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Nigeria: New York Post Script (1995)

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XXIV. NEW YORK GAMBIT

Two weeks after my return, I got a chance to move my Korean agenda further along during a visit to New York City. A few of us had scheduled a visit with Human Rights Watch/Africa Thursday, October 5, to discuss their growing concerns about the political deterioration in Nigeria. I scheduled the visit to New York on Nigeria to coincide with an event scheduled the following day by The Korea Society, which I had joined in the spring to take advantage of precisely the kind of opportunity that now presented itself.

I had traveled to Nigeria often and had been the headquarters go-to guy on Nigerian public affairs matters for five years. Over the years, I'd worked enough in Lagos and at Mobil's operations base at Qua Iboe Terminal in Akwa Ibom State (on the southeastern coast) that the turf was as familiar to me as, say, Milwaukee. If I didn't actually have a personal stake in the dynamics of the place, I knew the right folks to call.

My most recent visit to Lagos had been in late June and early July to stage a Host Government Relations workshop. Unlike Jakarta, the Lagos session had been a hit. Afterward, I had written a GR strategic plan—endorsed by everyone from Marconi on down—designed to do three things: help Mobil and others in the Nigerian business community put what pressure it could on the military to reform; work with the Nigerian elites to explain that if the military kept the repression up the west might call it quits; and work with opinion leaders in the U.S. (Congress, Hill staff, Administration desk officers, Human Rights Watch, etc.) to make sure they knew what was at stake if they started making boycott noises. A cornerstone of this strategy in the U.S. was

to energize a group of American businesses called the Corporate Council on Africa to get more assertive in the on-going discussion in Washington about Nigeria's future and give voice to the points that Mobil could not make on its own.

We were doing all these things, and the strategic thrust had come none too soon. Because of the deteriorating political and economic situation in Nigeria, we had begun to get shareholder letters about the new Nigerian regime. It was time to get our facts out fast.

Some colleagues and I had scheduled a sit-down with Human Rights investigators. Joining us were two officers of E&P's affiliate, Cecilia Onitiri, a Mobil Nigeria lawyer on temporary assignment to Fairfax, and whose brother was a civilian finance minister of the current government, and Paul Calder, the incoming vice president of Mobil Producing Nigeria, Unltd., a Texas A&M grad I'd first known from Jakarta where he was a senior operations guy.

Calder, a large man who looked like a former defensive tackle, was an Aggie through and through, and was about to relocate to Lagos to take on his new assignment. He also was a very congenial African-American, whose common touch with Indonesians had been legend. He was one of the few Americans to actually like the Indonesian fruit called dhurian, a melon most avoided as particularly foul-smelling. Calder's presence had the side benefit of jostling any pre-conceived, if unwitting, racially-inspired assumptions any human rights activist might have about how American 1st Worlders (read, whites) were morally bound to protect, well, disadvantaged Africans (read, blacks).

Mobil, at its best a meritocracy, frequently gives the lie to such fashions of the current politically correct. Its promotion practices often were utterly devoid of racial bias, which was true in Calder's case, though folks like me were not above taking advantage of their appearance, if, well, one did it in a suitable way.

The Mobil crew from D.C. took the 7 a.m. USAir shuttle to LaGuardia and met for breakfast with Calder at the New York Palace Hotel in the shadow of St. Patrick's before going to the Human Rights office at 485 5th Avenue, across from the New York Public Library at 10 a.m.

This was going to be a tough meeting. The progress toward democracy that had been underway in Nigeria for more than a decade had ended June 23, 1993, 11 days after the nation's June 12 presidential election.

A businessman named Moshood Abiola, a massively-rich Yoruba, had been elected president after a long campaign in which he had spent an estimated \$200 million to fund his campaign and, perhaps, grease palms. Long-time military strongman Gen. I B. Babangida, a Hausa, broke his word and voided Abiola's election on June 23. Like Claude Rains' character in the movie

Casablanca, who was “shocked, shocked” at the gambling in Rick’s saloon, Babangida said the election was corrupt—money may have changed hands during the campaign! At once, the fragile faith Nigerians had begun to place in each other flew away like dandelion seeds blown in a breeze. The reaction forced Babangida from office, and his replacement, a shadowy general named Sani Abacha, began a brutal crackdown that was plunging Nigeria into economic depression and political ruin.

The civilized world watched in fear that 100 million Nigerians, of black Africa’s most populous and resource-rich nation, might collapse into a blood-bath of tribal chaos. Such chaos had happened in the 1960s, when more than a million died when the oil-rich provinces where Mobil had been so successful tried to secede from Nigeria and create a nation they called Biafra. This war, oddly, had little effect on Mobil and the other foreign oil producers. During the Biafran war, no Nigerians disturbed oil operations. What changed was the uniforms of the guards on the towers outside the periphery. Neither side would mess with oil production. The money from oil production has no political allegiance. The question was who Mobil would eventually send the money to.

At hand that morning was whether Human Rights Watch/Africa would call on the U.S. to boycott Nigerian products, i.e., oil, and/or launch, as owners of Mobil stock, shareholder initiatives to demand that Mobil (and a handful of other companies) get out of Nigeria. The researchers for Human Rights Watch/Africa were earnest, fair-minded and knowledgeable. But they were, well, in Manhattan, not Lagos. They understood the intellectual issues. One young woman had even been to Nigeria and traveled through some of the country and had a very good knowledge of facts on the ground. But she had only spoken with dissidents; the point of view she held was more of a trade unionist variety, worker rights, permission to organize, to strike, that kind of thing. Worthy goals, all. But somewhat skewed.

The weapons they believed they had at hand to force bans against importing Nigerian oil were legal sanctions by the U.S. government of the Nigerian government, and grass roots citizen’s boycotts, pickets, or bad publicity against U.S. companies that do business in Nigeria—the standard modern-media-political-action tool bag. Theirs was a typical argument. As we always did, in such cases, we first stressed the facts of the matter, detailing what Mobil does on the ground, how many are employed, incomes earned by the people, opportunities that are opened up in education and training and health and personal development, contributions to the community, and—importantly—how limited Mobil’s leverage is.

Our argument was that progress in the areas of social and political development, human rights and environmental protection were always improved by having American outfits like Mobil in a country. We lead by example, we

influence slowly by doing what is right and expecting—frequently demanding—the same from others. If the Mobils are forced to leave, you remove the West from the table, you abandon friends and local peoples who depend on you, give other countries (the French or Japanese or Iranians or Russians or Turks or whoever may wish to ignore you) a chance to move in and exert their influence at U.S. expense, and/or otherwise isolate the country and make things worse.

At times, I've wondered why if the U.S. wants to change a country so much the U.S. is going to declare it off-limits, we don't we just declare war and start the killing quickly. If the country is evil enough to shun or starve, why not evil enough to kill? We're going to, anyway—by isolation, starvation and deprivation of innocents. Besides, boycotts and sanctions give the gangsters who run such places a foreign bad guy to blame for a people's troubles and help solidify their hold on the god-forsaken place. If, on the other hand, you go to war, you can kill the gangsters, declare victory and then get to fixing the problem quicker.

But in the polite West, we seem to prefer to isolate and point a well-manicured finger from the protected confines of prosperous communities that sustain our goodness. We can accuse the other of being the evil and declare ourselves the good. This is so much better than miring in the muck, fouling our hands as we risk our souls, as we get tangled up in a people's halting struggle to be free of the sticky, smelly swamp of poverty, ignorance and disease.

Well, there. I've had my say. But, like I said: tough subject. And make no mistake. Nigeria is a hard case country filled with wonderfully independent persons, who General Colin Powell, the hero of the moment, had that week called "marvelous scammers." They were in the grip of a tribal culture caught in a federal world. The country had been free of British colonial rule for 30 years, but remained in the chains of its own humanity—foil to corruption and greed and selfishness.

The problem is that Nigerians—cut into three major tribal groups (Yoruba, Hausa/Filani, Imo), two major religions (Christian for the Yoruba and Imo and Muslim for the Hausa/Filani) do not trust democracy because they do not trust each other. For fair-minded administration, Nigerians would prefer to turn to uniformed military rulers. Uniforms insulate Nigerian leaders from tribal influence and therefore they believe they are entitled to stage coups, which they do regularly. The latest gang, run by a military thug named Abacha, a night owl with shades, had the world's human rights activists community up in arms. They want Mobil, the second largest oil company in the country, to lean on Abacha and get his gang of thugs to do the right things. So our chore that morning was to try to buy time. The plan called for us to engage these human rights leaders and attempt—as best

we could—to achieve some understanding about what we do in Nigeria, why we try to do right and that we in fact do, and why we can't do much more than that or we'll be denied exploration acreage, have our operations harassed, and get tossed out.