1967-1970* (New York: I.B Tauris, 2012), 13-19.

⁷⁸ McNeil, “Frontiers of Need”, “Frontiers of Need: Humanitarianism and the American Involvement in the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970” (PhD diss., University of Texas, 2014), 29.

⁷⁹ Falola, *History of Nigeria*, 90

government. However, it increasingly became aligned with Igbo interests and abandoned broader pan-Nigerian concerns.⁸⁰ These parties were not just institutions with varying policy approaches or ideological agendas. As Gould pointed out:

By independence the country was only a federation in name; in reality it was a country of semi-autonomous regions ruled by political parties who enjoyed enormous patronage and power. In the East and West the parties, with their power of patronage, secured absolute support, especially from the emerging middle-class professionals. Each region, which meant each regional government, had control over the regional banks and the marketing boards and many other economic activities; this meant that jobs, marketing board licences [sic], loans and government contracts were given to party supporters, and to members of government ministers' extended families.⁸¹

The power invested in the three major political parties, beholden to their tribal and ethnic constituencies, made electoral politics a zero-sum contest. The political crises that afflicted Nigeria between independence and the coup of January 1966 – the crisis in the Western Region in 1962, the Census crisis of 1962-63, the national election of 1964, the violence of the regional elections in the West in 1965, and finally the first military coup of January 1966 – had some of their roots in the tension inherent in trying to build the fabric of a unitary nation-state from three distinct quasi ethno-states with diverging interests and identities.

For African American observers and supporters of Nigeria, the realities of Nigerian politics were both jarring and confusing. However, they were not ignored by these black observers, who may have been tempted to focus on specious romantic images of Nigerian independence. By 1962, Nigeria was engulfed in a growing series of political crises that increasingly challenged the political foundations of the Nigerian state. For those African Americans engaged with developments in Nigeria this growing political instability provoked a diverse series of responses, many of which were articulated in the black press. For some observers, the political turmoil provoked fear and uncertainty that the 'liberal democratic' institutions at the core of the Nigerian political experiment were fraying, and that this could lead to further instability, the intervention of the military in the political process, and growing authoritarianism. This was a concern not just focused on Nigeria, but also on broader developments in post-colonial Africa. For others, Nigeria's increasing political turmoil was merely the product of a young nation-state developing organically, much like the United

⁸⁰ For an analysis of the growing regional dynamics of the three major political parties in Nigeria see Richard L. Sklar, "Contradictions in the Nigerian Political System", *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 3, No.2 (1965), 201-213.

⁸¹ Gould, *The Struggle for Modern Nigeria*, 19

States at the beginning of its own experiment with political independence. Nigeria's political institutions would evolve, they insisted, with the challenges of independence. Therefore, African Americans should be open-minded when assessing Nigeria's progress.

By 1966, none of the African states that had gained their independence since 1957 had had a peaceful transition of power through a democratic electoral process. Even more alarming was the tendency of the armed forces in many African states to intervene in the political process. By the end of 1967, 10 out of 38 African states was under some form of military rule – including Nigeria. Frank Giles, a journalist at the London *Sunday Times*, quipped in April 1967 that '[w]here ex-British colonies are concerned... Sandhurst seems to have replaced the London School of Economics as the training ground of future national leaders'.⁸² An editorial in the *Chicago Daily Defender* two months after the first military coup in Nigeria in January 1966 summed up the trepidation felt by some African American commentators:

The military may evolve a more efficient government and a more balanced administration of internal affairs.... But military governments are dangerous, in that they never want to relinquish their reign. They retain power by ruthless suppression of the rights of the majority. This has been true throughout history.... The tragedy in Africa is that the movement towards a democratic process was interrupted just at the moment when the elected leaders were learning, through trial and error, the mechanism of representative government. Democracy as a political philosophy can easily be defended on the assumption of inherent human rights and dignity. But the means of establishing and safeguarding those rights are not easily acquired.⁸³

For other African American observers of the situation in Nigeria, the growing fragility of the new nation's political institutions were not a cause for alarm. The political instability merely represented the growing pains of a new state, a situation that new states in Europe and the Western Hemisphere faced in the late 18th and early 19th century, and that with time and patience would be resolved.⁸⁴ The advent of military rule in Nigeria, and the collapse of parliamentary democracy, was, according to veteran African American journalist Charles P.

⁸² Quoted in McNeil, "Frontiers of Need", 19.

⁸³ "Africa In Ferment", *The Chicago Daily Defender*, March 9, 1966, 15.

⁸⁴ An editorial in the *Los Angeles Sentinel* (although originally published in the *Chicago Daily Defender* stated that "Given time to consolidate their power, military rulers may force such constitutional alternations as to make a return to civil government a virtual impossibility. This is the pattern that has reproduced itself through history: one military hegemony would follow another until the masses got wise enough to consolidate their strength and force the military out. This was true in the 18th and 19th century Europe: so what Africa is going through is nothing more than [the] familiar... historical tremors that precede the onset of civil government in countries where the people are the ultimate masters of their own political destiny", see "Guest Editorial: Free Africa: The Military Threat", *Los Angeles Sentinel*, March 3, 1966, A6.

Howard, primarily an indictment of the failure of ‘Western’ political institutions to grow roots in African soil.⁸⁵ Military-rule was therefore not considered a backward step; it was, rather, a sideways pivot to a model of governance that offered a better chance of creating a stable and prosperous post-colonial state – a Faustian bargain on the path to modernity. As Nigeria’s political crisis escalated from 1962 over the status of the Action Group political party in the Western Region, African Americans dueled in the black press over these competing viewpoints.

The origins of the Western region crisis lie in the coalition government that was formed just prior to Nigerian independence. The national election in 1959 resulted in an odd coalition between the conservative NPC and NCNC. Out of the deal, Nnamdi Azikiwe gained the position of Governor-General – later President when Nigeria became a Republic – and NCNC politicians gained access to key positions within the central government. For the Yoruba-dominated Action Group (AG), which had taken on the role of official opposition party, being shut out of coalition government meant also being shut out of the political patronage network. Growing frustration within the AG led to ideological and strategic clashes within the AG over its future political direction. These clashes were epitomised by the personality clashes between founder of the party Obafemi Awolowo, the leader of the party in the national parliament, and Samuel Akintola, the premier of the Western region. Awolowo, according to Gould, wanted ‘to steer the party in a more socialist direction [and wanted to develop a party]... strong enough to determine its own destiny, and through popular and national appeal, form its own government’.⁸⁶ Akintola, a relatively more conservative figure within the AG, sought instead to see the party as part of the national government through coalition formation with Balewa’s NPC.

Claims and counter-claims of maladministration, anti-party activities, corruption, and indiscipline finally exploded in physical violence between supporters of the two factions when Awolowo tried to launch a coup against Akintola. The unrest resulted in a state of emergency being declared in the Western Region by Prime Minister Balewa. More dramatically, Balewa went about banning the Action Group and arresting key leaders, including Awolowo, on charges of treason, for attempting to overthrow the Federal government. The subsequent trial and imprisonment of Awolowo, using relatively flimsy

⁸⁵ Charles P. Howard, “Black Africans find ‘Democracy’ just another word for colonialism as white ‘experts’ supervise and command vital functions of country”, *Philadelphia Tribune*, March 6, 1965, 24.

⁸⁶ Gould, *The Struggle for Modern Nigeria*, 22.

evidence that he colluded with Ghana, was a crippling blow for Nigerian democracy. Wilbur Landrey, writing in *The Chicago Defender* in the aftermath of the unrest, lamented the turn of events in the Western Region:

Now on the second anniversary of Nigeria's independence, her democracy is undergoing its severest test. The leaders of the major opposition party [AG]...are either being investigated for alleged financial irregularities or under detention on suspicion of arms smuggling. Much will depend on the outcome of the present crisis, for if moderation and democracy survive in Nigeria, they will have a stronger chance elsewhere in Africa. There is energy and hope, but the crisis has bought a touch of disillusionment.⁸⁷

In November 1962, Metz Lochard noted for his readers the 'considerable misgivings about unity on a national scale' that the crisis had exposed. While partly praising Nigeria's democratic political system – '[p]olitical democracy has in recent years begun to make inroads on the old society' – Lochard worried that the regional dynamics of this system could spell ruin. He wrote:

[T]he only bond uniting the three regions is opposition to colonialism and among [N]ortherners even this is more formally felt. Now the restraining hand of the British administrator has been lifted, there is little to stop the leaders of the three regions from deciding the best way to stay in power is to become more powerful. For that matter, there will be little, other than the personalities of these leaders to stop the three regions from disintegrating under the stresses of their own internal antagonisms.⁸⁸

On 28 October 1964 Malcom X touched down in Lagos. His visit to Nigeria was part of a five-month sojourn in the Middle East and Africa to raise the profile of the Organisation of Afro American Unity (OAAU), a Pan-Africanist organisation he had recently established to promote dialogue between African-Americans and Africans. The centrepiece of Malcolm's visit was his attendance at the OAU conference in Cairo to seek the support of African nations in condemning the United States for violating the human rights of African Americans. While the response from African states was relatively tepid, the trip gave Malcolm the chance to engage with numerous leaders of newly-independent African states. He had travelled to Nigeria previously in May to address students at the University at Ibadan. The two trips had revealed to Malcolm, according to his biographer Manning Marable, 'a land battered by the

⁸⁷ Wilbur G. Landrey, "Ghana, Nigeria to shape Africa", *The Chicago Defender*, October 27, 1962, 19.

⁸⁸ Metz T. P. Lochard, "Split into many groups, Nigeria gropes for unity", *The Chicago Daily Defender*, November 14, 1962, 13.

effects of fierce internecine political battles; the political promises made when Nigeria had gained its independence in 1960 had not been fulfilled....’⁸⁹ In his travel diary, Malcolm recounted his experience of a party attended by members of the press, the diplomatic corps and Nigerian officials following a private meeting with President Azikiwe. According to Malcolm ‘[a] great deal of soul-searching was being done [about the state of Nigerian politics].... It will take much bloodshed to straighten this country out and I don’t believe it can be avoided’.⁹⁰

The pessimism of Malcolm X, one of the foremost champions of Pan-Africanism in the United States regarding Nigerian politics, was representative of broader concerns in the African American community concerning Nigeria’s increasingly turbulent political situation during the crises related to the national census in 1963 and the first national elections held in 1964. The national census further antagonised regional rivalries due to the perception that the results were fraudulent. The figures from the census were critical in deciding the political future of Nigeria, since population in each region determined how many seats would be gained in the federal parliament. Even after a recount, the results were ominous. They revealed that the NPC could now effectively govern without any coalition partners from the Western or Eastern regions. For the NCNC, this proved to be the trigger for it to end its coalition with the NPC prior to the elections scheduled for December 1964. ‘Nigeria’s first national election campaign since she became independent’, according to Lloyd Garrison in the *New York Times*, was a serious test for the new state’s political institutions and sense of civil harmony. ‘With more and more newly independent African states adopting one-party systems, Nigeria has become one of the last symbols of democracy. The question being asked by both foreign observers and Nigerians is: Can democracy work here?’.⁹¹

The election campaign and the result that was achieved were a stark warning about the fragility and dysfunction that permeated the Nigerian political system. The Northern Nigerian National Alliance (NNA) – a coalition between the NPC and Samuel Akintola’s Nigerian National Democratic Party – defeated the United Progressive Grand Alliance (UPGA), a coalition between the NCNC, Awolowo’s remaining supporters from the AG, and other progressive parties, gaining 190 out of the 312 seats in the Federal Assembly.⁹² While the

⁸⁹ Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), 313-314.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 373-374.

⁹¹ Lloyd Garrison, “Democracy faces test as Nigerian vote nears: Mounting violence and talk of secession bring fear for country’s future”, *The New York Times*, December 28, 1964, 4.

⁹² Alan Rake, “Nigeria after elections: What happened?” *African Today*, 12, No.1 (1965), 5-6.

NNA had won a mandate to govern, how that outcome had been achieved was contentious. Alan Rake, an Africanist scholar writing in *Africa Today* in 1964, bleakly summarised the outcome:

[t]he result is that nobody in Nigeria thinks it was a real election. The Northerners claim that the UPGA tried the boycott tactic because they knew they were going to lose anyway. The Southerners claim that they might have won if the contest had been completely fair. They have produced massive and documented evidence over the last few weeks showing the atmosphere of fear, corruption and intimidation that prevailed.⁹³

African American observers of the election, primarily in the black press, expressed a mixture of frustration and disappointment at Nigerian political institutions. While still supportive of Nigeria as a cause, many black commentators questioned the viability of the present political system. George Goodman wrote in the *Los Angeles Sentinel* that the election ‘debacle’ called for ‘political writers...to discuss the failure of Nigerian democracy’. Gooding noted that President Azikiwe’s latest article in *Foreign Affairs* titled ‘Essentials for Nigerian survival’, offered a potential starting point, although ‘[h]e doesn’t pretend to offer easy solutions to Nigeria’s welter of problems’.⁹⁴ Charles H. Loeb, a veteran black journalist and former war correspondent, wrote that ‘it is not surprising that a nation [the United States] of people accustomed to inside toilets, power lawn mowers, television sets, and electric can openers, simply cannot bring themselves to the acceptance that this vaunted system might not be exactly what is required to pull the backwards nations out of poverty and pain’.⁹⁵ ‘Democracy’, argued an editorial in the *Philadelphia Tribune*, ‘is a form of government for which the newly emerged nations of Africa are not ready. As a matter of fact, after 175 years there is still a large section of the United States which is not ready for a thoroughly democratic form of government.... At this stage of their development, most of the African nations regard a one-party government as essential for the stabilization of nation life’.⁹⁶ In launching a sideways swipe at the system of one-party rule in the Jim Crow South, the author of this article was raising an interesting dilemma. At a time when democratic ideas were crucial to the ongoing civil rights struggle in the United States, for some black commentators liberal democracy was not viewed as a perquisite for African self-governance. Was it more

⁹³ Ibid, 5.

⁹⁴ George Goodman, “Africa and the World”, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, May 20, 1965, A6.

⁹⁵ Charles Loeb, “World on View: Exporting our brand of Democracy”, *Call and Post*, February 13, 1965, 8B.

⁹⁶ “Everyone’s not ready for Democracy”, *Philadelphia Tribune*, March 31, 1964, 5.

essential that states like Nigeria adhered to the norms of parliamentary democracy, or was the building of a viable unified black state the more critical need?

An editorial in *The Chicago Defender* attacked Lloyd Garrison's coverage of the election. The author was strident in criticising media outlets such as the *New York Times* for their 'orientalist' assumptions about Nigerian political institutions. 'There is nothing unusual about political parties accusing their rivals of duplicity, improper election procedures, fraudulent use of the ballot box and improper registration. Such charges are common in American politics'.⁹⁷ In an *Atlanta Daily World* piece entitled 'Africa's present troubles like American Revolution', the author noted that '[t]he mutinies, dissension, and seeming dictatorial rule are no more than normal, ordinary signs of a country trying to establish itself on a firm footing so as to build itself up in all areas of endeavor'.⁹⁸ 'Placed against a long established country like the U.S.,' wrote the author, 'Africa is presently going through a period which the United States went through in the 1790s'.⁹⁹ 'The one problem all African countries share at independence', wrote the author of a lengthy editorial in *The Chicago Defender*:

was the need to build coherent nations out of incredibly fragmented societies consisting of ethnically and linguistically diverse, often hostile, tribes.... Strong government therefore seemed not only desirable, but acutely necessary.... A multi-party system differences, with each party be would simply heighten these coming totally identified with one tribe or an uneasy and dangerous alliance of tribes [sic]. Therefore, the reasoning runs, the one-party structure is best because it is both an integrative and stabilizing structure which can fuse the diverse groups together into a new sense of community. Americans who are critical and impatient because the new African nations aren't democracies should be reminded that the desperately difficult struggle being waged this very day on the civil rights front, in particular, to improve our own democracy is evidence that there are many way stations along the road to full democracy, and that no nation has yet traveled the entire route.¹⁰⁰

The military coup that erupted on 15 January 1966, was catalysed by the dysfunction that existed at the heart of the Nigerian political experiment. The coup led by a group of young Majors in the Nigerian Army, with the charismatic Major Chukwuma Nzeogwu the key ringleader, went about assassinating key political figures in the Nigerian government. Once the pall of confusion lifted, Nigerians discovered that most of their key political leaders were

⁹⁷ "Nigeria's Plight", *The Chicago Defender*, January 9, 1965, 8.

⁹⁸ "Africa's present trouble like American Revolution", *Los Angeles Sentinel*, March 12, 1964, D3A.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ "African Politics", *The Chicago Defender*, August 14, 1965, 14.

now dead. The butchers bill included Ahmadu Bello the Sardauna of Sokoto, the head of the Northern Peoples' Congress, Samuel Akintola, Premier of the Western Region, and Prime Minister Balewa – whose bullet-riddled body was found six days after the coup.¹⁰¹ George Goodman writing in the *Los Angeles Sentinel* explained to his readers that 'Nigeria, long the model "pupil" of Western parliamentary government in Africa, quaked and showed signs of crumbling this week, under violent political upheaval that dislodged its founding fathers'.¹⁰² In a bloody stroke, the young Majors had effectively decapitated the Nigerian ruling elite and extinguished the First Nigerian Republic.

The goal of Nzeogwu and his fellow Majors – all but one was of Igbo tribal descent – was to create a unified Nigerian state cleansed of the ethnic and regional differences that had afflicted the country since independence. The Africanist scholar Stanley Diamond was quick to point out that tribal identity was not at the core of the uprising. Instead, 'the Ibo [sic] role in the military coup is not properly analyzed as tribalistic but rather as nationalistic, with the Ibo [sic] assuming, with some justice, that they were the truest proponents of a modern, unified, African state, shorn of opportunistic ethnicity, the so-called "tribalism" of the most conservative Northern and Western elements'.¹⁰³ The leaders targeted by the soldiers were politicians the soldiers believed had been central to inflaming ethnic tensions. In a patriotic declaration following the coup, Nzeogwu outlined the reasons for the unprecedented military intervention:

Our enemies are the political profiteers, the swindlers, the men in high and low places that seek bribes and demand ten percent, those that seek to keep the country divided permanently so that they can remain in office as ministers and VIPs of waste, the tribalists, the nepotists, those that make the country big for nothing before the international circle, those that have corrupted our society and put the Nigerian calendar backward. We promise that you will no longer be ashamed to say that you are a Nigerian.¹⁰⁴

The collapse of the First Nigerian Republic generated deep interest and conflicting interpretations from African Americans. Since the Western Crisis of 1962, black Americans had witnessed the failure of Nigerian politicians to build a strong, stable black nation that had the potential to be model for the rest of Africa and for the black diaspora. Now, in black newspapers across the United States, African American commentators pondered the question:

¹⁰¹ Simon Awekwe, "Nigeria Returning to Normal Living", *New York Amsterdam News*, January 29, 1966, 15.

¹⁰² George Goodman, "Nigerian Upheaval: A Test for Africa?" *Los Angeles Sentinel*, January 26, 1966, A3.

¹⁰³ Diamond, "The End of the First Republic", 8.

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in Falola, *History of Nigeria*, 117

could a strong and unified Nigeria, one which harnessed the plentiful economic and human resources of the nation, come into being through military-rule? At a time when the post-colonial order in Africa seemed to be fraying as the decolonisation process ground to a halt, as white supremacist regimes in Portuguese Africa, Rhodesia, and South Africa seemed to be entrenching, and as the first generation of independence leaders passed from the scene, the future of Nigeria seemed all the more important.

The Chicago Defender informed its readers, two weeks after the military coup, that Nigeria had ‘been plunged into a nightmare of sectional rivalries capped by kidnappings’. The advent of ‘ambitious militarists’ seizing control of the Nigerian state was directly related to ‘[u]nemployment, low wages, inflation, a swollen and corrupt bureaucracy, unpopular government austerity, anti-graft measures, and political unrest hav[ing] conspired against the stability of civilian rule’. The article went on to lament that, while military rule emerged out of the politics of dysfunction in Nigeria, it ‘may force such constitutional alterations as to make a return to civil government a virtual impossibility’.¹⁰⁵ A further article on 26 February in the *Defender* reiterated this point, noting that the coup had ‘shattered the legend that this was Africa’s most stable, most highly organized state... the rumblings of a volcanic eruption were detectable early by those who had their ears to the ground’. This ‘volcanic eruption’ came in the form of ‘[w]holesale corruption and bribery [that was] undermining the economic foundations of the whole country’. The Nigerian government had squandered ‘more than \$70 million. Most of it went down the drain in inflated contracts with foreign firms’.¹⁰⁶

Lawrence Meredith of the *Afro-American* observed that ‘[t]he people deplored his [Prime Minister Balewa’s] death, but acclaimed the military take-over. The displaced government again, was accused of corruption and inefficiency’.¹⁰⁷ At a conference on African affairs at the historically-black Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, several regional experts on Africa expressed the view that the situation in Nigeria had been simplified. Far from being the ‘paragon of African democracy in action’ described by State Department officials and news reporters, the military coup had revealed ‘that corruption existed in that country’.¹⁰⁸ An editorial that appeared in the *Chicago Daily Defender* titled ‘New Africa’ offered a relatively judicious analysis of the military coup. While acknowledging the turbulence the coup had

¹⁰⁵ “Africa in Transition”, *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)*, January 29, 1966, 10.

¹⁰⁶ “Nigeria on right road”, *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)*, February 26, 1966, 10.

¹⁰⁷ Laurence Meredith, “Economic Pangs Causing African Turmoil: Army coups traced to economic strain”, *Afro-American*, March 5, 1966, 20.

¹⁰⁸ “Experts on Africa discuss local government problems”, *Afro-American*, February 12, 1966, 16.

caused, the article cautioned African Americans to embrace *realpolitik* and take a long view of the unrest:

[T]he transformation of Africa, below the Sahara, seems destined to be long and confused. However, there is no reason for despair, no point in recriminations, but no room for illusions. Somehow, Africa must be supplied with the tools of modern living. The tools of government will, for the most part have to be evolved on the spot. What emerges may please none of those who want to reasonably can be expected [sic]. It will revive the influence of the old continent and its civilization.¹⁰⁹

While Lawrence Meredith and the editorial staff at *The Chicago Defender* offered a relatively nuanced assessment of the impact of the military coup, some voices in the black community were full-fledged supporters of the overthrow of the First Nigerian Republic. The *Afro-American*, in particular senior correspondent Charles P. Howard, saw the situation in Nigeria in this light. Howard was adamant that, rather than an illegitimate act, the coup was a revolutionary event with a degree of grassroots authenticity. He declared that:

[T]his is a revolution of the people seeking to enjoy some fruits of independence that have up to now been denied them. It is a revolution by the people to rid themselves of the evils of greed and special privilege. It is a revolution against a set of rulers that were imposed on them by a British designed and rigged constitution, a constitution that made such a revolution inevitable.... This is a glorious chance for Nigeria to form a government to serve African needs, to rid their country of disease, poverty and corruption.¹¹⁰

Phillipa Schuyler, the daughter of George Schuyler, as well as a highly regarded concert pianist and author who had extensive knowledge of African affairs, recounted to Lillian Wiggins of the *Afro-American* her experience of being caught in the military coups in both Nigeria and Ghana during a recent tour.¹¹¹ Schuyler described both events as significant turning points that had the potential to spark a positive transformation for Nigeria:

Africa is getting its first taste of democracy, and it is a strange taste in a continent that once knew only rule by tribal chiefs and witch doctors. And yet it seems to have aroused a deep hunger on the

¹⁰⁹ "The New Africa", *The Chicago Daily Defender*, April 1, 1967, 10.

¹¹⁰ Charles Howard, "Hope for Unity: Nigeria's Military takeover is revolution by the people", *Afro-American*, January 29, 1966, 20.

¹¹¹ Schuyler was the author of *Who Killed the Congo?*, an account of her experiences during the Congo crisis in the early 1960s.

part of millions – some of the recent coups, such as in Ghana were an expression of that hunger – to recapture the hope of a better life under self-government than under colonial rule.¹¹²

In October 1960, African Americans had applauded the emergence of an independent Nigerian nation-state as a symbol and practical example of postcolonial Africa's future. Through Nigeria's parliamentary democracy, economic development and assertive diplomacy, African Americans saw a country that had the potential to play a significant role in the broader black diaspora. As Nigerians became citizens, rather than colonial subjects, and increasingly shaped their own destiny, African Americans ranging from civil rights leaders to journalists and educators, saw a practical example of black citizenship and self-government that reverberated across the Atlantic. As the civil rights struggle in the United States reached its climax during the early-to-mid 1960s, Nigeria's independence demonstrated the ability of those of African descent to build a vibrant liberal democracy, harness the resources necessary to build a modern economy and play a significant role in global affairs.

This was not only a vital example for African Americans, but one they wished to aid, particularly in terms of developing the educational resources of the new nation-state. However, the optimism about Nigeria in the African American community was circumscribed by the growing political dysfunction that lay at the heart of the new state. For African American observers, primarily in the black press, the snowballing crisis that threatened the stability of key Nigerian political institutions was either a grim warning for the future, or a temporary blemish on a project that still held great promise. Either way African Americans in the mid-1960s were focused on developments across the Atlantic, not only in terms of Nigeria's future but for the broader black internationalist project. As the next chapter will show, as the political situation in Nigeria descended into mass violence and warnings of imminent civil war, politically-engaged African Americans, would seek to help halt the march towards war.

¹¹² Lillian Wiggins, "Finds Africans getting first real taste of democracy", *Afro-American*, May 14, 1966, 5.

Chapter Three

‘To the benefit of Africa, the world, and ourselves’:

The American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa (ANLCA) Mission to Nigeria, 1966-1968

On 23 March 1968, a seemingly innocuous article appeared on page two of the *New York Amsterdam News*, the Harlem-based African-American weekly newspaper. The article, wedged between coverage of black veterans returning from Vietnam and the reaction of black community leaders and politicians to Robert F. Kennedy’s bid for the presidency, noted that after a year of planning and consultations the four co-chairmen of the American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa (ANLCA) were to travel to Nigeria to help resolve the conflict between the Nigerian federal government and the self-declared Republic of Biafra. One particularly striking section of the article was in paragraph four:

Meanwhile Dr King postponed his Poor People’s march on Washington to an April 22 starting date, partly to enable him to make the April 15 trip (to Nigeria and Biafra). Theodore E. Brown, executive director of the Leadership Conference, confirmed that the group was preparing to leave.¹

The fact that Martin Luther King Jr., in the midst of organising ‘a powerful, multiracial coalition of poor people to compel Congress to enact an economic bill of rights’, would be willing to act as an international peacemaker – to end an internecine African conflict – has been overlooked by historians.² Yet, King had long seen his US-based moral advocacy and activism as tied to war, militarism, race, and economic inequality globally. In his famed ‘Beyond Vietnam’ speech on 4 April 1967, King not only challenged the moral and political logic behind U.S intervention in Vietnam, but outlined the need for global brotherhood to confront the main challenges that beset the international community. As King declared, the

¹ “4 To Try For Peace in Nigeria,” *New York Amsterdam News*, March 23, 1968, 2.

² Thomas Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Struggle for Economic Justice* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 330-331.

‘call for worldwide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one’s tribe, race, class and nation is in reality a call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all mankind’.³

As King spoke these words he was working alongside other major civil rights leaders in the ANLCA in an attempt to bring the bitterly divided Nigerian Federal Military Government and political leaders from Eastern Nigeria together to resolve their bloody tribal and religious divisions. The mission to Nigeria was not only an example of an African American Pan-Africanism, it also was an example of King’s desire to spread a message of peace and tolerance in a more universalist internationalist idiom, that of the ‘The World House’.⁴ In evoking the ‘World House’ or *oikumene* in the Greek of the New Testament, King was drawing on the interwoven connection between the civil rights movement in the United States and the global Protestant ecumenical movement. As historians have recently noted the ecumenical and civil rights movements not only challenged racism and segregation in the United States, but globally through the campaign against colonialism and the upholding of universal human rights.⁵ In the case of the growing civil unrest in Nigeria, both King and his colleagues in the ANLCA and the broader Protestant ecumenical movement found their interests aligned in seeking a peaceful settlement to the political and ethnic tensions.

Novelist Chinua Achebe, in his memoir *There Was A Country*, reflected on his experience of the civil war from the Biafran side and recalled the significance of the intervention by ‘[t]he leaders of the African American civil rights community’:

On several occasions they came out forcefully against all forms of ferocity during the Nigeria-Biafra conflict, reacting with dismay at the magnitude of the human suffering in Biafra. They sent numerous forms of communication both to Ojukwu and Gowon to put an end to the bloody civil war. They were particularly appalled by the widespread hunger and starvation of Biafrans and by

³ Dr Martin Luther King Jr., “Beyond Vietnam”, (speech, New York, April 4, 1967), The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/beyond-vietnam>.

⁴ “The oceans of history are made turbulent by the ever-rising tides of hate. History is cluttered with the wreckage of nations and individuals who pursued this self-defeating path of hate. As Arnold Toynbee once said in a speech: “Love is the ultimate force that makes for the saving choice of life and good against the damning choice of death and evil. Therefore the first hope in our inventory must be the hope that love is going to have the last word””. See Dr Martin Luther King Jr., “The World House”, (speech, 1967), The Pluralism Project, Harvard University, <http://pluralism.org/document/the-world-house-martin-luther-king-jr-1967/>.

⁵ For two recent works exploring the links between Protestant ecumenicalism, civil rights, anti-colonialism and human rights see Bastiaan Bouwman, “From religious freedom to social justice: the human rights engagement of the ecumenical movement from the 1940s to the 1970s*”, *Journal of Global History*, 13 (2018), 252-273; Gene Zubovich, “For human rights abroad, against Jim Crow at Home: The political mobilization of American Ecumenical Protestants in the World War II era”, *Journal of American History* 105, No.3 (2018), 267-290.

the millions of stranded refugees, all of which they reiterated was “unacceptable to civilized world opinion.”⁶

Tellingly, it was not their mere taking of ‘moral positions’ that garnered Achebe’s appreciation. He noted especially African American leaders’ efforts toward ‘arbitration during the Biafran struggle – an intervention that brought succour to millions and helped place a moral lens on the atrocities taking place in my homeland’.⁷

Taking up the thread of Achebe’s remarks, this chapter uses the official papers of ANLCA, the underutilised oral history of Executive Director Theodore E. Brown, contemporary coverage in the black press, as well as U.S government documents to explore the ANLCA’s efforts to end the civil war between March 1967 and April 1968. From the beginning of active ANLCA involvement, Theodore Brown, a highly regarded trouble-shooter in the civil rights movement, and a talented diplomat, criss-crossed Africa from Accra to Lagos to Addis Ababa building diplomatic support for the mission. In the United States, the four co-chairmen of the Conference – Dr King from the Southern Christian Leadership Council; Roy Wilkins of the NAACP; A. Philip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters; and Whitney Young of the National Urban League – met with Nigerian and Biafran officials to gain further insights into the conflict and how best to end it through a compromise agreement. The Conference leadership also met with senior figures in the State Department, including Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Joseph E. Palmer, II and Secretary of State Dean Rusk, to coordinate their efforts.

The ANLCA was backed by over seven-five organisations, including African-American business, educational, fraternal and sorority, labour, professional, religious and social organisations, and enjoyed significant support in the black press, particularly the *New York Amsterdam News*. Even though King’s involvement in the ANLCA peace mission reflected his abiding interest in Pan-Africanism, as well as non-violent resolutions to conflict, scholars have either ignored the mission, viewed it as part of the international response to the Nigerian Civil War, or written it off as the final act of a moribund organisation.⁸ This chapter

⁶ Chinua Achebe, *There Was A Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (London: Penguin Books, 2013), 103-104.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ According to James Meriwether, since its first conference in November 1962, the ANLCA had institutionalised how “important contemporary Africa and its freedom struggles had become to the civil rights leadership and the struggle in America”. However, by the late 1960s the domestic civil rights battle, the collapse of the non-violent direct action coalition and the complexities of post-colonial Africa “made the continuance of the ANLCA an ongoing travail”. Meriwether noted that the Nigerian Civil War marked the end of the ANLCA as “it fell apart over the Biafran war in Nigeria”. Brenda Gayle Plummer in her recent work on African-Americans and

challenges such a narrative and argues that from March 1967 to April 1968, the ANLCA maintained a consistent approach towards Nigeria. For almost a year, the leaders sought to bring both sides of the conflict together on 'humanitarian grounds' in order to end the fighting through a diplomatic settlement. The peace mission built on firm foundations established between African Americans and Nigerians over several decades.

In addition to addressing the significance of the ANLCA mission on purely humanitarian grounds, this chapter also argues that the diplomatic efforts of the Conference cannot be understood without placing them within the context of the domestic civil rights struggle in the mid-to-late 1960s. By 1965, the mainline civil rights movement, with its goals of racial integration, interracialism, non-violence and co-operation with the Johnson Administration, found itself challenged by radical black activists and the advent of the Black Power movement. With its commitment to Black Nationalism and cultural identity over alliances with white liberals, Black Power challenged the tactics and strategies that had defined the national civil rights coalition since the mid-1950s. For the ANLCA, an organisation that stood in the mainstream of the civil rights movement, the mission to mediate the conflict between the Federal Military Government of Nigeria and the Republic of Biafra, was arguably an attempt by integrationist civil rights leaders to reassert themselves both at home and abroad. In taking on the role as peacemakers in Nigeria, the ANLCA sought to burnish its credibility as an organisation that stood for Pan-Africanism and Third World solidarity. By seeking to bring both the Nigerian government and the Biafran leadership together to resolve the conflict peacefully, the ANLCA and the civil rights organisations that made up the Conference hoped to show African-Americans that they were as dedicated to the Third World as Black Power activists, but also that they could positively affect political change and social justice through compromise and diplomacy, a notion that was increasingly being challenged at home.

decolonisation between 1958 and 1974 describes the response of African-Americans to the Nigerian civil war as "subdued". While she noted the impact of the ANLCA on policy towards Ian Smith's white supremacist regime in Rhodesia and the issue of U.S navy vessels visiting Cape Town, South Africa, the ANLCA peace mission to Nigeria is unmentioned. See Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be Africans*, 204-207; Plummer, *In Search of Power*, 194-199.

In a letter to Dr King, dated 16 November 1966, Sam Aluko, a highly regarded professor of economics at the University of Ife in Western Nigeria, who had met King at the World Council of Churches meeting in Geneva in July, described the violence:

The revolt did not end within the army but developed to some sort of unfortunate communal strife which led to several civilians being killed and many others being injured or maimed. As a result of all these, more than one million Nigerians have fled from their normal places of work back to their places of birth or were asked to leave the regions of their employment to return to their regions of birth.⁹

The violence that Aluko described was only a sample of the trauma, massacres, and displacement that roiled Nigeria from July 1966. The military regime led by Major-General Ironsi, which had replaced civilian rule in January 1966, was tainted from the beginning in the eyes of Northern Nigerians. The coup, in the eyes of many Northerners, had been an Igbo plot to undermine the dominance of the North over Nigerian politics. The decision of Ironsi to abolish the federation and create a unitary republic through the promulgation of the Unification Decree on 24 May 1966 further exacerbated these fears. According to historian Toyin Falola, the Ironsi military government ‘failed to address the accusation that the coup [of January 1966] was sectional and was confused on how to treat the coup plotters, whether as traitors who had to be punished or as liberators who deserved pardon’.¹⁰ The leniency that Ironsi had shown to the plotters who had murdered so many key figures in the Northern political elite created a sense of growing distrust. This distrust was further heightened by the decision to abolish the Federation. This decision by Ironsi reflected a utopian vision of the Nigerian state that was completely divorced from the strong regional realities that had become ingrained since the 1940s (explored in Chapter Two). The Unification Decree aimed to end this state of affairs through four major changes. According to Falola:

Regions would be abolished and replaced with groups of provinces; military governors of groups of provinces would replace regional governors; military prefects would supervise provinces; and the administrative class of all federal and regional civil services was to be unified.¹¹

While the decree was based on Ironsi’s observations of the problems with the Nigerian state (many of which were entirely accurate), the stripping of political power and patronage away

⁹ Letter from Sam Aluko to Martin Luther King, Jr., November 16, 1966, The King Center Digital Archive, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/letter-sam-aluko-mlk>. (Accessed on 14 May 2016).

¹⁰ Falola, *The History of Nigeria*, 118.

¹¹ Ibid.

from the regions, particularly the North which had dominated Nigerian politics since independence, was a step too far and provoked a violent backlash from Northern politicians and military figures.

The enunciation of the decree led to growing unrest throughout the North of Nigeria. The growing unrest and protest increasingly targeted Igbo immigrants working in Northern cities. For many Hausa and Fulani, the decree was a stalking horse for the eventual Igbo domination of the Nigerian state. Protest eventually turned into a violent counter-coup that erupted on 29 July. Major General Ironsi was murdered by mutinying soldiers while visiting Ibadan in Western Nigeria to promote his unitary decree. After several days of no effective leadership, another military man, Lieutenant Colonel Yakubu Gowon, was named head of state. The violence of the counter-coup did not stay compartmentalised within the military, and quickly spread into Nigerian society. In cities across Northern Nigeria, armed mobs with little interference from local or federal authorities attacked the *Sabon Gari*, or 'strangers' quarters' where Igbo lived. Estimates of the death toll vary widely but for several months after the counter-coup, up to 100,000 Easterners were massacred throughout the North, with perhaps 20,000 to 30,000 being killed in September alone.¹²

Coverage in the black press expressed a mixture of horror and uncertainty about the tide of events sweeping through Nigeria. As noted in Chapter Two, African American observers of the first coup in January had expressed mixed opinions. Some opined it was the collapse of parliamentary democracy, while others hoped that military rule would be a short aberration that would produce a more unified Nigerian state. Instead, in the pages of the major African American newspapers in the United States, readers found horrific accounts of atrocities and violence. Writing in the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, Barbara Osakwe, an assistant professor of political science at California State College, who was undertaking research in Nigeria when the violence broke out, provided a detailed first-hand account of the violence:

[Following the second coup] Events steadily grew more ominous and in October simultaneous massacres of Igbo took place in several (seven) Northern cities. In this bloodbath upwards of 100,000 men, women and children were slain or permanently maimed – eyes gouged out, tongues cut out, hands cut off, etc. The troops of the Nigerian army were not uninvolved in this pogrom.

¹² Heerten, *The Biafran War*, 55-62.

Refugees were taken from planes and trains as they tried to escape and shot en masse. Two million Igbos who managed to escape the pogrom returned to the Eastern Region.¹³

The *New York Amsterdam News* reported on the experience of Operation Crossroads Africa volunteers who were caught up in the violence. Operation Crossroads Africa, an inter-racial voluntary organisation founded by the African American Reverend James H. Robinson, the former pastor of Harlem's Church of the Master, had developed a strong institutional relationship with Nigeria since the late 1950s. The article noted that 'driving to Lagos from the East last week Crossroaders [volunteers] had to intervene when soldiers at checkpoint [sic] in the West almost beat their Ibo [sic] driver to death'.¹⁴ Dorothy Frazier, a twenty-two year old African American Peace Corp volunteer, based in the city of Zaria, in Northern Nigeria, barely escaped with her life after being mistaken for a member of the Igbo community. Frazier, in an interview with the *New York Times*, recounted that Northerners 'believed she was Ibo [sic] because she was new in town, wore Western clothes and a short hairdo and spoke her few words of Hausa, the local language, with an accent. Her skin is lighter than most Northerners and light-skinned Ibos are not rare'. Her life was spared by a fellow Hausa-speaking Peace Corps volunteer who convinced the mob that Frazier was indeed American.¹⁵ In the city of Jos, in the culturally diverse Middle Belt, another African American Peace Corps volunteer was beaten by Hausa soldiers until her driver intervened, pleading that she was not an Igbo.¹⁶

In October, at the height of the mob violence, *The Chicago Defender* contrasted Lieutenant Colonel Gowon's statement at a news conference that the flow of refugees was a 'temporary measure to restore confidence among the different groups' with a chaotic description of the unrest:

The panicky flights, which disrupted commerce and caused Nigerian airways to turn over its internal and African flights to refugee ferrying, following the recent violence in the northern region. Educated Eastern Ibo [sic], many of whom hold down jobs in the Hausa north, left their jobs and fled as Hausa tribesmen hunted them down and massacred many of their number.¹⁷

¹³ Barbara Osakwe, "Now: The Truth about Nigeria: Reasons behind Nigeria's bloody war", *Los Angeles Sentinel*, December 14, 1967, A1.

¹⁴ "Crossroaders explain Nigeria problems", *New York Amsterdam News*, September 10, 1966, 46.

¹⁵ "Peace Corpsman Back in Risk Area: U.S. Teacher was mistaken for an Ibo in Nigeria", *New York Times*, September 25, 1966, 25.

¹⁶ "Nigeria Riots Rage on 6th Anniversary", *New York Amsterdam News*, October 8, 1966, 38.

¹⁷ "Nigeria trying to hold together", *Chicago Daily Defender*, October 10, 1966, 2.

A further article in *The Chicago Defender* described an eyewitness account of ‘more than 800 bodies counted and mortuaries overflowing in four major northern region cities’.¹⁸ The *New York Amsterdam News* described to its readers the horrific scenes in the city of Kano as Hausa soldiers attacked unarmed Igbo civilians:

The Ibos had been gunned down mainly at Kano airport where they were waiting to board a plane to Lagos. Army officers at the airport fled and the mutineers drove into the Sabon Gari section where Ibos lived and joined by civilians killed and looted through the night.¹⁹

Jet magazine in July 1967 featured a horrific collection of photos taken of wounded and mutilated Igbo civilians who had been caught up in the September massacres. The accompanying article by Charles L. Sanders, the *Jet* bureau chief in Paris, offered a vivid description of the shocking violence unleashed. ‘[L]ast October’, wrote Sanders:

The Hausa – many of them federal soldiers in uniform – began a systematic Ibo massacre which left the more than 30,000 dead, thousands wounded, the two million refugees fleeing Eastward to escape Moslem machetes, fire and guns.... Ibo students had right hands chopped off by Hausas jealous of their ability to write. They had eyes gouged out by Hausa angry because they could read....Maternity wards were invaded, pregnant Ibo women were opened with machetes, their unborn children were torn from their bodies and chopped to pieces because “there are too damn many infidels now”.²⁰

The Rt. Reverend Alfred G. Dunston of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (AMEZ), who at the time was working in Nigeria, expressed ‘grave concern over the current unrest in Nigeria’ in a report in the *New Journal and Guide*. Dunston feared that the ongoing unrest would hinder the operations of the ‘100 churches, 19 grade schools and one teacher college’ that were operated by the church. Dunston hoped that ‘more tribal heads in the government... [and] the control of economic activity, especially as it relates to government officers’, may help ease overall tensions within Nigeria.²¹

The horrific violence noted above formed the basis of calls for secession by the Eastern Region. Historian Lasse Heerten noted that ‘[t]he 1966 massacres were vital to the eastern leadership’s decision to secede.... Like the Jews, the Igbo had seen themselves as a people spread in a diaspora where they became the victims of racial and religious hatred. Now,

¹⁸ “Nigeria Clamps Down on Tribal Rioting, Killing”, *The Chicago Defender*, October 5, 1966, 23.

¹⁹ “Nigeria Riots Rage on 6th anniversary”, 38.

²⁰ Charles L. Sanders, “The war between blacks nobody cares about”, *Jet*, July 27, 1967, 16.

²¹ “AMEZ Bishop is disturbed about Nigeria”, *New Journal and Guide*, August 13, 1966, 2.

founding an independent state was necessary to safeguard their right to life. Soon, the Eastern Region/Biafra modelled itself as an African Israel'.²² Brian McNeil, similarly, wrote that: '[t]he massacres were the definitive moment in the run up to the Nigerian Civil War, reigniting fears of ethnic domination, creating a crisis of confidence amongst Nigerian leaders, and ushering in a new era of political and ethnic violence that the central government was not able to control'.²³

'It is generally agreed', wrote Executive Director Theodore E. Brown in a letter addressed to the Call Committee of the ANLCA, 'that a very serious crisis is imminent regarding the future of the nationhood of Nigeria. Unfortunately, unless some new element, or elements, are introduced, this African state will experience, and the world will observe, a horrible civil war'. 'The situation', according to Brown, 'presents a unique but extremely vital opportunity for Negro American leaders to aid in a troubled situation'.²⁴ As Executive Director of the ANLCA, Brown became the central diplomatic figure in the search for a peaceful resolution to the crisis in Nigeria. While the members of the Call Committee were engaged in seeking a mediated solution to the conflict through their activities in the United States, Brown was at the coalface of the ANLCA campaign. He travelled to and from Africa on behalf of his colleagues, meeting with Nigerian and Biafran officials as well as heads of state of other crucial African countries such as Ethiopia and Ghana in an effort to build consensus behind the goal of the ANLCA leadership acting as a mediator between the divided parties. This was a role that Brown was more than capable of playing.

Born in New Brunswick, New Jersey in August 1915 and raised in Harlem, Brown was a crucial figure not only in the Civil Rights Movement, but also in the context of African American engagement with post-colonial Africa. The son of an unskilled labourer from Harlem, Brown had excelled academically at university. Through a combination of scholarships and fellowships, he undertook undergraduate and graduate degrees in labour

²² Heerten, *The Biafran War*, 64-64

²³ McNeil, "Frontiers of Need", 99-100.

²⁴ Memorandum From Theodore E. Brown to Dorothy Height, Martin Luther King, A. Philip Randolph, Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young, March 21, 1967, Box A42, File "NAACP Administration 1966- General Office File American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa 1966-69," The Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (TRNAACP), Library of Congress (LOC), Washington, DC.

economics at Northwestern University and spent several years at both Harvard and Columbia University undertaking further graduate studies. To support himself at college, Brown worked for the Chicago Northwestern Railroad as a coach attendant. As a young African American working on the railways with a scholarly interest in labour economics, he quickly came to the attention of A. Philip Randolph, founder and president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the first labour organisation in the United States led by African Americans.

The impact of Randolph on Brown's future was profound. '[I]t was Mr Randolph's influence', Brown recalled, 'and the influence of many of his associates in the creation of the brotherhood...that had a great deal to do with my involvement in the labor movement. But as you well know Mr Randolph's cosmic concern for a wide range of human problems, the humanitarian issues, cause [sic] me to naturally be influenced by that association'. Following a short period in the US Air Force during the Second World War – with the famed 99th Squadron, one of the first units composed entirely of African Americans, colloquially known as the 'Tuskegee Airmen' – Brown worked for the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) established by President Roosevelt to prevent discrimination against African American in defence industries. At the close of hostilities, Brown then returned to work for Randolph in New York as his administrative assistant and research associate. From 1956 to 1961, Brown worked for George Meany, the first president of the American Federation of Labour and Congress of Industrial Organisations (AFL-CIO), and one of the most significant individuals in the history of American labour unions in the twentieth century. At the AFL-CIO, Brown worked in the civil rights department and was also involved in engagement with international affiliates of the AFL-CIO. Besides being the premier labour organisation in the United States, the AFL-CIO was deeply engaged in international affairs. As an ardently anti-communist as well as anti-colonial organisation, the AFL-CIO developed transnational relationships with unions in the Third World to thwart communist subversion and support indigenous unions that broadly aligned with U.S foreign policy objections.²⁵

After his departure from the AFL-CIO in 1961, Brown was one of the original members of the task force established by the newly-elected Kennedy Administration to set up the Peace Corps. During his employment, Brown developed a growing interest in political

²⁵ Robert Martin, "Interview with Theodore E. Brown", transcript of an oral history conducted on August 20, 1968 by Robert Martin, Civil Rights Documentation Project, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington D.C., 1968, 1-9.

developments in Africa. He developed the training program that would be used by the first group of volunteers dispatched to Ghana. He also worked alongside staff from Howard University to train volunteers who were being sent to Gabon to build schools and teach the citizens of the newly independent nation. Brown's experience of international affairs – particularly in regard to the Third World – through the AFL-CIO and the Peace Corps, and his ability to work seamlessly between civil rights organisations, labour unions, and federal government bureaucracy made him an extremely suitable candidate to be the inaugural Executive Director of the ANLCA. Brown recollected that 'Dr King asked me would I be willing to try to co-ordinate in the sense to get as wide a representative cross section of Black organisations together in some program designed to involve black Americans as having some influence on the direction or lack of direction of United States policies in Africa [sic]'.²⁶

The position of ANLCA's Executive Director placed Brown at the forefront of African American engagement with Africa at a crucial period in the continent's history. Newly independent states grappled with economic development, the Cold War, and the continuation of colonialism and white supremacy in Southern Africa. With a wealth of experience gained from working in Africa during his time in government, his close personal relationship with African leaders such as Zambian President Kenneth Kaunda, and his diplomatic skill in successfully lobbying on behalf of the ANLCA to prevent U.S Navy warships docking in Cape Town (a major blow to the prestige of the Apartheid regime), Brown was a natural choice to preside over peace mediations in Nigeria. At the time, the chances of civil war looked increasingly likely.

Brown's letter outlining a potential role for the African American civil rights leaders in pursuing a peaceful settlement, dated 21 March 1967, came at a time when the political situation in Nigeria was approaching a dangerous crisis point. On 14 and 15 March respectively, two articles appeared in the *New York Times* that exemplified the growing tensions between the Federal Military Government led by Lieutenant Colonel Yakubu 'Jack' Gowon, and the Regional Government of the Eastern Region, led by Lieutenant Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu (both articles appeared as clippings in the papers of the NAACP related to the role of the ANLCA in the Nigerian crisis).²⁷ The acrimony between the two men and their respective causes was palpable. Gowon denounced Ojukwu as 'the butcher [of] the [Federal] Constitution; while Ojukwu declared before a gathering of foreign

²⁶ Martin, "Interview with Theodore E. Brown", 5.

²⁷ Memorandum From Theodore E. Brown, March 21, 1967, TRNAACP, LOC.

correspondents in Enugu, the capital of the Eastern Region, that ‘the East will secede if attacked – a physical attack or an economic blockade. We all know when you pick up a pistol and shoot a man it’s called murder – and equally so when you strangle him’.²⁸

The dilemma of the future of Nigeria would hinge on how both leaders and their advisors would cope with the structural reality that post-colonial Nigeria was in the process of disintegration. Without some type of diplomatic compromise, many in Nigeria and around the world feared the worst. The charismatic Ojukwu, who saw himself as the guardian of the persecuted Igbo, and the military professional Gowon, would find themselves as war leaders rather than merely political rivals. At the centre of the inflammatory rhetoric used on both sides, and at the centre of the concern of the ANLCA, was the implementation of the Aburi Agreement, a diplomatic agreement signed in Ghana on 5 January 1967. The agreement negotiated between the Federal Government and the Eastern Region was an attempt to end the cycle of ethnic violence and establish greater political stability, which could serve as grounds for political reconciliation between the regions. The mass killings of Igbo throughout the North, starting in May 1966 and escalating to their bloody peak in September, had had a deep physical, emotional and psychological impact on the Igbo-majority in the Eastern Region. For Ojukwu and members of the Consultative Committee of the Eastern Region, there was acute concern about whether it was possible to integrate the East back into the Federal state after the indifference that Federal authorities had shown regarding the massacre of Igbo throughout the North. During negotiations with Federal officials in Aburi, Ojukwu voiced this sentiment:

By September the molestations and the killings of Easterners had assumed such large proportions that Easterners everywhere outside the East lost complete faith in a Federal Government that could not offer the basic needs of the citizen, that is to offer the citizen protection.²⁹

In the United States, and particularly in the African American community, the signing of the Aburi agreement provided a glimmer of optimism after the bloodshed of the anti-Igbo pogroms. In the black press, after months of reporting on the slaughter of tens of thousands, Aburi presented an opportunity to resolve ethnic tensions peacefully and ensure Nigerian

²⁸ “Eastern Area warned by Leader of Nigeria”, *New York Times*, March 15, 1967, 10; Lloyd Garrison, “Lagos is warned by East Nigeria”, *New York Times*, March 14, 1967, 11.

²⁹ Transcript of Aburi Conference, page 7, Organisation of African Unity, Box 8, Nigeria Biafra Clearing House (NBCH), Swarthmore College Peace Collection (SCPC).

unity. Reacting to the Aburi agreement, an editorial in *The Chicago Defender* was optimistic that a compromise had been agreed to:

One redeeming feature of the whole tragic drama was the cry for national unity that pierced the air with great clarity and consistency. All through their intermittent periods of indecision and vicissitude, the masses of Nigerians did not lose sight of the ultimate need for a unified country if progress on the economic and political fronts was to have priority in the list of the country's achievements.... The meeting of Nigerian leaders in Ghana revives hope for the quick evolution of a federal system backed by a national constitution which defines in unequivocal terms the functions and responsibilities of each geographical segment of Nigeria.³⁰

The 'unequivocal terms' of the agreement proved to be a major stumbling block between the Federal Government and Eastern Regional Government once both parties had left Ghana. Historian Michael Gould wrote that Lt. Colonel Gowon regarded the agreement as 'an open and frank discussion with his military colleagues in a relaxed and informal manner with no fixed agenda, in an attempt to resolve the various differences and to plan a way forward which would ensure the unity and security of Nigeria'.³¹ Ojukwu, on the other hand, 'came to the meeting with very clear-cut objectives, fully briefed by his senior advisors who were determined to achieve an agreement which would give the East a high degree of independence'.³² Toyin Fayola reiterates this view, regarding the Aburi agreement as 'a vague and loosely worded resolution.... Gowon believed that the federation had been preserved at Aburi, while Ojukwu claimed that the Aburi agreement gave him wide-ranging powers to control the government of the Eastern Region and even secede from the federation'.³³ 'To Ojukwu', wrote historian J. Isawa Elaigwu, 'it meant extreme decentralization, which should give the Eastern Region full control of its affairs – a quasi-sovereign state sharing some essential services with other units in the "federation"'.³⁴ Nigerian historian Max Siollun described the fulcrum of the Aburi agreement as being that 'each region would be responsible for its own affairs, and that the FMG (Federal Military Government) would be responsible for matters that affected the entire country'.³⁵

³⁰ "Nigerian Unity", *The Chicago Defender*, January 28, 1967, 10.

³¹ Gould, *The Struggle for Modern Nigeria*, 49

³² Ibid.

³³ Fayola, *A History of Nigeria*, 174-175.

³⁴ Isawa J. Elaigwu, *Gowon: The Biography of a Soldier-Statesman* (London: Adonis & Abbey, 2009), 120.

³⁵ Max Siollun, *Oil, Politics, and Violence: Nigeria's Military Coup Culture (1966-1976)* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2009), 145.

As the terms of the Aburi agreement became contested, representatives of the U.S government feared the worst for what had once been the model state in Africa in terms of economic and political development. Following a meeting with Lt. Col Ojukwu in Enugu, the capital of the Eastern Region, U.S Ambassador to Nigeria, Elbert G. Mathews, sent a forlorn cable back to the State Department. He lamented that:

In view Ojukwu's hard line and apparent expectation of early confrontation leading to Eastern secession, I said I greatly depressed [sic] by grim prospects he offering and wondered whether he had weighed consequences of Eastern withdrawal from Nigeria.... I thought Eastern withdrawal would set off process of dissolution throughout Nigeria that was hardly likely to remain peaceful and could disintegrate into situation worse than Congo. East obviously would not be unaffected by such development.³⁶

The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), which had been carefully watching the situation, increasingly expressed pessimism about the viability of Nigeria. A widely circulated memorandum, addressed to the Director of Central Intelligence Richard Helms but also viewed by President Johnson's National Security Advisor Walt Rostow on 23 February, and ominously titled 'Rumblings of Civil War in Nigeria', noted that the previous deterrents that had prevented violence – neither side wanting to be responsible for civil war, both leaders resisting more belligerent advisors, circumspection about the effectiveness of the Nigerian Army, and Ojukwu's desire for a co-federal political system – were fraying. The report stated that:

Nevertheless, practical considerations are giving ground to emotional responses. Gowon and Ojukwu are hardening their stands while considering new moves which cannot fail to anger the other, e.g , the East appears intent upon securing (by the end of March) the oil revenue derived from its region, but now paid to the FMG [Federal Military Government]. Gowon may decree the establishment of new states among the minority areas in the East, clearly an inflammatory step.³⁷

A further CIA report on 17 March noted the growing rancour and overheated rhetoric from both sides:

The Eastern Region of Nigeria...has demanded virtually complete autonomy as its price for remaining within the United Nigeria. Ojukwu would probably prefer that solution, but the regime

³⁶ FRUS 379. Telegram From the Embassy in Nigeria to the Department of State , April 12, 1967 <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v24/d379> (accessed 11 May 2018).

³⁷ Memorandum for the Director, Subject: Rumblings of Civil War in Nigeria, February 23, 1967, CIA Electronic Reading Room, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79R00904A001300040033-0.pdf> (accessed 21 June 2018).

he governs has a sound economic base which enhances its chance of survival as an independent state, and his recent action suggest that he is resigned to an eventual move to secede from the federation.³⁸

The fracturing of the slim consensus that had sustained the Aburi agreement provoked alarm in the African American community and the search for some way to prevent the slide towards civil war. Simon Anekwe wrote in the *New York Amsterdam News* that Nigerian Ambassador to the UN Chief, S.O Adebo, after acknowledging that the current situation was ‘rather desperate’, had noted that ‘the Federal Military Government would seriously evaluate any external private or governmental initiative calculated to help resolve the crisis’.³⁹ An editorial in the *New York Amsterdam News* on 25 March urgently called for some type of third party to bring both sides together, particularly following Lt. Col Ojukwu’s declaration that if the Aburi agreement had not been implemented by 31 March, he would unilaterally implement them in the Eastern Region, a clear move toward secession from the federation. The article stated emphatically that:

We think that Nigerians need help in order to settle their differences.... It has been suggested to the Nigerian military leaders to request the assistance of an international mediatory committee, such as one composed of United Nations experts and African heads of state, to help negotiate and oversee the implementation of a settlement, with Nigeria absorbing the cost.⁴⁰

Anticipating the concerns that some Nigerian officials may have entertained about a third-party entity interfering in the sovereignty of the Nigerian state, the author of the article hoped that:

An unofficial peace mission from the United States could convince the Nigerian leaders of the wisdom of calling in a referee group to assist them. Such a peace mission might consist of Negro civil rights leaders like A. Philip Randolph, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Roy Wilkins, together with Senator Robert F. Kennedy. Nigeria needs help, for herself and Africa. If such a mission departs now, we might avert a bloody tragedy and show that America can wage peace just as it can wage war.⁴¹

³⁸ Weekly summary report from Directorate of Intelligence, Eastern Nigeria on the brink of secession, March 17, 1967, CIA Electronic Reading Room, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79-00927A005700040006-2.pdf> (accessed 21 June 2018).

³⁹ Simon Anekwe, “Two sides to Nigeria’s troubles presented in conferences here”, *New York Amsterdam News*, March 25, 1967, 20.

⁴⁰ “Help for Nigeria”, *New York Amsterdam News*, March 25, 1967, 14.

⁴¹ Ibid.

Perceiving an imminent crisis, Theodore Brown's March 1967 letter to his fellow ANLCA members noted that 'the situation presents a unique but extremely vital opportunity for Negro American leaders to aid in a trouble situation'.⁴² The decision of the ANLCA to offer its assistance to broker a diplomatic settlement was driven by the sense that the disintegration of Nigeria would not only be a disaster for the people of Nigeria, but also for Africa and the Black diaspora. Brown recounted that the cable sent by the Call Committee to the five military governors on 21 March was:

a communication based solely on humanitarian concern of [sic] based on the fact that there were many Nigerians who had gone to the schools, the universities, like Howard and Lincoln. There were warm friendships on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean in this regard, that the Nigerians have given tremendous amounts of encouragement and inspiration to millions of black Americans and it was felt that if they could resolve their problems without conflict it would much [sic] not only for the largest nation in Africa, for Africa, but also in the growing blackness, in cultural ancestry that is going on here.⁴³

In September 1967, Brown noted that the initial cable was driven not only by the concerns of the ANLCA but also from outside influences. He wrote that 'we [senior African American civil rights leaders] were under mounting pressure not only from Nigerian students and other Nigerians in the United States but also from many American groups who felt that 22 million American Negroes could perform a unique role for Nigeria and the world as a peaceful force in finding a solution to the Nigerian problem'.⁴⁴ This sense that African Americans had some role to play in bringing both sides together was reflected in a letter to the editor by F. Moore of Harlem in the *New York Amsterdam News*. 'I, a man of the streets of Harlem', wrote Moore, 'would like to know whom I should see in order that I may go to Nigeria and talk to both sides in this controversy. We blacks in America are struggling in a sea of anti-Negro

⁴² Memorandum From Theodore E. Brown to Dorothy Height, Martin Luther King, A. Philip Randolph, Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young, March 21, 1967, Box A42, File "NAACP Administration 1966- General Office File American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa 1966-69," The Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (TRNAACP), Library of Congress (LOC), Washington, DC.

⁴³ Martin, "Interview with Theodore E. Brown", 10.

⁴⁴ Memorandum From Theodore E. Brown to Dorothy Height, Martin Luther King, A. Philip Randolph, Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young, "The Nigerian Crisis", September 13, 1967, Box A42, File "NAACP Administration 1966- General Office File American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa 1966-69," TRNAACP, LOC.

[sentiment] and cannot afford the luxury of “black fighting black.” That is what I want to tell them in Africa’.⁴⁵

The link that Brown drew between Nigeria and the ‘millions of black Americans’ had been at the core of the ANLCA’s sense of mission since its first conference at Columbia University’s Arden House in November 1962. The conference had reflected the ebullience of the times. Across the states of the old Confederacy, civil rights organisations and activists were challenging the racial inequality of Jim Crow through non-violent sit-ins, Freedom Rides, and other forms of mass protest. At the same time, across the Atlantic, beginning with Ghana in 1957, newly-independent African states were emerging from European colonial rule to assert themselves on the world stage. The ANLCA sought to channel and direct this political energy to ‘raise interest in America and the situation in Africa, to educate people about Africa, and to influence U.S. policy towards the continent’.⁴⁶

According to Brenda Gayle Plummer, ‘[w]hat distinguished the committee that drafted the call to create an Africa-orientated group from past efforts is the conscious linkage it made between decolonization and antiracism on the continent and civil rights in the United States’.⁴⁷ Dr King, in a speech on the formation of the ANLCA that was reported in the *New York Amsterdam News*, highlighted the significance of the connection between events in Africa and black Americans:

The Negro recognizes now that he lives in a world community. There was a time when the intensity of our own problems excluded our awareness of the existence of injustice anywhere as a threat to justice everywhere. Colonialism and segregation are nearly synonymous.... In many ways the future of the emergent African nations and the American Negro are intertwined. As long as segregation and discrimination exist in our nation, the longer the chances of survival are for colonialism and vice-versa.⁴⁸

King’s speech challenged ‘racial provincialism’ in the African-American community. Evoking W.E.B DuBois as well as ecumenical Protestant internationalism, King called on the black community to look beyond ‘125th Street in New York or Beale Street in Memphis’ and see the importance of the interconnection between America and Africa.⁴⁹ Besides developing a greater understanding of Africa amongst African-Americans and in broader American

⁴⁵ F. Moore, “Help for Nigeria”, *New York Amsterdam News*, April 8, 1967, 15.

⁴⁶ Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be African*, 206.

⁴⁷ Plummer, *In Search of Power*, 122.

⁴⁸ “The Negro looks to America”, *New York Amsterdam News*, December 8, 1962, 13.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

society, the Conference aimed to influence the direction of U.S. foreign policy towards the continent by arguing that the United States should throw its full weight behind decolonisation (in political and economic terms), for reasons of morality and justice but also to counter the appeal of the Communist bloc in the Third World. Plummer noted that the ANLCA was not endorsing 'separatism' along Garveyite lines, but rather because it hoped 'to make relations with African states a central feature of black American protest by harnessing minority voting potential to a revised set of policies [towards Africa]'.⁵⁰

The model of organisation that the ANLCA had in mind was an ethnic lobbying organisation, such as the American Jewish Congress, a group that had used its organisational skills to develop a powerful electoral lobby regarding U.S foreign policy concerning Israel and the broader Middle East. The *New York Times* reported in July 1964 that the ANLCA's primary goal was 'to make the views of America's 20 million Negroes an important element in the formulation of United States policy towards the newly independent countries of sub-Saharan Africa.... These [ANLCA] leaders believe that the cultural and political cohesiveness of the American Negro population is interrelated with the future of the African peoples'. According to Theodore Brown, the ANLCA believed 'that they will be enlarging the role of the American Negroes as full citizens of this country'.⁵¹ Utilising the significance of black electorates – particularly following the 1960 presidential election – the ANLCA hoped to lobby the U.S government to devote time and effort to African causes and issues.⁵² In the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations, the ANLCA leadership saw numerous senior officials and aides, including the Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs G. Mennen 'Soapy' Williams, as key advocates for an expanded role for African Americans in U.S foreign policy and as supporting positions very similar to the African American leaders on decolonisation and aid to the continent.⁵³ Historian Mitch Lerner has noted that the ANLCA

⁵⁰ Plummer, *In Search of Power*, 123.

⁵¹ M.S. Handler, "Negroes ask role in foreign policy: leaders to meet in capital – White House interested", *New York Times*, July 9, 1964, 15.

⁵² For the interconnection between African American voters and U.S foreign policy see James Meriwether, "'Worth a lot of Negro votes': Black voters, Africa, and the 1960 Presidential Campaign", *The Journal of American History* 95, No.3 (2008), 737-763.

⁵³ "Williams also urged black leaders to speak out in favour of a stronger approach to Africa. In response, the American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa adopted resolutions demanding economic sanctions and military force to end Katangan independence and more U.S pressure on South Africa to end apartheid", see Thomas J. Noer, *Soapy: A Biography of G. Mennen Williams* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2005), 255-256. While there was certainly supporters of the role of the ANLCA in both the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations there was also skepticism about the evolution of the ANLCA into a distinctive ethnic foreign policy lobbying organisation. This was a view shared by President Johnson as well as by some senior officials. According to historian Carl P. Watts, Johnson made clear in a National Security Council memorandum

was reflective of ‘the impact that domestic civil rights imperatives had on American foreign policy towards Africa’.⁵⁴ The Johnson Administration was well aware of the need to develop a suite of policies regarding Africa not only as a Cold War imperative but as part of its domestic approach to civil rights and racial justice. These included supporting newly-independent African states, ending Portuguese colonial rule in Southern Africa, opposing Rhodesia’s 1965 Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) from Great Britain without ensuring black majority-rule, and arguing against collaborating with the Apartheid regime in South Africa out of Cold War expediency.⁵⁵

The response of both the Nigerian Federal government and Eastern Region officials, to the offer of mediation by the ANLCA, was encouraging for the committee members. Less than a week after the official cable was despatched to all parties involved in the dispute, Brown received positive replies from S.O Adabo, the Permanent Representative of Nigeria to the UN, and from Aggrey K. Oji, the Eastern Nigeria Liaison Officer based in New York.⁵⁶ Oji expressed his and the Eastern Region’s appreciation in ‘your interest in the problems of our country and share with you the hope that these problems will be solved quickly and peacefully so that all the peoples of Nigeria can develop and prosper’.⁵⁷ Three weeks later, the ANLCA received a lengthy correspondence from two community leaders in Old Calabar and Ogoja in the Eastern Region expressing their thanks for the decision of the Conference. The letter stated that:

Your offer to help affecting a settlement and in restoring normal life to the people of this country was... [a] divine intervention.... It underscored once more what we of this community have more

that “[h]e doesn’t think it at all a good idea to encourage a separate Negro view of foreign policy. We don’t want an integrated domestic policy and a segregated foreign policy”. Secretary of State Dean Rusk in a meeting with the ANLCA leadership in March 1965, while less forthright than Johnson, was keen for the African American leaders to understand that a distinctive African American foreign policy agenda could lead to delicate situations that had the potential to harm broader U.S interests (for example access to U.S bases on the Portuguese Azores) see Carl P. Watts, “The American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa and the Rhodesian Crisis” in *The U.S Public and American Foreign Policy*, eds. Helen Laville and Andrew Johnstone New York: Routledge, 2010), 115.

⁵⁴ Mitch Lerner, “Climbing off the back burner: Lyndon Johnson’s soft power approach to Africa”, *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 22, No.4 (2011), 582.

⁵⁵ Memorandum from Theodore Brown on future development of the ANLCA, May 2, 1966, Box A42, File “NAACP Administration 1966- General Office File American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa 1966-69,”TRNAACP, LOC.

⁵⁶ Letter from S.O Adabo to Theodore Brown, March 28, 1967, Box A42, File “NAACP Administration 1966- General Office File American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa 1966-69,”TRNAACP. LOC.

⁵⁷ Letter from Aggrey K. Oji to Theodore Brown, March 28, 1967, Box A42, File “NAACP Administration 1966- General Office File American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa 1966-69,” TRNAACP, LOC.

than once stressed, that the present crisis, which threatens the very existence of our nation, should also be viewed in terms of our world-wide responsibility – the responsibility of our race. Thus whether Nigeria continues to exist in unity or break up into principalities, our problem cannot and should not be complacently regarded by us as an issue of no concern to the rest of Africa, our race and the world at large.⁵⁸

While not as effusive as the leaders from the Eastern Region, a cable from Lt Col Gowon on 26 April, sent through the Nigerian ambassador to the United States Ade Martins, declared that:

The Commander-In-Chief wishes to take this opportunity to assure you and the millions of American citizens of African descent with whom we are proud to have a blood affinity, that Nigerian leaders will allow no obstacles to stand in our way in the course of national reconstruction. In this connection, the Commander-In-Chief noted with pleasure your good gesture in offering to place at Nigeria's disposal your goodselves [sic] in an effort to mediate between us in resolving our problems.⁵⁹

In a memorandum to King, Randolph, Wilkins and Young, Brown described the responses as 'thus far, all of it is favourable [sic]'.⁶⁰

The black press was aware of the historical significance of the ANLCA mediation efforts. The *New York Amsterdam News* called the offer of mediation:

an historically unprecedented opportunity [for African Americans] to do what governments and statesmen have been unable to do, namely, settle the quarrel involving the four regional governments and the federal, in that country of 56 million people. Not even UN Undersecretary Ralph Bunche was in such a unique position when he mediated the Arab-Israeli dispute in 1949, for he was the representative of the governments of the world.⁶¹

A further article in the *Amsterdam News*, three days before the Republic of Biafra was declared independent on 30 May, reflected on the importance of the mission:

The effect that civil war and disintegration would have on Nigeria, the rest of Africa and in the fortunes of the whole black world, is so great that we urge the Leadership Conference to go one

⁵⁸ Letter from Theodore Brown to Roy Wilkins, April 21, 1967, Box A42, File "NAACP Administration 1966- General Office File American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa 1966-69," TRNAACP, LOC.

⁵⁹ Cablegram from Ade Martins to Theodore Brown, April 26, 1967, Box A42, File "NAACP Administration 1966- General Office File American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa 1966-69," TRNAACP, LOC.

⁶⁰ Memorandum from Theodore Brown to King, Randolph, Wilkins & Young, March 28, 1967, Box A42, File "NAACP Administration 1966- General Office File American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa 1966-69," TRNAACP, LOC.

⁶¹ "Americans offer mediation of Nigeria division crisis", *New York Amsterdam News*, May 20, 1967, 34,

step further. We suggest that it send an emissary to consult with the Nigerians and determine whether or no they want mediation by the Conference.⁶²

The article also noted that the offer of mediation had been positively received in Nigerian government newspapers, with one paper running a subheading, 'we believe that you will do your duty for Nigeria, Africa, your race and the world'.⁶³ In a 17 May memorandum in which Nigeria was the number one issue, Brown remarked that 'this offer on the part of the Conference met with virtually unanimous favourable world-wide reaction. Two principal daily Nigerian newspapers carried front page editorials thanking American Negroes for this effort'. 'Our efforts are still active', wrote Brown, 'and it could be that we may be able to help to avert a major catastrophe in Nigeria, a nation populated by 56 million people'.⁶⁴

In a letter to the Call Committee prior to his departure for Nigeria in June 1967, Brown reiterated this point: '[i]t is difficult to tell you the tremendously favourable and frankly unanimous reaction that I've had expressed from segments to your efforts in this critical situation. This favourable reaction has also been expressed by high officials in our State Department. The fact that our effort, as private citizens, is concerned solely with humanitarian objectives gives us a unique position'.⁶⁵ While it is problematic to believe that a single cable could dramatically affect the complex situation on the ground in West Africa, it was clearly much more than an empty gesture. What was needed, in the aftermath of the cable, were concrete diplomatic efforts, which built on the goodwill being expressed by both sides in Nigeria for the humanitarian objective of bringing both sides together around the negotiation table.

The 'unique position' of the ANLCA was something that Executive Director Theodore E. Brown wished to use as diplomatic leverage as he flew to West Africa in June 1967 on his inaugural mission to Nigeria at the request of his colleagues in the Conference. As Brown noted in his lengthy report to the ANLCA in September 1967, '[b]oth in Nigeria and Ghana [where Brown also travelled to meet Biafran officials] there was often expressed the unique

⁶² "The Nigerian Tide", *New York Amsterdam News*, May 27, 1967, 16.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Memorandum from Theodore Brown to all Conference Participants, May 17, 1967, Box A42, File "NAACP Administration 1966- General Office File American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa 1966-69," TRNAACP, LOC.

⁶⁵ Memorandum from T.E. Brown to R. Wilkins, W. Young, A.P. Randolph, M.L. King, "RE: Nigeria", June 14, 1967, Box A42, File "NAACP Administration 1966- General Office File American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa 1966-69," TRNAACP, LOC.

non-governmental role of the Americans. One distinct advantage that the Negro leaders had was the ability to confer with both sides without getting involved in the issue of recognition of who was or was not a sovereign state'.⁶⁶ Between June and November, Brown made three significant trips to Africa directly related to addressing the crisis in Nigeria. During his initial visit in June, his talks with [newly promoted] Brigadier General Gowon were highly publicised in the press in Lagos, as well as on television and radio. Brown wrote that 'Nigerians were enthusiastic about the interest and efforts of millions of Americans acting independently of their government. Nigerians of every region were grateful for the offer of the American Negro leaders'.⁶⁷ From Lagos, Brown travelled to Accra, the capital of Ghana, to discuss the situation with General Ankrah, who had been instrumental as a mediator during the infamous Aburi talks. This was also the first time that Brown engaged with officials from the so-called Republic of Biafra, whom he described as 'pretty determined'.⁶⁸

Brown returned to the United States at the end of June and briefed his colleagues about the situation in Nigeria. According to his recollections, with no moves towards the use of force by either side, the ANLCA 'deemed it advisable that the Executive Director return to Africa especially for the purpose of meeting with officials from the Eastern Region'.⁶⁹ As Brown returned to Africa to test the diplomatic waters with officials from Biafra, particularly Lt. Col Ojukwu, the tensions that had been growing for over a year since the second coup finally exploded into war. Following Biafra's declaration of independence on 30 May, Brigadier General Gowon had ordered a general mobilisation of all Federal forces and instituted an air, land and sea blockade of the Eastern Region. After a month of 'phoney war', in early July, following a brief skirmish on the border between Benue Plateau State and the Eastern Central state, Nigerian forces commenced their 'police action' with a two-front advance into Biafran territory to quickly snuff out the so-called Republic and capture its leadership. Biafran officials were quick to point out that in choosing war, 'General Gowon...demonstrates to the world the emptiness of his leadership and his inability to negotiate peaceful solutions to the problems of Nigeria and Biafra through intelligent, humane statesmanship'.⁷⁰ Simon Anekwe in the *New York Amsterdam News* lamented that there was no international attempt to broker a settlement. '[T]he greater tragedy was an apparent lack of will, among African and non-

⁶⁶ Memorandum from Brown, September 13, 1967, TRNAACP, LOC.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Martin, "Interview with Theodore E. Brown", 11

⁶⁹ Memorandum from Brown, September 13, 1967, TRNAACP, LOC.

⁷⁰ Simon Anekwe, "Africa Today – Nigeria's Civil War", *New York Amsterdam News*, July 22, 1967, 17.

African states, to call in the moral power of the United Nations to end the carnage'.⁷¹ The outbreak of fighting did not derail Brown's mission on behalf of the ANLCA leadership. Although he reported back that an air of despondency gripped Lagos as hostilities got underway, Brown observed 'there was an increased feeling, especially in Ghana and among Biafrans and many Nigerians, that the efforts of American Negroes should be continued in an attempt to hasten the cessation of hostilities'.⁷²

The ANLCA mediation efforts, spearheaded by the diplomacy of Theodore E. Brown, was one of the most significant undertakings made by the Conference in its history. While issues related to Apartheid South Africa and Rhodesia were also of deep significance, Brown stated that, 'the conference has been sort of side tracked in the last year and a half because of the great horrors that are going on as a result of the conflict...between Nigeria and the area of Biafra. I should say that just about all of our time in the last year and a half has been engaged in that'.⁷³ The war in Nigeria was not just a matter that had deep implications for Africa and the black diaspora; in the eyes of the key members of the ANLCA, it also had important domestic implications. While provoked by the fear that the disintegration of Nigeria would lead to untold human misery and a backward step for post-colonial Africa, the mission also reflected the domestic context of the battle for black liberation in the United States. By 1967, the moderate agenda that the ANLCA espoused in international affairs was being challenged by emergent Black Power internationalism.

The Call Committee of the Conference was a veritable who's who of the mainline civil rights movement, which had assumed a dominant role in the black freedom struggle since the end of the Second World War. The movement – whose leaders believed firmly in the integration of African Americans into broader American society – had achieved noteworthy legal and political victories such as the *Brown vs Board of Education* decision in 1954, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Yet, by the mid-1960s their approach was under threat by the growing militancy of the Black Power movement.

⁷¹ Ibid

⁷² Memorandum from Brown, September 13, 1967, TRNAACP, LOC.

⁷³ Martin, "Interview with Theodore E. Brown", 9.

The emergence of Black Power leaders and their followers not only challenged the domestic integrationist model espoused by the leaders in the ANLCA; it also called into question their approach to international affairs. Imbued by the ideology and example of revolutionary armed struggles in the Third World, some of the individuals and groups that existed under the aegis of Black Power advocated armed resistance to challenge the racism and economic injustice in American society. In seeking to mediate the conflict in Nigeria, the ANLCA leadership hoped to show that seeking justice through peaceful means overseas was more effective than armed struggle, a lesson that was pertinent in black America. Reflecting on the growing levels of urban unrest and racial violence in the United States, Theodore Brown drew a parallel with the civil war in Nigeria:

I don't think the best types of leadership in what might be called a white world or the black world will ever feel that this society is going to advance better by first having conflict.... I think an armed conflict means the death of both blacks and whites. Look at Nigeria for example. That's the very point of Nigeria. The Biafrans are only something like about less than five million and the rest of Nigeria is something like 40 million. No one can say that that war will end up with anybody having a total victory.⁷⁴

While the analogy drawn by Brown is somewhat crude, it is important in assessing the link between the domestic crisis and the ANLCA mission to Nigeria. For Brown, a figure long associated with the civil rights movement, Black Power's support for violence to overcome racism and economic injustice was counterproductive. The war in Nigeria, with its horrific death toll and destruction, was a tragedy for Nigeria, Africa, and the black diaspora. Brown and the ANLCA believed that their involvement in seeking a compromise peace that would re-establish a united Nigeria offered the best hope for the postcolonial future.

It is in this context of the growing appeal of solidarity with radical Third World regimes and revolutionary national liberation movements that the ANLCA mission to Nigeria must be viewed. Firstly, the mission should be understood as a determined effort to end the suffering of Nigerians of all regions and facilitate the peaceful reunification of the country. However, the mission also marked a more 'activist' phase in the organisation's existence. Rather than focusing on lobbying the U.S government and the State Department in order to shape policy towards Africa, Brenda Gayle Plummer has argued that '[T]he ANLCA interests after 1966 reflected pressures by domestic nationalist organizations and civil rights activists committed

⁷⁴ Martin, "Interview with Theodore E. Brown", 53.

to the immediatism [sic] of “Freedom Now””.⁷⁵ Historian Komozi Woodard has highlighted the growing divergence between the younger generation of black nationalist militants and the civil rights establishment, particularly in foreign affairs. Woodard contrasted the attitudes of Malcolm X with the ANLCA during the Congo Crisis (1960-1965). While Malcolm was forthright in denouncing imperialism and U.S policy in the Congo, ‘the buzzwords for Martin Luther King Jr. and the American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa were civility and caution. In fact, the White House was attempting to *intimidate* and *condition* black leadership to accept its exclusive hegemony over foreign affairs, including colonialism and independence in Africa’.⁷⁶

This growing disillusion with what had been thought to be the ineluctable process of self-determination throughout Africa caused the ANLCA to adopt this more activist approach to the continent. In a memorandum from Theodore Brown to the call committee of the ANLCA in June 1966, Brown wrote in the context of Southern Africa that ‘Our efforts must be accelerated if we are to have a meanful [sic] impact on the problem of racism in Africa generally, apartheid in South Africa, the Rhodesia crisis, Angola and Mozambique and the “after thought” approach of our own government in the formulation of United States-African policy’.⁷⁷ At the Third Biannual conference of the ANLCA in January 1967, A. Philip Randolph spoke of the need for the organisation to be ‘[a] strong, aggressive and dedicated Negro movement committed to the abolition of apartheid in Africa [that] can exercise effective and meaningful influence on the foreign policy of the United States in [sic] behalf of Black Africa’.⁷⁸ Historian Steven Metz also observed that the growing militancy of Congressman Charles Diggs – a black politician closely aligned with moderate civil rights leaders – towards Apartheid South Africa, where he favoured total political and economic isolation and support for liberation groups, reflected:

[P]olitics within the black congressional group and the black community as a whole where a struggle was raging between the older, more moderate sectors of the leadership such as the

⁷⁵ Plummer, *In Search of Power*, 187.

⁷⁶ Komozi Woodard, “Amiri Baraka, The Congress of Africa People, and the Black Power Politics from the 1961 United Nations Protest to the 1972 Gary Convention”, in *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*, ed. Peniel E. Joseph (New York, Routledge, 2006), 56-57.

⁷⁷ Memorandum from Theodore E. Brown to Call Committee ANLCA, “Third Biennial Conference and proposed permanent organization”, June 29, 1966, Box A42, File “NAACP Administration 1966- General Office File American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa 1966-69,”TRNAACP, LOC.

⁷⁸ A. Philip Randolph, “Africa: Challenge and Crisis,” in *For Jobs and Freedom: Selected Speeches and Writings of A. Philip Randolph*, eds. Andrew E. Kersten and David Lucander (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014), 350.

NAACP and the Southern Christian Leadership Association [sic] and younger more radical elites who were dissatisfied with the pace of racial change in the United States. This challenge caught the first generation leadership unprepared.... Consequently, the ‘mainstream’ black leadership – including most congressmen – were pressured into increasingly radical positions on a range of issues.... [to] retain legitimacy within the black community....⁷⁹

Faced with the challenge posed by radical and Black power activists who rejected the integrationist approach, and who sought alliances with radical movements abroad, the peace mission represented an attempt by the ANLCA to maintain its credibility as an organisation dedicated simultaneously to Pan-Africanism, self-determination, and decolonisation. It can also be speculated that the mission by the four leaders of the most significant African-Americans civil rights organisation – the SCLC, NAACP, Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and National Urban League – was an effort to show unity of purpose at a time when the civil rights movement was showing signs of disintegration due to disagreements over issues such as the war in Vietnam, the political relationship with the Johnson Administration and economic inequality between African-Americans and the rest of American society. A successful peace mission to Nigeria offered the chance to prove that peaceful means could be used to alleviate serious political division.

To increase their assertiveness in African affairs and undercut the radical ‘Third Worldism’ of various black militants, the ANLCA proposed a number of policy initiatives and programs that coincided with the Nigeria peace mission. The Conference proposed the establishment of a university exchange program between the United States and Africa, as well as the development of an extensive Africa-focused adult education program for the black community. ‘This program is to be focused among American Negroes on African culture, Negro history and world affairs. Through this program we would seek to accomplish an intelligent and well informed American Negro knowledge of the culture of the Negro, and the nature of the political choices available to him’.⁸⁰ Besides improving educational standards in Africa, the ANLCA project – drawing on a deep reservoir of interest in the African American community in relation to Africa – sought to develop a more nuanced understanding of African affairs that aligned with the politics of the ANLCA. ‘In an effort to direct the

⁷⁹ Steven Metz, “Congress, the antiapartheid movement, and Nixon”, *Diplomatic History* 12, No.2 (1988), 169.

⁸⁰ Letter from Roy Wilkins and A.P. Randolph to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, September 28, 1967, Box A42, File “NAACP Administration 1966- General Office File American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa 1966-69,”TRNAACP, LOC.

natural ethnic expression into a constructive integrating program', wrote Roy Wilkins and A. Philip Randolph in a letter to Secretary of State Dean Rusk:

[t]he American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa currently is completing the preparation of a broad, locally presented educational program on African history and Africa-American concerns which we hope will engage a substantial part of the actual Negro leadership community in most cities. From these seminars, classes and conferences, we foresee also the emergence of a State Department constituency in so far as African policies are concerned.⁸¹

Both Randolph and Wilkins rejected the 'mischievous' contributions of some African-American individuals and groups promoting Pan-Africanism and Third World solidarity as 'contributing to...a dangerous commitment to divisiveness along color lines in the nation and in the world'.⁸² In a follow up letter to Mr J. Wayne Fredericks, a former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, and by this time a director of the African program at the Ford Foundation, both Wilkins and Randolph linked their initiative to understandings of Africa in the black community. '[A]n adult education program in this country', they wrote, 'will engage the attention of the leaders of the American Negro communities on the pavement as well as in offices and living rooms of the "Black Establishment"'. Both men warned Fredericks of the ramifications for organisations such as the Ford Foundation and the U.S government in not assisting the ANLCA potential program. 'For lack of an effective adult education program in this area', they warned, 'events, parties, factions, and in some cases adventurers are riding recklessly and hazardously in the wake of mischievous myth and political lies'.⁸³

That this large-scale program was being suggested at the same time as the ANLCA leadership were attempting to mediate the civil war in Nigeria is reflective of how both initiatives were driven by the need of the Conference to avoid being outflanked in African affairs by more militant organisations and voices in the African American community. The outbreak of major unrest in Nigeria and the threat of civil war engulfing the country shocked many African-Americans, including the leadership of the ANLCA. While the Conference's offer to help mediate the conflict was provoked by shocking accounts of violence and political disintegration reported in the mainstream and African-American press, the mission

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Letter from ANLCA leadership to Mr. J. Wayne Fredericks, October 2, 1967, Box A42, File "NAACP Administration 1966- General Office File American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa 1966-69,"TRNAACP, LOC.

can best be viewed as a way for integrationist civil rights leaders to reassert themselves both at home and abroad. The Nigerian peace mission and the education outreach also allowed the ANLCA to remain on good terms with the Johnson Administration, although King's relationship with Johnson had become increasingly strained due to his criticism of the Vietnam War. As noted by Theodore Brown, the ANLCA was unofficially supported by the State Department and the White House in seeking a peaceful settlement in Nigeria and was in communication with Secretary of State Rusk regarding its education proposal.⁸⁴

The importance of the connection between the Johnson Administration and the ANLCA was multifaceted. Firstly, for many of the senior leaders in the ANLCA, the Johnson Administration was still viewed as a vital ally in pushing forward a progressive domestic civil rights agenda; it was therefore essential to remain on good terms for the foreseeable future. Secondly, for the Johnson Administration, the activities of the ANLCA in relation to Africa allowed it to boost its prestige among the African American community and potentially undermine the standing of more militant black views. By taking concrete action on African affairs – mediation in Nigeria, educational outreach, and lobbying the Johnson Administration to put more economic and political pressure on colonial and white supremacist regimes in Southern Africa – the moderate leaders of the ANLCA were presenting themselves as more effective than other groups and individuals in the black community.

By October 1967, following Brown's two consecutive trips to Africa, the diplomatic contours of the ANLCA peace mission were clearly visible. Brown's trips to Nigeria and to other African capitals had established a clear diplomatic roadmap for the ANLCA to follow in its negotiations. The leadership of the Conference sought to leverage the appeal the African-American mediators had with both sides to bring them to the negotiating table. The ANLCA

⁸⁴ "Our government had knowledge of it and interest in our concern. Our government expressed no negative reaction to it. They expressed the hope that anything that could achieve a settlement or contribute to a settlement and thereby reduce the physical conflicts and sufferings would be helpful" Theodore Brown oral history, 12; "The government officials [including Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Joseph E. Palmer, II] expressed warm approval of the Negro leaders efforts in seeking ways and means to resolve the humanitarian aspects of the problem and they assured the American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa, through the Executive Director, that our efforts met with the approval of our government" See Memorandum from Theodore Brown, September 13, TRNAACP, LOC.

hoped to do this by working alongside other African leaders who had expressed alarm about the conflict. During his visits to Africa, Theodore Brown had not only been able to engage with parties from both sides in the civil war, but also with senior African statesmen such as General Joseph Ankrah in Ghana, Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, and President William Tubman of Liberia. These discussions, as well as discussions that members of the ANLCA had with envoys from both Nigeria and Biafra (for example, A. Philip Randolph met with Biafran envoy Sir Louis Mbanefo, a preeminent jurist and former member of the International Court of Justice to discuss the involvement of the ANLCA), helped define the scope of the mission.⁸⁵ In a detailed memorandum to Randolph, King, Wilkins, and Young, Brown outlined the next stage of the ANLCA's efforts. While Brown did not call for the leaders to travel to Nigeria, he felt that the continuing lobbying and campaigning of the ANLCA could yield significant results.

Brown believed the best course of action was for him to return to Africa to 'solicit help and seek advice, ways and means from other African leaders and solicit also their determined help in getting a conference under way between leaders of the two factions'. Brown also believed that major interest groups in the United States, such as churches, labour unions, businesses, and humanitarian groups, needed to be courted by the ANLCA 'in order to develop interest and world pressure for a quick cessation of hostilities and a restoration of a peaceful and tranquil Nigerian society'. To accomplish these joint goals Brown proposed that the ANLCA raise \$15,000 (\$114,767 in 2019). However, Brown called for the money to be raised rapidly via business and corporate interests in the United States 'with investments in Africa and particularly in Nigeria....[that] share our concern in this endeavour'.⁸⁶ Besides trying to end the fighting, the ANLCA were cognisant that the underlying causes of the war need to be addressed. In his recommendations Brown detailed the role of the ANLCA in encouraging an acceptable post-war settlement for all aggrieved ethnic and tribal groups. Brown recognised that:

[A] cessation of hostilities will not assure individual safety and freedom of movement to the persons and property of various tribal groups in Nigeria, our efforts should be concerned with a solution which will go into this problem in addition to bringing an end to open warfare.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Memorandum from Theodore Brown, September 13, 1967, TRNAACP, LOC .

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

Even as Theodore Brown and the leadership of the ANLCA outlined the scope of their diplomatic efforts and sought to aid African leaders and states in finding a peaceful solution, the military situation grew increasingly intractable and bloody, particularly following the Nigerian offensive that captured the Biafran capital of Enugu in October. This development prompted the ANLCA to ponder travelling directly to the warzone to act as mediators. ‘The civil war’, noted an editorial in *The Chicago Defender*:

which has been raging for months in Nigeria, taking the lives of thousands of men, women and children, has given a dismal picture of the outlook on the whole African continent south of the Sahara. Tribal conflicts of a deeper and more disastrous character than those that afflict other parts of independent Africa have brought complete disunity and frightful disorganization to Nigeria.⁸⁸

A *Call and Post* editorial noted, sadly, that even a swift military victory by FMG forces without a long-term political reconciliation would mean that ‘enmities are likely to be deepened – and an even greater tragedy could befall this anguished land....What is needed now is compassion, wisdom – and above all, mutual tolerance’.⁸⁹ A World Council of Churches appeal published in the *New Pittsburgh Courier* beseeched all combatants to pursue policies ‘which will begin to dispel fear and bitterness and open the way to a future to which all can consent’.⁹⁰ In an interview published in the *New York Amsterdam News*, the Biafran ‘diplomat’ and former student at Lincoln University, Kingsley Mbadiwe, who, as discussed earlier, had played an instrumental role in building the trans-Atlantic relationship between black Americans and Nigerians during the 1940s, informed African American readers that ‘[t]he men who sit in Lagos today, are waging a war of extermination and genocide against those of us who contributed the most towards the building of one Nigeria’. Faced with these horrific circumstances, Mbadiwe called on ‘the American people with their great concern for humanity to use their great world prestige to motivate those organisations, the OAU and UN, to take such action to prevent further genocide and bring about a peaceful settlement’.⁹¹ Mbadiwe’s description of the anti-Igbo violence as ‘genocidal’ anticipated what became the central issue among the international community from mid-1968. As increasing media coverage of the conflict gave newspaper and television audiences throughout the world a graphic illustration of the dire situation inside the Eastern Region, Biafran officials and supporters abroad increasingly framed this humanitarian crisis as a deliberate policy of

⁸⁸ “Nigeria in trouble”, *The Chicago Defender*, October 28, 1967, 10.

⁸⁹ “Guest editorial: Nigeria’s travails”, *Call and Post*, October 14, 1967, 5B.

⁹⁰ “WCC appeal for Nigeria”, *New Pittsburgh Courier*, October 21, 1967, 6.

⁹¹ Simon Anekwe, “Africa Today – Search of Peace”, *New York Amsterdam News*, October 28, 1967, 17.

genocide by the Nigerian FMG. For African Americans, as will be discussed in the next chapter, warnings of genocide became a key factor in shaping their own humanitarian response.

In a cable sent to Lt. General Gowon on 30 October, the Conference leadership outlined their growing concerns. 'As the war goes on in Nigeria', stated the cable, 'Americans of African descent become increasingly alarmed at the mounting bloodshed and misery. We offer again our hand in friendship in any effort to bring the bloodshed to an immediate end.... We hope that the six heads [of state] of the Organisation of African Unity will be able to undertake their mission as soon as possible'. This appeal for diplomacy and moderation in dealing with the civil war, was combined with a unique offer from the ANLCA leader: 'the possibility of making an emergency trip to Africa if such a move will help to halt the fighting in Nigeria'.⁹² While Brown by this point had made several trips to the warzone, this initiative would insert some of black America's most prominent leaders into the midst of an African crisis.

The potential mission to Nigeria received widespread circulation in the black press. For many commentators in the African American press, the mission was a significant event in highlighting the importance of Pan-Africanism to black Americans and the significant role African Americans could play in relation to the black diaspora. *The Chicago Defender*, the *New York Amsterdam News*, the *New Pittsburgh Courier*, and the *Los Angeles Sentinel* reported on the scope of the mission and the diplomatic activities of the ANLCA from March 1967.⁹³ 'Indicative of the American Negroes' deep concern about the civil war in Nigeria', stated an article in *The Crisis*, 'four of the nation's most prominent civil rights leaders revealed that they have been considering the possibility of making an emergency trip to Africa if such a move would help halt the fighting in Nigeria'. 'For the NAACP', continued the article, 'this involvement in African affairs is but an extension of a tradition dating back to the early years of the century and of the Association when W.E.B DuBois...called and the NAACP financed a Pan-African Congress which met in Paris in February, 1919'.⁹⁴ In the

⁹² "Press release: Four top rights leaders considering Africa trip", December 17, 1967, Box A42, File "NAACP Administration 1966- General Office File American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa 1966-69," TRNAACP, LOC.

⁹³ "4 top rights leaders consider Africa trip", *The Chicago Defender*, December 23, 1968, 32; "civil rights leaders may go to Nigeria", *New York Amsterdam News*, January 13, 1968, 26; "leaders may visit country: concern is shown over Nigeria war", *New Pittsburgh Courier*, December 30, 1967, 23; "local churches to hear Dr. King", *Los Angeles Sentinel*, March 14, 1968, D4.

⁹⁴ "The American Negro community and the Nigerian Civil War", *The Crisis*, January 1968, 20.

New York Amsterdam News, Simon Anekwe described the potential mission as ‘historical in its impact on Nigeria and Biafra, the rest of Africa and on Afro-Americans themselves.... School children would read of it in history books and tales of black men from across the seas who rescued their fatherland from the sword and flaming torch would be told like a great sea sage’. According to Anekwe:

[the mission is] a manifestation of the concern and interest of 22 million Afro-Americans in the destiny of their ancestral continent, the mission would represent the finest expression of Black Power....Such a mission would herald a new era of cooperation between African and Afro-Americans and launch black Americans on the course they must orbit as Americans in highlighting the importance of Africa and influencing decisions in Washington.⁹⁵

Even as the black press endorsed the efforts of the ANLCA leadership, the mission faced daunting diplomatic and domestic challenges that would circumscribe its scope and effectiveness. In his oral history, Brown made it clear that the mission saw the OAU as a critical element in securing a peaceful settlement. ‘[W]e placed a great deal of hope in the OAU efforts’, stated Brown:

because this was an African solution to the problem, hopefully, if possible. It was not a European or big power pressured solution. Since so much of the future of Africa, and the relationship of Africa and the outside world [sic], it was hoped that people of the stature, Haile Selassie and other heads of state, would really be the motivating influencing force for solution [sic] to this problem rather than Europe or from Washington.⁹⁶

While the ANLCA sought to work alongside the OAU, as a non-state actor the mission had to operate within the diplomatic parameters set by the Pan-African organisation. This meant that the ANLCA adopted similar talking points and objectives to the OAU, a situation that placed it at odds with the Biafran leadership.

In September 1967, as fighting raged between Nigerian and Biafran forces, the heads of state of the OAU gathered in the Congolese capital, Kinshasa. This was the first gathering of the OAU since the outbreak of hostilities, and the civil war resonated deeply with many of the leaders who gathered. For many of the young postcolonial African nation-states that also consisted of colonial boundaries binding together diverse ethnic, tribal and religious groups, secession posed an existential danger. While there was sympathy from some African heads of

⁹⁵ Simon Anekwe, “Africa Today – The Leadership”, *New York Amsterdam News*, January 27, 1968, 15.

⁹⁶ Martin, “Interview with Theodore E. Brown”, 17.

state for the situation the Biafrans found themselves in, there was unanimous agreement that secession posed a serious threat to the development of the continent and had the potential of turning the region into a Cold War battlefield. Territorial integrity and non-intervention, core ideas in the OAU Charter, defined the debates around the civil war in Kinshasa.

The resolution that emerged from the OAU meeting would define the policy of the organisation for the duration of the civil war. Besides condemning secession and upholding the principles of sovereignty within colonial borders and non-intervention, the OAU established a 'consultative mission' of six African heads of state – including Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, President William Tubman of Liberia and General Ankrah of Ghana – to assure General Gowon of the OAU's desire for 'the territorial integrity, unity and peace of Nigeria'.⁹⁷ According to the *New York Times*, the Kinshasa resolution adopted a two-track approach: the need to avoid a prolonged and bloody war that may irreparably undermine the viability of Nigeria, and the need to convince the Biafrans to abandon secession. 'Biafra must give up the secession and the Ibos must agree to help rebuild Nigerian unity', declared the editorial in the *Times*:

The Federal Government must demonstrate its determination to provide genuine security for the Ibos, who have suffered far more than any other group in the civil strife of the last two years. Lagos must also make good its promise to negotiate in good faith with leaders selected by the Ibos themselves and show flexibility about the size of the individual states and the powers to be allocated to them under a renewed Federal system.⁹⁸

Two of the leading historians of the international dimensions of the civil war, Lasse Heerten and John J. Stremlau, acknowledge that this OAU initiative had a decisive impact on the diplomacy surrounding the civil war and its eventual outcome. The Kinshasa resolution remained the key component of OAU diplomacy throughout the conflict.⁹⁹

For the ANLCA mission, the position of the OAU placed constraints on the arbiter role the civil rights leaders hoped to perform. While the ANLCA leadership was happy to meet with Biafran envoys in the United States, and while they carefully studied information outlining the reasons for Biafran secession, like the OAU, the ANLCA favoured a peaceful settlement that led to the reincorporation of Biafra into Nigeria. In his lengthy memorandum in

⁹⁷ John J. Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 114.

⁹⁸ "Nigeria needs the O.A.U", *New York Times*, September 28, 1967, 46.

⁹⁹ Heerten, *The Biafran War*, 72-76; Stremlau, *The International Politics*, 94-96.

September 1967, Theodore Brown reported that ‘it is reasonable to believe that both sides are willing to come to a conference table if the proper means and setting could be found to respect the sovereignty of Nigeria as defined by General Gowon’.¹⁰⁰ In a January 1968 article in *The Crisis* outlining the intention of the civil rights leaders to travel to Nigeria, Roy Wilkins denied a Radio Biafra interpretation of the ANLCA appeal that stated that ‘leaders of 20,000,000 Americans of African descent had sent a message expressing alarm because of “Nigeria’s aggression against Biafra”’. The *Crisis* article noted that ‘Mr Wilkins pointed out that this message had carefully refrained from taking sides in the conflict and did not mention Biafra’.¹⁰¹

Kingsley Mbadiwe, acting as an envoy for the Republic of Biafra in the United States, according to his biographer, expressed his frustration at African American civil rights leaders who while rightly wanting ‘the Nigeria-Biafra conflict resolved,’ were of ‘little practical help’.¹⁰² It can be deduced that Mbadiwe’s frustration was not a reflection of a lack of interest by black leaders, but of a wariness to support a ceasefire that would leave Nigeria and Biafra as two distinct political entities without plans for Biafra’s reintegration – a situation at odds with the objectives of the OAU. Although the ANLCA leadership were genuine in their desire to see the war stop and the bloodshed end, for the Biafran leadership this was an option they were unwilling to countenance. With the military situation in the warzone in flux, and with Biafran leaders looking to the international community – both to the Global North and the Global South – to support their independence struggle, the notion of peaceful reintegration back into Nigeria seemed unlikely. Biafran officials and large swathes of the population within the enclave remained distrustful of claims that that Igbo would be welcomed back peacefully into the Nigerian Federation. The deaths of thousands of Igbo civilians during the pogroms in 1966 and the millions of refugees forced to flee their homes to safety had hardened attitudes towards the maintenance of an independent Biafran nation as a guarantee for the safety of the Igbo.

Domestic pressures also added to the challenges the ANLCA mission encountered in trying to play a constructive role to end the civil war. On 1 April 1968, the *New York Times* reported that Dr. King, in the final stages of organising the Poor People’s campaign in

¹⁰⁰ Memorandum from Brown, September 13, 1967, TRNAACP, LOC.

¹⁰¹ “The American Negro community and the Nigerian Civil War”, 20.

¹⁰² Hollis R. Lynch, *K.O. Mbadiwe: A Nigerian Political Biography, 1915-1990* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 219.

Washington D.C and about to fly to Memphis to support striking black sanitation workers, was reconsidering his role in the ANLCA mission. Speaking to journalists King said ‘that he would probably not be able to fly to Africa the week of April 14 on a peace mission to try and end the civil war in Nigeria. He said he might send his friend and associate, the Rev. Ralph Abernathy instead’.¹⁰³ Three days later King was assassinated at the Lorraine Motel in downtown Memphis.

Although the ANLCA peace mission collapsed after the death of King, it did not signal the end of African American interest and concern about the civil war. In the papers of the ANLCA, the mission to Nigeria disappears from the archival records following the announcement that the Call Committee would be travelling to the warzone. Due to this it is difficult to deduce the factor or factors that led to its collapse. Drawing on the timeline of events it seems likely that the death of Dr. King and the growing racial unrest in the United States, combined with the growing realisation of both the Nigerians and the Biafrans that only a military solution could decide the conflict, sapped the energy behind a peaceful settlement. However, this did not mean that the surviving members of the Call Committee lost interest in the civil war, as will be revealed in coming chapters.

As the ANLCA mission fell short in its aspiration to achieve a diplomatic solution, other figures and groups in the African American community took up the challenge to have a positive impact on the situation. In March 1968, former President of the American Society of African Culture (AMSAC), the African American political scientist John A. Davis, organised the ‘Committee for Nigerian-Biafran Reconciliation’ alongside other prominent African American figures. ‘While Nigeria is virtually destroying itself’, warned Davis:

most Americans are not even aware a war is going on. It is our judgement that the struggle can continue for a long time, threatening the decimation of Biafra and the impoverishment of Nigeria. Our feeling is that if there is an upswelling of sentiment among influential Americans demanding peace without preconditions, hopefully, England, France, Russia and Portugal, which are all involved in the hostilities in some fashion, will respond to this.¹⁰⁴

‘The time is ripe’, wrote Davis, for a negotiated settlement without preconditions, regarding Biafran sovereignty and the reluctance of the Nigerians to directly speak to Colonel Ojukwu. It was vital, he noted, for influential Americans – particularly African Americans – to

¹⁰³ Ben A. Franklin, “Dr. King hints he’d cancel march if aid is offered”, *New York Times*, April 1, 1968, 20.

¹⁰⁴ Letter from John A. Davis to Dr. James H. Robinson, March 26, 1968, File 13, Box 15, James Herman Robinson Papers, Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, Louisiana.

actively engage in promoting a diplomatic settlement that would bring an end to the fighting. He suggested to Rev. Robinson that he should ‘spread the word in his own locality, recruit new members, and engage in public relations activities that will develop an American opinion pressing for negotiations for peace without preconditions’.¹⁰⁵

While packing intellectual heft and star power the Committee on Nigerian-Biafran Reconciliation struggled from its inception.¹⁰⁶ There was no press coverage in the black press regarding the Committee, and the first meeting of the Steering Committee, held at the AMSAC office in New York on 22 May, 1968 was ‘badly attended’ and gave Davis ‘pause about going further’.¹⁰⁷ The attendees agreed on general principles such as the importance of swaying world opinion and taking a public stand on the need to de-escalate the fighting, but serious concerns were raised about how the broader African American community could be mobilised to engage with the campaign. Domestically, issues such as ‘U.S...balance of payment, increases in taxes, and the demands of the Negro for legislation for the poor’ remained higher priorities for black Americans, according to the Committee. ‘The American Negro nexus’, wrote Davis, ‘or rather, the Black American nexus, was noted since the question is, again, if he is willing to give up something for his African brother in return for the satisfaction resulting from the establishment of a viable black African state’.¹⁰⁸

Davis’ lament over the failure of Nigeria-Biafra Reconciliation Committee speaks more to the rapid and ad-hoc nature of its formation than the interest of the broader African American community in the civil war. The attempt by the ANLCA to mediate the conflict was widely reported on and editorialised in the black press, while the Reconciliation Committee failed to gain any publicity.

Between March 1967 and April 1968, leading African American civil rights leaders in the United States had attempted to assist in finding a peaceful settlement to the Nigerian Civil War. Although their efforts were unsuccessful and the war continued until January 1970 and cost thousands more lives, this chapter has explored in detail the scope of this unique undertaking. As reports in the black press of unspeakable violence and terror reached

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ For a list of supporters of the committee see Memorandum from John A. Davis to All Committee members, May 10, 1968, File 18, Box 15, James Herman Robinson Papers, Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, Louisiana.

¹⁰⁷ Letter from John A. Davis to Committee for Nigeria-Biafra Reconciliation, May 24, 1968, File 1, Box 16, James Herman Robinson Papers, Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, Louisiana.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

American shores, the ANLCA, whose commitment to a moderate vision of black internationalism had made it one of the most prominent Africa-orientated black organisations in the United States, mobilised its personnel and resources to assist. Building on personal, institutional, educational, political and cultural connection with Nigeria, the members of the Call Committee devoted themselves to working for a solution that satisfied the concerns of the warring parties. In this the ANLCA was eventually inhibited by the diplomatic realities of the war and the tug of domestic civil rights issues. However, the mission itself established a strong precedent for how African Americans should engage with the civil war. Theodore Brown described the mission as an expression of ‘the ethnic relationship that exists between 56 million Nigerians and 22 million Afro-Americans’.¹⁰⁹

This sense of racial solidarity became intertwined with two ideas championed by the ANLCA that would become part of the broader African American discourse on the civil war – the first, on the importance of protecting the rights and security of the Igbo, the second, the view that this should be achieved through a unified Nigeria. In March 1967, as the ANLCA launched its first foray into the diplomacy of the Nigerian Civil War, its black internationalist intentions were clearly on display. ‘We offer our services’, declared the ANLCA press release, ‘in such an enterprise in the hope that this largest, richest, and in many respects most promising nation in Black Africa may fulfil the destiny it so richly deserves, to the benefit of Africa, the world, and ourselves’.¹¹⁰ As the next chapter will show, the notion of ‘Africa, the world, and ourselves’ would become central to the humanitarian response of the African American community as the summer of 1968 brought media reports of mass famine and claims of genocide from Biafra.

¹⁰⁹ Memorandum from T.E. Brown to R. Wilkins, June 14, 1967, TRNAACP, LOC.

¹¹⁰ “Press release Negro leaders offer to mediate Nigerian civil crisis”, March 27, 1967, TRNAACP, LOC.

Chapter Four

‘Black America Cares’: The Humanitarian Response of African Americans to Reports of Famine and ‘Genocide’ in Biafra, 1968-1970

On 29 March 1969, as the Nigerian Civil War dragged into its second bloody year, tenants in the Pratt Cooperative in the predominantly African American neighbourhood of Clinton Hill, Brooklyn started their own project to collect funds for Biafra. The ‘Ladies of Pratt’ led by Vivian Bradford and Pat McFarlane raised \$543.50 on Valentine’s Day 1969, from the three hundred families residing in the Cooperative. According to the *New York Amsterdam News*, the ‘Ladies of Pratt’ delivered the funds raised to the Biafra Relief Service Foundation.¹

Across the East River, the Mid-Manhattan Branch of the NAACP contacted the publisher of the *Amsterdam News*, Dr. C.B. Powell, to ask how they too could provide relief to Biafra. ‘Many of our members’, wrote branch president Max Delson, ‘would be interested in contributing to Biafran relief if they could be fairly sure that their gifts were moving into effective channels’.² Elsewhere, residents from the Tompkin Tenants Association in Bedford-Stuyvesant developed their own relief program led by a woman named Mae Miller to collect funds and food to be shipped to Biafra on a chartered mercy ship. Miller told the *Amsterdam News* that cash donations from residents and local merchants had already reached \$500 and almost three thousand cans of food had been collected at Tompkins House. Miller appealed for more aid from local residents, schools, churches and businesses, to fill a second relief ship bound for the warzone; the first ship, the ‘Forra’, had left Brooklyn loaded with 3500 tons of food and medical supplies.³

Such efforts among African Americans across New York’s boroughs were typical of a notable yet often overlooked movement of support to provide direct aid to Biafra – a response that was distinct from the liberal civil rights activists’ attempts to negotiate a political peace. On 7 September 1968, at the height of the starvation crisis, the *New York Amsterdam News* announced the formation of the Black Ad Hoc Committee for Biafra/Nigeria Relief that planned to stage a demonstration and mass rally outside Hancock Hall in Brooklyn. Organised under the slogan ‘Black America Cares’, the committee, co-chaired by Shirley

¹ “Pratt Tenants Aid Biafra”, *New York Amsterdam News*, March 29, 1969, 29.

² Simon Anekwe, “The Wave of Freedom: To Aid Biafra”, *New York Amsterdam News*, December 7, 1968, 21.

³ “Bed-Stuy Steps Up Biafran Aid with Cash Donations”, *New York Amsterdam News*, March 22, 1969, 30.

Washington, hoped ‘to dramatize the urgent need to get relief to the children of Biafra, thousands of whom are dying of starvation’. The same article announced that a group of prominent African Americans led by the former U.S Ambassador to UNESO and to Ghana (1966-1968), Franklin Williams, was planning to lobby President Lyndon Johnson, UN Secretary General U Thant and the Red Cross to do more to provide humanitarian relief. Unlike the members of the ANLCA peace mission, who had aimed to assist in crafting a political settlement that would maintain Nigerian unity, the supporters of the Black Ad Hoc Committee interpreted the conflict through the lens of a humanitarianism that strived to be apolitical. ‘As black Americans living in New York City’, stated the group’s official telegram:

with differing political philosophies we share a common concern over the tragic condition in which millions of black children presently find themselves....We express no judgement on the substantive issues involved in this civil war but we are convinced that the destruction of children’s lives through action or inaction is not an appropriate weapon of such conflict.

Faced with this unprecedented humanitarian challenge, this group of prominent African Americans called on President Johnson and the UN to mobilise equipment, money, and personnel for a massive airlift of supplies.⁴

This chapter explores the surge of grassroots African American humanitarian activism, not just in New York but throughout the United States. Dramatic media reports emerging from the Nigerian warzone in mid-1968 on mass famine in the Biafran enclave reverberated through black communities in the United States. While the ANLCA mission had tried to develop a negotiated settlement with the warring parties to preserve Nigerian unity, grassroots activism in black communities, beginning in mid-1968, tended to be less political and primarily humanitarian in orientation. In the context of ‘1968’, a year crowded with highly significant events, from the Tet offensive in Vietnam, to the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., to the student uprisings throughout Western Europe and the crushing of the ‘Prague Spring’, the civil war in Nigeria initially seemed to many to be a relatively trivial concern.⁵ Yet this changed due to the impact of widespread media coverage of the growing

⁴ “Concern For Biafra Rises among Blacks”, *New York Amsterdam News*, September 7, 1968, 34.

⁵ The most recent work on the dramatic events of “1968” by historian Richard Vinen concentrated on unrest in the United States, France, West Germany and the United Kingdom. The Third World, reflecting the authors intentions, only features in terms of the impact of the Vietnam War on student unrest and the influence of Maoism on students and workers in France. The Nigerian Civil War is not mentioned at all. See Richard Vinen, *The Long ‘68: Radical Protest and its Enemies* (London: Penguin Books, 2018).

humanitarian crisis in Biafra. On 12 June 1968, readers of the British tabloid newspaper *The Sun* were confronted by a front page devoted to the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Nigeria and to those most affected, children, under the title 'Land of no hope'. *The Sun*'s feature story, according to historian Lasse Heerten, was 'part of a first massive wave of media reports on the humanitarian crisis'.⁶ Images from intrepid photojournalists reporting from the war zone, such as by British photographer Don McCullin, together with television features, soon saturated the international media.⁷ McCullin was joined in Biafra by French photojournalist Gilles Caron who, according to professor of journalism Claude Cookman, was instrumental – along with McCullin – in bringing the realities of the civil war and famine to Western audiences. Caron's images, wrote Cookman, 'humanized his subjects...he chose expressions, gestures, and body language that gave his subjects dignity despite their suffering'.⁸

Photographs from McCullin, Caron and other photojournalists who braved the environment of the Biafran warzone, ended up not only in newspapers around the world, but also in high-circulation magazines such as *Time* and *Life*. On 12 July 1968 *Life* magazine featured a cover photo of a starving Biafran child in a refugee camp.⁹ Due to the dissemination of photography and television images, the suffering of children became the central icon of the civil war. Through the suffering their bodies endured due to starvation, they epitomised the inhumanity and loss of innocence that the war entailed.¹⁰

The African American humanitarian response to the starvation crisis in Biafra was part of a broader international response triggered by such media coverage from the warzone. Images of suffering bodies spurred on non-government organisations, individual activists, and ad-hoc organisations to help raise awareness and provide relief to Biafra. In the United Kingdom, the British-Biafra Association (BBA), the most active pro-Biafran organisation in the country, relentlessly lobbied Harold Wilson's Labour government to cease its supply of weapons to its ally in the Federal Military Government. In West Germany, Aktionskomitee Biafra drew on

⁶ Heerten, *The Biafran War*, 108-109.

⁷ On the importance of photography in creating a compassionate responses among particular audiences see Liam Kennedy, "Framing Compassion", *History of Photography* 36, Issue 3 (2002): 306-314.

⁸ Claude Cookman, "Gilles Caron's coverage of the crisis in Biafra", *Visual Communications Quarterly* 15, No. 4 (2008): 239.

⁹ "Biafra: A war of starvation and extinction", *Life*, July 12, 1968, 20-21

¹⁰ See Laura Suski, "Children, suffering, and the humanitarian appeal", in *Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy*, eds., Richard Ashby Wilson and Richard D. Brown (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009): 202-219.

close support from Catholic and Lutheran churches, Christian youth groups and student organisations of the conservative Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU/CSU). Aktion Biafra-Hilfe, based in Hamburg, expanded its presence across the North of Germany and to West Berlin and drew in an eclectic range of supporters from church groups to students influenced by the revolutionary politics of the New Left. In France, ad-hoc humanitarian organisations such as Comte d'Action Pour le Biafra and the Association France-Biafra found in the Gaullist government of President Charles de Gaulle and later Georges Pompidou a willing ally that linked humanitarian concerns with France's strategic interests in West Africa.¹¹

In the United States, the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive (ACKBA), which had links to individuals and organisations in the black community, emerged as the most significant ad-hoc humanitarian organisation among a plethora of NGOs that were formed to provide famine relief. Based in New York and led by an Englishman, Paul Connett, the ACKBA cooperated with a wide variety of civil society organisations throughout the country. The ACKBA, backed by impressive resources from Madison Avenue public relations firms, lobbied Senators and Congressmen, organised massed protests, letter writing campaigns and took out whole page ads in the *New York Times*. Historian Brian McNeil has noted that many of the founders of the ACKBA were former Peace Corps volunteers who had served in Nigeria prior to the civil war. They typically embraced a vision of American engagement with the world that saw morality and missionary zeal in the service of those less fortunate trumping the 'immoral' neutrality adopted by the Johnson Administration regarding Nigeria. Instead of crushing a national liberation movement through authoritarian allies and hundreds of thousands of tons of bombs and napalm, the ACKBA offered a path of redemption for the United States through helping a besieged people in the Global South survive famine and 'genocide'.¹²

On the 21 September, outside the UN headquarters, a twenty-six year old Reverend Jesse Jackson, who had risen to prominence working alongside the late Martin Luther King Jr. in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), denounced the lack of international action to alleviate starvation in Biafra. Jackson made clear that he was 'not surprised to hear

¹¹ For an in depth study of the political, social and cultural dynamics that contributed to the Biafran relief efforts and support for Biafran independence in the United Kingdom, West Germany and France see Heerten, *The Biafran War*, 205-262.

¹² McNeil, "Frontiers of Need", 195-212.

that America had not responded adequately to people dying in Africa because it had not responded to people starving and dying here'. For Jackson, 'the classical reason why America has not responded to Biafra is classical capitalism and racism'.¹³ When Jesse Jackson addressed the gathered protestors outside the UN headquarters he was surrounded by religious and secular figures including the founder of the ACKBA, Paul Connett, and Israeli peace activist and pilot Abie Nathan, both part of the transnational Biafran relief effort. However, while Jackson was part of a transnational movement to aid the people of Biafra, the African American response to the humanitarian situation in Biafra had unique qualities that reflected the nature of the African American community in the late 1960s. The crisis in Biafra was refracted through concerns about the viability of the recent gains of the civil rights movement, the growth of African American engagement with African cultures, the rise of black power, and the ongoing structural disadvantages black Americans faced in the 1960s.

In a circular report-letter dated 17 June 1968, the Reverend Fintan Kilbride from the Order of Holy Ghost Fathers asked a powerful rhetorical question regarding the daily atrocities and injustices of the civil war in Nigeria: 'what has become of the conscience of the world?'¹⁴ Kilbride, who had worked in Eastern Nigeria since 1955, had become a witness to the 'enduring suffering' of civilians in the warzone, suffering 'unequal in extent and intensity even by the Vietnam wars'. As he toured the war-torn enclave, Kilbride observed the reckless disregard for civilians in the warzone, particularly the bombing and strafing of civilians by the Nigerian air force. However, what most concerned him was a growing epidemic of starvation in the rebel enclave. '[T]he greatest tragedy' he wrote, 'was the slow starvation of 3,000,000 refugees; some in camps, some absorbed in the "extended family" system, but many of them eat one meal every two days, and generally subsisting at starvation levels'.¹⁵ Missionaries such as Kilbride became crucial interlocutors in providing information to the

¹³ "OAU Suggests Biafra Re-integrate Nigeria", *New York Amsterdam News*, September 21, 1968, 2.

¹⁴ Letter from Reverend Fintan Kilbride, June 17, 1968, File Catholic Missionary reports, Box 2, NBCH, SCPC.

¹⁵ Ibid.

international press on the situation in the warzone and raising the alarm about the humanitarian catastrophe unfolding while global attention remained focused elsewhere.¹⁶

Mass media, such as newspapers and television, played a critical role in circulation of Kilbride and others grim observations throughout the United States and around the world. 'In steamy Biafra, where the climate in the current rainy season is like a tepid Turkish bath, fat vultures wait greedily for people to die'.¹⁷ This sentence appeared in the *Chicago Daily Defender* just days after *Life* magazine had featured the starving Biafran child on its front cover. Like the *Life* cover and article, the suffering of children was at the core of the piece written by Peter Lynch. In February, Lynch had warned readers that the civil war 'could become the worst bloodbath in African history'; now, five months later, this prediction seemed to have become a reality.¹⁸ The photos that accompanied the Lynch article gave readers a visual insight into the horrors of *kwashiorkor*, a protein deficiency disease common in West Africa. The photos confronted readers with the effects of the disease: 'hands and feet are swollen' and 'arms and legs are bony and tawny'.¹⁹

Lynch's coverage of this particular form of grim suffering brought readers' attention to what was the culmination of a series of dramatic military developments that had changed the dynamics of the conflict from an internecine struggle with serious potential regional ramifications to a global humanitarian emergency. By the summer of 1968 what Nigerian officials and Western observers had once believed to be a relatively bloodless 'police action' had morphed into a bloody stalemate between Federal and Biafran forces. The Biafran leadership, at a military and diplomatic disadvantage, had, from the earliest stages of the crisis, attempted to internationalise the war in order to gain political legitimacy.²⁰ However, by mid-1968 this had proved a fruitless task. Most of the international community remained wary of Biafra's desire for self-determination, with members of the OAU, in particular, fearing that Biafran independence would lead to the 'balkanisation' of Africa and undermine the project of Pan-African unity. The United States government remained lukewarm about

¹⁶ On the role of Catholic missionaries in the Nigerian Civil War see Ken Waters, "Influencing the Message: The Role of Catholic missionaries in Media Coverage of the Nigerian Civil War," *Catholic Historical Review* 90, No. 4 (2004): 697-718.

¹⁷ Peter Lynch, "People dying like flies in steamy Biafra", *The Chicago Daily Defender*, July 15, 1968, 5.

¹⁸ Peter Lynch, "Nigeria's Civil War gets bloodier", *The Chicago Daily Defender*, February 17, 1968, 4.

¹⁹ Lynch, "People dying", 5.

²⁰ On Third World political actors seeking international support for self-determination struggles see Matthew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's fight for independence and the origins of the post-Cold War era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) see also Paul Chamberlin, "The Struggle Against Oppression Everywhere: The Global Politics of Palestinian Liberation", *Middle Eastern Studies* 47, No. 1 (2011): 25-41.

the prospects of Biafran independence. In a report prepared by Western Africa country director Roy M. Melbourne for Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Joseph Palmer, in April 1968, Melbourne noted that one of the key facets of U.S policy towards the civil war was ‘a determination not to interfere in the internal affairs of Nigeria’. According to Melbourne, ‘non-involvement’ in Nigeria meant adopting a series of policies that would minimise the risk of the United States being dragged into the conflict; this included ‘[r]ecognition of the FMG [Federal Military Government] and refusal to recognize “Biafra”.’²¹

The capture of Port Harcourt in May by Nigerian federal troops signaled to the international community that Biafra was likely doomed. The *New York Times* reported that the capture of the port and its oil facilities ‘all but completes a circle around the area where some eight million Ibos live’.²² Officials in the US State Department in Washington D.C and in the Foreign Office in London, believed that the capture of the city would not only sever Biafra from the outside world but swiftly bring the war to an end and preserve Nigerian unity. In a memorandum written in late 1967, American Ambassador to Nigeria, Elbert Matthews reported that he would ‘consider that the rebellion has been put down when the use of Port Harcourt and its airport is effectively denied to the rebels.’²³ However, the rapid advance of Nigerian federal forces was one factor that precipitated the starvation crisis witnessed by Reverend Kilbride, a crisis with global ramifications.

Before the outbreak of hostilities, the Eastern Region had been a net importer of food, particularly proteins. In a report issued by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in May 1969, the authors comprehensively outlined the factors that had led to the famine in mid-1968. Prior to the war, the Eastern Region had one of the most highly concentrated populations in sub-Saharan Africa and relied heavily upon foodstuffs imported from other parts of the Federation to sustain the population due to poor soil quality. These foodstuffs were purchased with the profits from palm oil and palm kernel trade with the rest of Nigeria and with royalties from the burgeoning oil industry. The pogroms against Igbo migrants in September 1966, the secession of Biafra and the outbreak of war in July 1967,

²¹ FRUS 396. Information Memorandum from the Western Africa Country Director, Bureau of African Affairs (Melbourne) to the Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs (Palmer), April 18, 1968, FRUS online, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v24/d396>, (accessed 12 April 2018).

²² Alfred Friendly Jr., “Vital Biafra port claimed by Lagos: Secessionists again call for cease-fire agreement at peace talks this week vital Biafra port claimed by Lagos”, *New York Times*, May 20, 1968, 1.

²³ Quoted in McNeil, “Frontiers of Need”, 148.

shattered this economic and trading system. According to the ICRC, the inflow of Igbo refugees into an already densely populated area combined with the collapse of remittances from Igbo migrants from other parts of the Nigerian Federation, led to skyrocketing rates of inflation. Like the recent famine in India in 1965-1967, it was not a shortage of food that led to starvation but rather a lack of money. The collapse of the intra-Federation trading system led to extreme rates of inflation in the price of basic food stuffs. The wartime situation also led to the Eastern Region being cut off from trading with other parts of the Federation, in particular from access to vital rice crops (the product of developmental assistance since independence) that now were behind Federal lines.²⁴ As Federal troops pushed back Biafran forces, the amount of arable land that could be cultivated shrank, while the number of people concentrated in a shrinking amount of Biafran territory increased rapidly. These elements, combined with the Federal government's land and sea blockade of rebel territory, created the conditions for famine.

The American Committee on Africa (ACOA), a US-based non-government organisation dedicated to supporting liberation struggles in Africa, which included some of the most prominent figures from the Civil Rights Movement, outlined to its membership the growing crisis in West Africa in a memorandum in August 1968. The report placed the death toll at 100,000, the majority children, for the month of July alone. A further half a million were on the edge of starvation in areas controlled by both Biafran and Nigerian forces. In response to this growing emergency, the memorandum called on members of the ACOA to help mobilise public opinion to pressure the Johnson Administration to take a more active role in providing food relief, rather than relying solely on NGOs.²⁵ The same month a report by the *International Review of the Red Cross* noted that 'the most alarming situation is to be found inside the enclave remaining in the hands of Biafran forces'. As the fighting dragged on, Red Cross officials feared 'serious undernourishment' among the almost 4.5 million civilians forced to flee the advancing Federal forces. As food supplies were restricted, *kwashiorkor*, emerged as an epidemic, particularly among children, the most vulnerable to its deadly effects.²⁶

²⁴ International Committee of the Red Cross Report on agricultural situation in Biafra, May 1969, Box 4, NBCH, SCPC.

²⁵ The Situation in Brief, ACOA Food Memo #2, American Committee on Africa, August 18, 1968 available at: <http://kora.matrix.msu.edu/files/50/304/32-130-1CA2-84-ACOA%20Food%208-18-68%20opt.pdf> (accessed 20 June 2018).

²⁶ International Review of the Red Cross, August 1968, Library of Congress, available at: https://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/Military_Law/pdf/RC_Aug-1968.pdf (accessed 29 July 2016).

For African Americans in the summer of 1968, at the height of the humanitarian emergency, the starvation of Biafran civilians caused consternation. From barbershops, to street corners, to local NAACP chapter meetings and to the pews of black churches, the ominous reports of ‘genocide’ via starvation and accompanying images provoked intense emotions. Television, alongside print media, played a key role in transmitting images of the suffering in the besieged Eastern region to viewers around the world. Writing in 1970, the Africanist Dame Margery Perham recalled that ‘through the medium of television for the first time the suffering of a besieged people has been carried into the homes of the great majority of the population’.²⁷ The television images beamed around the world via satellite entered the living rooms of African American homes; by 1970 television had become a ubiquitous part of the post-war era with 95 percent of U.S households owning a television.²⁸ Indeed, historian Yuya Kiuchi commented that by the 1960s television had become a key medium for black engagement with politics, civil rights and culture.²⁹

The reports of genocide were driven not only by the images seen in major newspapers and on television, but also by a concerted Biafran public relations campaign; the impact was significant. The famine conditions in Biafra were increasingly linked by Biafrans (both officials and civilians) with a concerted campaign by the Nigerian Federal Military Government to destroy the Igbo tribal group. Following the pogroms against Igbo migrants in Northern Nigeria in 1966, the leaders of the Eastern Region saw the Nigerian blockade and subsequent famine as part of an anti-Igbo campaign driven by ethnic and religious hatred. During the height of the crisis in mid-1968, Nigerian military officials did not help matters with menacing statements to the international press, including an *Economist* interview with Nigerian army Colonel Benjamin Adekunle, where he notoriously declared that he desired ‘to prevent even one Ibo having even one piece to eat before their capitulation’.³⁰

In Biafran propaganda the slaughter of tens of thousands of Igbo was equated with the worst crimes against civilians during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: the ‘pogroms’ of Jews living in the Russian Empire in the late 1800s and the more recent Holocaust – or *Shoah*

²⁷ Margery Perham, “Reflections on the Nigerian civil war”, *International Affairs* 46, 1970, 231–232.

²⁸ “Selected communications media 1920–2015 U.S Census Bureau”, *The Geography of Transport Systems: the spatial organization of transportation and mobility*, available at https://transportgeography.org/?page_id=1706 (accessed 12 October 2019).

²⁹ Yuya Kiuchi, *Struggles for Equal Voice: The History of African American Media Democracy* (Albany: SUNY press, 2012), 25.

³⁰ “Let’s Finish it off”, *The Economist*, August 24, 1968, 22.

– of European Jewry. A pamphlet issued by the Ministry for Information of the Republic of Biafra in June 1968, to commemorate one-year of independence, grimly stated that ‘Nigeria’s hatred for the Biafrans required that [they] solve the Biafra problem once and for all. Can Nigeria deny that her objective all along has been genocidal, the extermination of all Biafrans and the looting of their property?’³¹ Claims that the population of Biafra faced extermination through a deliberate policy of starvation by the FMG and photos of emaciated adults and children that were reminiscent of concentration camp inmates provoked intense emotions around the globe and in societies directly touched by Nazi Germany’s racial extermination policies.³²

The photos that African Americans viewed in the black press and from mainstream news sources were accompanied by dire reports on the humanitarian situation within Biafran territory. On 20 July, *The Chicago Defender* reported ‘that the death toll may reach more than a million unless emergency food shipments soon reach the area’.³³ Other organs of the black press – from New York and Cleveland to Baltimore and Los Angeles – echoed these gloomy sentiments throughout mid-1968. A photo essay in the *Los Angeles Sentinel* presented readers with an Old Testament vision of ‘hunger, pestilence, and death’. The photos gave readers a distinct impression of the suffering of civilians in the warzone; the roads crowded with refugees fleeing the fighting, the refugee camps teeming with humanity, the golden tinge of *kwashiorkor* flecking the hair of malnourished children, and a little girl weeping over the body of her mother killed in a Nigerian airstrike.³⁴

The *Afro-American* quoted a Red Cross official who stated that ‘between 200 and 300 were dying daily of starvation in Biafra’ and that this number could climb to ‘1000 a day’ by the end of July.³⁵ ‘As many as 3,000 civilians, including a large number of children, are dying daily of hunger’, lamented an editorial in *The Chicago Defender*.³⁶ ‘Six-thousand persons, mostly children with “match-stick legs and bloated” die’, reported Simon Anekwe in the *New York Amsterdam News*, ‘as a consequence of the blockade of Biafra by Nigeria and the disruption of population caused by the 14-month old war’. Anekwe quoted Edward H. Johnson, Canadian executive secretary of the Protestant Board of World Missions who

³¹ *The Case for Biafra* (Enugu: Government Printing Press, 1968), 12.

³² Heerten, *The Biafran War*, 201.

³³ “Nigeria’s Civil War”, *Chicago Daily Defender*, July 20, 1968, 10.

³⁴ “The innocent victims of war”, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, July 18, 1968, A3.

³⁵ “Biafrans dying of starvation”, *Afro-American*, July 13, 1968, 1.

³⁶ “Ibo Tribesmen”, *Chicago Daily Defender*, September 7, 1968, 10.

warned that '[t]he present death rate from starvation and malnutrition in Biafra is "6,000 a day; that's nearly 50,000 a week"'.³⁷ In July 1968, at the peak of the emergency, the *Defender* associate editor Betty Washington interviewed Jim Bob Achebe, a Biafran student at the Illinois Institute of Technology, who recounted that:

Last month 1,000 Biafrans were dying each month. But the situation has become worse. Just two weeks ago, the figure was up to 1,000 per day. Unless massive and immediate supplies of food and medicine are airlifted into Biafra, at least 3,000,000 people will die within the next 100 days.³⁸

The *New Journal and Guide* described a press conference with the Catholic missionary, Father Anthony Byrne, the director of emergency airlifts performed under the auspices of the Catholic relief organisation, Caritas. Byrnes, who had been in Biafra the week prior to the press conference, stated that, 'children [in Biafra] get only one good meal every three weeks.... They eat flies and scrape the ground for worms in hope of finding something to eat'.³⁹ In Cleveland, Ohio, the *Call and Post* called on its readers to contribute financially to the ad hoc Biafran-American Relief Committee on behalf of the 'starving refugees of Biafra'.⁴⁰ The *New Journal and Guide* quoted Rabbi March H. Tanenbaum of the American Jewish Committee (AJC) who described American Jews as 'particularly sensitive to the genocidal nature of the tragedy in Biafra, which arouses haunting memories of the Nazi campaign of extermination'.⁴¹ The sensitivity of American Jews regarding a potential genocide in West Africa made the community central to the debates and discussions associated with the civil war in the United States. During the ongoing civil rights struggle American Jews had been vital allies of the African American community. Now with claims of genocide being raised, and ominous comparisons with the Holocaust being articulated, Jewish commentators called on their allies in the black community to lend their support, in a conflict that touch on issues that intersected with both communities.

Claims and images of genocide in Biafra resonated with African American anxieties about white Americans' attitude to black deaths in the United States. Booker Griffin, an African

³⁷ Simon Anekwe, "50,000 Biafrans starve", *New York Amsterdam News*, October 12, 1968, 9.

³⁸ Betty Washington, "Effort made here on behalf of starving blacks in Biafra", *Chicago Daily Defender*, July 23, 1968, 3.

³⁹ "The starving children of Biafra", *New Journal and Guide*, August 17 1968, BB.

⁴⁰ "Committee seeks aid for Biafra", *Call and Post*, September 21 1968, 7A.

⁴¹ Louis Cassel, "World of religion: Jews, Christians unite to aid hungry Africans", *New Journal and Guide*, October 5, 1968, B11A.

American political commentator, in an editorial in the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, noted that '[G]enocide is certainly what is happening today as over a million Ibos are dying a month. Men, women and children dying like beasts in an era of supposed international justice'. He bemoaned the fact that '[t]he whole attitude of the Western powers is similar to the white attitude concerning blacks killings blacks in the ghetto. Good riddance'. In his weekly column in the *Philadelphia Tribune*, Bayard Rustin, warned his readers that 'in Nigeria black tribes have recently been killing others in behalf of social and political privilege'. This level of intolerance, like race relations in the United States or caste relations in India, was destined to produce a society where there was no 'premium on social justice and human rights'.⁴² In October, just days before he was to face Frank DePaula for the world light-heavy weight title, Biafran boxer Dick Tiger was quoted in the *Chicago Daily Defender* lamenting the international response to the Biafran crisis, where he claimed the Nigerian military government's 'object is genocide'. 'The American people would like to help us', he stated, 'but the government doesn't want to get involved.... They do not care what happens to black Africa just so long as it doesn't hurt British interests'.⁴³

Even prior to the emergence of visual images that dramatised the horrors in Biafra in mid-1968, the word 'genocide' had been linked to the civil war in Nigeria through the actions of Biafran quasi-diplomats operating freely in the United States. In an interview with journalist Ernest Boynton as part of an Associated Negro Press junket, published in the *New York Amsterdam News* in April and *The Chicago Defender* in May, the former governor of the Eastern Region Sir Akanu Ibiam warned that '[t]ales of harrow sweeping over Biafra and the death of women and children by the thousand have convinced the Ibos that, if we lose this war, extinction is just around the corner.... To talk about the secession for selfish reasons is to ignore the fact that the Northerners are fighting a war of genocide against us'.⁴⁴ In a letter written to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II renouncing his knighthood, Ibiam declared that it 'is simply staggering for a Christian country like Britain to help a moslem [sic] country militarily crush another Christian country, like Biafra'.⁴⁵

⁴² Bayard Rustin, "This rich black earth: racist feelings nothing compared to racist actions", *Philadelphia Tribune*, May 25, 1968, 7.

⁴³ "Tiger's thoughts are in Biafra", *Chicago Daily Defender*, October 26, 1968, 17.

⁴⁴ Ernest Boynton, "Biafra's 14 million people facing extinction says Ibiam", *New York Amsterdam News*, April 20, 1968, 7; Ernest Boynton, "Biafra fights off slaughter", *Chicago Daily Defender*, May 4, 1968, 6.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Heerten, *The Biafran War*, 87.

In March, the *Los Angeles Sentinel* reported on the visit of Kingsley Mbadiwe to Los Angeles where he met with city officials and Biafran students studying at Californian universities. Mbadiwe warned of ‘a religious war of genocide, wherein Nigeria’s two reigning religious groups, the Hausa and Fulani tribes – both of the Moslem religion – are trying to exterminate the male Ibo tribesman, who are all Christian’. He also placed the civil war in a Cold War context, noting that the ‘United States has allowed Russia to gain an ominous foothold in Africa’. ‘The civil war in Nigeria’, wrote Mbadiwe, ‘is even more serious... it is as much a threat to world peace as the Vietnam war’.⁴⁶ However, the use of the word ‘genocide’ to describe the situation in Biafra was linked to the notion that ‘progressive’ Biafra, a symbol of modernity in West Africa, was being attacked by ‘backward’ elements from within the Nigerian Federation. Historian Douglas Anthony wrote that:

[t]o other Africans it presented Biafra as the vanguard of a progressive, postcolonial Africa. And when directed at potential supporters in the West, representations of Biafrans’ modernity helped to make them less exotic and more sympathetic for a public whose understanding of Africa was generally unsophisticated – and often tainted by racism.⁴⁷

Biafran ambassadors and Swiss advertising firm Markpress, which was hired by the Biafran government, hoped to use these religious overtones and visions of modernity to build international support for Biafra.

Biafran leaders saw African Americans as a fertile section of American society to cultivate due to the importance of Christianity in the African American community, a fact that took on added significance against the overarching backdrop of the Cold War.⁴⁸ In seeking the support of African Americans Christians, although predominantly Protestants, the representatives of Biafra in the United States hoped to place religious solidarity ahead of racial ties and ahead of arguments for the preservation of Nigeria as a bastion of African self-determination. This was part of a broader diplomatic strategy in the United States that combined Christianity and the Cold War. In describing Biafra as both an anti-communist

⁴⁶ Joe Bingham, “Biafra, Rebel Nigerian State, Pleads for U.S. Intervention in Bloody War”, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, March 14, 1968, D1.

⁴⁷ Anthony, “Resourceful and progressive black men”, 45.

⁴⁸ Heerten wrote that “[i]n the USA, the civil rights movement – vigorously fueled by religious conviction, motifs and semantics – seemed a promising venue for Biafran appeals” Heerten, *The Biafran War*, 94. For the potential Cold War implications of the civil war see Richard Longworth, “Russia Playing ‘African Roulette’ in Nigerian War: No success earlier on continent cautiously betting federals to win against rebels”, *New Journal and Guide*, September 9, 1967, A4. See Also Maxim Matusevich, “Strange Bedfellows: An Unlikely Alliance between the Soviet Union and Nigeria during the Biafran War,” in *Postcolonial conflict and the Question of Genocide*, eds. A. Dirk Moses and Lasse Heerten (New York: Routledge, 2017), 198-216.

bulwark and a Christian nation under siege, Biafra officials and quasi-ambassadors were tapping into powerful sentiments that linked the geopolitics of the Cold War to protecting religious liberty and Christian ‘civilisation’.⁴⁹ During the Cold War, according to historian Andrew Preston, ‘[o]n issues involving diplomacy and defense, religious constituencies mobilized in greater numbers, with greater force, and to greater effect than they had in the past’.⁵⁰ As the leaders of Biafra saw international recognition as a crucial element for gaining independence, religion and the Cold War became enmeshed in their outreach. According to the Biafrans, the Nigerian government was not only intent on wiping out the predominantly-Catholic republic but doing so with the connivance and support of the atheistic Soviet Union.

In the late 1960s, the memory of the Holocaust was of enormous significance culturally and politically in broader American society—not least as the paradigmatic, definitive example of genocide.⁵¹ The trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1962 and Israel’s victory over its Arab opponents during the Six Day War in June 1967 only served to heighten the Holocaust’s hold on American public memory.⁵² For many African Americans in the press, in the civil rights movement, and various sections of the black church, genocide and the Holocaust were deeply linked to the racial experience of black Americans in the United States. However, as early as the turn of the twentieth century, the father of Pan-Africanism Edward W. Blyden, had linked the persecution of Jews in Europe during the late nineteenth century to the suffering endured by black people in the United States. According to historian Michael J.C. Echeruo, Zionism had been an important influence on Blyden’s call for African

⁴⁹ For a sample of works that explore the interconnection between religion and American foreign policy during the Cold War see Andrew Preston, *Sword of the Spirit: Religion in American War and Diplomacy* (New York: Anchor Books, 2012), David E. Settje, *Faith and War: How Christians Debated the Cold and Vietnam Wars* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), William Imboden, *Religion and American Foreign Policy, 1945-1960: The Soul of Containment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), David Settje, “Dueling Catholic Periodicals: America’s and Commonwealth’s Perceptions of the Cold and Vietnam Wars”, *Catholic Social Science Review* 9 (2004), 249-26, Dianne Kirby, “Divinely Sanctioned: The Anglo-American Cold War Alliance and the Defence of Western Civilization and Christianity, 1945-1948”, *Journal of Contemporary History* 35, Issue 3 (2000), 385-412.

⁵⁰ Andrew Preston, “The Spirit of Democracy: Religious liberty and American Anti-Communism during the Cold War” in *Uncertain Empire: American History and the Idea of the Cold War*, eds. Joel Isaac and Duncan Bell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 144.

⁵¹ See Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

⁵² Preston, *Sword of the Spirit*, 559; For the impact of the Six Day War on Holocaust memory in the United States see Shaul Magid, “The Holocaust and Jewish identity in America: the Unique and the Universal”, *Jewish Social Studies*, 18(2012).

Americans to return to Africa and establish a fatherland free from persecution.⁵³ During the Popular Front period in the 1930s, African Americans had increasingly linked their experience of Jim Crow with fascism, in particular the persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany. In his 1936 book *A World View on Race*, the African American scholar Ralph Bunche linked the ‘Negro Question’ and ‘Jewish Question’ in a broader ‘proletarian internationalist’ perspective. Historian Vaughn-Roberson wrote that:

Bunche considered fascism a logical expression of industrial capitalism, with imperial ambitions that were fueled by a desire to mask inequalities at home. Nazi Germany and fascist Italy invoked fear of Jews and Ethiopians to hide their exploitative economic platforms and thus legitimize their political power. The United States, he observed, similarly perpetuated anti-Black prejudice to distract poor whites from their own economic plight. By incorporating Jews within the colored world, Bunche argued that both Jim Crow and fascism act as a ‘camouflage for brutal economic exploitation’.⁵⁴

The defeat of Nazi Germany revealed the scope of the horrors of the Holocaust with the liberation of the concentration and death camps, and the trial of leading Nazi military and civilian officials at Nuremberg. In the aftermath of these ghastly revelations, the international community set about creating international and legal architecture to prevent these horrors from occurring again. As historian Carol Anderson has observed, African Americans increasingly used international forums and covenants such as the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR), and the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide – authored by Polish jurist Raphael Lemkin to target racial discrimination in the United States.⁵⁵ ‘Genocide’, a word Lemkin first developed to define Nazi Germany’s occupation policy in Eastern Europe, went on to be used by African American activists to internationalise the discrimination faced by their compatriots in the United States.

In 1951, the Civil Rights Congress (CRC) founded by the black radical activists William L. Patterson and Paul Robeson, released a 250-page document titled *We Charge Genocide*, indicting the U.S government for its failure to address the inequalities African Americans

⁵³ Michael J. C. Echeruo, “Edward W. Blyden, ‘The Jewish Question’, and the Diaspora: Theory and Practice,” *Journal of Black Studies* 40, Issue. 4 (2010): 544-565.

⁵⁴ Clayton Vaughn-Roberson, “The ‘Jewish Question’ in the Black Mind: The Image of World Jewry in African American Socialism,” *Journal of Civil Rights and Human Rights* 3, No.2 (2017): 67.

⁵⁵ See Chapters one and two of Anderson, *Eyes off the Prize*, 8- 112.

confronted in American society.⁵⁶ The report, which was circulated worldwide, attempted to link the racial regime of Jim Crow to the laws and policies of the Third Reich. Patterson argued that ‘that just as the United States, under cover of law, carried out genocidal racist policies in police murders of Black men, framed death sentences, death that came from withholding proper medical care to Black people, just so had Hitler built and operated his mass death machine under cover of Nazi law’.⁵⁷

In the 1960s ‘genocide’ featured frequently in African American rhetoric about race and inequality in America. Eichmann’s 1962 trial was widely covered in the black press. The *New York Amsterdam News* even sent an official correspondent, John A. Frasca, to provide weekly reports from Jerusalem. A range of religious and civil rights figures linked the revelations of the trial and the scale of Nazi racial crimes to the ongoing racial situation in the American South. ‘The trial of Adolph Eichmann in Jerusalem’, wrote the noted African American theologian William J. Faulkner, ‘on charges of revolting crimes against the Jews, should have striking significance to American Negroes’.⁵⁸ ‘The fact that men of all colors have suffered from this evil course [racial and religious prejudice] stands out as an indictment of Western civilization. Too long has the American Negro thought that he stands alone as the victim of racial prejudice and persecution. That he alone has been enslaved, despised, rejected and exploited’.⁵⁹ Faulkner was one of many African American commentators who argued that genocide was inherently part of the black American experience. The black sociologist Gordon B. Hancock wrote that the Eichmann trial had highlighted the universal applicability of race prejudice and genocide. He wrote:

Race haters and race baiters are working overtime to whip into a frenzy the hatred against Negroes even as hate against the hapless Jews was whipped into a frenzy by Hitler and his Nazis. Race hatred is one of the most violent of hatreds, and for us to minimize this face, makes us remiss in our sacred obligations.... The depth and breadth and heights of race prejudice in this country

⁵⁶ Raphael Lemkin, the intellectual founder of the concept of genocide, expressed his skepticism towards the use of genocide when referring to discrimination suffered by African Americans see Raphael Lemkin, “Nature of Genocide: Confusion with discrimination against individuals seen”, *New York Times*, June 14, 1953, E10. See Also Lemkin quoted by historian Carol Anderson in reference to the incompatibility of the Genocide Convention with the persecution of African Americans in the American South; “genocide occurred only when an intent existed to destroy an entire group, and those who committed lynchings lacked this requisite motivation...the basic policy of the South is not to destroy the Negro but to preserve that race on a different level of existence”, Anderson, *Eyes off the Prize*, 228.

⁵⁷ Quoted in David Helps, “‘We charge genocide’: revisiting black radicals’ appeals to the world community”, *Radical Americas* 3, No. 1 (2018): 7.

⁵⁸ William Faulkner, “Lessons from the trial of Eichmann”, *Cleveland Call and Post*, June 3, 1961, 2B.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

cannot be seen until the Negro makes a move for first class citizenship, and the resistance that evinces is amazing.⁶⁰

The black pastor Richard B. Martin from Virginia noted that ‘launchpads for Eichmanism’ had been ‘established here and elsewhere in the world’ in the form of ‘insults, indignities, imprisonments, abuses, intimidation and political gerrymandering’.⁶¹ The black Baptist minister Benjamin E. Mays wrote that ‘[p]rejudice against Jews was so strong that to the Nazi it was right to kill Jews. I am sure that most people who participated in lynchings had no pangs of conscience – nothing but a “n....” had been lynched’.⁶²

Facing a period of political and economic uncertainty in the late 1960s, with many African Americans fearing a backlash against the political and legal gains of the Second Reconstruction period, the language of genocide became interconnected with the fears harboured by black Americans for their ongoing struggle for equality in American society.⁶³ ‘Genocide’ was used to describe some of the key challenges facing black America, ranging from backlash politics, to the war in Vietnam, to family planning and the use of contraceptives, to police violence, and endemic poverty. The social historian Simone M. Caron noted that ‘[d]uring the 1960s, such genocidal fears were generally raised by [black] militants and those sceptical of the system’.⁶⁴ The political scientist and co-author of *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* with Stokely Carmichael, Charles V. Hamilton, suspected that the growing backlash in broader American society to African American demands for equality could lead to genocide. Answering with a definitive ‘yes’ to the question, ‘[i]s Genocide possible in America’, Hamilton wrote that:

[o]n matters of race, he [shorthand for white American society] will be irrational. Therefore, when he is confronted with legitimate demands which challenge his presumed superiority and his

⁶⁰ Gordon Hancock, “Behind the headlines: Eichmann’s case and danger of race hate”, *New Journal and Guide*, May 6, 1961, B12.

⁶¹ Richard B. Martin, “The Guide Post: Eichmann: Racism at its worst”, *New Journal and Guide*, April 22, 1961, B13A.

⁶² Benjamin E. Mays, “My View: This is Nazism”, *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 16, 1962, 12.

⁶³ The phrase “New” or “Second Reconstruction” was coined by the historian C. Van Woodward in his 1955 work *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* to describe the growing reform movement that challenged racial segregation in the mid-twentieth century. However, in the concluding chapter for the 1974 edition of *Strange Career*, written following the racial turbulence of the late 1960s, Woodward lamented that “[t]he foundations of the Second Reconstruction had, in fact, begun to crumble during the Johnson Administration” see Howard N. Rabinowitz, “More Than the Woodward Thesis: Assessing the Strange Career of Jim Crow”, *The Journal of American History* 75, No. 3(1988): 851-852.

⁶⁴ Simone M. Caron, “Birth control and the black community in the 1960s: genocide or power politics?” *Journal of Social History* 31, Issue.3 (1998): 546.

concept of his self-interest he might well react in a further oppressive manner – even to the point of genocide.⁶⁵

Discussion about genocide was not confined to radical circles; the issue was debated by a broad cross-section in the African American community. In July 1967, as hostilities commenced in Nigeria, the annual NAACP conference heard an alarming report from two New York-based welfare officers who claimed that state authorities in Mississippi were deliberately starving African American residents. ‘They are trying to kill the Negro voting plurality in Mississippi’, the authors warned: ‘Mississippi has a plan of genocide to get rid of as many Negroes as possible’. Unemployment and the systematic exclusion of African American agrarian workers from the Delta’s economy were creating poverty conditions that needed federal government intervention since local chapters of the AFL-CIO seemed unwilling to act.⁶⁶ The NAACP’s urban program director Edward T. McClellan warned black readers in the *Defender* in August 1968 that ‘[t]he probability of genocide happening in America today is as possible as the existence of a lack of justice in our institutions and people’.⁶⁷ Betty Washington reported in the *Chicago Daily Defender* that the youth branch of the NAACP was submitting a position paper to the UN, against the advice of senior figures within the organisation, condemning ‘the systematic genocide committed by this country on the Indians, and the enslavement, genocide, and continued subjugation of black people’.⁶⁸

Both the Black Panther Party (BPP) and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), used the concept of genocide to internationalise and highlight the continuing problem of racial discrimination in the United States.⁶⁹ The Panthers, in their Ten Point Program, explicitly linked the discrimination endured by the black community to the Holocaust.⁷⁰ The Ten Point Program appeared in October 1966, one month after the start of

⁶⁵ Charles V. Hamilton, “Genocide is possible, says black educator”, *Chicago Daily Defender*, August 3, 1968, 1.

⁶⁶ “Convention hears of ‘genocide’”, *Chicago Daily Defender*, July 15, 1967, 3.

⁶⁷ Edward McClellan, “Genocide is not a new thing on the American scene”, *Chicago Daily Defender*, August 7, 1968, 4.

⁶⁸ Betty Washington, “NAACP chiefs predict the results of militancy”, *Chicago Daily Defender*, September 13, 1967, 4.

⁶⁹ For SNCC’s use of genocide see pamphlet titled “Genocide in Mississippi” to draw attention to House Bill 180, also known as the Mississippi sterilization bill of 1964 see “The case of genocide in Mississippi – SNCC pamphlet” The Carter G. Woodson Institute, <http://civilrights.woodson.virginia.edu/exhibits/show/casefor/genocide/genocide> (accessed 5 February 2019).

⁷⁰ “Ten Point Program”, USA: Black Panther Party, Marxist History <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/workers/black-panthers/1966/10/15.htm>, (accessed 7 October 2018); See also Historian Sean L. Malloy wrote that “[Bobby] Seale linked the founding of the BPP to Newton’s realization that the police terrorizing West Oakland were essentially the same as the ‘pig forces committing murder and genocide right in front of our faces in Vietnam’” see Malloy, *Out of Oakland*, 118.

the pogroms against Igbo civilians in Northern Nigeria. A letter to the editor of the *New York Amsterdam News* deplored the arrest of the Chairman of SNCC, H. Rap Brown, on firearms charges, seeing the arrest as symptomatic of authorities cracking down on any black individual who ‘enlightens his “brothers” and “sisters” as to how this country commits acts of violence against black people and acts of genocide’.⁷¹

As reports of genocide started to emerge from the warzone in Eastern Nigeria in mid-1968, they resonated deeply with a community that had seen their experience of Jim Crow and broader racial discrimination as akin in key respects to ‘genocide’, as defined by Raphael Lemkin. While the case of potential genocide against the Igbo revolved around issues related to ethnicity, religion, and their positions within the polity of the postcolonial Nigerian state, rather than questions of race, charges of genocide were too significant to be ignored by black America since their own history bore the hallmarks of genocidal violence and dispossession.

As the grim images from the Nigerian warzone filled newsstands and television reports bombarded viewers with death and famine, voices within the African American community – as well as in broader American society – called on the black American community to do more to help. A December 1968 report by the Commission on International Affairs of the American Jewish Committee (AJC) lamented that ‘there has not been a total silence on Biafra among blacks, but there has been a disappointing lack of consistent demand and concern among the one segment from which it might most naturally have been expected to emanate’.⁷² While the report was correct to point out that African Americans were wary of taking an explicit political position on the war and subsequent famine, a close reading of the black press reveals that a heterogeneous array of black voices, including civil rights leaders, black politicians, black nationalists, black journalists, and average citizens were increasingly alarmed by the warnings of ‘genocide’. This growing concern spawned a variety of responses from the African American community, ranging from protests, funding drives by established black organisations, petitions, lobbying campaigns, community organising and even some individuals travelling into the warzone to help provide relief.

⁷¹ Henry Hagins, “Rap Brown”, *New York Amsterdam News*, September 16, 1967, 16.

⁷² “Tragedy of Biafra”, December 15, 1968, Biafraland, http://www.biafraland.com/1968_Biafra%20_Report_By_American_Jewish_Congress.htm, (accessed 22 November 2018).

The calls for African Americans to do more to aid the fight against starvation and ‘genocide’ in one of Africa’s most significant states were refracted through the politics and culture of black America in the late 1960s. For example, Robert T. Bowen, a black nationalist and founder of the Institute of Black Studies in Los Angeles, lambasted his fellow blacks for being ‘tone deaf’ on Biafra. The crisis in Nigeria, according to Bowen, presented African-Americans with the question of ‘whether or not home-grown black power leaps the ocean and – like the modern airline – spans the Atlantic river’. ‘Biafra’ was a ‘test [of] our proclaimed love, nation-spanning brotherhood, and inner strength and beauty’.⁷³ According to Bowen, African Americans were on the verge of failing this test. He lamented a black consciousness that seemed to be relatively insular – ‘I’m so wrapped up in love for my Hough-Watts-Harlem brothers, I don’t know which way Biafra is!’⁷⁴

‘Where are the radicals, the black militants’, wrote the journalist and Zionist socialist activist Aviva Cantor Zuchoff, who would become a prominent supporter of Biafran independence in the pages of *Village Voice*. ‘Why aren’t they holding a hunger strike at the Embassy of Great Britain, which is openly supplying tons of sophisticated weapons to the Nigerians?’⁷⁵ ‘The Biafran crisis comes at a poor time for the American Left’, lamented an editorial in *Liberation* titled ‘Biafra- Black is Human’:

A time in which the struggle for the liberation of our own black people is of primary importance and when the message Black is Beautiful is rightly proclaimed throughout the land. It is a difficult time to take cognizance of a struggle in Africa in which black people are pitted against each other in a merciless war, one side threatened with genocide by the other.

While acknowledging ‘there is a lack of ideology in the Biafran struggle that may limit its appeal to some on the Left’, the editorial declared that:

[A] strict concern for truth compels us so to describe this war and it is well that socially concerned people should be able to recognize and act on what is true. We should not forget that behind the truth Black is Beautiful is a higher truth: black is human.⁷⁶

⁷³ Robert T. Bowen, “Are Negroes tone deaf on Biafra?” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, July 18 1968, B11.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Aviva Cantor Zuchoff, “The Press of Freedom: The Biafran Distraction & the shriek of silence”, *The Village Voice*, October 17, 1968, File 4 American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive, Box 10, CHNB, SCPC.

⁷⁶ “Biafra- Black is Human”, *Liberation*, November 1968, File 4 American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive, Box 10, CHNB, SCPC.

Maxwell Cohen, a lawyer and member of the international law committee of the American Bar Association, as well as a friend of the late Professor Raphael Lemkin, called on African-Americans to show more interest in, and concern about, the situation in Nigeria and claims of genocide. Cohen who had developed strong links with the African American community in New York – particularly with black entertainers – had been contracted by the Biafran government to provide legal advice on use of the Genocide Convention to support Biafran claims at the UN. In an interview published in the *New York Amsterdam News*, following Cohen's return from visiting Biafra, where he had seen the bloodshed first-hand – including indiscriminate Nigerian government airstrikes – Cohen noted that, '[U]nless he [the African American] identifies with Biafra, all that African clothing and hairdo will amount to nothing but shallow mannerism'.⁷⁷

Charles Kindle, the African Affairs chairman of the Pittsburgh chapter of the NAACP, wrote in the *New Pittsburgh Courier* that, '[M]any black Americans are rightfully claiming their African heritage but wearing robes and beads and long hair does not make one identified with Africa. One must think and feel black'. Kindle saw the lobbying role of American Jews during the Six-Day War as a model black Americans should emulate in relation to Africa. They needed to press the U.S. government to provide food aid to Biafra and persuade the Nigerian Federal Government to allow it through their frontlines. According to Kindle, African Americans needed to use their political clout to stop 'black men...killing black men for the white man's interests' in Nigeria.⁷⁸

While Kindle, Cohen and Bowen expressed skepticism about how African Americans were contributing to the alleviation of the humanitarian crisis, some African Americans were making significant sacrifices to ensure that food reached those in need in Nigeria. Shirley Washington, an African American activist who was secretary of the anti-poverty organisation, Daughters of African Descent (DAD), wrote a heartfelt appeal to readers of the *New York Amsterdam News* for African American engagement with the war, invoking both black internationalism and memories of the Holocaust:

⁷⁷ Simon Anekwe, "Says Afro-Americans should show more interest in Biafra", *New York Amsterdam News*, November 9 1968, 4.

⁷⁸ Charles Kindle, "Letter to the editor", *New Pittsburgh Courier*, November 30 1968, 6.

We must show, as black people,[sic] that we care about our fellow black men's plight no matter where they are or what the political implications may be.... One has only to look at those pitiful news photos of emaciated dying children to think of Auschwitz. I can't believe the black community would join the general indifference that has been prevalent since the inception of this conflict.⁷⁹

Washington went on to mention the deaths of August Martin and his wife Gladys in a plane crash in Biafra. Martin, the first African American commercial pilot in the United States, was killed trying to land a plane loaded with emergency relief supplies for the Red Cross at an improvised airstrip.⁸⁰ Washington noted that:

One need not get as involved as the Afro-American couple Mr. and Mrs. Martin, who lost their lives in an air crash carrying food, in order to give concrete help.... All that is asked is your help in alerting our Government to our fervent desire to save our starving African brethren.⁸¹

In a letter to the editors of the *New York Amsterdam News* on 10 August 1968, Stanford and Virginia Harrington of New Hartford, New York, compared the response of Jewish people to the Six Day War to the apparent indifference of black Americans to Biafra:

'Thousands of black Biafrans are dying daily from starvation and the United States does not even raise its voice in protest.... Had this fate befallen the Israeli a year ago the American Jewish community would have raised their voices in a protest which would have brought action from the U.S. Black protestors! Where are you?'⁸²

Stanford and Virginia Harrington further stated that '[b]lack protestors (and white) must raise their voices and demand that the United States immediately send emergency relief supplies to the Biafrans regardless of any political considerations with Nigeria. Action, and not words, will demonstrate our true compassion'.⁸³

On 15 October 1968, the *Philadelphia Tribune* reported on the founding of '[a] committee to Save the Children of Biafra' in New York. Although no records of the committee exist to verify whether it was founded by African Americans, the article noted that, '[s]uch a committee may be one of the first attempts of Black Americans at Afro-American Unity, an

⁷⁹ Shirley Washington, "Amsterdam news readers write and write and write: Asks help for Biafra", *New York Amsterdam News*, July 20 1968, 13.

⁸⁰ "Airline establishes memorial scholarship", *New York Amsterdam News*, November 9 1968, 29.

⁸¹ Washington, "Amsterdam News readers write", 13.

⁸² Stanford Harrington and Virginia S. Harrington, "Pulse of New York's public: who's protesting on Biafra?" *New York Amsterdam News*, August 10, 1968, 10.

⁸³ Ibid.

ideology expounded upon by the late Malcolm Shabazz [X]. The Biafran crisis, although not clear to many, can be sympathized with solely on the strength that thousands of human beings are badly in need of help'.⁸⁴ By invoking the ideals and vision of Malcolm X and his Pan-African Organisation of Afro-American Unity (OAAU), the article sought to connect Malcolm's vision of an organisation dedicated to Pan-African unity with the importance of African Americans providing assistance to Biafrans enduring unspeakable suffering in the warzone in Eastern Nigeria.⁸⁵ While a central concern of the program of the OAAU was to highlight racism and violations of human rights committed against African Americans by bringing these to the UN, the OAAU also had a significant grassroots dimension. Historian Garrett Felber wrote that 'the group's founding members imagined an organisation that would start locally and think internationally'.⁸⁶ The author (or authors) of the *Philadelphia Tribune* article sought to channel the grassroots activism at the core of Malcolm's thinking and the OAAU in order to mobilise the African American community to provide humanitarian aid to Biafra.

Whitney Young Jr., of the National Urban League, echoed the need for action by the African American community in a column in the *New York Amsterdam News*. Placing the crisis in Nigeria in a broader international context, Young noted that 'many people who are upset by the tragedies of Vietnam or who rush to condemn the Russian rape of Czechoslovakia haven't spoken out to protest the suffering of black people in the Nigerian war'. Facing this dire humanitarian situation Young wrote that the African American community was essential to a broader American relief effort mounted either through the Red Cross or UN:

Black Americans especially, have a responsibility to urge such actions on our government [in regard to the famine in Biafra]. And they ought to question some of the black nationalists who are so openly pro-Arab about the Egyptian role in this slaughter of black people.⁸⁷

Young was referring to Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's provision of pilots and aircraft technicians to support the FMG fleet of Soviet-made MIG fighter-bombers that had been used to devastating effect against Biafran forces and civilians in the warzone. As historian Melani McAllister has noted, Egypt had become an important nation-state in the

⁸⁴ "Help needed for children of Biafra", *Philadelphia Tribune*, October 15, 1968, 10.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Garrett Felber, "'Harlem is the Black World': The Organisation of Afro-American Unity at the Grassroots", *The Journal of African American History* 100, No. 1 (2015): 201.

⁸⁷ Whitley M. Young, "To be equal: The Biafra crisis", *New York Amsterdam News*, September 21, 1968, 14.

worldview of many black nationalist organisation due to its opposition to Israel and the United States and support for national liberation struggles in Africa.⁸⁸

In critiquing the black nationalist organisations, and some ‘radical’ civil rights organisations such as SNCC that had adopted a pro-Egypt/pro-Arab stance during the Six Day War, Young was seeking to expose the hypocrisy of these organisations that cheered on Egypt’s revolutionary foreign policy in Africa—a policy that also involved Egyptian pilots killing Biafran civilians in their homes, churches and marketplaces.⁸⁹ At a time when the civil rights movement was fracturing, Young’s call for the African American community to rally to provide humanitarian relief, coming from a relatively moderate leader in the civil rights movement, was in stark contrast to the position of black nationalist organisations that seemed to be more focused on revolutionary zeal than preserving black lives. In calling on black Americans to take responsible action to address the starvation crisis in Biafra, Young was seeking to demonstrate the continued importance of mainline civil rights leaders and organisations in the international as well as domestic sphere.

Roy Wilkins, of the NAACP, wrote in the *Afro American* that the suffering in Biafra was both confusing and traumatic for African Americans. Although Wilkins did not state explicitly that African Americans needed to take on a greater role, he saw the crisis as having wider implications for the black diaspora. He reflected that:

The searing feeling between tribes – something Colored Americans cannot conceive of – is always present in either the foreground or the background. The federal government of Nigeria is determined to have one country even if one corner is brought in with its soil soaked in blood and its roadsides littered with the bones of victims of starvation. The residents of the eastern region who call themselves Biafrans point to the death toll among the Ibo [sic] tribe and scream genocide. But all of this including the starvation of millions of black people is saddening and frustrating to black America. Where is the difference that black people were going to show the white world? Where is the compassion and forbearance?⁹⁰

As the black press provided extensive commentary on the humanitarian crisis in Biafra, and as individuals within the black community and in broader American society called on African Americans to become more involved, African Americans responded with a variety of

⁸⁸ Melani McAllister, “One Black Allah: The Middle East and the Cultural Politics of African American liberation, 1955-1970”, *American Quarterly* 51, No. 3 (1999): 632.

⁸⁹ McAllister, “One Black Allah”, 644-645.

⁹⁰ Roy Wilkins, “Wilkins Speaks: Nigerian War saddens all Blacks”, *Afro-American*, December 31, 1968, 4.

actions intended to help ease the starvation crisis. These took the form of grassroots protests, fundraising campaigns, concerts, backyard carnivals and bake sales, charity dinners, and campaigns organised by black civil rights organisations, churches, and individuals, as well as efforts by African American leaders to lobby the U.S government and other international actors not only to provide more aid but to help craft a political solution.

One such campaign centred on deploying music and celebrity for the purposes of raising awareness and funds. On 12 April 1969, the *New York Amsterdam News* announced that a musical spectacular, ‘Conscience for Mankind’, would be staged at the new Madison Square to raise funds for food and medical supplies – and eventually doctors and nurses – for besieged Biafra.⁹¹ The president and lead organiser of ‘Conscience for Mankind’, was the African American lawyer and founder of the Town Sound recording studio, Gloria Toote. Toote, the youngest-ever graduate from Howard Law School and recipient of a doctorate from Columbia University in constitutional law, had initially built her reputation as an attorney for black entertainers who faced discrimination in the white-dominated recording industry. This experience working with black artists convinced Toote that there was a lack of recording studios available for artists like her former clients, and that a black woman was more than capable of establishing a recording studio and running it for a profit.⁹² The connections that Toote had developed in the recording industry would be important as she set about organising ‘Conscience for Mankind’. According to the *Call and Post*, Toote had gained funding support from the legendary Atlantic Record studio, a hub of black musicians during the 1960s, as well as further donations from Roulette Records. Toote arranged for the African American singer Dionne Warwick to record a tape message that would be played on hundreds of radio stations seeking help for the Biafra people through financial support for a concert that would include a star-studded roster of performers.⁹³

At the same time as the ‘Conscience of Mankind’ concert, the *New Pittsburgh Courier* reported that a local thirteen-year old, Debra Denise Walker, had organised a carnival in her backyard with the help of her parents to raise money for the children of Biafra. Walker, who suffered from muscular dystrophy, raised \$67.73 from local residents, prompting the *Courier* to comment that ‘although she too is poor, [she] feels there are those less fortunate than

⁹¹ “‘Conscience for Mankind’ plans big garden benefit”, *New York Amsterdam News*, April 12, 1969, 23.

⁹² “Lawyer tries a world of sound”, *Ebony*, May 1, 1969, 73-80.

⁹³ “Dionne Warwick tapes appeal”, *Call and Post*, March 29, 1969, 8B.

she'.⁹⁴ The cases of 'Conscience of Mankind' and Debra Walker's carnival are just two, of many, examples of African American humanitarian activism in response to reports of famine in Biafra.

The mobilisation of African Americans to raise awareness about the crisis in Nigeria, and to provide material and financial assistance, was not just driven by established political, civil rights and religious organisations, but also by grassroots activism from local communities. Since the 1990s, historians have challenged the narrative that the Civil Rights Movement was a top-down movement driven by national leaders and organisations. The African American community's response to the famine and warnings of 'genocide' in Biafra, built on this tradition of bottom-up mobilisation. The campaigns that black America organised to help Biafra existed alongside and tapped into the same energy that mobilised African Americans to confront pressing domestic challenges. For example, raising money for Biafra relief occurred at the same time as campaigning to raise awareness about African American poverty in the American South.⁹⁵

In the historically black neighbourhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant, Biafran relief intersected with President Johnson's War on Poverty vision. Bedford-Stuyvesant, with its almost 450,000 black residents, had in the late 1960s become a critical front in the battle waged by the Federal government to alleviate the scourge of urban poverty and inequality. The Youth in Action Community Corporation in Bedford-Stuyvesant, which according to historian Michael Woodsworth, was central to the Johnson Administration's Great Society programs, had not only established job placement programs, legal services, a senior citizens council, and a community-run supermarket, but also was providing food aid to residents of Beaufort County, South Carolina, who did not qualify to receive public assistance.⁹⁶ In an interview with the *New York Amsterdam News*, Lola Cuffee, a Youth in Action (YIA) board member coordinating food aid with the NAACP chapter in Beaufort County, noted that:

We tried to reach the grassroot people and to let them know of our deep concern with the problem of malnutrition and undernourishment in their communities.... If properly organized and

⁹⁴ "Carnival benefits Biafrans", *New Pittsburgh Courier*, July 19, 1969, 8.

⁹⁵ For a work that explores the historiographical debates surround grassroots civil rights activism see Emily Crosby, ed., *Civil Rights History from the Ground Up: Local Struggles, a National Movement* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011) see also Stephen Tuck, "'We are taking up where the movement in the 1960s left off': the proliferation and power of African American protest during the 1970s", *Journal of Contemporary History* 43, No. 4 (2008): 640.

⁹⁶ See Michael Woodsworth, *The Battle of Bed-Stuy: The Long War on Poverty in New York City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016).

supervised, our initial effort could be a great link between southern Negroes and northern Negroes because each of us has something to contribute.⁹⁷

The scope of the YIA food relief campaign expanded beyond South Carolina to the Nigerian warzone. The YIA chapter in Bedford-Stuyvesant established a committee to organise food relief for Biafra. Mary Harden Umolu, who is discussed in greater depth below, advised the committee on what should be sent across the Atlantic. She recommended that the committee concentrate on cash donations, medical supplies, and vegetable seeds to ‘meet the urgent needs of the Biafrans’, due to the prohibitive costs of shipping canned food to Biafra. Money was absolutely essential, argued Umolu, in a meeting organised by the YIA’s public information director William Merchant, due to the costs of trans-shipping supplies stored on the Portuguese-controlled island of Sao Tome into Biafran territory. The YIA campaign on behalf of starving Biafrans was not, however, limited to gathering supplies and funds. The ‘Helping Hand Soul Festival’ was sponsored by the YIA ‘to help alleviate the hunger of thousands of people in Biafra and in communities in South Carolina’.⁹⁸

Music and benefit concerts formed a significant component of the African American response – and a key feature of the broader humanitarian response – to the famine in Biafra. In October 1969, a line-up of predominantly African American artists, including the blues singer and guitarist B.B King, headlined an ‘Evening for Biafra’ to support the work of the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive and the Biafra Relief Service Foundation. Besides the star-studded line-up of entertainers, the evening included a speech by former Democratic Presidential candidate Senator Eugene McCarthy denouncing the United States’ foreign policy towards the civil war and speeches by other prominent Biafra supporters and activists. The *New York Amsterdam News* reported that the ‘audience was remarkable for the number of blacks who attended the event with tickets ranging from \$3 to \$50 a piece. In some cases, there were whole families of black parents with teenage children; and they came from all boroughs’.⁹⁹ In Chicago, the Black Consumer League of America, proclaimed Valentine’s Day 1969 to be ‘Soul Day’ to raise awareness about the crisis in Biafra. For \$9, guests including ‘Afro-Americans, Negroes, blacks and blue-eyed soul brothers will celebrate “soul day” at a benefit party to raise money for Biafran relief’.¹⁰⁰ In Pittsburgh, the local chapter of

⁹⁷ “YIA Delivers Food in SC for Undernourished Blacks”, *New York Amsterdam News*, May 31, 1969, 30.

⁹⁸ “Bed-Stuy Steps Up Biafran Aid”, 30.

⁹⁹ ““Evening for Biafra” A Success’, *New York Amsterdam News*, October 25, 1969, 1.

¹⁰⁰ “Evening of Soul is Biafra Benefit”, *Chicago Daily Defender*, February 5, 1969, 4.

the NAACP helped to organise a 'Folk Concert' to support the Biafra relief fund that featured African American artists including Sonny and his Premiers.¹⁰¹

Black celebrities and personalities, including Jackie Robinson, added their star power to efforts to provide humanitarian assistance. The *New York Amsterdam News* reported that black footballer Roosevelt Grier, the 6 ft 5 former defensive linebacker for the Los Angeles Rams, would head a drive by the organisation 'Americans for Biafran Relief' to provide 'two ounces of food daily for starving Biafran children'. Grier, alongside actor Cliff Robertson, who in 1963 starred as a young John F. Kennedy in *PT109*, Virginia Secretary of State John D. Rockefeller IV and Seagram Executive Vice-President Jack Yognman, hoped to raise approximately \$9 million that would go to Joint Church Aid to feed around two million Biafran children.¹⁰²

While New York City, partly aided by the presence of the UN as well as its historically strong black internationalist networks, became the centre of Biafran activism both in terms of aid and support for political independence, support for humanitarian assistance occurred in other parts of the country too. The *Chicago Daily Defender* reported that students at the predominantly African American Thornton Township High School, particularly in the Afro-American history classes and on the student council, raised \$100 to give to International Red Cross through a donut sale.¹⁰³ In Philadelphia, the executive board of the local NAACP branch approved 'a substantial sum of money to be sent to the Biafran Relief, for aid to the children of Biafra'.¹⁰⁴ The Emergency Committee for Biafran Relief, established in Chicago in October 1968 by a group of concerned Chicago citizens, hoped to raise funds as well as organising newspaper advertisements and radio spots to 'acquaint the people of Chicago with the plight of the people of Biafra'.¹⁰⁵ The *Chicago Daily Defender* reported that Alderman A. A. Rayner, Jr. was playing a key role 'by affiliation or by consultation' within the Committee. Rayner was a prominent African American businessman, and owner of the Rayner funeral home. However, he had shot to prominence in the majority African American Chicago South Side due to his civil rights activism and his challenging of the powerful Democratic political machine that dominated local politics in Chicago.¹⁰⁶ *The Chicago*

¹⁰¹ "Biafra Relief to Benefit", *New Pittsburgh Courier*, December 6, 1969, 2.

¹⁰² "Biafra Relief Group Begins New Aid Drive", *New York Amsterdam News*, December 6, 1969, 47.

¹⁰³ "Students Send Aid to Biafra", *Chicago Daily Defender*, January 18, 1969, 26.

¹⁰⁴ Julia Jordan, "Germantown Gems: N.W.Phila.Branch NAACP Aids Biafra", *Philadelphia Tribune*, March 11, 1969, 10.

¹⁰⁵ "Biafra Relief Sought", *Chicago Daily Defender*, October 1, 1968, 7.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

Defender also published a 'Biafran-Nigerian menu' prepared by the American Friends Services Committee. Featuring Nigerian recipes such as 'Groundnut stew' and 'Jollof rice', the menu was designed for a benefit luncheon to raise money for emergency relief.¹⁰⁷

In Wichita, Kansas, in late August 1968, the African-American editor of the *Wichita News Hawk*, Leonard Garrett, started a nationwide campaign to assist in alleviating starvation in Nigeria-Biafra. Garrett, according to historian Gretchen Cassel Eick, was a central figure in the African American community in Wichita. From 1966, Garrett had run the *News Hawk* newspaper, a major source of news and information for Wichita's black community.¹⁰⁸ Besides being editor and publisher of the *News-Hawk*, Garrett was the founder of the Kansas Black Arts Festival in 1968 and was a prominent local civil rights activist and historian. 'The most tragic event in the recorded history of the black man', solemnly intoned an editorial authored by Garrett in the *News Hawk*, 'is the present war now taking place in Nigeria, Biafra'. As Biafrans died of starvation 'at the rate of thousands' daily, '[t]he only true glimmer of hope rests in the hands of the Black Americans':

Unless the Black American shows his immediate concern, it is apparent that no one else will. But he must show his concern en-masse and right now! Biafra must be kept alive [...] The millions that have died have systematically died for reasons known to those people that would have an interest into forcing these people into a larger political association to provide a larger economic market. Surely we will not stand by silently and unconcerned to see this tragedy end in complete Black Genocide.... As of this moment we the Black American should tell our Government to use their powers to accomplish a ceasefire in the Nigeria and Biafra conflict. To use these powers to see that a massive airlift takes relief to starving Biafrans. Twenty-two million Black Americans should tell the U.S Government that they are more than concerned about the lives of our Black people.¹⁰⁹

An official press release from Garrett, with assistance provided by Miss Geraldine Smith, a former employee of UNICEF, announced the official formation of 'a young black organisation', Black American Aid to African Starvation (BAATAS). From its base in Wichita, the BAATAS would seek to become a national organisation. The initial objectives of the BAATAS included gaining a minimum of three million African American signatures on a petition to be presented to U.S government officials, organising a fundraising drive in

¹⁰⁷ "Biafran-Nigerian Menus", *Chicago Daily Defender*, March 13, 1969, 30.

¹⁰⁸ Gretchen Cassel Eick, *Dissent in Wichita: The Civil Rights Movement in the Midwest, 1954-1972* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001): 64.

¹⁰⁹ "Outside Editorial: The shame of our times", *News Hawk Supplement*, undated, New York, File U.S. Black positions, Box 9, CHNC, SCPC.

Kansas, and lobbying Kansas governor Democrat Robert Docking to organise a ‘Month of Hope for Children of Nigeria-Biafra’. Garrett hoped to raise awareness about BAATAS through the ‘assistance of Negro publications throughout the land along with Black orientated radio stations across the nation, civic and community organizations, [and] youth organizations’.¹¹⁰

The BAATAS campaign gained broader attention in New York and Chicago, the cities with the largest black populations in the country, through the influence of the black press. The *New York Amsterdam News* reported that the BAATAS campaign, with the slogan ‘Let the Black Man Help the Black Man’, had raised \$25,000 (\$184,000 in 2019) in Wichita’s African American community alone, to cover ‘the costs of inland shipment of high protein foods’ in the warzone. The article noted that these funds had been raised in the black community ‘through the method of Door to Door Donation’ and enthusiastic youth volunteers.¹¹¹ The *Chicago Defender* praised the ‘small town newspaper’ for reaching beyond county lines to Africa. The article noted that the *News Hawk* had ‘for over four months carried the starving Biafrans plight as its most important story’. The BAATAS campaign had gained the support not only of ‘the World [council of] church organization and every black church in Kansas’, but also high-profile national political leaders. Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts, one of the most high-profile supporters of an expanded U.S involvement in providing humanitarian aid to Biafra, and the first African American Senator since Reconstruction, Edward Brooke, a moderate Republican, had lent their support to the BAATAS campaign.¹¹² Garrett appeared alongside the Governor on Kansas television and other dignitaries in the hope of drawing the attention ‘of the people of the world to the plight of the nations of Biafra and Nigeria’ during the so-called ‘Month of Hope’ between Thanksgiving and Christmas.¹¹³

Garrett’s efforts were either not witnessed or not enough for one James Owens from Jacksonville, Florida. In February 1969, Owens wrote a blistering letter to the editor in the *New Pittsburgh Courier* denouncing what he perceived to be the lethargy of the black church towards the humanitarian catastrophe across the Atlantic. ‘I haven’t heard of the Negro churches doing anything at all.... The Negro churches nationwide should raise a BIAFRA

¹¹⁰ Press release BAATAS, undated, File U.S Black positions, Box 9, NBCH, SCPC.

¹¹¹ “Paper Starts Black “Aid to Africans””, *New York Amsterdam News*, November 9, 1968, 4.

¹¹² “Editor leads appeal for starving Biafra”, *Chicago Daily Defender*, December 7, 1968, 32. See also “YM”s asked to aid hungry of Biafra”, *Chicago Daily Defender*, December 14, 1968, 5.

¹¹³ “Editor leads appeal for starving Biafra”, 32.

RELIEF FUND and show our love and concern for our own people in AFRICA'. Yet the anger that Owens directed at African American elites for their lack of concern for our 'HOMELAND' was misplaced.¹¹⁴ Since mid-1968 black leaders in the major branches of the black church and civil rights and political leaders had added their voices to raise funds for the victims of famine, raise further awareness about the war and lobby the U.S government to do more to provide food relief. The African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) Church, one of the oldest black denominations in the United States, which had developed member churches and facilities in Nigeria for decades, was one of the major black organisations to mobilise its constituents to provide aid. Bishop Alfred G. Dunston, the former leader of the AMEZ church in Nigeria and Bishop Samuel D. Lartey, the current church leader in Nigeria, led the appeal to the 850,000 members of the church to help the suffering 'babies, children, women and aged people of Biafra'. The Board of Bishops of the denomination started the fund-raising campaign with a donation of \$1500 following a meeting held in Durham, North Carolina.¹¹⁵ A column two weeks later in the *New York Amsterdam News* praised the decision of the AMEZ Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Church for having 'been able to raise money to send to the war victims in Biafra'. The columnist argued that the success of these two denominations meant other black church groups such as the National Baptist Convention of the U.S.A could do likewise and perhaps even more.¹¹⁶

In August 1968, at the height of press coverage of the famine, Simon Anekwe, the 'Africa Today' columnist for the *New York Amsterdam News*, wrote that 'it would be imperative that a delegation of black leaders ask President Johnson to order an immediate airlift of food into Biafra'. While acknowledging that '[a] few black Americans have spoken out and others have sent money to the relief agencies', he stressed that 'more community-wide actions' were required.¹¹⁷ Editorials in the black press called for international organisations such as the OAU and the UN to play a more significant role in ending the war. Even prior to the outbreak of hostilities in July 1967, the editors of the *New York Amsterdam News* had called on the

¹¹⁴ James Owens, "Letters to the Editor", *New Pittsburgh Courier*, February 22, 1969, 14.

¹¹⁵ "Bishops Raise Funds for Biafra", *Philadelphia Tribune*, August 31, 1968, 29.

¹¹⁶ "The Church World: Let's Help Ourselves", *New York Amsterdam News*, October 12, 1968, 29.

¹¹⁷ Simon Anekwe, "The Wave of Freedom: Africa Today-Black Response", *New York Amsterdam News*, August 17, 1968, 13.

premier body of international opinion to intervene directly in the face of evidence of genocide and the potential of the conflict spilling over into Nigeria's neighbours. 'We therefore urge that the UN,' declared the editorial, 'take action now to prevent civil war and help both sides work out a modus vivendi that would enable this largest African state to resume its stride towards a viable political community with security for all its citizens'.¹¹⁸ A year later with 'still greater loss of life', due to starvation and continued hostilities between Nigerian and Biafran forces, *The Chicago Daily Defender* argued that '[a]ll the members of the African Organization for Unity should bend their energies towards bringing a quick end to the civil war before foreign powers intervene on humanitarian grounds'.¹¹⁹ That same month black leaders joined forces with national labour and religious figures to send a cable to Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia who, as President of the OAU, had assumed a quasi-mediator role in the civil war and was hosting a peace conference in Addis Ababa.

The appeal, which was published in the NAACP's publication, *The Crisis*, was signed by some of the most prominent African Americans in the country, including Roy Wilkins, James Farmer, Dorothy Height (National Council of Negro Women), A. Philip Randolph, and Bayard Rustin. 'Continuation of the conflict', stated the cablegram, 'with its attendant stream of refugees and the already devastating rate of starvation among the civilian population, is intolerable to concerned world opinion. The first human right is the right to life, yet the war and hunger is annihilating the lives of tens of thousands of civilians and potentially of millions'. The signatories pledged their 'strongest efforts to secure massive relief supplies and full cooperation in the supervision and all technical details of delivering food and medicine'. Roy Wilkins added his own caveat stating that, '[t]he need to feed the starving millions transcends all military and political considerations. It is to be devoutly wished that all parties concerned will summarily end the food blockade as they increase their efforts to negotiate a lasting peace'.¹²⁰ Rustin and Randolph also joined with leaders of the American Jewish Congress (AJC) to request that President Johnson launch a massive airlift of supplies using American aircraft into Biafran territory.¹²¹

In April 1969, delegates gathered in Monrovia, Liberia as part of the OAU consultative mission on Nigeria to discuss ways to end the fighting and seek a peaceful settlement that

¹¹⁸ "Time for the UN", *New York Amsterdam News*, July 1, 1967, 16.

¹¹⁹ "Biafra and Nigeria", *Chicago Daily Defender*, August 14, 1968, 13.

¹²⁰ "U.S Leaders Urge End to Hunger in Biafra", *The Crisis*, October, 1968, 291.

¹²¹ "Wire to President Johnson Urging U.S Provide Helicopter Airlift Relief to Biafra", August 2, 1968, American Jewish Congress, http://www.ajcarchives.org/AJC_DATA/Files/645.PDF (accessed 11 December 2018).

would allow Nigeria to be reunited. As discussions commenced in Monrovia, twenty-two African American civic and religious leaders in the United States sent an urgent cable calling on Emperor Haile Selassie, as head of the OAU, and the gathered delegates, to do all they could do ‘to help restore confidence and to help find ways of healing the breach [between the warring parties]’. Signed by senior civil rights leaders as well as political figures such as Representative Shirley Chisolm, and religious figures including Reverend James H. Robinson, Bishop Alfred G. Dunston, Jr., and Bishop William A. Hillard, the cable announced that:

An increasingly pressing concern of your lives in Africa and our lives here in the U.S continues to gnaw at our minds and spirits. The fact that the lives of many thousands of men, women and children are continually destroyed in the established area of Africa known as Nigeria and Biafra is a most troublesome matter to the whole world in general, and to Afro-Americans in particular.¹²²

Although the mission failed to break the deadlock between the FMG and the Republic of Biafra, due to the reluctance of Biafran officials to embrace the notion of Nigerian unity, the cablegram illustrated that African American leaders were looking beyond the provisioning of aid, seeing the rapid end to hostilities as a humanitarian imperative. For the leaders who signed the cablegram, a diplomatic settlement offered the best opportunity to stop ‘[t]he destruction of life, property and resources...[resulting in] the denial of opportunity for the development of talents, industrial potential and creativity of so many of our people’.¹²³ The Nixon Administration, due to the lack of Cold War considerations involved in the civil war, had been willing to increase the amount of humanitarian aid to international agencies flying supplies into Biafran territory. However, the suggestion of the United States playing a more proactive role in a political settlement provoked a serious clash between the Nixon White House and the State Department. As historian Daniel Sargent has argued, while President Nixon and his National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger were aware of the public clamor over Biafra, the State Department fiercely resisted any diplomatic move that would undermine its foreign policy-making status and challenge the basis of Nigerian sovereignty.¹²⁴ In reaching out to the OAU, the African American leaders were hoping that the OAU would not be as constrained as the United States was in acting as an intermediary in the conflict. However, this proved to be an overestimation, since the majority of governments

¹²² “U.S. Blacks urge halt to war in Nigeria”, *Chicago Daily Defender*, April 26, 1969, 5.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Sargent, *Superpower Transformed*, 77-78.

of OAU states remained wary of any type of secessionist movement that challenged existing state borders. Such political calculations had previously hamstrung ALCA efforts to address the situation in Nigeria.¹²⁵

Historians have considered the response of African Americans to the civil war in Nigeria and the subsequent humanitarian crisis as ‘subdued’.¹²⁶ However, the evidence suggests that many African Americans cared deeply about the events unfolding in the Nigerian warzone. There is no exact dollar figure of how much African Americans contributed to Biafra relief through grassroots organisations in the black community and through other ad-hoc and established NGOs. However, it would be reasonable to argue that black America’s relief contribution was a minority of broader American support from private citizens during the course of the civil war. The attention paid to the claims of famine and genocide in the black press; the statements and activities of civil rights leaders; the benefit concerts; fundraising drives; the BAATAS campaign; letters to editors and editorials on the crisis; petitions; the fundraising by black churches; endorsements of famine relief by black celebrities; protests; and even a backyard carnival show a level of African American engagement that has been overlooked by scholars, who have largely concentrated on the political question of Nigerian unity in the black community at the expense of humanitarianism.¹²⁷

These efforts, when combined with a critical mass of broader American public opinion, pushed the Johnson Administration and then the Nixon Administration to view humanitarian response to the crisis in Nigeria as a political priority. As Henry Kissinger acknowledged in October 1969, the international system had entered a new age, particularly due to the advent of improved mass communication and the transfer of information instantaneously. Kissinger wrote that what ‘used to be considered domestic events can now have world-wide consequences’. U.S politicians and officials could not shield their policymaking from domestic demands for further action by the U.S government and the international community to tackle famine in Biafra.¹²⁸

¹²⁵ See Samuel L. Oluo, “The role of the Organisation of African Unity in the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970” (Masters diss., University of North Texas, 1978), 82-86.

¹²⁶ See Plummer, *In Search of Power*, 194-199.

¹²⁷ For contemporary observers who saw African Americans as more concerned about the politics of Nigerian unity see Conor Cruise O’Brien, “Biafra Revisted”, *New York Review of Books*, May 22, 1969. See also Stanley Diamond, “Who Killed Biafra?”, *New York Review of Books*, February 26, 1970. For historians who have emphasised the importance of Nigeria as a political entity in the African American communities worldview see Heerten, *The Biafran War*, 239-242. See Also Plummer, *In Search of Power*, 194-199. See Also Staniland, *American Intellectuals and African Nationalists*, 205-209.

¹²⁸ Quoted in Chamberlin, “A world restored”, 443 see also Sargent, *A Superpower Transformed*, 79-80.

Prior to the massive public outcry over images of mass starvation in Biafra, the Johnson Administration had been content to remain 'neutral' in this internal conflict, as the war in Vietnam absorbed most of its attention and energy. Nigeria was a crucial U.S ally in Africa and American officials, since the Eisenhower Administration, had viewed the country as a vital Cold War partner. The shocking press coverage of the starvation crisis in Biafran territory challenged this passive approach. 'The public pressure here mounts daily', wrote National Security Council (NSC) staffer Edward Hamilton to the President's Special Assistant Walt Rostow: 'Biafran starvation has been front page news almost constantly while you were away, and I have learned this afternoon that *Time* now plans to do next week's cover story on this problem. American opinion is heavily pro-Biafran, though without much knowledge of the facts'.¹²⁹

Just weeks before, Johnson approved the sale of eight Globemaster transport planes to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and Joint Church Aid in December 1968 (four planes for each organisation), to increase the airlift capacity of the relief effort. This was despite the consternation of the Nigerians who viewed Joint Church Aid as a front for arms smuggling into Biafra. 'The great humanitarian concern for starving people, mostly in Biafra', noted NSC staffer Harold Saunders to Walt Rostow, in outlining the domestic pressures the Administration was under:

[has affected] [o]ur body politic from Ted Kennedy to the major religious-relief organizations has shown increasingly vocal concern not only over the present situation but over a possible major carbohydrate famine beginning in December [1968]. Against this background, we in the White House and people at the Katzenbach level in State have become deeply concerned over the thought of Lyndon Johnson leaving the White House with this kind of seemingly preventable disaster at its height.¹³⁰

While the African American humanitarian response was part of a much larger American – and indeed global – response to warnings of imminent 'genocide' and famine, it did reflect unique attributes of the black community in the United States in the late 1960s. Black Americans from all walks of life were motivated to participate in the humanitarian campaign

¹²⁹ Memorandum from Edward Hamilton of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Special Assistant (Rostow), August 12, 1968, FRUS online, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v24/d398> (accessed 17 May 2018).

¹³⁰ Memorandum from Harold H. Saunders of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Special Assistant (Rostow), November 14, 1968, FRUS online, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v24/d401>, (accessed 23 April 2018).

by the sense that the destiny of Africa was intimately linked to their conditions in United States. The allegations of genocide that emerged from the warzone added an extra layer to the humanitarian effort as it resonated deeply in the African American community. The deprivations that Biafrans had to endure were analogous – although on a much greater scale – to some of the conditions African Americans endured in the United States. While many African Americans were keen to do their part when confronted by the awful images of starvation in black newspapers and on television, and while they sought to promote an apolitical humanitarian response, the political ramifications of the war for Nigeria and the broader black diaspora would not go away. At the beginning of 1969, the debate in the African American community would centre on whether Nigerian Unity was essential for the goal of Pan-Africanism or whether an independent Biafra could be a source of ‘black power’ and rejuvenate post-colonial Africa.

Chapter Five

‘Do our brothers and sisters care?’:

The Joint Afro Committee on Biafra and African American supporters of Biafran Independence, 1969-1970

On 23 November 1968, the front page of the *New York Amsterdam News* announced that Charles (37X) Kenyatta – the black Muslim leader of the Harlem Mau Mau Society and a former devotee of the late Malcolm X – had returned from a four-day visit to the Republic of Biafra. Kenyatta, in visiting the war-torn enclave, had followed in the footsteps of a host of journalists, peace activists, intellectuals, and politicians from around the world, who had travelled to Biafra to ‘witness’ the humanitarian consequences of the civil war.¹ Kenyatta was forced to endure the perilous flight from the Portuguese-controlled island of San Tome through airspace relentlessly patrolled by Nigerian warplanes that had shown little hesitation in firing on relief flights attempting to circumvent the Federal Government blockade. Arriving at one of the two remaining operational airstrips in the territory, Kenyatta would have seen not only the scale of the relief effort but also the challenges faced as relief planes were forced to land at night on barely lit airstrips – some lit by candles in beer bottles – while also enduring regular air raids by Nigerian jets.² Kenyatta may have also observed that at airfields such as Uli, essential food supplies were mixed in with arms to sustain the Biafran war effort, symbolic of the fact that humanitarianism and politics could not be easily separated.

‘I saw the suffering, the starvation on all levels’, Kenyatta recounted of his four days in Biafra. During his time in the territory, Kenyatta described the ongoing aerial bombardment of Biafra by Nigerian forces: ‘I saw churches that were bombed, homes burnt and bodies mutilated’. While cognisant of the tremendous suffering provoked by the war, Kenyatta

¹ According to historian Lasse Heerten, “[b]y defining the ‘field’ – the zone of war and humanitarian crisis – as an exclusive space of experience, journalists, activists, and others who had visited Biafra presented themselves in the role of “witnesses” after their return. Their accounts are vested with power by ascribing the position of a privileged speaker to the authors”, see Heerten, *The Biafran*, 147-148.

² “Only one airport is open in Biafra: Uli field reported shut as Federal troops move up”, *New York Times*, September 15, 1968, 9.

developed an abiding respect and admiration for the besieged Biafrans. He willingly shared their sacrifice, claiming that he only had one full meal during his stay and had eaten bananas for the rest of the visit. 'The people treated me wonderfully', he pronounced on returning to the United States.³

The highlight of his whirlwind visit was a private meeting with the Biafran Head of State, Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu, in Umuahia, the current Biafran capital, following the capture of Enugu. The two men could not have been more dissimilar: Kenyatta, the former convicted criminal from North Carolina, who had spent most of his life in and out of prison, and Ojukwu, a child of immense wealth and privilege, whose background was hidden beneath his Castro-like military fatigues and beard. However, both were drawn to the notion that the struggle of Biafra had immense importance for not only Africa but for the black diaspora. Ojukwu, through a haze of cigarette smoke, described to Kenyatta the historical significance of the Biafran struggle:

I see Biafra as a bastion of the free in an age in which freedom and self-determination are conditioned by the colour of the skin. I see Biafra as a challenge to the colour myths of the centuries which relegate the black man to the role of a serf without brains, without pride, without dignity. I would even go further and say that for the acceptance of the black race, there must be a Biafra. Without Biafra the black man cannot establish as fully equal with other men. The black man must be able to point to a social organization which stands equally as erect as others. Possibly it might not be this Biafra. If this Biafra is stifled, then perhaps in twenty years another will emerge.⁴

For Ojukwu, Biafra was not merely a political project designed to protect the lives and interests of ethnic Igbo following the pogroms committed against Igbo in Northern Nigeria in September 1966, but also a universalist political experiment in black self-determination and self-sufficiency. At a time when the optimism around colonial liberation had dissipated due to the realities of nation-building, Ojukwu was putting forward a case not only to Kenyatta and African Americans, but also to the international community, that Biafra was worthy of support not only due to the depredations inflicted on the so-called Republic of Biafra, but because of what it had the potential to stand for. Following his discussion with Ojukwu,

³ "Kenyatta visits Biafra", *New York Amsterdam News*, November 23, 1968, 1.

⁴ C. Odumegwu Ojukwu, *Biafra: Selected Speeches and Random Thoughts of C. Odumegwu Ojukwu* (London: Harper & Row, 1969), 200-201.

Kenyatta declared that ‘the black world of America must be concerned and I shall tell it from the mountain top. What I saw cannot be described in one story’.⁵

On returning to the United States, Kenyatta went about informing ‘the black world of America’ about his ordeal in Biafra. In April 1969, Kenyatta ventured into the American heartland to give a lecture on his experiences in the warzone at the University of Kansas. As noted in the previous chapter, Kansas had become a hub for African American humanitarian activism through the Black American Aid to African Starvation (BAATAS) campaign. The event was sponsored by the Black Student Union and the local chapter of the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive (ACKBA) and was intended to highlight ‘[t]he truth about Biafra’ from ‘[a] Black American’s first-hand account’.⁶

This chapter explores the significance of the little-known organisation that Kenyatta helped to establish, the Joint Afro Committee on Biafra (JACB), and its struggle to convince African Americans to throw their support behind the Republic of Biafra. As I have noted in the previous chapter, the emergence of starvation in Biafra as a global issue galvanised African Americans from a variety of backgrounds to mobilise to provide aid and assistance. However, there was a significant difference between providing *humanitarian* assistance to victims of famine and the war, and the *political* element: supporting Biafran independence. For many African Americans, financial, material, and moral support for starvation in the black diaspora was one thing; supporting Biafran independence was a step too far due to fears that Biafran independence would further undermine the future of postcolonial Africa. The JACB pushed back vigorously against this thinking in the black community, whether through protests, letter writing campaigns, speaking events, engagement with the black press, conferences or alliances with other like-minded NGOs. Biafra should be supported, argued the JACB, not only for humanitarian reasons, but to support an ‘authentic’ black nation that offered a new vision of African freedom, ‘Black Power’, and independence.

As will be discussed below, the JACB represented Biafra as a plucky black republic battling the global forces of white supremacy, while also developing economic self-sufficiency, social equality and cultural enlightenment. At a time when African Americans were increasingly looking to the Third World for models of black political empowerment separate from white power structures and institutions, economic justice, and cultural

⁵ “Kenyatta visits Biafra”, 1.

⁶ Charles Kenyatta lecture flyer, undated, Kansas, File Kansa, Box 11, CHNB, SCPC.

renaissance, the JACB vocally argued that Biafra was a model worth supporting. Although a relatively small organisation with a limited following in the African American community, the JACB was significant because it was the only black group that advocated for Biafran independence and sought to link this support to broader developments in the black community in the late 1960s.

However, the vision of Biafra as a model for black self-determination, offered by the JACB, ultimately found limited appeal in black America. For many individuals and groups in the African American community, memories of the Katanga secession movement in the Republic of the Congo (1961-1965), fears that the process of decolonisation was stalling and potentially could go backwards on the African continent, and the sense that a united Nigeria offered a more viable vessel for the successful development of postcolonial Africa than an independent Biafra, clearly shaped attitudes in the black community.⁷ This was a view held by African American individuals and groups ranging from black nationalists to the NAACP. The realities of the war also impacted on black Americans' attitudes and opinions.

By late 1968 the narrative of genocide by starvation was increasingly being challenged by independent observers in the warzone and in the international community. As historians Lasse Heerten, Karen E. Smith, and Brad Simpson have noted, the finding of an international observation team made up of military officers from Canada, Poland, Sweden, the UK, and the OAU, was critical in muting much of the international outrage at the situation in Biafra.⁸ 'The moral legitimacy of Biafran demands for self-determination', wrote Brad Simpson, derived in no small measure from the charge that the FMG was committing genocide against Igbo

⁷ This sentiment was captured in an essay by Conor Cruise O'Brien in the *London Review of Books*. He wrote that '[t]he reasons for the anti-Biafran feeling lay deeper than the "Katanga parallel," though they were related to it. The Tilden student demonstrator [pro-Nigerian African American student from Brooklyn] put it in a nutshell when he said: "We black nationalists support Nigeria." He quite simply and naturally saw Nigeria as a black nation: one of the largest and most populous of black nations, and for long one of the most admired. The attainment of independence by the African states had been an important factor in the resurgence of black America. These states were called "nations" and anything that put the nationhood of any of them in question seemed to belittle the achievement of independence. The idea that nationhood in Africa might have to assert itself in other ways than within the frontiers of colonization and de-colonization opened up too long and confusing a perspective to be readily acceptable' See Conor Cruise O'Brien, "Biafra Revisited", *London Review of Books*, May 22, 1969. The next chapter will further discuss this sentiment.

⁸ While Smith noted that there was a great deal of scepticism surrounding the findings of the Observer Team (OT) when they were initially released in October 1968, due to the lack of knowledge members of OT had with defining the legal parameters of genocide and the close relationship the OT had with the Nigerian military, "nonetheless, the observer team – and the related pressure on the FMG by the UK government to moderate the level of violence – may have had some impact on the ground" See Karen E. Smith, "The UK and 'Genocide' in Biafra in *Postcolonial conflict and the question of Genocide: The Nigeria-Biafra War, 1967-1970*, eds. A. Dirk Moses and Lasse Heerten (New York: Routledge, 2017), 150-151.

civilians through massacre and enforced starvation’.⁹ ‘The international observer team’, according to Heerten, ‘decided the secession’s prospects’:

The Biafrans had based their claims on a language of legal norms in which human rights, self-determination, and genocide intertwined. The assertion that the human rights of the population of the former Eastern Region could only be guaranteed through the founding of a sovereign state of Biafra hinged on the genocide allegations: because of the genocide, there must be self-determination. However, the inversion of this argument meant that without genocide there would also be no self-determination. As it turned out, Biafra was not an African Auschwitz. And therefore Biafra did not become an African Israel.¹⁰

As the genocidal intentions of the Federal Military Government (FMG) came to be seen as overblown, the conflict became less associated with fears that the world would witness another Holocaust and instead was viewed as a post-colonial secessionist struggle, where the ambit of international law and opinion favored the Nigerian government and institutions such as the OAU and the UN. In this context, the African American community looked on the future viability of Biafra cautiously.

The first press mention of the JACB appeared on 1 February, 1969 as a one-page advertisement in the pages of the *New York Amsterdam News*.¹¹ Under the heading, ‘Do our Brothers and Sisters Care?’, a photograph depicted a group of emaciated children looking pleadingly at the camera – an image resonant with the many images that had defined global media coverage of the war since mid-1968. As described in the previous chapter, the images of starving children became the central motif in mobilising support for the global campaign to provide humanitarian aid. Next to the picture, a section of text directly confronted African American readers:

⁹ Brad Simpson, “The Biafran Secession and the Limits of Self-Determination”, in *Postcolonial conflict and the question of Genocide: The Nigeria-Biafra War, 1967-1970*, eds. A. Dirk Moses and Lasse Heerten (New York: Routledge, 2017), 121.

¹⁰ Heerten, *The Biafran War*, 289.

¹¹ My copy of the advertisement was found at the Hoover Institution, see “Do our brothers and sisters care?”, February 1, 1969, Box 3 Folder “Joint Afro Committee on Biafra, 1969”, American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive Collection, Hoover Institution Archive, Stanford, CA.

One of these Biafran children may have been born to lead our race's struggle for identity, freedom and equality. But the people of Biafra are being wiped off the face of the earth deliberately! It is not a civil war or a rebellion...it is **GENOCIDE!**¹²

Below this call to action was an ominous selection of quotes from *Stern* magazine, a West German weekly news publication. The quotes were from an interview with Colonel Benjamin Adekunle, also known by his *nom de guerre* 'Black Scorpion', the commander of the Nigerian Third Division. Adekunle had gained international notoriety for his comments that 'I want to prevent even one Ibo having even one piece to eat before their capitulation' and '[w]e shoot everything that moves...Even things that don't move'. These comments were widely circulated by supporters of Biafra – including the JACB – as indicative of the genocidal intentions of the FMG. Underneath the picture of emaciated children, a cartoon showed the Nigerian leader, Lt. General Gowon accepting caches of weapons from the Soviet Union and United Kingdom while the UN and OAU turn a blind eye, even as these weapons were used to destroy hospitals, schools, and villages in Biafra. At the bottom of the advertisement, a tear away section gave readers the opportunity to send a pre-written message to an African American member of Congress, imploring them to take action. The message simply stated: 'I urge you to use the power of your office to stop the massive slaughter of our Biafran brothers'.¹³

The JACB was coordinated by Mary Harden Umolu, a native of New York who had developed strong personal and professional ties with Nigeria – in particular, the Eastern Region – since 1958. Born in Newsom county in Virginia, Mary Harden was raised in New York, and graduated as a speech pathologist from Brooklyn College, a senior college of the City of New York University.¹⁴ Her marriage to John Umolu, a member of the Eastern House of Assembly and Parliamentary Secretary to the Premier of Eastern Nigeria, in the late 1950s took her to Nigeria, where she spent the next decade. Although her husband was highly involved in the politics of postcolonial Nigeria – during the 1950s he was one of the leading anti-colonial and labour activists in the Port Harcourt – Harden would develop her own unique interest in the largest state in Africa.¹⁵ During her decade in Nigeria, she worked as a producer for East Nigeria Broadcasting Corporation, based in the city of Enugu, developing

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Luia Garrett, "Gadabouting U.S.A", *Afro-American*, November 25, 1967, 7.

¹⁵ Gladys Graham, "It Happened in New York: overseas visitors are cautioned on Behaviour", *Philadelphia Tribune*, January 28, 1958, 4. See Also Howard Wolpe, *Urban Politics in Nigeria: A study of Port Harcourt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 126.

educational and cultural radio and television programs for children and women.¹⁶ While in Nigeria, Harden endeavored to increase the level of engagement Americans – in particular, African Americans – had with Africa. Through her erstwhile sorority, the Brooklyn Zeta Phi Beta, she supported the development of chapters of the sorority in Africa. Three were already established prior to her departure in 1958, with programs designed, according to the *Afro-American*, to establish ‘recreation rooms for children, backyard literacy programs, an international pen pal circle, theaters for children and a lecture and concert bureau’.¹⁷

Returning to the United States following the fall of Enugu to Federal forces in October 1967, she was feted by Biafran members of the African Student Association for her work in Eastern Nigeria, and then immediately threw herself into raising funds for Biafran relief effort (as noted in the previous chapter).¹⁸ At the First International Conference on Biafra, held at Earl Hall at Columbia University between 6 and 8 December 1968, Mary Harden Umolu called on her fellow pro-Biafran delegates – who included Paul Connett, the founder of the ACKBA; Count Carl-Gustav von Rosen, the Swedish aviator who had run the Nigerian blockade to deliver supplies to Biafra; Maxwell Cohen, the noted attorney who was currently preparing a brief condemning the Nigerian government for committing genocide in Biafra; and the Africanist and supporter of Biafra, Dr Stanley Diamond – to view the African American community as a vital ally in supporting Biafra’s struggle for self-determination. She stated before the gathered delegates that:

Many months ago, I said to some representatives, “the black people of the United States are the key to the United States treatment of the Nigeria/Biafra conflict.” As long as the enemy can keep black people of the United States quiet, keep them without information, then anybody in the White House, anybody in the State Department, can say, “we can’t touch it: after all, the black people don’t care; they don’t want us to touch it.”... We must get to the black community. We must get to the churches. We must get to the sororities and the fraternities. We must get to the schools and to the Universities. We must get to these people, wherever they are and tell them the truth about what

¹⁶ “Tales of Africa at MUSE”, *New York Amsterdam News*, February 8, 1969, 28.

¹⁷ “Zetas re-elect Deborah Wolfe”, *Afro-American*, January 13, 1962, 12. See Also Gladys Graham, “It happened in New York: Children are unofficial goodwill ambassadors”, *Philadelphia Tribune*, June 3, 1958, 4, “To join husband in London”, *New Journal and Guide*, June 21, 1958, 7, “Westchester club cities two at Waldorf Astoria”, *New York Amsterdam News*, October 24, 1959, 13,

¹⁸ “Harriet Tubman Guild Plans ‘Queen’s’ Contest”, *New Pittsburgh Courier*, December 2, 1967, 17.

is happening to their people in Biafra; about the quality of these people; the efforts of these people.¹⁹

As noted in Chapter Four, Harden Umolu had been a proactive figure in mobilising members of the African American community to involve themselves in providing humanitarian aid and lobbying the U.S government and other international organisations to help end the war. While Kenyatta and McKissick were the more recognised figures in the JACB, Umolu was pivotal in not only the development of the organisation, but also its media engagement, educational outreach, and links with likeminded organisations such as the ACKBA. She was central to its protests and conferences, and also to its articulating of an intellectual position for black American support for Biafra, especially through her writing in the black press. In this role she was ably assisted by Shirley Washington, who had also been engaged in protests to support humanitarian relief in Biafra, as co-chairwoman of the Black Ad Hoc Committee for Biafra/Nigeria Relief.²⁰ Washington, a graduate of Howard University and member of the anti-poverty organisation Daughters of African Descent, had, like Harden Umolu, spent several years in Western Nigeria in the mid-1960s before returning to the United States. In her capacity as secretary of the JACB she aided Harden Umolu in the publication of the JACB's agenda of support for Biafra in the black press.

In his role as honorary chairman of the JACB, Floyd McKissick was the most prominent member of the organisation. The former National Director of CORE, McKissick had emerged as a nationally recognised figure. He was an early proponent of the concept of Black Power, and his 1969 book *Three Fifths of a Man*, according to historian Christopher Strain, was one of the most powerful books to come out of the civil rights movement. In the book, McKissick vividly captured the disillusionment that engulfed the black freedom struggle following the assassination of King in April 1968, and boldly called for socialistic reform to the U.S economy, as well as black empowerment.²¹

On replacing James Farmer as the National Director of CORE in January 1966, McKissick took the organisation in a very different direction to the course it had steered since its founding in 1942. Instead of non-violent direct-action protest against racial discrimination to achieve racial integration, McKissick was the catalyst for shifting the organisation towards an

¹⁹ Speech by Mary Umolu at the First International Conference on Biafra, 7-8 December, 1968, Box 3, Folder 3, American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive Collection, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford, CA.

²⁰ "Concern for Biafra rises among blacks", *New York Amsterdam News*, September 7, 1968, 34.

²¹ Christopher Strain, "Soul City, North Carolina: Black Power, Utopia, and the African American Dream", *The Journal of African American History* 89, no. 1(Winter 2004): 58.

embrace of Black Nationalism and 'Black Power' that since Stokely Carmichael's explicit call for 'Black Power' in 1966 had challenged the integrationist vision of the civil rights movement. After fierce disputes within the CORE leadership, with McKissick being the leading figure in the 'separatist' faction, he emerged as leader. Farmer, for his part, had originally endorsed McKissick's rival George Wiley, a figure who continued to support white activists having an important role within CORE and the broader civil rights movement. Farmer switched his support reluctantly to McKissick noting that at a time of urban racial unrest throughout many American cities, he better articulated 'the feelings of the ghetto'.²²

On assuming the leadership of the national office of CORE, McKissick stated that '[w]hat the Negro wants is total equality. And that does not mean integration all the time. He wants his self-identity. He wants his culture'.²³ In a heated exchange between McKissick and Senators Robert F. Kennedy and Abraham Ribicoff during a Senate subcommittee hearing into 'urban problems' in December 1966, McKissick pronounced the integrationists' civil rights movement 'dead'. The future lay with black power in 'seeking political and economic power, creation of a black consumer bloc, enforcement of federal laws, and a stop to police brutality'. McKissick also sought to use his leadership of CORE to reshape the image black Americans had of themselves. He declared before Senators Kennedy and Ribicoff that 'He [the African American] is no longer ashamed of his color...that his roots are in Africa'.²⁴

This embrace of black power and growing rejection of traditional civil rights also saw McKissick looking to post-colonial Africa for sources of both inspiration and practical assistance. In August 1967, as the Nigerian Civil War erupted, McKissick undertook a three-week 'Black Power' fact-finding mission to Africa, travelling to Senegal, Zambia and Tanzania. On his return, the *Afro-American* reported that the trip 'had shown him new possibilities for all-colored programs of employment, education and political organisation'. He quipped to reporters that '[w]e didn't see... Tarzan swinging through the trees – we saw people hard at work'.²⁵ McKissick's visit to Tanzania, a country that under the leadership of President Julius Nyerere had assumed the mantle of Pan-African leadership following the overthrow of Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana in 1966, was propitious.

²² Quoted in August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, *CORE: A study in the Civil Rights Movement 1942-1968* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 407.

²³ Ed McHale, "CORE to be flexible and aim for 'total equality'", *New Journal and Guide*, January 22, 1966, 15.

²⁴ "Kennedy, McKissick clash on Black Power", *Call and Post*, December 17, 1966, 4A.

²⁵ "CORE gets new ideas in Africa; NAACP demand SS revisions", *Afro-American*, August 26, 1967, 16.

In January 1967, Nyerere and his party the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU) released the 'Arusha Declaration', a document that outlined African socialism and economic self-reliance as the model for the future of Tanzanian development. 'The experiment in socialism that is being tried in Tanzania, noted the *Chicago Daily Defender*, 'is being watched very closely by all Africa and by Western Powers, particularly the United States and Britain. Should that experiment prove to be successful it will no doubt influence the character of African governments throughout the newly independent states'.²⁶ McKissick's growing interest in developments in Africa coincided with the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War and the escalating humanitarian catastrophe. As an advocate of Black Power who saw developments in postcolonial Africa as having significant importance for the African American community, it is no surprise that he was drawn to the crisis in Biafra.

Like Mary Harden Umolu, Shirley Washington, and Charles Kenyatta, McKissick had been a key black advocate for humanitarian assistance to Biafra from the emergence of the first media reports of mass starvation. Besides humanitarian assistance, McKissick became the first significant black leader to support Biafran independence. On 31 August 1968, in the *New York Amsterdam News*, McKissick put his name to the first of four weekly articles, endorsing Biafran independence. The four articles that appeared between 31 August and 21 September were word-for-word copies of the Tanzanian government statement for the recognition of Biafra issued in April that year. However, McKissick added his own clear message, stating that:

[w]e believe this issue to be one of the most important issues of this decade. Black people in America must be concerned not only with the saving of lives of Black people in Africa, but must also be concerned with the political realities of our times and must be able to stand forthright for or against an issue. This writer stands unequivocally for the recognition of Biafra as a state and nation.²⁷

As historian Brenda Gayle Plummer has noted, in supporting Biafran independence McKissick was the first – and only significant black leader – to take this position. However, as will be discussed below, the JACB sought to tap into powerful contemporary sentiments in the African American community, particularly relating to Black Power and the significance

²⁶ "African Socialism", *Chicago Daily Defender*, March 8, 1967, 15.

²⁷ Floyd McKissick, "From a Black point of view: Case for Recognizing Biafra", *New York Amsterdam News*, August 31, 1969, 13.

of the Third World to the black freedom struggle to try and gain a powerful constituency in favor of Biafran independence.²⁸

‘We, as Afro-Americans’, declared the official position paper of the Joint Afro Committee on Biafra, ‘struggling in America to achieve the most basic of human conditions, freedom and dignity, feel the battle for full freedom of our black brothers abroad is our struggle also’.²⁹ The statement evoked a shared history of African American support for self-determination on the African continent. However, instead of a shared struggle against the racial oppression and economic injustice of European colonial rule, the activists of the JACB were seeking the support of the African American community for the independence of Biafra from ‘reactionary’ postcolonial Nigeria. In the previous chapter, I highlighted the growing impulse in the African American community for it to play a larger role in providing aid to end starvation in Biafra, particularly as growing media coverage exposed African Americans to the dreadful conditions in the warzone. The JACB tapped into this sentiment, but expanded upon it, by linking humanitarian support to the goal of establishing an independent Biafran state. In recounting the bloody pogroms of Igbo in 1966, the official position paper noted ‘[t]hat the population took it upon themselves to guarantee their own lives and property, by proclaiming their homeland a free and independent state’. ‘What we [the JACB] have just described’, noted the Committee, ‘is enough to justify Afro-American support of Biafra.... How can we stand by when our brothers and sisters in Biafra are being exterminated. Genocide is more than enough to justify our support of Biafra’.³⁰ ‘What the Afro-American thinks and does in this crisis is extremely important’, declared an editorial written by Umolu and Washington on the front page of the *Amsterdam News*, ‘[i]n fact, the helplessness of Africans [sic], shows that it will be the Afro-American response to this crisis that will be critical’.³¹

Like the organisation Black American Aid to African Starvation (BAATAS), the JACB used the black press as its primary medium for articulating its political position on the civil war, for engaging with the African American community and for highlighting its other activities such as conferences, lobbying of black politicians, protests and fundraising. The

²⁸ Plummer, *In Search of Power*, 197.

²⁹ Position Paper of the Joint Afro Committee on Biafra, undated, Box 3, Folder “Joint Afro Committee on Biafra, 1969”, American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive Collection, Hoover Institution Archive, Stanford, CA.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Mary Harden Umolu and Shirley Washington, “Nigeria Vs. Biafra; Why this war must end”, *New York Amsterdam News*, August 2, 1969, 1.

principle newspaper for the articulation of the group's views was the *New York Amsterdam News*. As seen in Chapter Four the *New York Amsterdam News* was the black newspaper that was the most strident in its advocacy of African American political and humanitarian engagement with the civil war – particularly through the Nigerian-born journalist Simon Anekwe, a fierce partisan of the Biafran cause through his regular column 'Africa Today'. In using the *Amsterdam News* as their primary means of disseminating information, the JACB not only sought to gain national exposure but also publicity in the large African American community in New York – particularly Harlem – that had a long history of transnational black activism.

By late 1968, New York, with its deep history as a hub of global politics, had emerged as a fertile 'pro-Biafra' environment for a range of activists. Home to an expansive diplomatic and NGO presence thanks to the UN headquarters, and with ready access to various media organisations, the city was the central node of pro-Biafra operations in the United States.³² For the JACB, which established their headquarters across the East River in Brooklyn, New York offered a geographic location that allowed the relatively small organisation to engage with a global community of pro-Biafra activists – both Floyd McKissick and Charles Kenyatta served on the advisory board of the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive (ACKBA), the leading pro-Biafran organisation in the United States.³³ By October 1968, the ACKBA had morphed from an organisation dedicated to stopping "genocide" in Biafra through humanitarian aid, to one that believed that supporting political recognition of Biafra was the only way to end the humanitarian crisis and Nigeria's wanton destruction of the Biafran nation and its people.³⁴ The JACB, like the ACKBA, used media engagement, fundraising, conferences and lobbying to shape African American attitudes to the war. Through these various strategies, the JACB crafted a narrative of Biafran self-determination as a humanitarian response to the mass killing and starvation of Igbo, and was a progressive development in terms of black self-government in Sub-Saharan Africa. Nigerian unity, a concept many African-Americans viewed as sacrosanct, was pernicious when justified to

³² Heerten, *The Biafra War*, 136.

³³ Both Kenyatta and McKissick are listed as members of the advisory board of the ACKBA see Biafra Lifeline, No. 8 Vol.1, undated, New York, File 3 American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive, Box 10, CHNB, SCPC. See also Current News about Biafra, No. 17, June 11, 1969, New York, File 3 American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive, Box 10, CHNB, SCPC.

³⁴ For a detailed description of this shift in ACKBA policy see McNeil, "And Starvation is the Grim Reaper", 278-301.

destroy the nationhood of a people whom the JACB believed were a positive force for African development.

Following the founding of the JACB in February 1969, the key members of the organisation concentrated on outreach to the black community and working alongside the ACKBA to highlight the humanitarian situation in Biafra. This initial activity had much in common with the grassroots activism and organising that permeated the black community following widespread reporting of famine in Biafra from mid-1968. In March 1969, Mary Harden Umolu was the principal speaker at the 'Helping Hand Soul Festival' organised by the Bedford Stuyvesant branch of Youth in Action, a government agency – with a focus on African American youth – that emerged out of President Lyndon Johnson's 'War on Poverty' federal program to address the problems that disadvantaged youth faced in Brooklyn, as detailed in Chapter Four. The event aimed not only to help alleviate hunger in Biafra but also to aid 'communities in South Carolina'.

On 29 March, the *New York Amsterdam News* reported that both Mary Harden Umolu and Charles Kenyatta had appeared as speakers alongside notable pro-Biafran activists including Paul Connet of the ACKBA and Abie Nathan, the Israeli peace activist and pilot who had risked his life running the Nigerian blockade to deliver supplies to Biafra, at the High School Conference on Biafra held on 23 February.³⁵ On 19 September 1969, Umolu appeared alongside pro-Biafran intellectual and religious figures to protest President Richard Nixon's speech before the UN, following his inaction regarding a statement he had made on the campaign trail in September 1968 calling the situation in Biafra 'genocide'.³⁶ The ACKBA quoted the *New York Amsterdam News* that President Nixon failed to mention either the Nigeria-Biafra War or even Africa during his speech to the General Assembly.³⁷

The JACB only started appearing with its own agenda when the leadership of the Committee organised a conference on Biafra to be held in New York between 21-24 August 1969. The conference, themed 'Biafra's right to survival and self-determination', was held at the Hotel Diplomat in Manhattan and sponsored by the Biafra Students Association. It aimed to bring together supporters of the Biafran cause, including members of the JACB from as far

³⁵ "Junior Temple cub hosts pro-Biafra program", *New York Amsterdam News*, March 29, 1969, 30.

³⁶ Biafra, official publication of the ACKBA, September 19, 1969, New York, File 2 American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive, Box 10, CHNB, SCPC.

³⁷ Biafra, official publication of the ACKBA, September 23, 1969, New York, File 2 American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive, Box 10, CHNB, SCPC.

away as California, to discuss and debate the future of Biafra. Through a series of lengthy articles in the *New York Amsterdam News* that coincided with the conference, the JACB outlined their reasoning on why the African American community should throw its support behind Biafra.³⁸ In supporting the struggle of Biafra, noted the JACB, African Americans were continuing the ‘revolution of the non-white world’ and would disprove the notion that ‘the fundamental question of the worth of a black man’s life has not yet been settled by the black man himself’.³⁹

On 30 May, two years since Biafra’s declaration of independence, protestors were again gathered outside the UN headquarters at Turtle Island to call on the international community to do more to end the ‘genocide’ in Biafra. At 3pm, as delegates drank coffee in the North Lounge, the relative calm was shattered by a burst of flames. A youth encased in ‘a cloud of red and orange flames’ ran between the rose gardens and the East River as delegates, visitors and protestors gasped in horror. UN security guards vainly chased the youth armed with fire extinguishers, until he finally collapsed at the foot of a Russian statue dedicated to world peace. The youth, identified as 20-year old Columbia University theology student Bruce Mayrock, was rushed to Bellevue hospital where he died of his horrific injuries on arrival. As he lay dying in the back of the ambulance, he whispered to Dr Michael H. K. Irvin, the head of the UN clinic, that he had immolated himself ‘to stop genocide in Biafra’. A rabbi who knew Mayrock and his family later told the *New York Times* that ‘[h]e was an idealistic young man deeply upset by the events in Biafra. People were being killed and he felt no one was doing anything. That’s why he did what he did’.⁴⁰

Three months later, the Joint Afro Committee on Biafra, would evoke the memory of Bruce Mayrock to spur the African American community into action. In the first of a series of opinion pieces in the *New York Amsterdam News*, the JACB evoked Mayrock’s martyrdom to denounce what the organisation saw as the relative indifference African Americans – and the broader black diaspora – had shown the cause of Biafran independence:

³⁸ “Committee on Biafra convenes”, *New York Amsterdam News*, August 16, 1969, 13.

³⁹ Harden Umolu and Washington, “Nigeria vs. Biafra”, 1.

⁴⁰ Sam Pope Brewer, “Youth sets himself afire at U.N and dies after Nigeria protest”, *New York Times*, May 30, 1969, 1.

[a] young idealistic white American called the attention of the world to the plight of starving black children by setting himself afire before the United Nations. No black leader except Charles Kenyatta publicly commented on his efforts which were reminiscent of Andy Goodman and Michael Schwermer in their Mississippi martyrdom. And what has been the response to this major tragedy facing black people from the majority of our race on both sides of the Atlantic including the Caribbean? Our general reaction has been painful discomfort and dismay.⁴¹

If a young white American was willing to die to protest the slaughter of black Africans, what was the African American community doing to help their fellow members of the diaspora? In their initial piece that appeared on 1 February, 1969, the JACB placed blame on the OAU member states for lack of unity in bringing about a ceasefire and in leaving the organisation of the famine relief effort to Western countries and NGOs. The article was a clarion call for the African American community to do more. At a time when Black Nationalism was becoming a central organising principle in the African American community in terms of politics, culture and education, the JACB sought to harness this interest in the name of Biafra. ‘Those of us who consider ourselves as black nationalists know that our chief concern is about black people everywhere in the world. The last thing a true black nationalist wants is the destruction of a group of black people for any reason’.⁴²

In mid-1969, the success of Biafra’s struggle for independence remained in the balance. ‘A federal victory on the battlefield can no longer be viewed as a certainty’, reported Lloyd Garrison from Umuahia, the temporary Biafran capital in March 1969. ‘The prospect is for a long and more bloody war’, he gloomily noted.⁴³ The “police action” that the FMG had declared in July 1967 had within two years morphed into an attritional struggle that had drawn in an array of international states including Great Britain, the Soviet Union, the United States, France, Egypt, and Tanzania. The stakes were particularly high for Lt. Col Odumengwu Okjuwu, Biafra’s head of state. Besides the images of emaciated children that stared pleadingly from the pages of newspapers, magazines and on television, Ojukwu, the sophisticated and gregarious soldier-intellectual, symbolised Biafra’s struggle across the globe, from the covers of *Time* magazine to the *New York Times*. However, as the battle for Biafra’s future hung in the balance, Lloyd Garrison wondered whether Ojukwu was ‘the

⁴¹ Mary Harden Umolu and Shirley Washington, “Nigeria vs. Biafra; Why this war must end: First in a series”, *New York Amsterdam News*, August 2, 1969, 1.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Lloyd Garrison, “Biafra, in 6 months, has moved away from the edge of defeat”, *New York Times*, March 17, 1969, 1.

indispensable man, or but a lonely figure swept up in the storm of African history, whose currents he can try to navigate but whose force and direction are beyond control'. 'Africa', lamented Garrison, 'has never taken kindly to failures, and its political landscape is littered with onetime heroes who are now has-beens'.⁴⁴

[If] by some miracle, Biafra and Ojukwu survive, both could emerge as something unique in Africa: a nation and leader conceived in violence, hardened in war, united in suffering. While other African states have gained their independence through a gratuitous stroke of the colonial master's pen, Biafra, whatever becomes of it, has dared to fight and die for its freedom. In victory, history could well enshrine Biafra as the first truly black African republic, with Ojukwu its most prominent symbol.⁴⁵

As the second anniversary of the start of hostilities approached, the military situation remained in flux. After six months of protracted fighting and heavy losses on both sides, Biafran troops managed to recapture the town of Owerri in Imo State in late April. The capture of this strategically important town was a boon for the Republic since it opened up interior lines of communication for Biafran forces throughout the enclave, and relieved pressure on the crucial airfield at Uli. The latter was vital for humanitarian relief and maintaining a steady supply of arms from Sao Tome, and most tantalisingly, opened up the possibility of an advance on Port Harcourt with its crucial deep-water port and oil refineries. However, the victory at Owerri was overshadowed by the capture of Umuahia, the temporary capital of Biafra, just when Biafran forces thought they had seized the momentum in the conflict. With the chance of gaining independence by military means an increasingly difficult proposition, Ojukwu and the Biafran leadership again looked to the international community to gain recognition and diplomatic leverage. As a student of history, Ojukwu may have been aware that a successful independence – or secessionist – struggle depends crucially on outside support.

The announcement of the 'Ahiara Declaration', named after the colonial building in the village of Ahiara where Ojukwu's headquarters were hidden, on 1 June 1969, had two main purposes: to boost the morale of the Biafran population by outlining the intellectual foundations of the nation-state, and to gain further international recognition. In his memoirs, Chinua Achebe, who was chairman of the National Guidance Committee, a committee

⁴⁴ Lloyd Garrison, "Odumegwu Ojukwu is Biafra: It's a lot more than a civil war", *New York Times*, June 22, 1969, SM7.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

created by the Biafran Ministry of Information where political, cultural, literature and philosophical matters would be discussed, described the Ahiara Declaration as a living document that would serve as:

a set of philosophical rules that would serve as a guide for the people of Biafra. The Biafran nation, Ojukwu explained, had to have special attributes – the very principles that we approved of and were fighting for: unity, self-determination, social justice, etc. The final version of the document, we hoped would also tell our story to the world....⁴⁶

The Committee, which, besides Achebe, included intellectuals loyal to the Biafran cause, had a variety of intellectual influences ranging from Marcus Garvey's black nationalism, to Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin, the Third Worldism of Fidel Castro, Che Guevara and Mao, and the Negritude movement of Léopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire. However, one of the most significant influences on the drafting of the Ahiara Declaration was the Arusha Declaration issued by President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania in 1967. Achebe was effusive in his praise of the example that Arusha and the leadership of President Nyerere offered Biafra:

[t]he importance of Julius Nyerere in Africa at that time was immense. Nyerere particularly caught the attention of African scholars because he stood for the things we believed in – equality, self-determination, respect for human values. I particularly like how he drew inspiration from traditional African values and philosophy. He was admired by all of us not just because of his reputation as an incorruptible visionary leader endowed with admirable ideological positions, but also because he had shown great solidarity for our cause. He was, after all, the first African head of state to recognize Biafra.⁴⁷

As the drafters of the Ahiara declaration worked furiously, in rudimentary wartime conditions, on creating the intellectual foundations of the Republic of Biafra, the historian C.L.R James declared in a 1969 epilogue to his prescient 1938 work *A History of Pan-African Revolt* that Tanzania was now at the forefront of the Pan-African political project:

[The] example, however, was to come from Tanzania, under the leadership of Dr Nyerere. The impact that the policies of Tanzania has made upon Africa and can in time make upon the rest of the world, underdeveloped and advanced, has already established the African state of Tanzania as one of the foremost political phenomena of the twentieth century. Tanzania is the highest peak

⁴⁶ Achebe, *There Was a Country*, 144.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 145.

reached so far by revolting blacks and it is imperative to make clear, not least of all to blacks everywhere, the new stage of political thought which has been reached.⁴⁸

In placing Biafra alongside Tanzania as “states” that were in the vanguard of Pan-Africanism and resistance to imperialism, white supremacy and neo-colonialism, Ojukwu, Achebe and the authors of the Ahiara Declaration were linking Biafra’s struggle to the broader Third World political project which peaked during the late 1960s.⁴⁹ Biafra burst into international consciousness at the height of the decolonisation process. By 1968, the Third World had become central to the global politics of the era. The Global South was not just a chessboard on which rival superpowers dueled for influence, but a growing source of inspiration in terms of political, economic, social and cultural ideals. Throughout the industrialised world, young Leftists sensed that the winds of revolutionary change were no longer blowing from Moscow, but from states and movements throughout the decolonised world. ‘From around 1960 onwards’, wrote historian Christoph Kalter, ‘the “Third World” concept reframed and encouraged communication and cooperation between people who fought for change in different parts of the globe’.⁵⁰

In Asia and Africa, the Third World was a “mobilization myth” that accompanied the promises, achievements, and disenchantments of decolonization’.⁵¹ For many of these individuals inspired by the Third World, the American war in Vietnam was one of the central issues that galvanised them politically. While vociferously opposing the United States intervention, which resembled the most morally dubious and violent aspects of European colonialism, they also saw the Vietnamese forces of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and the National Liberation Front (NLF) as examples of successful resistance to the United States and the forces of global capitalism. Vietnamese resistance, according to historian Odd Arne Westad, became a lodestar for other Third World movements, individuals and groups in industrialised states soon to be dubbed the New Left. Hanoi’s political and propaganda victory – but not military victory – over U.S forces during the Tet offensive in 1968, further enhanced the notion that the Global South was now at the core of the Left’s

⁴⁸ C.L.R James, *A History of the Pan-African Revolt* (Oakland: PM Press, 2012), 118.

⁴⁹ For a broad overview of the notion of the “Third World political project” see Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People’s history of the Third World* (New York: The New Press, 2007).

⁵⁰ Christoph Kalter, “From global to local and back: the ‘Third World’ concept and the new radical left in France,” *Journal of Global History* 12(2017): 116.

⁵¹ Ibid.

revolutionary project.⁵² If the methods and example of the Vietnamese could force the United States into a humiliating stalemate, perhaps they could be applied elsewhere. The late historian Arif Dirlik echoed Westad in describing 1968 as marking a point when political ideals from the Third World increasingly resonated in the First:

[1968 was] ‘the year of the Third World’, not because the Third World was responsible for the events of that year but because the Third World was everywhere in the consciousness of political activists. It was a mobilizing idea for those involved in the struggles against colonialism and new colonialism. Among the First World radicals and progressives, solidarity with the Third World represented a new measure of political radicalism. 1968 may well be described as the political coming of age of the Third World that had assumed visibility with the Bandung Conference of 1955, but now became a focal point of radical activity globally.⁵³

While Biafra was a humanitarian and political issue geographically located in the Third World, the struggle of the Biafrans for independence was viewed by many Western European and North American observers as a catastrophe afflicting the postcolonial world rather than a struggle that could act as a model for other postcolonial states or movements, or even inspire radical individuals and groups in the West. In fact, many observers of the conflict in Western Europe and the United States had been drawn to the struggle of a majority ‘Christian’ enclave against a Nigerian state ‘dominated’ by Muslim Fulani and Hausa due to its perceived links to the preservation of ‘Western civilisation’ and ‘modernity’ on the African continent.⁵⁴

The Ahiara Declaration was an announcement to the international community that Biafrans, rather than being passive victims, were actually at the forefront of the Third World project. Historian Lasse Heerten saw Ahiara as invoking ‘the auspicious prospects of the secessionist project’. By linking Biafra to Tanzania’s vision of African socialism, Biafra was not just confronting famine and genocidal oppression, but equally ‘the indifference of a racist world dominated by white imperialists. In this way, they tied their campaign increasingly to the rhetoric of anti-colonialism and Black Power’.⁵⁵ Historian Douglas Anthony, described

⁵² Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 191.

⁵³ Arif Dirlik, “Forward: the Third World in 1968,” in *The Third World in the Global 1960s*, eds. Samantha Christiansen and Zachary A. Scarlett (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013), viii.

⁵⁴ “Biafrans”, according to Heerten, were portrayed in Western media coverage, “as hard working Christians... representatives of an enclave of global Western civilization amidst postcolonial decay and savagery. In effect, the humanitarian narratives were only to a small degree an exercise in “empathizing with the Other.” In most representations, The Biafrans were turned into people “like us” despite their skin colour” see Heerten, *The Biafran War*, 142-143.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 289-290.

the language and ideas of Ahiara as sharing significant connections to some of the leading anti-colonial thinkers of the era. He wrote that:

[A]s evocative of Fanon and Malcolm X as Nkrumah, or Nyerere, was the Biafra of earlier rhetoric: modern and independent, but standing toe to toe not with 'feudal', tradition-bound northern Nigeria but with dynamic, global white supremacy. Unlike the northern Nigerian antagonist, whose resistance to Biafran progress was the by-product of social and religious conservatism, this foe feared the emergence of a rival unencumbered by presumptions of racial inferiority and eager to undermine historical patterns of political and economic domination.⁵⁶

The Ahiara declaration was not only a call to arms for the Biafran people as they faced the existential challenge of Nigerian military pressure, but a declaration to the world that Biafra represented a new form of black self-determination. '[T]he Negro', according to the authors of the Declaration:

can never come to his own until he is able to build modern states (whether national or multi-national) based on a compelling African ideology, enjoying real rather than sham independence, able to give scope to the full development of the human spirit in the arts and sciences, able to engage in dialogue with the white states on a basis of transparent equality and able to introduce a new dimension into international statecraft. In the world context, this is Biafra – the plight of the black struggling to be man. From this derives our deep conviction that the Biafran Revolution is not just a movement of Igbo, Ibibio, Ijaw and Ogoja. It is a movement of true and patriotic Africans. It is African nationalism conscious of itself and fully aware of the powers with which it is contending. From this derives our belief that history and humanity are on our side, and that the Biafran Revolution is indestructible and eternal.⁵⁷

For the organisers and supporters of the JACB, the 'Biafran Revolution' was not only an appealing postcolonial nation-building project, but a model that had distinctive qualities that the JACB believed would resonate with broad elements of the African American community. The official position paper of the JACB clearly articulated this connection, stating that:

But there is more. Biafra and her people are worth our support for what they are. Biafrans are not the "Yes, suh" type. They are the kind of people who will not give in to being bullied by the world powers. They are the kind of people who can say to their former "masters", "you don't have to love me, I love myself". They can use their brain, muscle, soul power for survival and

⁵⁶ Douglas Anthony, "'Resourceful and Progressive Blackmen': Modernity and Race in Biafra, 1967-1970," *Journal of African History* 51, Issue.1 (2010): 58.

⁵⁷ Emeka Ojukwu, "The Ahiara Declaration (The Principles of the Biafran Revolution)", Biafraland http://www.biafraland.com/ahiara_declaration_1969.htm, (accessed 21 January, 2018).

advancement. They are capable of extracting, processing, and marketing their own natural resources. In fact, they are the kind of people who offer great hope to Africa and black people everywhere.⁵⁸

This notion put forward by the JACB – that the struggle for Biafran independence could offer a model and an inspiration for African American advancement in the United States – was a view also articulated by Roy Wilkins of the NAACP. In an editorial published in the *New York Amsterdam News* in March 1969, Wilkins wrote that ‘[o]ut of the civil war in Nigeria comes a heartening account of the pooling of ingenuity and skill that could be an example to the Negro minority in the United States’. In discussing Biafra’s development of technology to refine crude oil, develop weapons, expand educational opportunities, and manage its war effort against a superior foe, Wilkins saw an example that had a unique appeal to black America. ‘As we look at our Eastern Nigerian kin with compassion and admiration, the question arises: “Why cannot we marshal our disciplines, priorities, skills and resources under a directorate to speed our complete freedom and our solid stance as a respected member of a racially pluralistic society?” Surely we here can adapt the Biafran plan to our needs’.⁵⁹ While Wilkins, a relatively conservative figure in the civil rights movement, was in many ways the antithesis of the Black Power advocate Floyd McKissick and the theatrical militant Charles Kenyatta, what united the three men was seeing Biafra as a model and example of black empowerment that had the potential to resonate with a broad cross-section of the African American community.

The JACB were cognisant of how political, social and cultural ideas from the Third World (and in particular postcolonial Africa) – but also ideas surrounding black capitalism, black separatism, socialism, armed self-defense and black political empowerment – had by the late 1960s ingrained themselves in the African American community.⁶⁰ Even Wilkins’ NAACP, while highly critical of the violent rhetorical excesses of Black Power leaders and their lack of political realism in regards to the importance of the Democratic Party in achieving racial

⁵⁸ Position Paper of the Joint Afro Committee on Biafra, undated, Box 3, Folder “Joint Afro Committee on Biafra, 1969”, American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive Collection, Hoover Institution Archive, Stanford, CA.

⁵⁹ Roy Wilkins, “Biafrans pool skills, we don’t”, *New York Amsterdam News*, March 15, 1969, 16.

⁶⁰ For recent works on Black Power and the Third World see Sean L. Malloy, *Out of Oakland: Black Panther Party Internationalism during the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017), see also Fanon Che Wilkins, “The Making of Black Internationalism: SNCC and Africa before the Launch of Black Power, 1960-1965,” *Journal of African American History* 92, No.4 (Fall 2007), see also by Fanon Che Wilkins, ““In the Belly of the Beast”: Black Power, Anti-Imperialism, and the African Liberation Solidarity Movement, 1968-1975” (PhD thesis, New York University, 2001).

equality, was equally supportive of key tenets of the black power program such as economic empowerment, fostering racial pride and building black voter strength.⁶¹

The election of Republican Richard Nixon as president in 1968, in the eyes of many African Americans, limited avenues for significant legislative gains for the black freedom struggle, due to Nixon's ambivalent commitment to the overall goals of the civil rights movement.⁶² As Black Power and black empowerment became the watchwords of the African American community, the JACB sought to utilise these political, economic and social dynamics to build support for Biafra. The Republic of Biafra was not only a symbol of black political, economic, cultural empowerment, and resistance to white supremacy and neocolonialism, but also a model that directly resonated with African American circumstances in the late 1960s.⁶³

The JACB was not the only pro-Biafran group to extoll the merits of the 'Biafran Revolution'. As charges of "Genocide" against the Nigerian government appeared less and less tenable, organisations such as the ACKBA and Biafrans themselves extolled the virtues of the Republic of Biafra. In the pages of the *Biafra Lifeline*, the official publication of the ACKBA, the novelist Chinua Achebe, who had become one of the most outspoken supporters of the Biafran cause, placed Biafra's life or death struggle within the context of post-colonial developments within Africa and the broader Third World. He wrote that:

Biafra stands for the true independence of Africa, for an end to the four hundred years of shame and humiliation which we have suffered in our association with Europe. Britain knows this and is using Nigeria to destroy Biafra.⁶⁴

A fellow Biafran, Sir Louis Mbanefo, a highly regarded jurist who had supported Biafra from the start of hostilities and acted as an ambassador plenipotentiary for the Republic around the globe, likewise cast Biafra as having a unique destiny in Africa. In an interview also in *Biafra*

⁶¹ For a historical overview of how the NAACP confronted the challenges posed by the Black Power movement see Simon Hall, "The NAACP, Black Power, and the African American Freedom Struggle, 1966-1969", *The Historian*, Vol 69, No. 1 (2007): 49-82.

⁶² For an analysis of the significance of race and the politics of racial backlash in the 1968 Presidential election see Jeremy D. Mayer, "Nixon Rides the Backlash to Victory: Racial Politics in the 1968 Presidential Campaign", *The Historian* Vol 64, No. 2 (2002): 351-366.

⁶³ According to historian Manning Marable, "[b]y 1967 and early 1968, Black Power had become the dominant ideological concept among a majority of black youth, and significant portions of the black working class and middle strata" see Manning Marable, *Race, Reform and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction and Beyond in Black America, 1945-2006* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2007), 94-95.

⁶⁴ *Biafra Lifeline*, No.5, Vol.1, undated, New York City, File 1 American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive, Box 10, CHNB, SCPC.

Lifeline he recounted his verbal clash with a clergyman on British television who questioned why the Biafrans did not surrender in the face of superior Nigerian military capabilities. He retorted that:

The implication was clear – that most Biafrans didn't know what they were fighting for, that we were underdeveloped, too immature to have a national consciousness of our own. But I will tell you something: we are not Little Black Sambos. We all may die, but no one can take from us the right to die in defense of our liberty.⁶⁵

Rather than a nation of 'little black Sambos', a phrase that evokes highly racialised ideas of political immaturity and subordination, Biafra stood, according to Mbanefo, as the latest incarnation, stretching back to the American Revolution, of a group of oppressed people seeking to form their own state to guarantee their security, prosperity, and political liberty.

An editorial in the *Biafra Review*, a booklet produced by pro-Biafran activists in the United States, placed Biafra in the same category as Vietnam as a crucial battleground in the struggle against neo-colonialism and subjugation by foreign powers. '[T]he Third World is in disarray. The giant hopes of Bandung have been manacled and crushed', declared the editors. Faced with an offensive by neo-colonial and colonial powers intent on undermining the independence of post-colonial nation-states throughout the world, Biafra and Vietnam stood in the vanguard of this ongoing struggle. 'Biafra's will to independence and Vietnam's will to independence are seen as threats that must be crushed. The super powers [sic] have therefore launched exemplary wars of intimidation against Biafra and Vietnam'. Alongside a tribute to the recently-deceased Vietnamese nationalist leader Ho Chi Minh, the editors of the *Review* saw crucial linkages between the two conflicts.

In the eyes of the new colonialism of Russia, Britain and America, the Biafrans, like the Vietnamese, are "contaminated" with the virus of national liberation. They refuse – in the jargon of Pax-Americana – to be "reasonable" "moderate" and "stable" hopes of democracy. That is in ordinary words, they refuse to be cowed, unprotesting, spineless servants to the monster masters of the new global empires.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Pamphlet from the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive, featuring a copy of Lloyd Garrison, "The 'point of no return' for the Biafrans", *New York Times*, September 8, 1968, SM29, File 1 American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive, Box 10, CHNB, SCPC.

⁶⁶ "Biafra and Vietnam: Victims of exemplary wars", *Biafra Review*, New York, File Biafra Government publications, Box 7, CHNB, SCPC.

Paul Connett, the British-born founder of the ACKBA, also described Biafrans as being engaged in a two-front struggle in a television interview after returning from a visit to Biafra:

I thought I saw two struggles going on in Biafra, a struggle for survival, which we'd all heard about, and the second thing, the struggle for freedom, and it was here that I sensed that something was happening which was indestructible. The Biafrans themselves call this the Biafran Revolution.⁶⁷

Connett, when asked by the interviewer if he was depressed by the situation he observed within the embattled enclave, declared that he was 'excited':

I was excited because it was my first trip to Africa and I really believe that Africa, and especially the part of Africa I saw, Biafra, has a lot to offer our society, our culture. This vitality, this excitement for life – you really feel these people are living.⁶⁸

This was a view that Connett was keen to articulate to the African American community, a group he claimed would 'be at the forefront of those people crying out for Biafran independence' if only they were more aware of the full significance of the freedom struggle being waged. In an editorial written in the *Amsterdam News* after returning from the visit, Connett lauded the 'struggle for freedom' being waged across the Atlantic. He described Biafra as 'a black African dream come true'. Rather than starvation and immense destruction, Connett vividly described a nascent state 'in the vanguard of African revolution. It has a face-to-face confrontation with the forces of neo-colonialism and imperialism'.⁶⁹ Connett recounted in the article a meeting with Tonya Eriksema, a twenty-nine year old Biafran university graduate who had studied in the United States. 'We believe in Freedom: in leading our own the way we want', Eriksema had intoned: 'this is the basis for the Biafran Revolution. We won't let others always make us feel we can't make it – that they'll make it for us – we believe that a black man can exist on his own and in dignity'.⁷⁰

The sentiments of Connett were widespread in the transnational network that supported Biafran self-determination. The Republic of Biafra and its people were not just hapless victims of the Federal Military Government siege of the enclave, but a revolutionary model for the rest of the African continent. Conor Cruise O'Brien, the Irish politician and UN

⁶⁷ Interview transcript for Twin Circle Headline, WOR-TV, June 1, 1969, New York, File 1 American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive, Box 10, CHNB, SCPC.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Paul Connett, "Biafra: A taste of freedom", *New York Amsterdam News*, May 31, 1969, 49.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

diplomat who had played an instrumental role during the Congo crisis in the early 1960s as special representative for UN Secretary General, Dag Hammarskjöld, became an outspoken supporter of Biafran independence. 'Biafra', wrote O'Brien in the *London Review of Books*, 'is probably the clearest case of a country where Africans, and only Africans, are in charge. It is strange and sad that people who are sincerely and passionately devoted to the cause of Africa should recognise the numerous Dahomey-type facades [a way of distinguishing Biafra, according to O'Brien, from the politically and economical weak nation-states that emerged in some parts of sub-Saharan Africa during the decolonisation process] and deny recognition to a genuinely heroic African independence struggle occurring before their eyes in Biafra'.⁷¹

The ethnomusicologist Charles Kiel from the University at Buffalo in New York State, who had spent several years in Nigeria prior to the civil war studying the musical traditions of the Tiv minority tribe, was a supporter of the ACKBA and a strong advocate for Biafra as an embryonic state that could overcome the glaring challenges engulfing post-colonial Africa. In a report produced for the ACKBA in October 1969, Kiel warned that the destruction of Biafra, a 'modernizing' minority, 'to protect parochial nationalisms, [was] hardly a future that any sincere Pan-Africanist can cherish'.⁷² Another academic and supporter of the Republic of Biafra, the Africanist Stanley Diamond, from the New School for Social Research, in a pamphlet titled *The Biafran Possibility*, outlined the historical significance of Biafra's existential struggle. 'The subcontinent [of Africa]', wrote Diamond, 'remains subject to continued manipulation from abroad [due to] traditional societies [that] have been shattered, and there is no revolutionary thrust to transform and heal them in the future'. 'Biafra', according to Diamond, 'has the potential to become the first viable black state in Africa and the crystallizing center around which a modern Africa could build itself'.⁷³

In several pieces authored by Mary Harden Umolu and Shirley Washington in the *New York Amsterdam News*, the JACB argued that the 'progressive' Igbo of Biafra were fighting a Manichean struggle against a 'reactionary' Nigerian state that had become a satrap for neocolonial and colonial powers intent on destroying a black population which was at the forefront of the political, intellectual and cultural advancement of the black diaspora. On 9 August, Umolu and Washington wrote that, 'It should be noted that this is the first time in the

⁷¹ Conor Cruise O'Brien, "Biafra Revisted", *New York Review of Books*, May 22, 1969.

⁷² Charles Kiel, "Biafra Memo", October 2, 1969, New York, File 4 American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive, Box 10, CHNB, SCPC.

⁷³ Stanley Diamond, "The Biafran Possibility", Biafra, undated, New York, File 4 American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive, Box 10, CHNB, SCPC.

history of imperialism that the world powers, capitalist and communists, have gotten together to pretend to sew up the broken seams of a black nation'.⁷⁴ The powers that supported the Nigerian government (the United Kingdom and Soviet Union were the most prominent) 'certainly are not interested in black unity but rather they seek a more efficient way to exploit black people'.⁷⁵ Nigeria, like the Congo between 1960 and 1965, according the JACB, had become an object of political and economic exploitation by foreign powers, with only Biafra offering any form of resistance.

An article one week later, also in the *Amsterdam News*, elaborated further on this theme. The Nigerian military regime was not only in alliance with foreign powers intent on exploiting the human and natural resources of Nigeria for their own interest, but this very same regime was clearly focused on subjugating a black population that were widely admired for their political, intellectual, cultural, and economic achievements. The authors lamented the capture of Port Harcourt by the Nigerian military in May 1968 as a grievous blow against a 'great and industrious people'.⁷⁶ Particular opprobrium was expressed at the destruction of the University of Nigeria – renamed the University of Biafra following independence in May 1967 – in the city of Nsukka during the early stages of the fighting. Like the destruction of the library of the Catholic University of Leuven by Imperial German Army troops during the invasion of Belgium in 1914, the torching of Nsukka shocked onlookers globally who saw it as a grievous attack on the black diaspora.⁷⁷

As noted previously, the University of Nigeria was considered to be one of the leading educational institutions on the continent, destined to produce the doctors, lawyers, journalists, intellectuals, engineers, and teachers needed to make postcolonial Nigeria – and West Africa – thrive after the depredations of European colonial rule. The JACB described the university as 'a black university where young black minds were being trained in the ways of running a modern progressive black state and it was willfully destroyed by the reactionary forces that run the supposedly potentially great Nigeria'.⁷⁸ The article went on to describe the destruction following the retreat of Biafran forces from the college town:

⁷⁴ Mary Harden Umolu and Shirley Washington, "Nigeria Vs. Biafra; Why this war must end", August 9, 1969, 49.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Mary Harden Umolu and Shirley Washington, "Nigeria Vs. Biafra; Why this war must end", August 16, 1969, 44.

⁷⁷ For a description of the sacking of Leuven see the introduction to Margaret Macmillan, *The War that ended Peace: The Road to 1914* (New York: Random House Publishing, 2014).

⁷⁸ Umolu and Washington, "Nigeria Vs. Biafra", 44

[b]ecause they have too much reverence for books to destroy them, the Biafrans left the university buildings and equipment intact, and it was of federal Nigerian troops [sic]. The troops immediately set about burning books and destroying millions of dollars worth of microfilmed knowledge. If the only purpose of this war is to make Nigeria one, what would motivate those troops to sack the University? The answer of course, is hatred and jealousy. In fact their act of destruction merely confirms the kind of nation Nigeria is now and will be in the future – a backward place intent on the repression of Ibos [sic].⁷⁹

The destruction of the university at Nsukka and the shutting of schools due to ‘deliberate’ aerial attacks by Nigerian aircraft – many flown by Egyptians due to shortages of qualified Nigerian pilots – were viewed by the JACB as an example of children ‘being deprived of the education that any modern black nation must provide for their citizens’.⁸⁰ Reflecting on the denial of educational opportunities due to the fighting and the deliberate destruction of institutions of higher learning, Umolu and Washington lamented that:

Years from now if Biafra should be destroyed, the same Nigeria will go begging, cap in hand, to the non-African nations to send “Peace Corps” or other skilled persons because they had destroyed educational facilities and killed off a certain segment of their graduates.⁸¹

In depriving Biafran youth of educational opportunities through their aerial bombardment, the Nigerian government was showing that it was no different from European colonial powers in denying educational opportunities to a population that stood for genuine political and economic independence.

Even in the midst of the depravations of war and famine described above, the JACB saw in Biafra a new model for postcolonial development in Africa. In the *Amsterdam News*, the JACB extolled to readers the ‘revolutionary’ *élan* of the Biafran cause:

[w]hat started out as a reaction of an aggrieved and shaken people has turned into a full-fledged genuine revolution for change against the reactionary forces of Nigeria. The Biafrans have been forced through the isolation and horrors of war, to break the umbilical cord of outside assistance that controls African nations. This has brought about a new breed of black men who for the first time realize that they can rely on themselves because they must. Their inventiveness has been a byproduct of it.⁸²

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² “Nigeria Vs. Biafra: Why this war must end”, *New York Amsterdam News*, August 23, 1969, 42.

The JACB's articulation of Biafra's ability to sustain itself as independent of outside political actors – never mind the embattled enclave's dependence on international humanitarian aid and arms supplies – was a clear indication that they saw Biafra not only embodied the ideals of the Ahiara Declaration but also its progenitor, Tanzania's Arusha Declaration of 1967. As historians Seth Markle and Ronald W. Walters have noted, Tanzania's vision of Pan-Africanism, support for liberation struggles in Southern Africa and program of economic self-sufficiency proved to be very appealing to a variety of individuals and groups in the African American community. Walters wrote of the interest that the Arusha Declaration and Tanzania's unique path of development sparked across the Atlantic:

The impact of the Arusha Declaration in the United States was electric because of the growing ideological trend towards the Africanization of the Black community but also because the declaration provided theoretical concepts relevant to the Black struggle. For example, it was not unnoticed that the concept of self-reliance was closely associated with the idea of Black self-determination stemming from the Black Power movement.... The impact of the personage of Nyerere and the country of Tanzania resulted in the growth of a mythical following in the American black community as a great locus of Pan African thought and practice in Africa, especially after the downfall of Nkrumah.⁸³

In his recent monograph *A Motorcycle on Hell Run: Tanzania, Black Power, and the Uncertain Future of Pan-Africanism, 1964-1974*, Markle has described the significance of Tanzania as an example and model to a host of African American Black Power activists including Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael and James Forman from SNCC and Robert F. Williams. Under President Julius Nyerere's leadership, Tanzania had taken an active, and at times risky, role in the liberation of Southern Africa from Portuguese-rule, and from white minority governments in Rhodesia and South Africa. Markle wrote that:

'[b]y 1965, liberation movements had either sprung up or gathered strength in Southern Africa, Namibia, Mozambique, Angola, and Southern and Northern Rhodesia, transforming Tanzania into a vital frontline state that acted as a rear base for military operations. ANC, PAC, SWAPO, MPLA, FRELIMO, ZANPU, and ZANU camps were spread out over eight regions of the country while administrative offices were set up in Dar es Saleem'.⁸⁴

⁸³ Ronald W. Walters, *Pan-Africanism in the African Diaspora: An Analysis of Modern Afrocentric Political Movements* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 66.

⁸⁴ Markle, *A Motorcycle on a Hell Run*, 47.

Besides placing Tanzania at the vanguard of attempts to destroy the last vestiges of colonialism on the Africa continent, President Nyerere was also a key proponent of invigorating the OAU. In his 1965 essay, *The Nature and Requirements of African Unity*, he envisioned a frame for further unifying the continent within the framework of a federated state. Tanzania's political development, according to historian Frederick Cooper, was a serious attempt at creating an ideological and political program that was suitable for African conditions, incorporating the whole nation – not just urban elites. The Arusha Declaration promised economic self-reliance and an end to 'the trade-and-aid model of development and emphasised the engagement of rural communities with a national project'.⁸⁵ For individuals such as Malcolm X and Carmichael, who were increasingly disillusioned with the gradualist approach of the civil rights movement, Tanzania's assertiveness in challenging colonialism and white supremacy, and its commitment to Pan-African development, held unique appeal.

While the JACB did not mention either Arusha or Tanzania directly, implicit in their praise of Biafra's vision of development was a desire to convince the broader African American community to take Biafra seriously as a positive political project that should be held in esteem by the black diaspora. If Black Power activists could be inspired by Tanzania or the guerrillas resisting Portuguese colonialism in Southern Africa, they should also be inspired – and politically engaged with – Biafra's existential struggle with Nigeria.⁸⁶ In the final article of their series, published on 30 August, 1969, Umolu and Washington directly linked Biafra's 'revolutionary' struggle to the Black Power revolution in the United States. 'For more than two years', wrote the pair:

[t]he Biafrans have given real meaning to **Black Power** by their ability to maintain order despite the bombings and disruptions of war. They have manufactured their own weapons including rockets, extracted and refined crude oil into kerosene, diesel and petroleum. The lack of panic and the calm dignity in the face of death on the part of the Biafrans should fill any black man with pride.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Frederick Cooper, *Africa since 1940: The Past of the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 177-178.

⁸⁶ For an in-depth study of African American opposition to Portuguese colonial rule in Southern African in the 1960s and 1970s see Chapter 5 of Raymond Joseph Parrott, "Struggle for Solidarity: The New Left, Portuguese African Decolonization, and the end of the Cold War Consensus" (PhD diss., University of Texas, 2016), 336-404.

⁸⁷ Mary Harden Umolu and Shirley Washington, "Nigeria Vs. Biafra: Why this war must end", *New York Amsterdam News*, August 30, 1969, 33.

The pride expressed for Biafran Black Power related to the stiff resistance the besieged republic was offering to the nefarious forces of ‘white supremacy’. As noted in Ojukwu’s interview with Charles Kenyatta, the forces of white supremacy not only did not care about the suffering of millions of black Biafrans, but they blocked any attempt at international recognition of the fledgling black republic due to ingrained racism. The Ahiara Declaration bluntly stated that ‘because we are black, we are denied by the white powers the exercise of this right which they themselves have proclaimed inalienable. In our struggle we have learnt that the right of self-determination is inalienable, but only to the white man’.⁸⁸ This racism, according to the leaders of Biafra, went hand in hand with the desire of ‘white powers’ to destroy Biafra to prevent the undermining of their political and economic dominance in postcolonial Africa.

The JACB echoed this sentiment, with Umolu and Washington attempting to show the broader African American community that rather than simply a casualty of civil war, Biafra was the victim of a global white imperialist conspiracy that sought to wipe out its population and seize control of its vital natural resources, particularly its large quantities of crude oil. The United Kingdom’s and United States’ tacit support of Nigeria, an ‘Uncle Tom partner’ in the eyes of the JACB, was due to the fact that:

Biafrans are definitely a threat to the International white power structure and they have shown through their courage and blood in the past two years that they are capable of with-standing all the modern weapons the white world can throw at them. For it is a simple fact that the Biafrans are not fighting Nigeria but rather the great white powers of the world. That they have survived so long can only be taken as a tribute to Black Endurance and Will [sic].⁸⁹

In the long run, the unconditional surrender of the Republic of Biafra in January 1970 in the face of overwhelming Nigerian military superiority and a total lack of international recognition, showed the limits of Biafra’s appeal as part of the broader Third World discourse, and the failure of the JACB to build broad-based support for Biafra. In a biting editorial published in the *New York Amsterdam News*, Charles Kenyatta blasted vast

⁸⁸ Emeka Ojukwu, “The Ahiara Declaration (The Principles of the Biafran Revolution)”, Biafraland, http://www.biafraland.com/ahiara_declaration_1969.htm, (accessed 21 January 2018).

⁸⁹ Umolu and Washington, “Nigeria Vs. Biafra”, 33.

segments of the African American community, including civil rights leaders and Black Muslim leaders, for failing adequately to support Biafra's struggle for independence. Kenyatta – who had been gravely wounded in a drive-by shooting in Bronx, which the *Amsterdam News* speculated was related to his outspoken support for Biafra – declared that 'American Black organizations and so-called Black leaders did not identify with the Biafran cause. They believed that the success of the Biafran revolution would signal an uprising in many of the forty-three countries on the African continent and thus destroy so-called African Unity'.⁹⁰ In Kenyatta's rather eccentric worldview, the existing African nation-states, like various civil rights and other black organisations in the United States, were indebted to white power structures, both political and economic. 'Every national organization in the United States which claims to be fighting for Black Freedom, from voters' rights to narcotics, is in conspiracy with the Federal Government to keep the masses of Blacks in subjection [sic].' With the defeat of the Republic of Biafra, Kenyatta claimed that these forces aligned with oppressive white power structures had won a significant victory. 'The fall of Biafra was the fall of African freedom', wrote Kenyatta, 'and those leaders of all colors who spoke out against that freedom; the governments of the world who acted against it; and the United Nations who covered up its destruction are accessories to that crime'.⁹¹

While the JACB was vocal in its advocacy for Biafra self-determination, it remained a distinctly minority viewpoint in the broader African-American community. Aside from its campaign to mobilise the black community through the black press, its impact was negligible, even with figures such as Charles Kenyatta and Floyd McKissick having prominent roles in the organisation. An undated document from the ACKBA papers at the Hoover Institution noted that the JACB 'had little if any impact on the Black community. PanAfricanism [sic] was far more enticing'.⁹² Why was this so? As I will argue in the next chapter, for many in the African American community, Pan-Africanism, as expressed in support for the unity of the Nigerian state, was deeply connected to the strength of post-colonial Africa, and as such, had a stronger purchase on the black community than the JACB claim that Biafra was at the

⁹⁰ Charles Kenyatta, "Black man: dig yourself", *New York Amsterdam News*, February 28, 1970, 15. The motives for the assassination attempt against Kenyatta were murky. Reports published in the *New York Amsterdam News* pointed to not only his support for Biafran independence but also vocal and pro-active opposition to drug dealing in Harlem see "Kenyatta tied to Nigeria", *New York Amsterdam News*, June 21, 1969, 1. See also Les Matthews, "Is Kenyatta talking?: Why was militant shot?", *New York Amsterdam News*, June 14, 1969, 1.

⁹¹ Kenyatta, "Black man", 15.

⁹² Office document, undated, Box 3 Folder "Joint Afro Committee on Biafra, 1969", American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive Collection, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford, CA.

forefront of efforts to liberate and renew the Third World. While African Americans may have been united in their condemnation and horror at reports of starvation and claims of “genocide” in Biafra, as noted in the previous chapter, developments on the ground in Nigeria shifted debates from what black America could do to help those in need, to whether Biafra was a viable political experiment. Although a minority voice within the African American community, exploring the role of the JACB adds greater texture and depth to how black America understood the civil war in terms that intersected with anti-colonial and global ‘Third World’ discourses.

Chapter Six

‘Long live the united Republic of Nigeria – the hope of black men everywhere in this Twentieth Century world’: African Americans and the priority of Nigerian Unity, 1969-1970

In late 1969, the writer and black nationalist Amiri Baraka appeared on *The David Frost Show* to discuss the publication of his 1967 play, *Slave Ship*. Seated alongside the black singer and actress Odetta, Baraka engaged Frost in a passionate and at times acerbic debate about racial politics in the United States and around the world under the glare of the studio lights. After engaging in a back and forth with Baraka on racial repression in the United States, Frost turned the conversation to international affairs, and one of the most pressing contemporary issues, the ongoing civil war in Nigeria. Biafra had been a topic of interest for Frost’s other famous guests in 1969, the former Beatle John Lennon and his wife Yoko Ono. Lennon, for his part, had vocally opposed Britain’s support for the Nigerian government, and in his most dramatic gesture in November 1969 returned his MBE as ‘a protest against Britain’s involvement in the Nigeria-Biafra thing’.¹ On *The Frost Show*, Lennon linked his and Ono’s recent peace activism to the war in Nigeria, stating that:

[W]e’re trying to sell peace, like a product, you know, and sell it like people sell soap or soft drink, you know, the only way to get people aware that peace is possible and...it isn’t inevitable to have violence, not just war, all forms of violence. People just accept it and think, Oh they did it, or Harold Wilson did it, or Nixon did it, they’re always scapegoating people. It isn’t Nixon’s fault, we’re all responsible for everything that goes on, you know, we’re all responsible for Biafra and Hitler and everything.²

By contrast, Baraka saw Lennon and Ono’s vague universal pacifism, and their specific attitude to Biafran independence, as a betrayal of the black diaspora’s cause. For Baraka, African Americans were engaged in a war of liberation against white oppressors. Querying this line of argument, Frost drew on the example of the war in Nigeria to challenge Baraka’s ‘black vs white’ dichotomy. ‘[T]he tragedy of Nigeria and Biafra, which is admittedly

¹ Gloria Emerson, “A Beatle returns award as a protest”, *New York Times*, November 26, 1969, 2.

² Quoted in James A. Mitchell, *The Walrus and the Elephants: John Lennon’s Years of Revolution* (New York: Seven Stories Press: 2013), 42.

horrible', noted Frost, '...is an example of black races going at each other'. Baraka immediately pushed back against Frost's interpretation of the civil war, stating that:

Jones [Baraka]: It's another case of white people manipulating black people. It's the oil interests....

Frost: Who's manipulating Colonel Ojukwu, apart from his own ego?

Jones: If you'll check Biafra out, you'll find that any black country which has a national anthem like "Finlandia" [sic] has cultural values that come from outside the African experience.

Frost: Oh I don't know. "Finlandia" has a wonderful sense of rhythm. [Laughter].

Jones: For you, it does. But what I am saying is that is Biafra's national anthem, and I am saying it is a racist act to impose another culture, another set of values, upon a people. It's racism for you to impose your Greco-Roman or Judeo-Christian culture upon me. What we nationalists are saying is, "We are from Africa, and what we want is self-determination for our people. We want to live under the laws of our choice, and we want to choose the value system under which we live".³

For Baraka, Biafra was not a model for black self-determination, but a neocolonial aberration that held dangerous implications for the African continent.

A noted black poet and writer, Baraka was, of course, not the only member of the African American community to stress the importance of Nigerian unity. In October 1968, in the pages of *Muhammad Speaks*, the official newspaper of the National of Islam (NOI), an article denounced the Biafran war effort as the product of 'a few profiteering Ibo tribal leaders'. 'Ojukwu', according to the author:

won "humanitarian" support from renowned moral cripples like Senator Richard Russell of Georgia, Richard Nixon and Teddy Kennedy; he has turned to Israel, comparing the Ibo tribe to the Jews; he has hired mercenaries who killed Black Liberators in the Congo; the offices are in Black-oppressor Portugal; South Africa and France are on his side; charity organizations, ignoring the people of Angola and Mozambique, starved by the Portuguese, swarm over the Nigerian war on mercy flights to feed starving children. And then, to add the last straw to this strange alliance, Ojukwu, posing as a revolutionary resisting Western colonial "domination" and "Soviet Revisionism", is now asking China for help.⁴

³ Amira Baraka, "David Frost interviews LeRoi Jones", in *Conversations with Amiri Baraka*, ed. Charlie Reilly (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1994), 62-69.

⁴ "Nigerian who lived 6 months behind 'Biafra' line explodes white west propaganda", *Muhammad Speaks*, October 18, 1968, 7.

Muhammad Speaks also included in the article an exclusive interview with E. A. Imiama, a teacher from Calabar who had been living in territory controlled by Biafran forces. Imiama provided details on the persecution non-Igbo minority tribes faced from Biafran forces; how many victims of the famine were actually from minority tribes forced to relocate by Ojukwu's troops; and how these same tribes also experienced detention and in some cases execution for their perceived lack of loyalty to the Biafran cause. At the conclusion of the article, Imiama issued a warning to the readers of the newspaper and the broader African American community:

Before ending his interview, Imiama cautioned all African Americans and other people who should support freedom, justice, equality, and the unity of Africa to learn the truth before they give money to 'Biafran' relief groups.... [N]o clear-thinking Black man should mistake the intentions of these destructive forces [Portugal, Apartheid South Africa, and France] threatening the growth of African unity.⁵

This chapter explores why the political imperative of Biafran independence failed to gain traction in the black community compared to the importance of Nigerian unity. As much as the activists of the JACB were inspired by the ideal of Biafra being at the forefront of Pan-African unity and Third World solidarity, black supporters of Nigerian unity saw the continental and geopolitical ramifications of the civil war. Civil wars have long drawn in outside actors, whether nation-states or other non-government organisations, each with their own sets of goals and objectives.⁶ Nigeria was no exception. For African Americans who had keenly supported the provisioning of humanitarian aid for civilians in the warzone and called for a diplomatic solution to the conflict, Biafra's choice of allies in its struggle for independence raised significant concerns. While the Federal Military Government (FMG) received diplomatic and military support from the United Kingdom, Soviet Union and OAU, the Republic of Biafra sought diplomatic support and overt and covert military aid from an eclectic collection of nation-states, including Tanzania, Ivory Coast, Haiti, France, Portugal, Rhodesia, South Africa, The Gambon, and Zambia. The inclusion of Portugal, Rhodesia and South Africa on this roster of allies perhaps showed the expedience of the Biafrans in seeking allies wherever they could be found. However, for many African American observers it revealed the character of a political entity whose choice of allies had the potential to undermine the future of postcolonial Africa. Portugal, Rhodesia and Apartheid South Africa

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ See David Armitage, *Civil Wars: A History in Ideas* (New York: Vintage Books, 2017).

not only represented relics of colonialism that continued to stand in the way of an African continent liberated from colonial-rule, but in the case of Rhodesia and South Africa were governments that supported overt policies of white supremacy towards the black-majorities within their borders. At a time when the decolonisation process had stalled, and when some observers warned that the post-colonial project in Africa was unravelling, African Americans saw the Nigerian Civil War as an integral part of these ominous developments. This chapter traces the importance of these geopolitical stakes for African Americans before providing an analysis of the importance of Nigerian unity to a cross section of black Americans who had the potential to play a significant role in shaping broader attitudes in the black community – from black foreign correspondents and members of the black press to black politicians such as Senator Edward Brookes and Congressman Charles Diggs.

From the outset of hostilities in July 1967 to the surrender of Biafra in January 1970, the leaders of the Republic of Biafra were aware that outside military support would be essential to sustain their war-effort, and therefore give the new nation a chance at sustaining its independence. Writing in the *New York Review of Books*, Stanley Diamond, a supporter of Biafra, conceded that fifty percent of Biafran supplies came from overseas, particularly from France and Portugal. ‘In their desperate effort to survive’, wrote Diamond, ‘the Biafrans bought arms from whatever sources they could, using (and paying for) facilities in Lisbon and Sao Tome, which became strategic links between Europe and Africa’.⁷ Following the remarkable Biafran military offensives across the Niger River into the Mid-Western region in late 1967, the French government, which retained close political and military links to its former colonies in West Africa, looked on Biafra favourably. The motivations that spurred on France’s intervention in Biafra, through the organisation of a mercenary mission and the shipment of arms, were multifaceted. Historian Christopher Griffin argued that President De Gaulle and Jacques Foccart, the President’s Secretary-General for African and Malagasy Affairs, were motivated by fears about Soviet encroachment into Nigeria, scepticism of the ability of large federations to remain viable in post-colonial Africa, the importance of oil concessions in Biafra for French oil companies, and an Anglophobic desire to cut British

⁷ Stanley Diamond, “Who killed Biafra?”, *New York Review of Books*, February 26, 1970.

influence in West Africa down to size.⁸ Although the mercenary mission was poorly-planned and haphazard, by October 1967 French arms and equipment, mainly captured German and Italian weaponry from the Second World War, was being clandestinely shipped into Biafra, via the Ivory Coast, with the full support of President Houphouët-Boigny.⁹

The French military officials and intelligence agents tasked with supporting the Biafran war-effort had gained much of their experience in these activities during the Katangan secession struggle in the Republic of the Congo between 1960 and 1963. ‘Despite Ojukwu’s protestations to the contrary’, wrote Griffin, ‘many of the same dynamics persisted in both conflicts, including the fact that French help to [Moise] Tshombe [the self-declared leader of Katanga] was at least in part solicited by the President of the Ivory Coast.... Katanga gave France experience in using mercenaries to fight a war in which the consequences of failure were minimal’.¹⁰ The Biafran leadership, desperate for political and military support, were keen to refute any links with the Katangan secessionist movement. On 11 January 1969, Ojukwu issued a statement titled ‘Biafra: the antithesis of Katanga’ to reassure the international community of the unique circumstances of Biafra’s struggle.¹¹ In 1967 the Biafran government had published a book *Nigeria and Biafra: the parting of ways* with a specific chapter titled, ‘The irrelevant case of Katanga’. ‘In the former Federation of Nigeria’, wrote the authors:

it was the Northern Region that had a history of repeated demand for and threats of secession. Biafra, on the contrary, had a long tradition of sacrifice and concessions for the maintenance and promotion of Nigerian unity; and up till the eve of Biafran Independence the Government and people of Biafra spared no pains in their attempt to save Nigeria from disintegration. A third point of difference, which stems from the second, is that whereas Katanga voluntarily seceded from the Congo, Biafra was compelled by the necessity of survival to cease to belong to the former Nigerian Federation.¹²

Even though there were significant political, tribal and international differences between Biafra and Katanga, the decision of the Biafran regime to accept political and military support from international actors whose interests did not align with the politics of

⁸ Christopher Griffin, “French military policy in the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970”, *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 26, No.1 (2015), 118-120.

⁹ Ibid, 112.

¹⁰ Ibid, 117.

¹¹ Ibid, 116.

¹² *Nigeria and Biafra: the parting of ways* (Enugu: Government Printer, 1967), 5.

decolonisation, caused many contemporary commentators and observers to question the *raison d'être* of the Republic of Biafra.

Historian Alanna O'Malley has written that during the Congo crisis 'India and Ghana used the crisis to advance the agenda of decolonisation, taking up the cause of the Congo and decrying what they perceived as the neo-colonial response of Belgium and Britain'.¹³ By contrast, in Apartheid South Africa, noted historian Ryan Irwin, politicians and opinion makers juxtaposed the anarchy and perceived African political immaturity on display in the Congo with the exceptional political and economic qualities of their white-minority regime.¹⁴ In the United States, as the Congo Crisis became a source of international tension and a Cold War flashpoint, the majority of African American opinion was firmly in support of maintaining the unity of the Congo. Notable exceptions included avowed anti-communist conservative journalist George Schuyler and former black YMCA missionary and later anti-communist, Max Yergan, who were members of the American Committee for Aid to Katanga Freedom Fighters, alongside other prominent U.S conservative figures.¹⁵ '[F]or black America, wrote James Meriwether, 'what stood out more [than anti-communism] was the image of a black man struggling to unite an African country against white neo-colonial intrigue'.¹⁶ Commentators in the black press and letters to the editor of major African American daily newspapers supported Congolese unity. Articles denounced the meddling by Belgian interests and called for Katanga's reincorporation. An editorial in the *Cleveland Call and Post* compared the protestors rallying in support of Katanga and denouncing the UN peacekeeping mission that was trying to reincorporate the rogue province with ongoing civil rights protests throughout the American South. The 'demonstrators for Katanga', stated the article, 'represents the views of the John Birch group [more] than of people genuinely interested in freedom for oppressed people wherever they live'.¹⁷ A further editorial in the *Chicago Daily Defender* called out supporters of Katanga, included arch-segregationist Senators James Eastland from Mississippi and Allen J. Ellender from Louisiana, as indicative of a racialised attitude towards governance and political participation in the United States and post-colonial Africa. 'Eastland', wrote the editors, 'evidently, does not want the Congo crisis

¹³ Alanna O'Malley, "Ghana, India, and the Transnational Dynamics of the Congo Crisis at the United Nations, 1960-1", *The International History Review*, 37, No. 5 (2015), 972.

¹⁴ Ryan Irwin, "A Wind of Change? White Redoubt and the Postcolonial Moment, 1960-1963", *Diplomatic History*, 33, No. 5 (2009), 922-923.

¹⁵ "Carl Rowan blasts supporters of Congo's Moise Tshombe" *Atlanta Daily World*, January 4, 1962, 6.

¹⁶ Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be Africans*, 227.

¹⁷ "Why Katanga and not Georgia?", *Cleveland Call and Post*, December 23, 1961, 2C.

to be resolved; he wants to point to it like his colleague from Louisiana, Sen. Ellender, as evidence that Africans are unready for self-rule'.¹⁸

With the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War, 'Katanga' and 'Biafra' would become interlinked in the minds of many African Americans as dangerous secessionist movements, from regions with plentiful raw materials and dubious foreign contacts, that intended to dismember larger political units. The scepticism and even outright hostility towards Biafra due to the allies it was gaining support from, was on display. The former UN diplomat and supporter of Biafran independence, Conor Cruise O'Brien, writing in May 1969, lamented that African Americans had failed to see the difference between the two movements. After witnessing a pro-Nigerian rally by black high school students in Brooklyn, O'Brien observed that:

In Biafra at Easter I had seen young Africans, probably about the same age as those who demonstrated at the Tilden High School, preparing to go back to the front and singing war songs of their black nation: Biafra. The news item, combined with this experience, forced me to think about the reasons why Biafra seems to be either invisible or obnoxious to so many black Americans (though by no means to all)... Because of past experiences of my own, it was mainly by way of "the Katanga parallel" that black American suspicion or hostility in relation to Biafra had reached me: "You were against the secession of Katanga. Why are you **for** the secession of Biafra?" I have tried to explain that the cases were not parallel. Katanga had been a case of foreign intervention, not of genuine secession.... The Katangese "patriots" were almost all Europeans and the pro-Katanga blacks were their employees. In any case the secession of Katanga was never anything but a maneuver for the recapture of the whole of the Congo.¹⁹

The beginning of the 1960s offered a sense of optimism for the future of the African continent liberated from colonial rule. However, by the end of the decade this optimism about Africa's political and economic future had dissipated. The new nation-states of the continent were wracked by misgovernment, military-rule, post-colonial leaders who increasingly adopted authoritarian methods to hold onto power, economic malaise, and ethnic tensions. If the challenges of nation-building were a difficult enough, colonialism and racial injustice had yet to be expunged from the continent. According to historian Jeremy Friedman 'by the late 1960s... decolonization seemed to have stalled. After the independence of Zambia in 1964, the decolonization process hit a brick wall in the southern part of Africa due to the

¹⁸ "Tshombe's Stogee", *The Chicago Defender*, December 29, 1962, 8.

¹⁹ Conor Cruise O'Brien, "Biafra Revisted", *New York Review of Books*, May 22, 1969.

determination of the Portuguese as well as the white South Africans and Rhodesians to hold on to power'.²⁰

If the situations in Rhodesia and the Portuguese Empire posed serious challenges to the decolonisation process in Southern Africa, the Apartheid regime in South Africa looked to be at its strongest point politically and economically and was becoming more assertive in its foreign policy. By the late 1960s the survival of the apartheid regime looked increasingly secure. In 1960, as the wave of decolonisation crested in sub-Saharan Africa, Pretoria became a central foreign policy concern of many of these newly-independent African states. President Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, one of the leading advocates of Pan-Africanism and foes of colonialism and white supremacy, stated that '[Africa's] safety [could] not [be] assured until the last vestiges of colonialism [were] swept from Africa'.²¹ 'For many of these African states', wrote historian Ryan M. Irwin, 'the system of apartheid represented a direct affront to the very notion of black liberation. Not only did it blatantly exploit Africans for economic advancement; it also embraced the logic and methods of colonial domination. By modernising the methods of white domination, the Union of South Africa essentially positioned itself as the chief antagonist of the burgeoning African nationalist movement'.²² However, by the mid-to-late 1960s the unity of the Pan-African cause had dissipated.

This disillusionment throughout post-colonial Africa presented the Apartheid regime with a unique opportunity. According to historian Jamie Miller, 'just as the norms and consensus of the post-colonial moment a decade earlier had worked against Pretoria, by the end of the 1960s, divisions over the direction of the African project played into South Africa's hands'.²³ The regime in Pretoria exploited its anti-communist credentials to assist 'conservative' African states that feared the growing threat that communist organisations and ideology posed to regime stability.²⁴ In seeking to build stronger relations with post-colonial African states either through development aid or anti-communist alliances, the Apartheid regime hoped to undercut anti-apartheid African unity – particularly through the OAU – and provide greater international legitimacy that would prevent further attacks on its domestic racial system.

²⁰ Friedman, *Shadow Cold War*, 149

²¹ Irwin, "A Wind of Change?", 907.

²² Ibid, 908.

²³ Jamie Miller, *An African Volk: the apartheid regime and its search for survival* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 64.

²⁴ Ibid, 65.

On 9 March 1968, Lillian Wiggins, a leading journalist for the *Afro-American* reported on the arrival of Ambassador Joe Iyalla to present his diplomatic credentials to President Lyndon Johnson as the new Nigerian Ambassador to the United States. A consummate career diplomat, he faced a host of challenges in his new Washington D.C posting.²⁵ Within months of his appointment, Ambassador Iyalla faced a growing chorus of negative American public opinion from those outraged at reports of large-scale famine in Biafra and at claims that his own government was deliberately conducting genocide against Igbo civilians. Even more ominously, senior American politicians were calling for Nigerian sovereignty to be violated in order to deliver humanitarian aid, and presumptive Republican presidential nominee Richard Nixon had stated on record that what was occurring in Biafra was ‘genocide’. Ethel Payne, one of the leading African American journalists in the country, the so-called ‘First Lady of the Black Press’ and a highly respected foreign correspondent, had been watching developments in Nigeria from afar, and was increasingly concerned, like Ambassador Iyalla, about how the mainstream press was reporting on the civil war. ‘[W]e were saturated with news about Biafra’, Payne noted in an oral history interview, ‘[t]hey had superior public relations people, and the stories were just pouring out about the plight of these poor children, and you saw emaciated children and starving children and dead children. This whipped up public fever, you know. It became so highly propagandized.... I had an instinct that something was wrong [with the coverage being received in the U.S]’.²⁶ Nigerian leaders were also concerned that a concerted pro-Biafra media campaign would affect the attitudes of the African American community by dividing opinion. Payne wrote that ‘both military and civilian [leaders] are greatly concerned about the effect of Biafran propaganda on black people in America. There are huge numbers of Ibo [sic] students in the USA who are actively working there on behalf of the rebel regime and the concern here is that the distortion of the facts, is dividing the sympathies of American blacks’.²⁷

Through Wiggins, Payne arranged to meet the ambassador to discuss the civil war. Iyalla, according to Payne, was exasperated because ‘there was just a blackout on the federal side to

²⁵ Lillian Wiggins, “Nigerian ambassador meets the press”, *Afro-American*, March 9, 1968, 14.

²⁶ Ethel Payne interview #5, interviewed by Kathleen Currie, “Washington Press Club Foundation”, September 24, 1987, transcript, available at <http://beta.wpcf.org/oralhistory/payn5.html>, (accessed 11 August 2018).

²⁷ Ethel Payne, “Black Attitudes here concern Nigerians”, *Chicago Daily Defender*, February 10, 1969, 8.

tell its story. He said it was just a deliberate effort to close out news about the larger story that he felt, and he just felt they weren't getting a break'.²⁸ With that he asked if both Payne and Wiggins would be willing to report on the Nigerian side of the story for their respective newspapers, the *Afro-American* and the *Chicago Daily Defender*. Both agreed. In the case of Payne and Wiggins, their coverage of the conflict would emphasise to black audiences the continued importance of Nigeria as the largest and most significant black-majority state in Africa, a state that even when beset by civil war continued to inspire hope and confidence. However, both women warned that this vision was being undermined by the Republic of Biafra's callous decision to seek support from dubious foreign allies, which saw the weakening – even disintegration of Nigeria – as a blow to the notion of black-majority rule.

Both journalists arrived in Nigeria at the beginning of 1969 to report on the conflict. As two of the few foreign journalists covering the conflict from the Nigerian side of the frontline, Payne and Wiggins were widely feted by senior Nigerian military leaders. In a private meeting with General Gowon, Payne recalled that he 'stood out, because he definitely made a comparison of this [the Nigerian Civil War] to the efforts of the civil war in the United States. He said that, "This is about nationhood. This is about preserving the country, the whole war"'.²⁹ In linking Nigeria's civil conflict to the American Civil War, Gowon was perhaps trying to infer that, like the Union victory in the Civil War that inaugurated a period of black emancipation and self-determination, as well as preserving a unique experiment in self-government, military victory over the Biafran rebels would lead to a renewal of Nigeria. Defeat of secessionists would mean a victory for Africa and the broader diaspora.

Both Payne and Wiggins reported on the frustration of Nigerian officials with American foreign policy towards the civil war, particularly the decision of the Johnson Administration to sell transport aircraft to several NGOs and charities flying supplies into Biafra, in violation of Nigerian sovereignty. In an interview with Edward O. Enahoro, Deputy Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of External Affairs, Payne reported that Enahoro 'consider[ed] it an unfriendly act and unfortunately, it has been interpreted as further evidence of playing a concealed hand in the game of high stakes for economic imperialism'.³⁰ Enahoro expressed his fears that the cargo planes, even with assurances from the U.S government, would be used to smuggle arms and ammunition into the enclave, and therefore help sustain the Biafran war

²⁸ Ethel Payne interview #5.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ethel L. Payne, "Deadly power game behind Nigerian strife", *Chicago Daily Defender*, February 3, 1969, 6.

effort. He also pointed out to Wiggins that Nigeria was not against providing aid to Biafra through a land corridor or daylight flights, controlled by the International Committee of the Red Cross and watched by observers from the OAU. The Biafran leadership's rejection of daylight flights, and its insistence on night flights (the preferred method of moving arms into Biafran territory), caused Nigerian officials to speculate that Ojukwu and his comrades were more interested in sustaining their war effort than in trying to alleviate the humanitarian crisis in the territory they controlled.³¹

Wiggins, through her reportage, challenged the notion that the anti-Igbo pogroms of mid-1966 had been the central facet in the creation of 'Biafra'. In an interview with Wiggins, Ukpabi Asika, an American educated Igbo administrator of the East Central State, explained that the anti-Igbo pogroms of 1966 had 'drawn [Igbo] back to their traditional heartland after the military coup by powerful and emotional appeals from kinsmen who were pressured by Ojukwu and his forces'. However, Igbo who resided in Asika's administrative area or arrived as refugees fleeing the fighting 'have found out the big difference between here and there, having discovered that the cost of living here is very low and there is no molestation from anywhere. They regret they didn't come out earlier'. For Wiggins, the significant role played by Igbos in the East Central State was 'evidence that Colonel Ojukwu's charge of genocide against the Ibos was unfounded and mere propaganda'.³² In her interviews with Asika as well as the former attorney-general of the Eastern Region Dr. Graham Douglas, Wiggins wrote that the decision for secession was not unanimous and '[m]any of the Ibo leaders objected to the idea of secession'.³³ In discussing the minority tribes – including the Efik, Ibibio and Ijaw – that inhabited the southern coast and Niger-Delta regions, areas that were incorporated into Biafra and claimed by Nigeria, Wiggins saw the Biafran leadership taking a high-handed approach.

On the day Ojukwu announced his secession and declared war on the rest of Nigeria he overran the territories of the Rivers State and the South Eastern States where there are five million [minority tribal groups]...and forced them into his regime which he later called "Biafra".... When this happened many of the non-Ibo ethnic groups were discontent and uncooperative. As a result many cruel things happened to them.³⁴

³¹ Lillian Wiggins, "'Fantastic' starvation reports denied: AFRO finds Nigeria bitter at U.S. for bully tactics", *Afro-American*, February 8, 1969, 1.

³² Lillian Wiggins, "Nigeria's civil war: How Ibos forced Biafra on others", *Afro-American*, March 29, 1969, 1.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

The assertions in Wiggin's *Afro American* piece have subsequently been challenged by historians. However, at the time the article helped project an image of Biafra to African American readers that portrayed it as an autocratic and illegitimate political entity that did not have the support of those people living within its territorially defined limits.

The starvation crisis that had occupied so much of the global media coverage of the civil war up to this point, was also a focus of Payne's and Wiggins' reporting. While both black journalists acknowledged that malnutrition and starvation were occurring, they argued that the Nigerian government was making a concerted effort to alleviate its worst affects. Payne reported from Uyo in Southern Nigeria, approximately eighty kilometres from the rebel capital at Umahia, where Nigerian officials, the Nigerian Red Cross, and the International Committee of the Red Cross were caring for refugees coming over the Federal lines. The refugees, according to Payne, 'were cared for in 120 camps and healing centers. Twenty-six cooking centers fed 26,000 people a day and more than 50 tons of food a week was used.... The death rate [from *Kwashiokor*] at the peak of the crisis, according to the Red Cross, was 700 a week. Within a month of being treated medically and receiving a high protein diet, the rate was down to 50 a week'. Payne noted that 'Nigerian government officials have been extremely sensitive about worldwide publicity implying that they were provoking genocide by refusing to let food in for hungry Biafrans, mostly children'.³⁵ In conversation with South African-born pediatrician R. G. Henrickse at the University College Hospital in Ibadan, Wiggins reported that the outbreaks of *Kwashiokor* that had caused such global concern were not 'the direct result of the war' but an endemic medical crisis that had afflicted Nigeria prior to 1968. While the breakdown of food supplies and the mass movement of civilians had increased the frequency of the disease, and therefore the death rate, Henrickse challenged the narrative of mass starvation. 'It would appear that the gravity of the situation was grossly exaggerated in the international press', Henrickse explained, 'and there is absolutely no evidence to support claims that thousands were dying daily. In fact, it would be difficult to substantiate a claim of hundreds of deaths daily, even during the worst period of the malnutrition emergency'.³⁶

In presenting an image of Nigeria and its leadership as responsibly prosecuting the civil war and providing relief to civilian victims of the conflict, particularly Igbo refugees, Payne and Wiggins were providing to their respective black readerships a vision of Nigeria at war

³⁵ Ethel Payne, "Nigeria's refugee food crisis eases", *Chicago Daily Defender*, February 6, 1969, 8.

³⁶ Lillian Wiggins, "Malnutrition in Nigeria existed before civil war", *Afro-American*, March 1, 1969, 1.

that ran counter to some of the more sensationalist press coverage seen in the United States, and counter to that conveyed by the Joint Afro Committee on Biafra, as seen in the previous chapter. Nigeria, rather than being a 'rogue' state, willingly committing 'genocide' against its own citizens, was portrayed as a state led by measured and rational actors, intent on simply unifying their country, while at the same time attempting to minimise any humanitarian concerns of the international community.

If they cast the FMG as a responsible political actor, Payne and Wiggins were extremely critical of the Republic of Biafra, not only for its intransigent position on aid deliveries, but also for the international alliances it sought to sustain its war effort. On 3 February 1969, Payne outlined to her readers the extent of Portugal's involvement in supporting the Biafran war effort through the provisioning of arms supplies. 'Portugal', she intoned to her readers:

[i]s the country most hated by black Africans countries because of its colonial policies, particularly in Angola. It is deeply involved in Biafra, giving material support and leasing its air strip at Sao Tome in the Atlantic Ocean to the joint church aid for flights to Biafra.... From a long range viewpoint, it is in Portuguese interest to try and fragment Nigeria because a strong, united black country with its potential economic strength is a threat to Portugal, the last European colonial power in Africa.³⁷

France also gained Payne's ire for the assistance it had provided to Biafra, not only in terms of arms and equipment, but also tacit diplomatic recognition. According to Payne, French supplies into Biafra were 'now running at 150 tons a week'. Like the Portuguese, according to Payne's sources in Lagos, 'France wish[ed] to weaken the potential strength of a United Nigeria ...[and] it is De Gaulle's intention to stamp out British political and commercial influence in West Africa regardless of the danger of prolonging the war'.³⁸

Wiggins matched Payne in her vigorous condemnation of outside actors who supported the Republic of Biafra. Writing in April, Wiggins informed her readers that the majority of independent African nation-states stood firmly behind Nigeria in its efforts to bring Biafra to heel. 'It is a fact', stated Wiggins:

³⁷ Payne, "Deadly Power Games", 6.

³⁸ Ethel L. Payne, "France steps up military aid to Biafran rebels", *Chicago Daily Defender*, February 13, 1969, 10.

that all of Africa then stand to lose if Nigeria is broken up. Nigeria, with 56 million people, is the last of the large populated countries of Africa which has a chance to make independent decisions, in so far as the rest of the world is concerned, and stand behind her convictions.³⁹

In her interview with Ukpapai Asika, the civil servant ‘pointed out that three countries in Africa who possessed the best potentials for being a strong power in Africa have been deterred from their goals...the Congo, United Arab Republic and now Nigeria’. ‘Before the war’, noted Asika, ‘Nigeria was autonomous in policy, much to the dissatisfaction of many. This posed a threat. For the first time, black men were standing alone, independent in their thoughts’. ‘[B]lack all over [the world]’, beseeched Asika, ‘as well as in America, will bring pressure to bear on those desiring to break Nigeria into bits and pieces’.⁴⁰

During her time in Nigeria, Ethel Payne encountered *The Times* journalist Winston S. Churchill, the grandson of the former British Prime Minister. Churchill, who had written impassioned reports on the famine in Biafra, had emerged as one of the leading pro-Biafra advocates in the United Kingdom. He did not impress Payne. ‘Oh, he was so arrogant, so brash’, reflected Payne, ‘[h]e came over with a fixed idea, and it was almost like it was British colonialism reasserting itself’.⁴¹ Payne’s flippant dismissal of Churchill’s assessment of the situation in Biafra, combined with both women’s decision not to enter Biafran territory and to speak primarily to Nigerian officials, might prompt one to assume that the two African American journalists were mouthpieces for the FMG.⁴² While it is right to be sceptical of some of the sources used by both journalists, much of their reporting aligned with a growing international consensus around the conflict. By the beginning of 1969 sections of the international community at large were reassessing some of the fundamental aspects of the conflict that had drawn significant global attention in mid-1968.

As noted above, the International Observation Teams (IOT) report on the conduct of Federal forces battling Biafran troops punctured the narrative of Biafrans as victims of a deliberate policy of genocide being committed by the Federal Military Government. These reports had a detrimental effect on how the international community viewed the Biafran side of the conflict, although many Biafrans, both civilians and military, continued to hold deep-seated fears about the intention of the Nigerians – a product of personal experiences of

³⁹ Lillian Wiggins, “Nigeria’s Civil War: African nations support Nigeria”, *Afro-American*, April 5, 1969, 1.

⁴⁰ Lillian Wiggins, “Ibo cites Nigerian rehabilitation work in liberated Biafra”, *Afro-American*, April 26, 1969, 5.

⁴¹ Ethel Payne interview #5.

⁴² On Churchill’s role as both a journalist and advocate for Biafra see A.B. Akinyemi, “The British Press and the Nigerian Civil War”, *African Affairs* 71, No. 285 (1972), 425-426.

Nigerian Army atrocities and memories of the anti-Igbo pogroms of 1966. From late 1968 and into 1969, the IOT report combined with a series of other events to erode support for the Biafran political experiment, although humanitarian aid continued to flow from abroad. The military situation on the ground, which the Biafran leadership hoped to mitigate through international intervention, looked increasingly bleak. The historian and Africanist, Dame Margery Perham, who had initially been a vocal supporter of the Biafran cause in the United Kingdom, recanted her earlier views following a visit to Nigeria in late-August 1968. Dame Perham was particularly impressed by the concerted program, developed by civil servants in the FMG, to protect Igbo civilians and to ensure they were reincorporated back into the Nigerian polity. '[I]n different departments' wrote Perham, 'and without a whiff of propaganda...the Federal Government, admitting the wrongs committed against the Ibo [sic], was planning to treat them, after surrender or defeat, as probably no enemy, in civil or foreign war, has ever been treated in history'.⁴³

If the case of genocide was being increasingly challenged, and if the FMG was seeking to improve its international reputation through adroit humanitarian programs and magnanimous post-war reconciliation plans for the Igbo, then the politics of humanitarian aid only further challenged Biafra's image as a martyr at the hand of Nigerian maleficence. In the ongoing diplomacy of humanitarian aid into the Biafra enclave, the growing intransigence of the Biafran leadership provoked deep frustration from officials from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and from American diplomats. In a meeting between U.S representative to the European Office of the UN, Roger Tubby, and James Freymond, acting president of the ICRC, Freymond expressed his frustration with the Biafran leadership. 'I think Ojukwu has been playing games with us and with Ferguson [the U.S relief coordinator appointed by President Nixon]', Freymond angrily asserted. The Biafran leader's rejection of daylight relief flights into Biafran territory and Ferguson's suggestion of a river relief corridor frustrated the ICRC president. 'He [Ojukwu] should accept these if he wishes the world to continue humanitarian help; otherwise he should take full responsibility for the death of millions of his own people'.⁴⁴ In a memorandum to President Nixon on 7 July 1969, Henry Kissinger outlined the Gordian knot that now ensnared both the political and

⁴³ Perham, "Reflections on the Nigerian Civil War", 239-240.

⁴⁴ Telegram 1835 from mission to the European Office of the United Nations to the Department of State, June 9, 1969, FRUS online, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve05p1/d74>, (accessed 3 December 2018).

humanitarian elements of the civil war. ‘The Federals insist on day flights with inspection in Federal territory’, wrote Kissinger:

[y]et the Biafrans fear “inspection” means Federal poisoning and, more important, will not risk daylight relief flights becoming a cover for Federal MIGs to stage surprise raids [on crucial Biafran airfields].... Neither side will accept the river corridor negotiated by Clyde Ferguson: the Federals because they claim the food will go to rebel troops in that sector, the Biafrans because they fear a military violation of the point where they open their defensive lines to receive and trans-ship the food.⁴⁵

For both sides, humanitarianism was now deeply intertwined with their respective political goals. For the Nigerian FMG, the humanitarian aid flown into Biafra by various ad-hoc organisations and religious groups via the Portuguese island of Sao Tome was not only a violation of Nigerian sovereignty but prolonged the civil war, since arms and ammunition arrived alongside food and medicine. For the Biafrans, the airlift ensured that its forces had the arms they needed to sustain their war-effort, and the ongoing humanitarian situation ensured that global attention remained focused on the conflict. As historian Lasse Heerten notes:

The actions of both camps damaged Biafra’s reputation...more than that of the FMG, as the “rebels” depended on the support of Western publics. In the eyes of the international public, Ojukwu’s refusal to allow Lagos to inspect the shipments was inexcusable: it directly prevented an effective relief operation, and his explanation – that Lagos could use the inspections to poison food and medical supplies – were considered doubtful internationally.⁴⁶

As the political and humanitarian sides of the conflict became intertwined, African Americans’ perspectives on the war evolved. Reports such as the ones filed by Payne and Wiggins from Nigeria provided African American readers with a more nuanced understanding of the conflict. In documenting a more positive image of Nigeria, both journalists were placing the importance of a viable and unified Nigeria squarely before the African American public. The importance of this political element was substantiated by the involvement in debates around the civil war of two of the leading black politicians in the United States, Senator Edward Brooke and Congressman Charles Diggs.

⁴⁵ Memorandum from the President’s assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, July 7, 1969, FRUS online, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve05p1/d82>, (accessed 7 December 2018).

⁴⁶ Heerten, *The Biafran War*, 298.

As highly-visible African American politicians in Congress, both Brooke and Diggs had expressed throughout their respective political careers a deep interest in African affairs. Both men were also cognisant of the importance that African Americans placed on Africa – although Diggs was more forthright in expressing this view. Congressman Charles Diggs, elected to the House of Representatives in November 1954, was the first African American to represent Michigan in Congress. As Diggs rose to national prominence in the African American community, he also became an outspoken supporter of African independence. In a column in *Ebony* in August 1976, Diggs outlined what he considered to be the stakes involved in African Americans' relationship with Africa. He wrote that:

Blacks in America have a special interest in economic and political developments in Africa because it is our ancestral land; because we, like Africans, have been subjected to racial oppression – and white domination.... Therefore, all black Americans stand to benefit when the African continent becomes a great power.... Similarly, when black Americans take full advantage of their potential political power in the United States we can, as have other ethnic groups for their ancestral lands, assist African nations.⁴⁷

These principles had formed the basis of Diggs' views on Africa since the 1950s. In March 1959, Diggs was appointed to the Committee on African and Near East Affairs, a sub-committee of the House of Foreign Affairs committee, the first African American ever appointed to the role. Diggs would use his appointment to advocate strongly for the United States to support self-determination throughout the continent, to oppose the racially discriminatory practices of Apartheid South Africa, and to call upon African Americans to be more engaged with African affairs.⁴⁸ Writing in the American Committee on Africa's journal, *Africa Today*, Diggs lambasted U.S government officials, the mainstream press and the African American press for their lack of engagement with Africa. 'Our racial problem', wrote Diggs:

is a significant factor in our relations with Africans. They cannot trust us, cannot believe in our "democracy" when the Negro continues to undergo such oppression as he does here. The American lack of concept of modern Africa is further revealed in the unsympathetic and inaccurate

⁴⁷ Charles C. Diggs Jr., "The Black American stake in U.S. policy towards Africa", *Ebony*, August 1, 1976, 76.

⁴⁸ "Diggs named to Africa Committee", *Cleveland Call and Post*, March 7, 1959, 8C.

treatment of news of the All-Africa People's Conference. Even the Negro press was indifferent and gave it little or no coverage.⁴⁹

Diggs called for the State Department to hire more African American diplomats to help advance American interest in the fractious Cold War international environment.⁵⁰ 'Colored Americans can play a key role in winning Africa for democracy', declared Diggs; '[he] stands willing to make his own contribution to the progress of world freedom in U.S-African relations'.⁵¹ He also supported the creation of an NAACP international relations department that would 'use its facilities to improve our African foreign policy and further strengthen our relationship with Africa'.⁵² Diggs, like many of his fellow African Americans, saw the independence of Nigeria in October 1960 as an 'inspiration' because of the nation's 'orderly transition to independence, its pattern of stability, and its quality of leadership'.⁵³

Unlike Diggs, who represented a predominantly African American congressional district, Brooke, as Senator from Massachusetts, placed his views on US-African policy within the contours of broader American foreign policy (the importance of transcending the parochial concerns of the black community would also shape his domestic priorities). Brooke had long had an interest in international affairs, with his scepticism towards the U.S intervention in Vietnam forming a significant part of his successful Senate campaign in 1966.⁵⁴ Brooke's visits to twenty-six sub-Saharan African states (including Nigeria) in January 1968 were significant in developing the contours of his approach to the African continent.⁵⁵ In a speech on the Senate floor on his return, Brooke outlined the scope and parameters that American diplomacy should take to newly-independent nation-states of the region. Simon Anekwe exclaimed in the *New York Amsterdam News* that '[n]ot since the Senate days of the late President Kennedy has there been a speech on Africa as fundamental and significant as that delivered April 29 by Senator Edward W. Brooke'.⁵⁶ According to John W. Finney of the *New York Times* 'Senator Edward Brooke, the only Negro member of the Senate' called for 'the United States to "begin to disengage" from economic ties with South Africa and impose an absolute ban on all trade with Rhodesia. He also proposed that the United States begin to

⁴⁹ Charles C. Diggs, Jr., "U.S policy in Africa", *Africa Today*, 6, No.1 (1959), 20.

⁵⁰ "Diggs hits barrier in foreign service", *Afro-American*, December 31, 1960, 8.

⁵¹ "U.S. colored citizens can win Africa", *Afro-American*, March 17, 1962, 9.

⁵² "Plea to NAACP: help U.S. in Africa, Diggs asks", *Afro-American*, January 3, 1959, 5.

⁵³ "Independence of Nigeria hailed", *Atlanta Daily World*, October 13, 1960, 6.

⁵⁴ Edward W. Brookes, *Bridging the divide: my life* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 154-168.

⁵⁵ "Senator Edward Brooke starts 26-day fact-finding tour of sub-Saharan Africa", *Atlanta Daily World*, January 25, 1968, 2.

⁵⁶ Simon Anekwe, "Africa Today: - Senator Brooke", *New York Amsterdam News*, May 11, 1968, 19.

reduce its military relations with Portugal if that nation does not make a commitment to permit self-determination for her African colonies'.⁵⁷ Brooke's speech received widespread coverage in the *Call and Post*, *New Pittsburgh Courier* and the *Chicago Daily Defender*.⁵⁸ The journalist Ethel Payne commented that Brooke's speech paralleled the ongoing Poor People's campaign of the late Martin Luther King Jr., in reminding 'America, of the "forgotten continent" as a parallel to the "forgotten people" at home'.⁵⁹ Besides Southern Africa, Brooke turned to discuss the political future of post-colonial African nation-states. With the Nigerian Civil War clearly in mind, Brooke stated that:

A country that is 90 per cent illiterate cannot be expected to operate an elaborate two-party system with the range of choices available in a more advanced nation. In some cases one-party government may be the lesser evil in the initial stages of national evolution.... Where the alternatives are chaotic tribalism or fierce dictatorship, a humane central government based on a single party with wide popular participation is hardly to be despised.⁶⁰

With broad experience in African affairs, both men actively contributed to the debates and discussions surrounding U.S policy toward the Nigerian Civil War. In these deliberations both Brooke and Diggs emphasised crafting the best policy with regards to *American* interests. However, in outlining the importance of humanitarian aid, the need for Africans to solve their own problems, the importance of the OAU, the significance of Nigerian unity for the African continent, and fears that Biafran independence could have adverse consequences for post-colonial Africa, Brooke's and Diggs' views intersected and complemented the broader cross-section of African American opinion regarding the civil war.

The election of Republican Richard Nixon in November 1968 created a new dynamic in terms of U.S policy toward the civil war. In an election campaign dominated by domestic unrest and the war in Vietnam, the crisis in Biafra had managed to emerge as a small but significant issue in the campaign. On the campaign trail, candidate Nixon issued a statement titled 'Nixon's Call for American Action on Biafra'. Nixon called on the FMG to stop its military campaign and blockade of Biafran territory that he described as 'the destruction of an entire people'. 'While America is not the world's policeman', Nixon declared, 'let us at least

⁵⁷ John W. Finney, "Africa sanctions urged by Brooke: U.S action against white minority regimes asked", *New York Times*, April 30, 1968, 15.

⁵⁸ "Brooke urges split with South Africa", *Chicago Daily Defender*, April 29, 1968, 7; "Brooke urges economic, political sanctions against South Africa", *Call and Post*, May 11, 1968, 12B; Ethel L. Payne, "Blasts South Africa, Portugal: Sen. Brooke call for U.S. action in Africa", *New Pittsburgh Courier*, May 11, 1968, 2.

⁵⁹ Payne, "Blasts South Africa", 2.

⁶⁰ "Excerpts from Senator Brooke's speech on African policy", *New York Times*, April 30, 1968, 14.

act as the world's conscience in this matter of life and death for millions'.⁶¹ On assuming the presidency, Nixon was aware of the strong pull that the crisis in Biafra had on Congress and American public opinion. Unlike Johnson, Nixon, with his keen political instincts and abiding interest in foreign affairs, did not want to be caught flat-footed. Whitney M. Young Jr., of the National Urban League was quoted in the *New York Amsterdam News* expressing his desire for the new administration to act quickly in regard to the civil war. 'We would certainly hope', noted Young, 'and expect that the Nixon Administration will exert its full power to see that the slaughter is stopped and that food, clothing and shelter are rushed to the starving and homeless. The war between the Federal Republic and Biafra is destroying that great country'.⁶²

In a report to the President, newly appointed National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger warned that Congress and broader public opinion regarding Biafra would soon buffet the new administration. Kissinger wrote:

On the Hill the Problem [sic] joins unlikely allies such as Kennedy and McCarthy, Brooke and Russell, Lukens and Lowenstein. The pressure has been intense; it is bound to grow.

Senator Kennedy is now all but calling for an independent Biafra. The public campaign is well-financed and organized—an amalgam in part of genuine concern and left-wing guilt feelings over Vietnam. The same people who picket on our "interference" in Asia also demand we force-feed the starving Nigerians.⁶³

Brooke did not share Kissinger's cynicism regarding the impulse drawing a broad-section of Americans into the humanitarian campaign in aid of Biafra. Like his fellow Senators concerned about the humanitarian situation, he wished to see the United States to do more in this humanitarian crisis. However, he also believed that a political solution to the civil war was essential in tackling the humanitarian emergency. In his highly-regarded speech on Africa, Brooke had warned that '[n]o issue in Africa is so urgent as the restoration of peace in Nigeria'.⁶⁴

⁶¹ For a transcript of candidate Nixon's statement see Memorandum from Richard V. Allen of the National Security Council staff to President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), February 13, 1969, FRUS online, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve05p1/d39>, (accessed 29 April 2019).

⁶² "Biafra-Nigeria concerning Nixon", *New York Amsterdam News*, February 22, 1969, 3.

⁶³ Memorandum from the President's assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, January 28, 1969, FRUS online, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve05p1/d25>, (accessed 14 May 2018).

⁶⁴ Senator Edward Brooke, "A Perspective on Africa: African objectives and American policy", April 29, 1968, File House of Representatives (statements), Box 6, NBCH, SCPC.

By the beginning of 1969, Brooke was increasingly alarmed at statements and calls among members of Congress, as well as in the pro-Biafra lobby, for the United States to increase its political involvement in the civil war. As we have seen in previous chapters, by October 1968 the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive (ACKBA) was thinking more radically about how to save the population of Biafra from starvation and ‘genocide’. ‘If the United States and United Nations refused to take the lead in relief out of a reluctance to violate Nigerian sovereignty’, wrote historian Brian McNeil, ‘then the answer was for the committee to openly advocate for Biafran self-determination and the Biafran right, in the face of genocide, to an independent and inviolable nation-state’. To stop the genocide of the Biafra people, the ACKBA argued, meant lobbying the U.S government to recognise the independence of Biafra. This decision caused splits within the organisation as some individuals felt that the political stand taken by the ACKBA undermined its humanitarian objectives. However, ACKBA founder Paul Connet rejected this notion and argued that in the face of a genocidal blockade and military campaign, only self-determination – recognised by the international community – could guarantee the survival of the people of Biafra.⁶⁵

Similar rifts played out in Federal politics, with Brooke assuming an active role in stressing Nigerian sovereignty. In an article published in the *Afro-American*, Brooke countered the pro-Biafran argument and said that ‘[t]he United States has no right to go into either sector of war-torn Nigeria without the permission of the Nigerian federal government’. Brooke was opposing the argument of his fellow Massachusetts senator Edward M. Kennedy who declared that ‘humanitarian considerations should override such “petty political objections”’.⁶⁶ According to the *Afro-American*’s editor Moses J. Newson, ‘Kennedy called on President-elect Nixon to step up efforts to get a ceasefire in the war, a position generally promoted by supporters of breakaway Biafra’. ‘Senator Brooke’, wrote Newson, ‘said he was of the opinion the best interests of Africa would be served if the civil war is concluded in a manner that leaves Nigeria a united country.... A ceasefire without agreement on unity is seen in Africa as certain to complicate the situation’.⁶⁷ One month later Brooke argued that Kennedy’s calls for the United States to provide direct medical assistance could lead to ‘a Vietnam-type situation’. ‘Kennedy and I differ on the political involvement in Biafra’, stated

⁶⁵ McNeil, “‘And starvation is the Grim Reaper’”, 290.

⁶⁶ Moses Newson, “Brooke says U.S can’t go into Nigeria at will”, *Afro-American*, January 18, 1969, 1.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

Brooke: 'I fear a Vietnam-type situation if the federal government should interfere in the problems of a sovereign country, Nigeria'.⁶⁸

This did not mean that Brooke was blind to the humanitarian catastrophe. Alongside Senator Kennedy he had lent his support to the BAATAS campaign of Leonard Garrett. In a statement issued on 22 January 1969, regarding his joint resolution with Senator Pearson of Kansas concerning Nigeria-Biafran relief, he noted how the civil war had shocked and mobilised the conscience of America. 'Literally thousands of Americans', according to Brooke:

have joined together to raise funds for the homeless and starving. Foodstuffs and medicines have been collected and dispatched. Letters have poured into the offices of countless public officials. Preachers and teachers, students, wives and workman have joined in a conscientious effort to meet the needs of the innocent.⁶⁹

However, Brooke sombrely explained that humanitarianism did not mean the United States should intervene politically in the civil war.

We cannot determine a settlement of this war, for that is in the hands of the contenders. We cannot impose a ceasefire, for that too can only be decided by the parties directly in conflict. In my considered judgment, the cause of peace and stability in Africa would not be served by recognizing "Biafra" as a state.⁷⁰

In his memoirs, Brooke would later write:

I knew that ultimately the best hope for the people of Nigeria, of Biafra, and indeed of all of Africa, was to end the struggle and to bring the sides together. Africa was entirely too divided along ethnic and tribal lines; support for one breakaway effort would only encourage a dozen more.⁷¹

As the Nixon Administration weighed up its options regarding further humanitarian relief, Senator Brooke became a key voice in arguing that the United States should not increase its political involvement. Even prior to Nixon's election, Brooke had warned then candidate Nixon that his rhetoric on the campaign trail regarding Biafra had the potential to alienate the Nigerians. He agreed with Nixon that the United States should act as the 'conscience of the

⁶⁸ "Brooke warns Biafra could be new Viet", *Afro-American*, February 8, 1969, 1.

⁶⁹ "Statement of Senator Edward W. Brooke on relief for Nigeria and "Biafra". January 22, 1969, File Congressional Records, Box 6, NBCH, SCPC.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Brooke, *Bridging the Divide*, 172.

world' and avoid acting as a 'world policeman' in Biafra. However, Brooke felt that Nixon had 'conveyed to Nigerians the notion that he was "placing the entire blame" on the FMG and "the impression that [he] would advocate direct American intervention in a situation which is already the principal concern not only of the government of Nigeria but of the majority of African states as well"'.⁷² The Senator argued that he wanted Nixon to 'support humanitarian efforts in every way possible, while preserving his own "non-interventionist political stance in this very complex matter"'.⁷³ Before Senator Eugene McCarthy's Senate subcommittee on Africa in the autumn of 1968, Brooke had censured the leadership of the Republic of Biafra for using humanitarian aid 'as at best an increment to their military holding action'. While aid should continue to be channelled through recognised organisations such as the ICRC, UNICEF and through the involvement of the OAU, only a diplomatic settlement could truly end the war and the humanitarian crisis. The Nigerians and Biafrans had to lead the way in these negotiations, in conjunction with the OAU, with the United States supporting from the sidelines. 'To do otherwise', warned Brooke, 'is to intrude more deeply than is wise or necessary, a role we have already found creates both distrust abroad and dissension at home'.⁷⁴

Kissinger had noted that Brooke was one of the key actors in the Senate shaping discourse in Congress and in broader public opinion regarding the civil war. As the White House and National Security Council (NSC) were hammering out the contours of the new Administration's policy towards the civil war, Brooke met with President Nixon to convey his deep-seated concerns regarding the conflict. In an interview in 2006, Brooke recalled his lobbying of President Nixon:

Teddy [Senator Kennedy], of course was tied in with the Biafrans and all the rest of it, and they wanted us to give immediate relief to the Biafrans. They used women and children as the argument, but that would have been seen as really supporting the Biafrans.... What I definitely feared was this would have its rippling effect through the whole continent of Africa. So I just didn't want that to happen, and I really – I didn't get down on my knees with Nixon, but I said,

⁷² Quoted from a letter sent by Senator Brooke to Candidate Nixon regarding Biafra on September 17, 1968 in Roy M. Melbourne, "The American response to the Nigerian conflict, 1968", *Issue: A Journal of Opinion* 3, No.2 (1973), 37-38.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 38. On the Nixon Administration's foreign policy as a method of countering unrest domestically see Chapter Five and Six of Jeremi Suri, *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003). Brooke's attitude towards U.S involvement in interventions in the Global South align with Nixon's own attitude see Richard M. Nixon, "Asia after Vietnam", *Foreign Affairs*, October 1967.

‘This is something I feel very passionate about. I’m sure it’s right. We should not be in that country at this time.’ He finally agreed and said, ‘I’ll take it under consideration.’ I said, ‘No, do more than take it under consideration. Just tell me this is what you’re going to do.’⁷⁵

In National Security Study Memorandum 11 (NSSM 11), a study on Biafran relief authorised by Nixon, senior American bureaucrats thrashed out policy options and their political implications for the President to review. NSSM 11 laid out six options for the President to choose from. At one extreme it called for the United States to double down in its support for the FMG and leave Biafra to its fate. The other extreme was to recognise the political independence of Biafra, an option adamantly opposed by the State Department.⁷⁶ Historian Brian McNeil noted that the option chosen sought a compromise between guaranteeing Nigerian sovereignty and providing humanitarian assistance. ‘The Nixon administration would still see a Nigerian victory as the best outcome for American foreign policy’, wrote McNeil:

[b]ut the President would provide no additional political support to the government in Lagos. At the same time, Nixon would announce a broad-based relief initiative with the promise of publicly threatening either side for obstructing humanitarian operations. This option would commit the President to virtually nothing and would not tie his hands to one side or another. If either side impeded relief, then, Morris [NSC staff member] advised that Nixon could move toward the other side, or alternatively, ‘brand the obstructer and disengage, continuing present levels of relief with a clean conscience’. Even if his modified approach were to fail – and Morris was not sanguine about its chances – it ‘would still let us say we honestly did all we could on relief short of choosing sides in a civil war that’s none of our business – a position which would find vocal allies in Senator Brooke, Fulbright, and others’.⁷⁷

While Brooke warned the Nixon Administration of the perils of adopting a diplomatic strategy that had the potential to undermine Nigerian unity, Congressman Diggs travelled to the warzone to assess the situation himself. On 15 February 1969, both the *Chicago Daily Defender* and the *New York Amsterdam News* reported on the arrival of Charles Diggs in Lagos as part of an official Congressional delegate on a ten-day fact-finding mission to both Nigeria and Biafra.⁷⁸ Diggs, according to the *Defender*, would be ‘the first black American

⁷⁵ “Interview with Edward W. Brooke” by Stephen F. Knott, “Edward M. Kennedy oral history project, Miller Center, University of Virginia”, 17 August 2005, transcript, available at:

http://web1.millercenter.org/poh/transcripts/ohp_2006_0816_brooke.pdf. Retrieved 17 July 2016.

⁷⁶ McNeil, “Frontiers of Need”, 310-315.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 314.

⁷⁸ “Rep. Diggs, others in Biafra, Nigeria”, *New York Amsterdam News*, February 15, 1969, 2.

legislator to visit the war-torn state [Biafra]'.⁷⁹ Both Senator Charles E. Goodell and Congressman Alfred Lowenstein had visited Biafra in an unofficial capacity, but Diggs was there as a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House of Representatives and head of the House subcommittee on African affairs. Speaking to journalists at the United States Information Services headquarters in Lagos, Diggs stated that 'if Nigeria cannot settle its problems without external assistance it will not bode well for the future of black Africa and it would reflect negatively upon justifications for the whole independence movement [in Africa]'. 'The one Nigerian concept best serves Africa', declared Diggs to the gathered journalists: '[t]he OAU should be adequate to meet the problem and handle the negotiations'.⁸⁰

Diggs' visit to the warzone exposed him to the realities of the humanitarian catastrophe engulfing Nigeria but also helped solidify his view that a unified Nigeria was in the best interests of the African continent. Seeing the scale of the suffering endured by civilians in the warzone deeply moved Diggs, and he called for the United States to channel more aid through established relief organisations. However, he remained unconvinced about the viability of the Republic of Biafra and seriously doubted whether the United States would recognise it diplomatically. For Diggs, the war was a direct challenge to the post-colonial political order that had been an inspiration and example for African Americans throughout the 1960s. 'I think...that it is very important that since it is the first real crisis in sub-Saharan Africa that they establish a capacity to solve their own problems', noted Diggs in the *Afro American*.⁸¹ 'Most African nations', Diggs continued, 'feel very strongly about the precedent here. This could happen in their countries.... There are diplomatic initiatives the United States can take in bringing peace to the area but these should be through African contacts acceptable to both sides'.⁸² Reflecting on his experience in areas of Nigeria that had been liberated from Biafran forces, Diggs found 'no indication that the federal government intends to commit atrocities against the Biafrans if they end their secession'. 'This is not to say there won't be some individual reprisals by some people', Diggs noted:

but my general feeling is that these guarantees, certainly the government policy of amnesty, is genuine.... I feel the people will be re-integrated with a minimum of problems. World opinion is

⁷⁹ Ethel L. Payne, "Diggs urges arms embargo in Nigeria to halt conflict", *Chicago Daily Defender*, February 15, 1969, 1.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Lillian Wiggins, "Diggs leads official look at both sides", *Afro-American*, February 22, 1969, 1.

⁸² "Biafra picture colored – Diggs", *Afro-American*, March 8, 1969, 1.

going to mitigate against any massive repressive measures. Nigerians don't want to put themselves in that position of massive retribution.⁸³

On returning to the United States, Diggs continued to emphasise the importance of Nigerian unity. In May, he blasted former Presidential candidate Senator Eugene McCarthy for challenging the U.S policy of 'One-Nigeria', and urging the Nixon Administration to recognise the independence of Biafra. Diggs rejected this idea as lending 'false encouragement to a dying cause'. With only four out of forty-one African states granting diplomatic recognition to the break-away enclave, Diggs asserted that, '[i]t would appear to me that if the Biafran interests haven't been able to get recognition from more African nations, there is no reason why the United States should become involved diplomatically'.⁸⁴ 'Many observers of the conflict in Nigeria', reported the *Afro*, 'have been struck by the way so many liberals have joined with conservatives in the effort to establish what would be a dependent colony called Biafra inside the borders of independent Nigeria'.⁸⁵

The *Afro-American* newspaper editorialised its strong support for the stance taken by Senator Brooke and Congressman Diggs. 'Senator Edward M. Kennedy', wrote the editors:

says we should not let petty political objections such as Nigerian's [sic] complaints about violations of her airspace prevent us from getting relief supplies to rebel Biafra. Senator Edward W. Brooke says we have no right to be trafficking in and out of Nigeria without permission of the federal government. Sen. Brooke is right.... Breakaway Biafra should not be allowed to use hunger and starvation as weapons in its rebellion. Starving children should not be pawns in the war.... Humanitarianism is not to be criticized. But it should not be used as an excuse to commit violations of international borders. Nor should it be used in a manner that in the long run will create more suffering than it proposes to alleviate.⁸⁶

In another editorial titled 'Biafra A Lost Cause', the authors applauded Diggs for his uncompromising opposition to Senator McCarthy. Diggs, declared the authors:

has correctly blasted Senator Eugene McCarthy's call for the U.S to diplomatically recognise rebel Biafra as a foolish move that would serve no purpose other than to prolong the civil war in Nigeria, causing more deaths, hardships and hatred for Americans by Africans.... Are men like McCarthy aware of the fact that without the ports and oil lands Ibos [sic] took from weaker tribes to form what they called Biafra, that "republic" could only exist as a colony completely dependent

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ "Diggs blast idea of link to Biafra", *Afro-American*, May 24, 1969, 1.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ "Nigeria still has rights", *Afro-American*, January 25, 1969, 7A.

on outside financial aid, a conclave completely surrounded by people loyal to the Nigerian government?⁸⁷

The Republic of Biafra, according to the authors, was continuing a losing struggle that exacerbated the human toll of the conflict, but also was a political entity that undermined not only Nigeria, but the broader post-colonial African political experiment. '[O]utside financial aid', potentially from interests that ran counter to the goals of self-determination for the African continent, was an issue that African Americans could not ignore.⁸⁸ The National President of Nigerian Student Unions in the Americas, Linus A. Bassey, wrote in the *New York Amsterdam News* that compared to 'Charles Kenyatta and Mary Umolu, white-backed black nationalists', Brooke and Diggs were part of a group of 'far-sighted blacks'. 'They are those', declared Bassey:

Who support the decision of the Organisation of Africa [sic] Unity...which understands in depth and in detail complicated African problems and the fact that what succeeds in one country can succeed in another. They are those who tell the rebels to lay down their arms and cooperate in the building of the most powerful black nation, whose philosophy is African unity and the liberation of the whole black race.⁸⁹

Although a minority, voices were raised in the black press opposing the stances taken by Brooke and Diggs regarding the Nigerian Civil War. In a letter to the editor, Benji Jomo Anosike, wrote that the *Afro-Americans* support for Diggs' criticism of Senator McCarthy was ill-judged. The OAU role in the Nigerian Civil War, according to Anosikie, had failed 'to stop this unprecedented carnage of African blood.... It appears that the places that matter in the conflict are not Lagos, Addis-Ababa, Freetown or Biafra but London, Moscow, Paris. Who could stop the genocide but the United States?'⁹⁰ Robert Hall, the African American co-founder of 'Operation Bootstrap', the black self-help project in Watts, Los Angeles, in a press conference following his return from Biafra, had called on the United States to intervene directly to stop the fighting. When asked about Senator Brooke's opposition to any type of political intervention in Biafra, Hall chided the senator. 'Brooke belongs to what is called the establishment', asserted Hall, '[h]e was elected by whites...and responds to them'.⁹¹

⁸⁷ "Biafra a lost cause", *Afro-American*, May 31, 1969, 4.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Linus A. Bassey, "Who are the true friends of Biafra?", *New York Amsterdam News*, August 30, 1969, 33.

⁹⁰ "Afro reader says: how many must die?", *Afro-American*, June 21, 1969, 4.

⁹¹ Simon Anekwe, "Goodell deplores Biafra deaths", *New York Amsterdam News*, March 8, 1969, 33.

In launching this blistering attack on Brooke, Hall was calling into question the Senator's commitment not only to Africa but to African Americans in the United States. Since his election in 1966, Senator Brooke, a Republican, had championed the notion of linking the civil rights movement to a moderate brand of political conservatism. For Brooke, African Americans needed to look beyond the Democratic Party's Great Society social welfare programs and the radical rhetoric and ideals of Black Power activists, if they were to achieve an equal place in the United States. On the campaign trail during his Senate run, Brooke had declared that '[a] vote for me is a vote against Stokely Carmichael'.⁹² On Brooke becoming the first African American Senator since Reconstruction, historian Leah M. Wright has noted that '[w]hat is perhaps more significant, however, is that African Americans viewed Brooke as *their* senator, implicit was the understanding that he would represent their desires [including in international affairs] regardless of his party affiliation'.⁹³ In calling into question Brooke's concern for black suffering in Biafra, Hall was questioning the senator's commitment to racial equality in the United States. If Brooke could not be trusted to be a voice for those suffering in Biafra, African Americans should also be dubious about his commitment to equality at home.

Both Senator Brooke and Congressman Diggs were pivotal figures in the ongoing debate surrounding U.S foreign policy towards the Nigerian Civil War. President Nixon and his senior advisors saw Brooke as a key legislator who had to be brought on side to ensure the successful implementation of the Administration's agenda. Both Brooke and Diggs would endorse the Nixon Administration's approach to the civil war, particularly the decision to appoint the African American professor and former Howard University dean of law, Clarence Clyde Ferguson Jr., as the Civilian Relief Coordinator for Humanitarian Aid to Nigeria – a decision that was widely applauded in the black press. While both men sympathised with the suffering of civilians caught in the fighting, neither believed that this justified supporting Biafran independence. Supporting self-determination for Biafra seemed illogical in light of the evidence that the claims of genocide were overstated and given the military precariousness of the Biafran war-effort. Most significantly, in the eyes of both legislators, the potential permanent disintegration of Nigeria had significant ramifications for post-colonial Africa.

⁹² Quoted in Leah M. Wright "'The Challenge of Change': Edward Brooke, The Republican Party, and the Struggle for Redemption", *Souls* 13, No. 1(2011), 103.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 105.

For both Brooke and Diggs, the importance of Nigerian unity to the broader project of post-colonial African development was not an ephemeral issue. For the two black politicians, as well as U.S officials and diplomats in Washington D.C., it was becoming clear that outside actors were increasing their involvement in the civil war. On 15 April 1969 Henry Kissinger passed on a memorandum to Undersecretary of State Elliot Richardson outlining a recent conversation between David Rockefeller, chairman of Chase Manhattan bank, and Ivory Coast Ambassador to the United States, Timothee Ahoua. Speaking on behalf of his President Felix Houphouet-Boigny, Ahoua expressed deep concern about the ongoing civil war in Nigeria:

President Houphouet-Boigny', reported Ahoua, 'believes that the Biafran problem is becoming increasingly important as Soviet influence in Nigeria is gaining ascendancy over the British influence. Houphouet-Boigny believes that the present Nigerian regime no longer has full control of the government and that aid to Biafra is important in stopping the spread of Soviet influence in Nigeria.'⁹⁴

Faced with a growing Soviet political and diplomatic footprint in West Africa, Houphouet-Boigny, the ardent anti-communist and key political figure in Francophone Africa, outlined the important role key anti-communist but 'unconventional' African states could play in supporting Biafra. Rockefeller noted that the president:

has been having secret conversations with the governments of South Africa and Rhodesia in an effort to persuade them to support Biafra. The South African Government has agreed to such support and is providing a credit of \$2,000,000 for supplies and food for the Biafrans. This aid will not be revealed officially and will not go through the International Red Cross sources. The South African Government justification is based on concern of the Soviets' growing influence in Nigeria and their feeling that it would be just as well for the Biafrans to remain independent of this influence.'⁹⁵

The involvement of outside actors, with interests that had the potential to undermine the future security and prosperity of post-colonial Africa's largest nation was an issue African Americans did not ignore. A month after the meeting between Rockefeller and Ambassador Ahoua, the front page of the *Afro-American* featured the blistering headline 'Ivory Coast Spends \$\$ on Biafra as own people suffer'. Written by journalist Winston Berry, the article

⁹⁴ Memorandum from the President's assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to the Under Secretary of State (Richardson), April 15, 1969, FRUS online, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve05p1/d56>, (accessed 11 March 2018).

⁹⁵ Ibid.

castigated the Ivory Coast's top-down development model as failing to deliver the prosperity to its citizens. 'With his [President Houphouet-Boigny's] own people in such dire economic straits and foreigners raping the people of their nation's produce, how can the ambassador of the Ivory Coast [Ahoua] justify spending thousands of dollars to distribute propaganda statements by Dr. Kenneth O.Dike, "roving ambassador to the government of Biafra?"'⁹⁶ In calling out President Houphouet-Boigny, the *Afro-American* was challenging the diplomatic posture of a regime that it viewed as running counter to the interests of post-colonial Africa and to the broader struggle to liberate Southern Africa. Historian Jamie Miller has written that by the late 1960s 'the dominant model in francophone Africa of close ties with Paris, or *francaafrique*, was rapidly disintegrating.... In place of the *francaafrique* state identities, leaders increasingly looked to wed their ideologies to Cold War models.... [M]oderate leaders like Ivorian President Felix Houphouet-Boigny...suddenly found themselves looking for ways to invigorate their conservative, top-down agenda for the future'.⁹⁷ This increasingly meant building tacit diplomatic arrangements with Apartheid South Africa, on anti-communist grounds, at the perceived expense of Pan-African unity.

The sense that the gains of independence were being stalemated, perhaps being forced into retreat, became interconnected with the Nigerian Civil War. The role of outside actors, whose interests ran counter to Pan-Africanism and black self-determination deeply alarmed a cross section of individuals and groups in the African American community. As noted above, with memories of Katanga still fresh in the minds of many black Americans and the decolonisation process entering a period of uncertainty, events in Nigeria took on extra importance. 'It was likely that Portugal sold arms to Biafra', acknowledged Stanley Diamond, 'partly because she would be contributing to a war in black Africa, and thereby deflecting attention from her own atrocious colonial record'.⁹⁸

In an article in the *London Financial Times*, that was syndicated by the *Chicago Daily Defender*, journalist Bruce Loudon saw Portuguese support for Biafra as part of a broader grand strategy initiated by Lisbon. 'Perhaps it is Biafra', wrote Loudon, 'more than anything

⁹⁶ Winston Berry, "Ivory Coast spends \$\$ on Biafra as own people suffer", *Afro-American*, May 17, 1969, 1.

⁹⁷ Miller, *An African Volk*, 67.

⁹⁸ Diamond, "Who killed Biafra".

else, that has led to Portugal's changed diplomatic tack in Africa. For in supporting Ojukwu, Portugal is allied with her two more vociferous enemies in Africa – Zambia and Tanzania'.⁹⁹ Under the new leadership of Premier Marcello Caetano, support for Biafra was an attempt by the Portuguese to normalise relations with some of its bitterest foes on the continent and perhaps take some of the military and diplomatic pressure off its colonial holdings. The political scientist James H. Polhemus described the strategies adopted by Portugal, Rhodesia and South Africa as a deliberate attempt to preserve the status quo in their respective territories:

Efforts to fragment Nigeria would have made excellent sense for South Africa, Southern Rhodesia, and Portugal. While weakening a potentially powerful opponent to minority white rule in South Africa and Rhodesia and to colonialism in Angola, Mozambique and South West Africa, the three could hope to earn the gratitude of an independent Biafra which would itself be a potential power in Africa.¹⁰⁰

Historians Olayiwola Abegunrin and Olusoji Akomolafe substantiated this point. 'The white regime in South Africa, they wrote:

whose withdrawal from the Commonwealth was spearheaded by Nigeria saw an opportunity to pay back Nigeria during this period [the civil war]. For all these countries, the Nigerian civil war provided a golden opportunity to help in the balkanization of the most populous Africa country which has made absolutely clear her opposition to what they (the white regimes in Southern Africa) stood for.¹⁰¹

'The fighting in Nigeria must end with a united nation', declared an editorial in the *Afro-American* in February 1969, '[n]othing else can be considered a satisfactory solution.... If it were made clear to Biafra that it will not be propped up and supported in its rebellion; the civil war soon would be terminated, lives saved and the African continent's largest nation saved from unwarranted outside influence'.¹⁰² A month later an editorial titled 'Game's Over

⁹⁹ Bruce Loudon, "Lisbon Abounds with African diplomats", *Chicago Daily Defender*, May 1, 1969, 12.

¹⁰⁰ James H. Polhemus, "Nigeria and Southern Africa: Interest, Policy, and Means", *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 11, No. 1(1977), 48-49.

¹⁰¹ Olayiwola Abegunrin and Olusoji Akomolafe, "Nigeria and the Southern African Liberation Struggle", in *Nigeria in Global Politics: Twentieth century and Beyond*, eds. Olayiwola Abegunrin and Olusoji Akomolafe (New York: Nova Science publishers, 2006), 112.

¹⁰² "Biafra lobby shows true face", *Afro-American*, February 8, 1969, 4.

for Biafra' informed readers that '[i]t would mean nothing but trouble and tragedy to have a few million hostile people supported by outsiders – neocolonialists – surrounded by 55 million Nigerians. Most of black Africa would be unhappy with this arrangement'.¹⁰³ The tone and content of these editorials would continue until the surrender of Biafra in January 1970. Under headlines including 'Time to crush Biafra', 'Egging on Biafran suicide', 'Biafra A lost cause', 'Ojukwu shows true colors' and 'Biafra relief used for guns', the editorial staff of the *Afro-American* blasted the political struggle of the Republic of Biafra and its supporters in the United States.¹⁰⁴ A cartoon on page four of the *Afro* on 29 March under the title 'France gets "Colony Biafra" before Portugal, S. Africa, Rhodesia Move' depicted a cowed Col. Ojukwu standing alone before a group of suited individuals – perhaps French diplomats, intelligence officers or businessmen – seated behind a desk emblazoned with the title 'Council of African oppressors to aid the colony of Biafra'.¹⁰⁵ An editorial on the same page outlined the stakes for its readers:

France, Portugal, South Africa and others supporting Biafra want nothing more than to divide up Nigeria so they can control Nigeria economically and politically. Nigeria is destined to become the world's largest oil-producing country.... Nigeria can no more allow a small minority of its people to pull away as a new nation than could the United States permit the southern states to leave the Union. Little by little the hypocrites who tried to hide behind the humanitarian dodge are being exposed as to their real reasons for wanting to see Nigeria, or any other African nation, carving into easy-to-handle sections.¹⁰⁶

On 23 August 1969, following a front page article outlining the scope of South African military aid to Biafra, an editorial savaged the tacit agreement established between Ojukwu and the Apartheid regime.¹⁰⁷ 'Now the most racist nation of any standing in the world is openly plowing military wares to Col. O. Ojukwu, the greatest traitor to black Africa since the late Moishe Tshombe [Prime Minister of Katanga]'. Reflecting the broader theme of Pan-African unity and the ongoing decolonisation struggle in Southern Africa the editorial

¹⁰³ "Game's over for Biafra", *Afro-American*, March 15, 1969, 4.

¹⁰⁴ "Time to Crush Biafra", *Afro-American*, April 12, 1969, 4; "Egging on Biafran suicide", *Afro-American*, May 3, 1969, 4; "Biafra a lost cause", *Afro-American*, May 31, 1969, 4; "Ojukwu shows true colors", *Afro-American*, June 14, 1969, 4; "Biafra relief used for guns", *Afro-American*, September 20, 1969, 4.

¹⁰⁵ "France gets "colony Biafra" before Portugal, S. Africa, Rhodesia move", *Afro-American*, March 29, 1969, 4.

¹⁰⁶ "Neocolonialists back Biafra", *Afro-American*, March 29, 1969, 4.

¹⁰⁷ "Biafra takes South Africa as ally, weapons supplier", *Afro-American*, August 23, 1969, 1.

declared that '[e]ven if South Africa's racists prolong life for Ojukwu's rebels it cannot provide stability and security. For in due time, South Africa's days are numbered too'.¹⁰⁸

The editors of the *Afro* not only intended to expose Biafra's unsavory allies, but also to highlight how the seemingly altruistic humanitarian aid efforts were prolonging hostilities and costing more lives. A cartoon published on 12 July depicted this concern. Instead of the cowed figure of Ojukwu, an unnamed Nigerian government official stands before Senator Edward Kennedy, a Red Cross official and another figure representing 'religious, business, U.S., and neo-colonial interests'.¹⁰⁹ The accompanying editorial 'Nigeria acts firmly', bluntly declared that it was humanitarian organisations and their supporters in Congress that were to blame for the continuation of the war. By their support of a humanitarian airlift that had violated Nigerian sovereignty and which was not coordinated with the Nigerian government, these individuals and organisations, charged the *Afro*, had caused human misery. 'Flights going to Biafra without federal approval should be shot down without hesitation', proclaimed the editors, 'no matter who they are or what they may be carrying. Nothing the relief programs are doing now is more important than bringing an early end to the civil war, on a united Nigeria basis'.¹¹⁰ Other African American newspapers and publications, while not as strident in their opposition to Biafra, expressed growing concerns about the political and humanitarian implications of the fighting continuing. 'This senseless civil war', stated an editorial in the *Chicago Daily Defender*, 'should have been halted long ago either by local application of commonsense or by the impact of external pressure. The United Nations should have utilised its influence and prestige to bring the two warring African factions to the negotiating table'.¹¹¹

The decision of the former President of Nigeria and leader of the Nigerian independence struggle, Nnamdi Azikiwe, to move his support from the Republic of Biafra, back to the Nigerian FMG, was a significant development that further galvanised African Americans to support Nigerian unity. 'The most dramatic demonstration of Ojukwu's loss of support from his closet allies', wrote Lasse Heerten, 'was the return of Nnamdi "Zik" Azikiwe to the Federal camp'.¹¹² Azikiwe had left Nigeria in 1968 and according to the *Chicago Daily Defender* had acted as a 'special advisor and spokesman for the secessionists' – one of his

¹⁰⁸ "S. Africa and Biafra", *Afro-American*, August 23, 1969, 4.

¹⁰⁹ "We intend to fly into your country when we like so Biafra can fight on", *Afro-American*, July 12, 1969, 4.

¹¹⁰ "Nigeria acts firmly", *Afro-American*, July 12, 1969, 4.

¹¹¹ "UN and Nigerian War", *Chicago Daily Defender*, July 8, 1969, 13.

¹¹² Heerten, *The Biafran War*, 302.

poems had formed the basis for Biafra's anthem, 'Land of the Rising Sun'.¹¹³ In September the *New York Amsterdam News* reported that Azikiwe was leaving London, where he was receiving medical treatment, and would return to Lagos to meet General Gowon.¹¹⁴ He was returning to Nigeria to 'help repair the damage done to my people by this ill-wind which has brought nothing but disaster'.¹¹⁵ Of critical concern for global opinion, Azikiwe called on the secessionists to end their struggle and described the claims of genocide against Igbos as 'completely unfounded'. 'Wisdom counsels that all Ibo [sic] and non-Ibo who are now adversely affected and are suffering privations as a result of the civil war, should have second thoughts and urge their leaders to go to the conference table and negotiate for a just and honorable peace', wrote Azikiwe in a statement issued in London. He continued, 'I am obliged to testify to all who listen to me and who have doubts about the personal safety of the Ibo people, as I was obliged to have up to one year ago, that the information is a cock-and-bull fairy tale'.¹¹⁶ Azikiwe's decision was met with consternation and anger in Biafra, with the former President denounced as a 'fool' and a 'scoundrel' by soldiers, civilians, civil servants and senior leadership alike.¹¹⁷

In the United States, however, African Americans saw Azikiwe's change of mind as a hopeful development. An editorial in *The Crisis* in October 1969, titled 'New Hope for a Rebirth of Africa', positively noted Azikiwe's renunciation of support for Biafran secession and support for a unified Nigeria. The article stated that:

Dr Azikiwe's call for the cessation of hostilities and a return to the 'one Nigeria' concept is a highly significant in that he himself is an Ibo [sic], the predominant tribe in break-away Biafra.... In the early stages of secession he sided with his native region but has now come to realize the danger of the Balkanization of the nation which, united, has the potential of becoming a significant world power. In his appeal for reunion he expressed the conviction that Biafran fears of genocide were without foundation.... The Biafrans have fought with desperate heroism but, seemly, in a lost cause, the success of which could prove fatal to the world's largest and potentially most powerful black nation.¹¹⁸

Besides the waves caused by Azikiwe's change of allegiance, black press coverage continued to focus on factors such as the malevolent intent and influence of third-party

¹¹³ "'Zik'" calls for unity of Nigeria: end to secession", *Chicago Daily Defender*, September 13, 1969, 5.

¹¹⁴ "Azikiwe leaves Biafra", *New York Amsterdam News*, September 6, 1969, 31.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ "'Zik calls of unity", 5.

¹¹⁷ "Biafrans seek peace without 'pre-conditions'", *Afro-American*, September 13, 1969, 22.

¹¹⁸ "New hope for a rebirth of Africa", *The Crisis*, October 1969, 324.

nations in the conflict. Lindsay Barrett, the Jamaican-born novelist and poet, in an extended article in the *Negro Digest* in October 1969, provided a detailed analysis of the significance of Nigeria for the broader struggle for self-determination on the African continent. In describing the support that the Republic of Biafra gained from abroad, Barrett wrote that '[w]e [referring to African Americans and the broader diaspora] cannot afford to lose sight of the fact that the nations engaged in ensuring the workability of such devices are nations dedicated to the external subservience of Africa and the black race to their own burgeoning economic ascendancy'. 'You black brothers', declared Barrett, 'have cited my earlier writings on the subject of black force, black unity, black love. These are the issues at stake here and only the unity represented and pursued with benevolence and dignity by the Federal Government, without pandering to foreign sentiments, can achieve the forward movement of these issues in this crisis'.¹¹⁹ Although the impartiality of Barrett's report is worth questioning, due to the fact he was currently working for the FMG as Head of the Information Department in East Central State, the article captured the growing sense that Nigerian unity was not only inevitable but necessary. In November, the *Defender* reported a relatively magnanimous speech by General Gowon at the University of Ibadan where he had stated that 'personally, I remain convinced that the only true basis for on which a lasting settlement can be conceived and achieved is the unity of Nigeria.... The secessionist leadership is the only obstacle to a return of immediate peace'.¹²⁰

Even if there was a growing sense that Nigerian unity was the only feasible way that the conflict would end, there were still numerous voices in the black press who took umbrage at the human costs of reunifying Nigeria. In the *Afro-American*, *New York Amsterdam News* and *The Chicago Defender*, articles, interviews, letters to the editor and editorials pushed back at the growing discourse in the African American community in favor of Nigerian unity. In the *New York Amsterdam News*, the journalist Simon Anekwe, who had lobbied for Roy Wilkins to join a peace mission of civil rights leaders to Nigeria in April 1967, and who had later emerged as a strident voice of Biafran independence in the black press, denounced the organisation's hypocrisy in its editorial in support of Azikiwe's call for Nigerian unity. 'Evidently the *Crisis*', wrote Anekwe, 'wants Biafra to be annihilated so the prospect of the powerful black nation can be realized. Attainment of this goal would rightly inflate the pride

¹¹⁹ Lindsay Barrett, "The Nigerian Crisis: An Arena for Africa's struggle for self-determination", *Negro Digest*, October 1969, 67.

¹²⁰ "End in sight in Biafra war?", *Chicago Daily Defender*, November 19, 1969, 12.

of black peoples and the end should be pursued irrespective of the means. Such apparently is the *Crisis* logic'. Comparing the *Crisis* coverage of the Biafra War to civil unrest in Northern Ireland, Anekwe lamented that:

[t]he NAACP has been fighting for practical recognition of moral principles in the quest for basic human rights over black-white relations here. It finds that morality is the crux of the Irish problem. But in the instance where blacks are directly the combatants, the *Crisis* abandons its high pedestal for the lower one of expediency.¹²¹

Anekwe also projected his venom on Moses J. Newson of the *Afro-American* and Graham Hovey, a member of the *New York Times* editorial board. 'The *Times* and Mr Hovey', wrote Anekwe, 'have often thrown their editorial weight behind Nigeria without regard to the merits of the situation or simply to hurt Biafra'. He expressed particular scorn for what he saw as Moses' unsubstantiated attacks though his editorials on how relief money was being used by the Biafra Relief Service Foundation mainly to pay the salaries of the organisation's staff. Both men, according to Anekwe, 'have one thing in common: their dedication to the destruction of Biafra and Biafrans, "no matter how legitimate their grievances"'.¹²²

The editorial policy of the *Afro-American* provoked a backlash from some individuals, who saw the pro-Nigerian unity platform of the newspapers to be a callous disregard of the suffering of the Biafran people. A Biafran student in the United States, H. U. Ihenacho, denounced the *Afro* as a 'pro-Nigerian newspaper', that like the OAU and numerous African leaders had 'betrayed their moral responsibility by falling prey to British balkanization propaganda'. 'Biafra's case stands as a glaring example', continued Ihenacho, 'of what will happen if any country, through imperial pressure or personal aggrandizement, singles out a section of its community and subjects it to the type of persecution that Nigeria has inflicted'. Maintaining the appeal to genocide as a category, he concluded, 'The right of Biafra to self-determination is the only way to save Biafra from suffering the fate of the Armenian Christians in the Ottoman Empire or that of the Jews in Nazi Germany'.¹²³ William Washington wrote in April 1969 that 'to justify the slaughter of ten thousand Ibos for the murder of two northerners borders on the ludicrous'. 'It is interesting', noted Washington, 'that in your denunciation of Biafra for its association with France and others, you did not

¹²¹ Simon Anekwe, "NAACP & The Crisis", *New York Amsterdam News*, November 8, 1969, 15.

¹²² Simon Anekwe, "Two editors", *New York Amsterdam News*, November 22, 1969, 19. Anekwe is quoting a speech by Assistant Secretary of State Joseph Palmers speech given in Lagos.

¹²³ H. Ihenacho, "Afro readers say: Biafran students view", *Afro-American*, March 1, 1969, 4.

equally [sic] denounce Nigeria for its association with Russia and Egypt, a country which is party to the slavery of Black people today'.¹²⁴ Donald J. Consentino, a former Peace Corps Volunteer in Nigeria, wrote: 'I do not think that the cause of unity is served by the war Nigeria is waging against Biafra'. Reflecting on the commentary espoused in the pages of the *Afro-American*, Consentino noted that:

the death of non-white people is not a prime concern of the "great powers," it ought to bring forth the condemnation of the AFRO. The Ibo people have demonstrated after two years of warfare that they prefer death in struggle to death in surrender. The only real alternative to Biafran autonomy appears to be annihilation, and a Nigerian victory over a graveyard.¹²⁵

However, notwithstanding dissenting voices such as those above, throughout 1969, a growing consensus asserted itself in the African American community in support of Nigeria's unity. Although the JACB lobbied furiously in the African American community, for the majority of black journalists, civil rights leaders, politicians and newspaper editors, supporting the independence of the Republic of Biafra was a risky proposition. The growing doubts in the international community about the claims of genocide being inflicted on Biafran civilians combined with the growing politicisation of the humanitarian relief effort eroded much of the goodwill and support globally for Biafra's struggle for independence.

The notion of African Americans supporting the development of economically strong and politically viable African nation-states had been a significant feature of black American political, intellectual and cultural discourse since the end of the Second World War, as I have noted. Yet, the enduring strength of this political outlook can perhaps be appreciated more when seen in connection with nineteenth century antecedents. Activists and intellectuals throughout the long history of the black diaspora had viewed the establishment of black nation-states and self-government as a critical component in challenging ideals around racial inequality. This can be seen, for example, in the black colonisation (back-to-Africa) efforts of the antebellum period. According to Hollis Lynch, the biographer of Pan-African intellectual and politician, Edward Wilmont Blyden, '[i]t was because Blyden believed that the Negro was at least potentially the equal of other races, that he was so anxious that Liberia should succeed'.¹²⁶ Later, during the American Civil War and the Reconstruction period, as historian

¹²⁴ William Washington, "Doubts end of killing", *Afro-American*, April 26, 1969, 4.

¹²⁵ Donald J. Consentino, "Killing cannot buy unity", *Afro-American*, August 2, 1969, 4.

¹²⁶ Hollis R. Lynch, *Edward Wilmot Blyden: Pan-Negro Patriot 1832-1912* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 19.

Brandon R. Bryd notes, African Americans ‘eagerly drew connections between their seemingly improved status [in the United States] and the past and contemporary advancements made by the Haitians [since 1804]’.¹²⁷ According to the African American abolitionist Frederick Douglass, the Lincoln Administration’s decision to grant official diplomatic recognition to the Republic of Haiti, which it had been denied by previous administrations, was a practical and symbolic declaration of the improved status of African Americans. ‘Douglass knew’, wrote Bryd,

that Anglo-Americans regarded the nation-state as the highest form of civilization, and he understood that white supremacists viewed African-Americans as incapable of self-determination because they could not claim a “legitimate” nationality. Consequently, the diplomatic recognition of Haiti, long a subject of black nationalist interest, assumed unparalleled significance for Douglass.¹²⁸

Later again, in the early twentieth century, Marcus Garvey, the President-General of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), championed the establishment of strong and viable African-led governments as essential elements of the ‘rebuilding of the African continent’. ‘So long as Negroes remained without a powerful country of their own’, argued Garvey:

any gains in the Americas would be fleeting, insecure, subject to the whims of white governments. “Back to Africa” did not mean relocating all Western blacks to the continent, but rather organizing a cadre of scientists, mechanics, and artisans to build railroads, establish schools, and broadly perform the “pioneering work” necessary to resurrect the struggling black republic [Liberia] as a flourishing Negro homeland.¹²⁹

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the political status of Eritrea, a former Italian colonial possession nestled on the shore of the Red Sea, further demonstrated the significance of politically and economically viable African nation-states to elements in the African American community. Following the surrender of Italian colonial forces, Eritrea was administered by a British military administration. However, Ethiopia claimed sovereignty over the territory on relatively dubious historical grounds. The Council on African Affairs (CAA), a leftist African American organisation dedicated to the liberation of Africa from

¹²⁷ Brandon R. Byrd, “Black Republicans, Black Republic: African-Americans, Haiti, and the promise of Reconstruction”, *Slavery & Abolition* 36, Issue. 4 (2014), 546.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 545-547.

¹²⁹ Ewing, *Age of Garvey*, 83-84.

colonial-rule, argued that a political union between Ethiopia and Eritrea was essential for ‘the progress of Ethiopia from semi-feudal backwardness into a developed modern nation state’.¹³⁰ W.E.B DuBois, a member of the CAA, argued that the maintenance of Eritrea was essential to Ethiopia’s security and future prosperity. Writing in June 1949, DuBois declared that ‘Eritria [sic] can only be self-supporting by depending on Ethiopia trade. Its use to Italy is only that of a base to attack Ethiopia. It is on the other hand, by history, racial-identity an economic necessity and an integral part of Ethiopia’.¹³¹ ‘Eritrea is a land which Ethiopia must control’, wrote DuBois in the CAA periodical *New Africa*, ‘it is a country which she should own if she is to have economic expansion and free access to the markets of the world’.¹³²

Seen in this light, the commitment to Nigerian unity and hence viability, was part of a longer commitment to the promotion of successful black nation states as both a symbolic and political goal. As Nigeria and the Republic of Biafra were locked in an existential struggle to define the future of Africa’s largest and potentially most significant nation-state, the intellectual legacies of Blyden, Douglass, Garvey and DuBois informed and refracted the debates and discussions in the African American community regarding the Nigerian Civil War. Nigeria, although a deeply flawed political experiment, represented to many black Americans, a living example of self-determination from colonial rule. As the African continent grappled with the legacies of colonialism, with white supremacist regimes in Rhodesia and South Africa, and with interventions by former colonial powers and new superpowers, African Americans overwhelmingly saw a strong Nigeria as critical not only for postcolonial African development, but also for black pride across the Atlantic.

¹³⁰ Anderson, *Bourgeois Radicals*, 164.

¹³¹ Quoted in Ibid.

¹³² Statement to Atlas News Service, June 3, 1949, DuBois Papers, <http://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums312-b199-i056>, (accessed 10 February 2019).

Conclusion

In December 1970, the African American soul artist, James Brown, stepped onto the tarmac in Lagos to a wild greeting from thousands of ecstatic Nigerians. Arriving with an entourage of over twenty other performers and band members, Lagos was the first stop for Brown on a highly anticipated tour of the African continent.¹ For the man sometimes referred to as ‘Soul Brother Number One’, the tour was not only about music, but also about the deep interconnections between African Americans and Nigerians. In an interview published in *Jet* magazine, Brown stated that ‘[w]e’re all the same. Take the suit and collars off and everybody’s the same, here and there, Over there, the brothers have the land and the potential; over here [the United States], we have the education and the experience. All of us can be free men as soon as we find a way to hook these things up’.² Brown’s Pan-Africanist outlook meant that the Nigerian Civil War, which had ended in the unconditional surrender of the Republic of Biafra in January 1970, loomed as an issue during his tour. Brown toured army hospitals, still filled with the numerous casualties of the conflict, and handed out his records. According to the *Atlanta Daily World*, in a meeting with General Gowon, the Nigerian head of state praised Brown for his ‘emphasis on education’, while the soul singer ‘commended the Nigerian leader for unifying the country’.³ Like his fellow namesake Jameses, Meredith and Farmer, whose opposing views were featured in the Introduction of this thesis, Brown’s actions and statements during his tour of Nigeria symbolised the broader contours of African American engagement with the Nigerian Civil War that this thesis has explored. Like Meredith, Brown represented the Pan-Africanist impulse that emphasised Nigerian unity as critical for the cause of the broader black diaspora.

The end of the fighting on 15 January 1970, with the collapse of organised Biafran resistance and the flight into exile of Biafran head of state General Ojukwu a few days earlier, was greeted with immense relief in the broader African American community. The responses in the black press captured the competing impulses that had animated black America throughout the civil war, responses which this thesis has surveyed. An editorial in the *Chicago Daily Defender* neatly encapsulated the dilemma the African American

¹ “Top hits: James Brown goes international”, *Afro-American*, October 24, 1970, A3.

² M. Cordell Thompson, “James Brown goes through some new changes”, *Jet*, December 30, 1971, 59.

³ “James Brown returns from tour of Nigeria”, *Atlanta Daily World*, December 25, 1970, 2.

community faced during the war. '[Y]es, there was sympathy for the starving Biafran children', noted the editorial, 'but no sympathy for Biafra's aspiration towards nationhood'.⁴ An editorial in the NAACP journal, *The Crisis*, placed the end of hostilities in a broader Pan-African perspective. 'Even though appalled by the misery endured by the progressive Ibos and other tribes of the late Biafran Republic', noted the editorial:

most black Americans supported the Federal government because we fervently want a strong African nation and a united Nigeria affords the best opportunity for realization of that dream.... Those of us who want to see Africa achieve its rightful place in the sun are immensely relieved by the end of the fratricidal slaughter. We hail the triumph of the Federal forces and applaud General Gowon's generous amnesty and plans for reunion. Long live the united Republic of Nigeria – the hope of black men everywhere in this Twentieth Century world!⁵

For the members of the Joint Afro Committee on Biafra (JACB), who had campaigned vigorously, but in vain, to gain African American support for Biafran independence, the end of the nascent nation-state was a bitter blow. Mary Harden Umolu and Shirley Washington, who had worked hard to provide the political, intellectual and cultural justification for Biafra in the black community, wrote a eulogy for the now extinct nation in the *New York Amsterdam News*. '[W]e are at least on record', stated Umolu and Washington, 'as having been representative of some black American concern about the worth of every black human being who breathes.... We black Americans could have saved those people and we will never be allowed to forget it'.⁶ 'And you Biafrans', lamented Simon Anekwe in the *Amsterdam News*, 'your young state is dead. But the wonders you created: your political, social, and technological achievements; the ideals of the Biafran Revolution born of the turmoil, these are not dead. It is not your republic but her ideals that will transform Africa. For indeed unless the seed die, itself remaineth alone'.⁷

These attitudes and opinions, expressed at the conclusion of hostilities, were a representation of the broader attitudes and opinions that preoccupied elements of the African American community from 1967 to 1970. As I have shown, rather than being an event that received only 'subdued' interest among African Americans, the Nigerian Civil War, a conflict that had significant global ramifications, intersected with central concerns in the

⁴ "A tragic ending", *Chicago Daily Defender*, January 19, 1970, 13.

⁵ "Long Live Nigeria", *The Crisis*, February 1970, 41-42.

⁶ Mary Umolu, "Amsterdam News readers write and write and write: Biafra & Blacks", *New York Amsterdam News*, February 14, 1970, 5.

⁷ Simon Anekwe, "Africa Today: Thoughts on Biafra", *New York Amsterdam News*, January 24, 1970, 15.

broader black internationalist project. 'Black America Cares' has charted the various initiatives that the African American community engaged in during the civil war – ranging from diplomacy to humanitarian assistance, to protests and intellectual debates about the future of postcolonial Africa – and has linked these efforts to the longer history of African American engagement with Nigeria in the early twentieth century. While the Nigerian Civil War took the level of engagement between African Americans and Nigerians to new heights, the relationship continued to develop and be debated into the new millennium.

The military defeat of the Republic of Biafra and the reunification of Nigeria brought solace to those in the African American community who had, during the civil war, championed Nigerian unity as not only beneficial for all Nigerians, but for the broader black diaspora. Although African Americans had been an active and vocal presence in the broader humanitarian campaign to provide famine relief to Biafra from mid-1968, and a small number of activists had mobilised in support of Biafran independence, support for Nigerian unity in the end became black Americans' default position. This was due to factors such as the long-established relationship between African Americans and Nigeria, to the significance many black Americans placed on Nigeria's role in world affairs, reflective of their long history of advocating for viable, black independent states, growing scepticism of claims of 'genocide' in Biafra, and the unsavory geopolitical alliances the Biafran leadership cultivated to support their struggle. The debates, discussions and activism that emerged during the civil war became central to defining the relationship between African Americans and Nigerians. Up until the end of the twentieth century, Nigeria's importance as the largest nation-state in Africa, its economic potential, its foreign policy committed to ending white-minority rule in Southern Africa, and its being a symbol of black political achievement in Africa, resonated through the trans-Atlantic relationship between African Americans and Nigerians. These issues were joined by discussions about Nigeria's domestic political institutions and commitments to human rights in the trans-Atlantic dialogue.

In the aftermath of the oil shocks of the early 1970s, and the gradual shift of the U.S economy from a net oil exporter to importer, Nigeria emerged as the second largest supplier of crude oil to the United States. This new economic heft in an increasingly globalised economy, for many African Americans was a sign of Nigeria's growing importance on the world stage and the fact that its interest should not be ignored by the United States.⁸ 'If you

⁸ By 1974 oil production as a percentage of Nigerian GDP would make up 31.9% up from 8.1% in 1970. In the same year, oil exports as a percentage of Nigeria's total exports would be 92.9% compared to 57.5% in 1970.

are thinking about these long gas lines', noted Ambassador Andrew Young, the former aide to Martin Luther King Jr. and President Carter's UN ambassador, 'one out of every eight gallons of gasoline sold in this nation comes from Nigeria....We are talking about the kind of realities that I think white folks can understand'.⁹ 'How Nigeria will handle its growing oil output', wrote the historian Dr. Jean Herskovits in *The Chicago Defender* in January 1975, 'may be directly connected with how Western countries, notably the United States, treat Southern African matters'.¹⁰

For those African Americans who had supported Nigerian unity during the civil war, Nigeria's increasingly assertive foreign policy towards Rhodesia and Apartheid South Africa throughout the 1970s and 1980s directly resonated with aspects of black experience in the United States. '[T]he issue of trade sanctions against Zimbabwe Rhodesia', wrote journalist Bill Drummond in the *New Journal and Guide*, '[is] a litmus test for President Carter's commitment to the aspirations of blacks in America.... American blacks are increasingly looking to Africa as a derivative of the civil rights movement in the American South. Salisbury has become a latter-day Selma'.¹¹ African Americans saw Nigeria as a key actor in the struggle to overthrow white-minority rule in Southern Africa and lobbied the U.S government to be increasingly aware of this significance.¹² This importance of Nigeria to the United States and to broader developments in Africa was not lost on the Carter Administration and was widely covered in both the mainstream and black press.¹³ A State Department briefing on Nigeria from 1977 noted that it was destined to be a regional superpower. 'Nigeria's population (75 million) and wealth', stated the report, 'make it the most important country in black Africa'.¹⁴ Carter's National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, recommended to the President to 'do more to develop relations with the new emerging powers.... In Africa, Nigeria should be our primary target, given its enormous potential'.¹⁵ Jimmy Carter became the first sitting U.S President to visit Nigeria in March

See Brian Pinto, "Nigeria During and after the Oil Boom: A Policy Comparison with Indonesia", *The World Bank Economic Review* 1. No.3 (1987), 421.

⁹ Quoted in Nancy Mitchell, *Jimmy Carter in Africa: Race and the Cold War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 5.

¹⁰ Jean Herskovits, "Nigeria joins big oil powers", *Chicago Defender*, January 4, 1975, 3.

¹¹ Bill Drummond, "Black America's stake in Rhodesia", *New Journal and Guide*, July 6, 1979, 11.

¹² Guy Arnold, "Nigeria – Key to a Rhodesia Settlement", *New York Amsterdam News*, September 1977, B1.

¹³ Michael T. Kaufman, "Carter Trip to Nigeria Culminates in Long Effort to Improve Relations", *New York Times*, March 31, 1978, 13; Moses Newson, "Nigeria's Obasanjo, Carter: behind the smiles – tough talk", *Afro-American*, October 22, 1977, 1; "Nigeria Discouraged by U.S. Policies", *New Journal and Guide*, December 22, 1978, 12; Simon Anekwe, "Kennedy lauds Nigeria", *New York Amsterdam News*, October 25, 1980, 26.

¹⁴ Quoted in Mitchell, *Jimmy Carter in Africa*, 146.

¹⁵ Carter simply wrote "Agreed" as a marginal note on the report. Quoted in Ibid, 147.

1978. In Lagos, Carter would issue his strongest call yet 'in the name of justice' for white-minority rule to be progressively transformed in order to achieve 'full political participation for all her people in every respect... [in] the social and economic life of the nation and an end to discrimination based on race or ethnic origin'.¹⁶

During the 1970s Nigeria remained an authoritarian regime with a coup culture that replaced one military strongman with another, sometimes with bloodshed, often leading to the stifling of civil liberties and political participation. Although African Americans remained focused on the racial component of Nigeria's engagement in global affairs, some voices hoped to link the democratisation and liberalisation of Nigerian politics to the question of race. Writing in December 1983, civil rights leader Bayard Rustin reported on Nigeria's most recent national election, one of a series since the 1979 handover of power to elected civilian leaders. Although Rustin was aware of the deep ethnic and economic tensions that continued to exist in the nation-state, he wrote that 'the very fact that an election did take place in the poor, developing country suggests that democracy is relevant to the entire Third World'.¹⁷ 'The election results', declared Rustin, 'also fly in the face of the false arguments of white racists who have suggest[ed] that majority rule in South Africa will inevitably translate into communist dictatorship or tribal conflict, turmoil and instability'.¹⁸

The crumbling of the Apartheid regime in 1994 led to renewed interest in the African American community on the question of democracy and civil liberties in Nigeria. The Clinton Administration's deliberations on whether to impose sanctions on Nigeria, following the execution of the human and minority rights campaigner Ken Saro-Wiwa by the military regime of Gen. Sani Abacha, galvanised a cross-section of African American community both for and against this policy.¹⁹ Randall Robinson, the president of Trans-Africa, one of the foremost African American anti-Apartheid organisations in the U.S, wrote to President Clinton calling for a complete oil embargo, the freezing of assets and a halt to new investment. Signed by fifty-four prominent African Americans including politicians, civil rights leaders, mayors, entertainers and artists, the *Philadelphia Tribune* noted that 'the continued protest by the influential group of African Americans shows the Black American

¹⁶ Helen Thomas, "Carter on historic visit: Minority white regimes must go Nigeria visit big success", *Afro-American*, April 8, 1978, 1.

¹⁷ Bayard Rustin, "Nigerian Voters Exercise Rights", *Los Angeles Sentinel*, December 29, 1983, A6.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Christopher S. Wren, "U.S. is seeking further ways to punish Nigeria for Execution", *New York Times*, December 17, 1995, 11

tradition of fighting against injustice at home and abroad, whether it's in the United States, South Africa, or Nigeria'.²⁰

Equally vehemently, other significant groups and individuals in the African American community opposed this condemnation of Nigeria. The Rev. Maurice A. Dawkins, a columnist for the National Newspaper Publishers' Association (NNPA), disagreed with Robinson on sanctions and noted that 'the diagnosis may be correct, but the wrong medicine will kill the patient whereas the right medicine will heal him.... I believe it is a mistake to assume that economic sanctions will accomplish the objective of democratizing Nigeria'.²¹ A delegation of black publishers from the NNPA visited Nigeria in November 1995 and called on the African American community to look beyond negative mainstream press coverage of Nigeria in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and on *CNN*, to oppose the Clinton Administration's agenda. 'We should not impose folly', exhorted the NNPA publishers, 'by trying to impose an alien democracy on that country as some in America demand be done. Let home-grown democracy take place in Nigeria in stages leading up to elections in three years'.²² Dawkins, both a civil rights activist and former Republican Senate candidate, established the 'Coalition for Fairness in Africa Policy', an organisation that aimed to 'rally support among African Americans to pressure the White House to drop its threat to slap economic sanctions on Africa's most populated country because of alleged human rights abuses'. Through a campaign in the black press titled 'Fairness towards Nigeria' and a 100,000 signature petition, Dawkins hoped to 'let President Clinton know that we African Americans respectfully recommend responsible engagement with Nigeria and oppose isolation and economic sanctions'.²³ Although the Clinton Administration did impose limited sanctions on Nigeria, including a ban on military equipment sales and a reduction in humanitarian aid, the more expansive suite of sanctions gained little momentum in Congress. According to Glenn Frankel of the *Washington Post*, besides lack of agreement with European allies and lobbying by major oil interests, Dawkins' campaign was a significant

²⁰ "Black Americans continue to put pressure on Nigeria", *Philadelphia Tribune*, December 19, 1995, 6A.

²¹ Maurice A. Dawkins, "Nigeria is no S. Africa: Visit by Nigeria Foreign Minister sparks debate on role of Blacks in relation to country's conflicts", *New Journal and Guide*, August 23, 1995, 11.

²² "Exclusive Report: Black publishers say Nigeria is not "troubled", "disturbed"", *New Journal and Guide*, November 1, 1995, 1.

²³ "Virginia GOP chooses Black", *New York Times*, June 12, 1988, 28; William Reed, "Government uses double standard on Black nations", *Philadelphia Tribune*, May 28, 1996, 3A; William Reed, "Fair Treatment sought for Black American Countries", *Atlanta Daily World*, June 9, 1996, 1.

factor since it ‘helped create the impression that the Congressional Black Caucus was divided on the issue.... This made it easy for other lawmakers to beg off’.²⁴

This thesis has shown that African Americans, in responding to the civil war in Nigeria, were not just showing a deep-seated interest in developments in postcolonial Africa, but also saw the conflict as interconnected to the struggle of the broader black diaspora in Africa, the Caribbean and in North America. On 12 March 1961, the African American novelist James Baldwin wrote in the *New York Times* that:

[T]he American Negro can no longer, nor will he ever again, be controlled by white America’s image of him. This fact has everything to do with the rise of Africa in world affairs. At the time that I was growing up, Negroes in this country were taught to be ashamed of Africa. They were taught...that Africa had never contributed ‘anything’ to civilization.²⁵

As Africans throughout the continent took hold of political independence and equal citizenship, black Americans saw this tide as threatening the foundations of racial prejudice and inequality suffered by African Americans in the United States. ‘Any effort, from here on out’, wrote Baldwin, ‘to keep the Negro in his “place” can only have the most extreme and unlucky repercussions’.²⁶ Historian Nikhil Pal Singh noted that throughout the 1960s African Americans from all walks of life ‘saw themselves as active participants in struggles for black sovereignty.... [T]hey were much more likely to embrace as indivisible the fate of American Negroes, Africans, and other colonized peoples’.²⁷

Although the Nigerian Civil War revolved around some issues that African Americans had no direct experience of, such as the nation-state’s ethnic and regional dynamics, and the structure of the post-independence Nigerian polity, black Americans still saw a serious issue that demanded urgent attention. The collapse of Africa’s largest and potentially most economically significant nation-state into anarchy, bloodshed, and civil war, was not only a backwards step for post-colonial Africa, but an ill-omen for the transnational struggle for black equality and citizenship. If Nigerians failed in their quest for self-determination, many

²⁴ Glenn Frankel, “Nigeria mixes oil and money”, *Washington Post*, November 24, 1996, C01.

²⁵ James Baldwin, “A Negro assays the Negro mood”, *New York Times*, March 21, 1961, SM 25.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 176.

African Americans feared it would have repercussions for their own freedom struggle. African American civil rights and black power activists, religious figures, politicians, journalists, academics, and members of the public deployed the language and ideas of the black freedom struggle in the late 1960s to understand and try and influence the Nigerian Civil War. They also interlinked concepts associated with the Nigerian Civil War such as humanitarianism, genocide and secession, to broader debates, campaigns, and initiatives in the African American community.

In March 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr. declared that '[n]o individual can live alone, no nation can live alone, and anyone who feels that he can live alone is sleeping through a revolution. The world in which we live is geographically one. The challenge that we face today is to make it one in terms of brotherhood'.²⁸ The Nigerian Civil War, a regional conflict that emerged as an issue of global proportions due to advances in media technology, improvements in transportation, and the globalisation of ideas around self-determination, humanitarianism and human rights made the civil war, in the words of King, a conflict that demanded the forging of new 'world' perspectives.²⁹ 'Black America Cares' has shown the many complex ways, channels, and means by which black Americans rose to that task.

²⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr. , "Remain awake through a great revolution" (speech, Washington D.C , March 31, 1968), The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/publications/knock-midnight-inspiration-great-sermons-reverend-martin-luther-king-jr-10> (accessed 22 July 2019).

²⁹ Ibid.

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