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February 12, 1969

MEMORANDUM FOR HENRY KISSINGER

SUBJECT: The Biafran Relief Decision *File*

The bureaucratic mountain having brought forth Biafran relief in six tidy but costly options, I wanted you to have my own personal views.

I see the Presidential interest in this problem as a limited two-fold aim:

1. Answer and relieve domestic pressure by demonstrating (a) the President's serious concern for the suffering, and (b) that the Administration is carrying on a fresh and top priority search for practical solutions.
2. A credible try to get in more food without (a) greater political involvement on either side, or (b) risk to American lives, property, and long-range political interests.

Public Stance

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We had a good start on the first aim two weeks ago with the Ziegler announcement of an urgent review. I think it makes sense to follow that now by announcing the NSC will consider the subject. After the meeting, we could simply say we were still studying, have steps under consideration, and can't discuss specifics. At some point the President might even issue a short statement along the lines of our proposed press conference answer, which he hasn't used so far (Tab A). These steps don't commit us to anything but concern. They should buy valuable time -- perhaps a month -- to do some quiet diplomacy along whatever course the President chooses.

The Policy Choice

The second aim is obviously the tough nut. The NSC options paper tells the President that the price of expanded relief is almost certainly political movement toward one side or the other, with numerous risks and uncertain rewards. I strongly agree that he must know this fundamental choice is there. At the same time, I see an important nuance in how we approach that choice, and thus how we might explain to a concerned public why we did not make it in favor of more relief cum greater involvement.

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As I indicated in the summary paper, there is a general consensus in the Government for Option 2. You'll recall that option bargains diplomatic support for the Feds in return for relief concessions designed to confront Biafra with the moral and political opprobrium of refusing to accept food from an operating land corridor. Frankly, Option 2 was posed this way largely because (a) we wished to draw the choices sharply; (b) State and Defense are convinced, at least at the IG level, that the Feds won't come around on relief for less than some hefty U. S. political backing; and (c) there is a unanimous bias in the bureaucracy in favor of the Federal side. (I spent nine hours in unrelieved IG negotiation with Assistant Secretary Palmer just to get the minimally fair statement we now have on the merits of Option 6 -- recognizing Biafra.)

In fact, there is a threshold to Option 2 which affords us greater neutrality and less involvement than most of my colleagues are willing to admit. The scenario could run roughly like this:

- A quiet demarche with the Feds to ask for cooperation in setting up a land corridor. Our interest is strictly humanitarian and we withhold political endorsements. Our only bargaining counter is the threat of disclosing non-cooperation.
- A quiet but direct approach to Biafra (perhaps by a newly-appointed U. S. relief coordinator) to ask the same thing at the same time under the same conditions.
- If either side obstructs, for any reason, then make the choice to (a) press the point by greater involvement or (b) brand the obstructor and disengage, continuing present levels of relief with a clear conscience.

The major considerations in this approach are:

1. We must be prepared at some point along the way for the Feds to hold out for some sort of high-level U. S. lip service to "one Nigeria". Yet just that would mean taking sides.
2. If the approach founders on this Federal price, and the suffering goes on, we cannot make our public case for disengagement here at home without branding the Feds. Yet that would be a blow to their position and State is bound to resist it. Palmer et al. will argue, first, that we should kick in "minimum" support, and, if we can't do that, we somehow fuzz the question of guilt.

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If Biafra obstructs, of course we make our public case and avoid further involvement with the Feds. The problem is that Ojukwu will understand this as well as anybody. He's too smart to let us off the hook that easily.

3. In the last account, however, I recommend this approach on the basis of a simple judgment on the outcome of the war. It allows us to stay reasonably clear of the Feds at a time when the odds are at least even that they're the wrong horse to back. My own (minority) view right now is that Biafra is going to make it one way or another.

In any case, the post-war future of the Nigerian Federation, with or without Biafra, is likely to be unsavory at best. I see this as just the beginning of a protracted period of turmoil and potential savagery. And the ultimate arbiter will no longer be the English-mannered elite we've known since 1960, but rather the bloated and fresh-from-the-bush Federal army, which has put automatic weapons at the service of fractious tribal loyalties.

4. Whatever the outcome of the war, the failure of this approach 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 Senators Brooke, Fulbright and others.

Recommendation:

That you support a limited approach of this kind in the NSC discussion of Biafran relief options.

My spies tell me that Under Secretary Richardson and his staff may be thinking along the same lines. But Richardson will still be in Paris Friday, and I just don't know how Secretary Rogers will come down after a briefing from the African Bureau. If such an approach were adopted, though, it would seem to be a fit subject for continuing scrutiny on the Under Secretary's Committee -- lest some of those basic choices get made for us in the crevice of a cable to our pro-Fed Ambassador in Lagos.

Roger Morris

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