

Background to the recent Nigerian elections

General Obasanjo more than just a "friend" of the Americans

Elizabeth Liagin
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Elizabeth Liagin is an independent journalist who has done extensive research into General Olusegan Obasanjo, who won the recent presidential election in Nigeria. She submitted the following commentary in response to the 5 March article "Nigerian election fraud leaves elite in control" by Chris Talbot

The 13 February 1976 assassination of Murtala Muhammad, which brought Olusegan Obasanjo to power the first time, was widely believed at the time to be linked to the CIA. Perhaps the same might be said for the 27 February 1999 "coup" as well.

Obasanjo is more than just a "friend" of the Americans. He is an operative. And his involvement with America's foreign policy elite is a long, sometimes complicated, but delightfully interesting story.

There are several key persons and institutions that appear over and over in the Obasanjo files. One is Donald B. Easum, who was the United States Ambassador to Nigeria at the time of the 1976 assassination. Another is the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, where Henry Kissinger, who was Secretary of State at the time of the same assassination, serves as a "counsellor." Then we have Robert S. McNamara, a former World Bank president and the Secretary of Defense who carried much of the blame for the Vietnam War. More recently, McNamara embarked on an excursion to Haiti in the aftermath of the election that brought Jean Bertrand Aristide to office. Upon his return, McNamara pronounced Aristide "vehemently" anti-US, implying that the United States would be in for another round of whatever it was that Fidel Castro stirred up in people after his revolution more than two decades before. Within a year of McNamara's assessment, Aristide was ousted by thugs on the CIA's payroll.

Back to the seventies: At the time of the coup that installed Obasanjo, the US was still reeling from the OPEC oil embargo. That action would have been all the more devastating were it not for the fact that Nigeria, under Yakubu Gowon's leadership, had opted to breach the embargo and ship oil to the West. Because of the inflated price petroleum commanded at the time, Nigeria experienced unprecedented economic growth. When Murtala took over, the US immediately became concerned, not knowing if Nigeria could be relied upon as a supplier under a new regime. In an attempt to soften up the anti-Western ideology associated with Murtala, Secretary of State Kissinger proposed a state visit. Murtala told him to stay home--something interpreted in Washington as a "ten" on the scale by which political insults are ranked.

In the months after Murtala took over in July of 1975, cables between Washington and Lagos increased in number almost five-fold. That in itself is an indicator of heightened political interest that goes beyond the mere arrival of a new administration. Some of those cables have been released via the Freedom of Information Act, and although they may not be entirely conclusive, they certainly suggest a US role in the assassination that brought Obasanjo to power in 1976.

To avoid getting overly-complicated, there were two dominant themes conveyed in most of those formerly classified cables. One concerned oil

and the extent to which the new Nigerian leadership would try to use oil "as an economic weapon" against the US, to quote the language used in several dispatches. The second concerned Nigeria's growing economic, political and military status within Africa.

The written communication between Lagos and Washington--much of which, I should add, is still classified--focused mainly on political intelligence, on the anti-Western opinions of various ministers and other leaders, on Nigeria's foreign policy (including its support for the then-banned African National Congress in Lusaka), and, of course, its support for any potential OPEC strike in the future. Also of concern to Washington power brokers was the fact that Nigeria continued to acquire weapons of increasing sophistication and could be expected to effectively enforce its national interests in any regional dispute.

Among the more interesting cables is one, written by Ambassador Easum just days before Murtala's murder, that suggested Nigeria's economy would have to be brought down ("degraded," in Clinton terminology) so that development expectations would compete with the growth of national power--the assumption being that the military expansion Washington so feared would falter.

A related concern was the strength of Nigeria in terms of manpower. In August of 1975, as a matter of fact, the Congressional Research Service prepared a study called "Oil Fields as Military Targets." Its purpose was to serve as a background briefing to Congress in the event a second, "air-tight" oil embargo was launched and the president decided to seek legislative approval for a war over oil. One nation evaluated, and ultimately dismissed, as a possible subject of such an attack was Nigeria. There were definite advantages to attacking Nigeria, of course. Not the least of these were the fact that (a) the country's oil reserves were largely on land, making them less costly to operate (or reconstruct in the event of sabotage) in the wake of an invasion; (b) Nigeria offered a clear benefit in terms of transit because shipments would be relatively direct, not passing through strategic "hot spots" like Hormuz; (c) the populace would be relatively unsuspecting, giving the US military the advantage that comes with surprise (which rather contradicts the notion of Congressional debate); and (d) Nigeria would be among the countries least likely to provoke retaliation by the USSR, not to mention Soviet interceptions of communications, etc. But on the negative side, two important aspects of the would-be invasion stood out. One was the terrain--similar in many respects to that which had "frustrated" US troops in Vietnam over the previous decade. The second was the density of population in the eastern and delta regions in which the purported invasion would have had to take place. The ensuing struggle, one in which tens of thousands of angry Nigerians were potential combatants, would have drawn world attention to American imperialism, the report frankly concluded, making any attempt to colonize Nigeria's oilfields a distinct liability.

There were other documents produced at around the same time to corroborate this intense interest in Nigeria, the country's population, and its oil wealth. The US Information Agency or USIA (which operates the

Voice of America of other propaganda actions around the world) does yearly reports on the US interest in various countries. Theirs, too, cites the pervasive worries about Nigeria becoming the economic and demographic giant of Africa, capable of spreading an anti-American ideology all over the continent, and likewise stressing that agency goals should serve the larger objective of increasing US influence over Nigeria's politics and culture. Then there was the notorious NSSM 200 (National Security Study Memorandum 200), sometimes called the "Kissinger population paper," in which it was stressed that oil and mineral-rich Nigeria could easily cope with a far larger population and would gain sufficient status to compete with the US influence over Africa. The memorandum recommended that 13 of the largest developing countries, Nigeria included, be targeted with aggressive campaigns of fertility control in order to contain their rise to power.

"Whatever may be done to guard against interruptions of supply," said the document, which was adopted as official policy "guidance" in the development assistance program in late 1975, "the US economy will require large and increasing amounts of minerals from abroad, especially from less developed countries. That fact gives the US enhanced interest in the political, economic, and social stability of the supplying countries. Wherever a lessening of population pressures through reduced birth rates can increase the prospects for such stability, population policy becomes relevant to resource supplies and to the economic interests of the United States."

The same study included detailed instructions on how US policymakers could use such "multinational" institutions as the World Bank and various UN agencies to pressure governments into adopting population-reduction policies, and even hinted that food and development aid might be made conditional on actual (measurable) reductions in national fertility rates.

The general tone of the dispatches sent between Lagos and Washington was clear. Washington wanted new leadership for Nigeria. And on 13 February 1976, the assassination that brought Obasanjo to power was carried out. Curiously, it was exactly five days later, on 18 February, that President Gerald Ford signed a long-awaited and much-publicized executive order barring the assassination of foreign heads of state by the CIA.

In 1979, Obasanjo became the first Nigerian military leader to voluntarily turn over his office to an elected leader, Shehu Shagari. And what came next is important. Almost right away, Obasanjo turned up in New York, where he was appointed to the board of directors of the African American Institute. The African American Institute, then located directly across the street from the United Nations, had been set up in 1954 with money that came from the CIA. Its principal task was to increase US influence over the foreign and domestic policies of the emerging African states, at that time still under formal European control.

In the next few years, Obasanjo began turning up in all kinds of interesting places--giving a high-profile lecture at Kissinger's Center for Strategic and International Studies (which also distributes literature written by Obasanjo), for one thing, and hosting a meeting on religion and politics at the government-controlled US Institute of Peace. During the mid- and late 1980s, things were especially fascinating. Obasanjo was still on the AAI board, as he has continued to be, even during his years in detention under Sani Abacha right up to the present day. In 1988, from his vantage point at AAI and CSIS, Obasanjo launched an endeavor of his own, the Africa Leadership Forum. Assisting him from the beginning, and prominently involved over the next several years, was the notorious ex-defense secretary, World Bank boss, and probable Haiti coup-instigator, Robert McNamara.

Obasanjo's forum fits every description of a classic "front group." Its financing comes from nebulous sources, its activities are conducted for the most part under pseudonyms. It created centers for the study of military and "security" issues; organized "leadership" conferences; underwrote

reports on policy matters by "local" scholars; recommended legislation (not just in Nigeria but before the AAU, as well); financed an office for conflict monitoring; recruited journalists for propaganda campaigns; and sought out young academics for political training--most of these actions presented as the initiative of host country institutions that were, in reality, Obasanjo creations. In the 10 years between the founding of the forum and Obasanjo's decision to make a run for president, the forum also worked with the development agencies of various nations, the US Information Service, and other big league collaborators in the Western world.

According to forum literature, the source of the group's money is yet another institution, the Africa Leadership Foundation, which was founded in 1988 by Obasanjo simultaneously with the forum's creation. Indeed, the foundation exists for the express purpose of financing forum activities. Obasanjo's New York-based foundation is not listed in the phone book, but forum records list an address at a residential condominium on upscale Park Avenue, where foundation chief of operations and Obasanjo confidant Hans d'Orville resides. D'Orville, a German national who speaks with a British accent, was asked about the origin of several million dollars which had suddenly surfaced in Nigeria right after Obasanjo declared his intent to compete for the presidency last year. He insisted he didn't know.

The year 1988 was also notable for the inauguration of a "population policy" in Nigeria, financed with more than \$100 million from the US Agency for International Development and the World Bank, and officially approved by Gen. Ibrahim Babangida, Sani Abacha's predecessor and a personal friend of Obasanjo's. One of the key actors in that operation was the CIA-linked African American Institute in New York, on whose board Obasanjo sat.

The African American Institute was at the time headed by none other than Donald B. Easum, the former US Ambassador to Nigeria who suggested the subversion of Nigeria's booming economy and on whose watch the assassination of Murtala Muhammad took place.

A 1988 contract between the Agency for International Development and AAI called for the latter to work to generate "a policy climate conducive to the successful execution of a national family planning effort [in Nigeria] and to strengthen federal, state, and local government capability in strategic planning in order to efficiently mobilise and execute an effective and self-sustaining national family planning programme." Babangida, ironically, is also rumored to have had a part in the 1976 coup that installed Obasanjo.

Two years after the national population policy was launched, Obasanjo was again called upon to assist in the promotion of the US agenda in Nigeria, this time acting under the auspices of his Africa Leadership Forum. The occasion was a June 1990 World Bank conference on population control in Lagos, organized, at least in part, by Obasanjo ally and advisor McNamara. At the close of the meeting, which was held secretly in a heavily-guarded Lagos compound, Obasanjo stepped forward to openly demand that the federal military government of Nigeria adopt a mandatory limit of three children per woman.

The money Obasanjo brought to his recent presidential campaign, which became the source of a major scandal in the Nigeria press, is just the proverbial tip of the iceberg. For years Obasanjo has associated with key actors in the hierarchy of global politics. In his work with the CIA-created African American Institute and the Africa Leadership Forum, he has overseen projects that could literally be used as textbook examples of Cold War era covert operations--"constituency-building" campaigns, intelligence gathering, the penetration of the news media, the recruitment of unsuspecting local collaborators, and the creation of a network of inter-linked groups and dummy corporations through which major operations can be orchestrated and financed. As brutal as was Obasanjo's first period in office, it is likely that Nigerians will experience even worse in the coming years.



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