

BRIEFING

THE US INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY'S BIASES DURING THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR

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THE UNITED STATES INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY struggled to deliver impartial and dispassionate analysis on the Nigerian Civil War. Two US presidents and the American public had strong, often emotional, responses to the 30-month conflict, which pitted the Federal Government against the secessionist Republic of Biafra. President Johnson saw the war as an unwelcome distraction, ordering aides to get those 'babies off [his] TV set'.¹ President Nixon spied an opportunity, seizing on the conflict as a way to show his human side; he argued that the United States was not doing enough to ease civilian suffering in the secessionist enclave.² Similarly, many Americans identified with Nigeria's Igbos who, aided by a slick propaganda campaign, portrayed in moving images the war's toll on Biafra's civilian population. *Time* and *Life* magazines published sympathetic cover stories on Biafra's plight. Jimi Hendrix and Joan Baez participated in a relief concert for Biafra in Manhattan. The war, which lasted from July 1966 to January 1970 and led to the deaths of more than half a million people, stirred US citizens to march in public rallies and donate more than US\$11 million to feed, clothe, and assist Biafra's displaced population.

As Nigeria marks the conflict's 50th anniversary this year, it is instructive to revisit the US Intelligence Community's assessments and reflect on some of the contemporary challenges analysts face today—whether on Nigeria or Africa more broadly. The Intelligence Community (IC) published more than 300 President's Daily Briefs, National Intelligence Estimates, and other memoranda related to the conflict. It was not, however, immune to the outpouring of public support for the Biafran cause. Throughout the conflict, the IC's analysis reflected an undercurrent of

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1. Roger Morris, *Uncertain greatness: Henry Kissinger and American foreign policy* (Harpers, New York, 1977).

2. Henry Kissinger, *The White House years* (Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1979).

support for the Biafran side. I argue that this preference almost certainly contributed to several intelligence failures related to the conflict's trajectory and outcome, as well as Nigeria's postwar prospects. While the IC accurately anticipated the onset of the war, cognitive biases and faulty assumptions tilted its judgments in favor of Biafra and amplified its fear of mass atrocities committed by Nigerian forces. The IC also struggled to inform the policy process, especially during the Nixon White House. Many of its judgments were ignored or derided, and thus it failed to influence US postwar responses.

The IC's record on the Nigerian Civil War is relevant in part because analysts today continue to labor under similar pressures and constraints. In the case of Nigeria, it is challenging to render judgments free of personal sentiment when confronting the devastation wrought by Boko Haram. While the American public has not reacted to the current tragedies in Nigeria as they did in the late 1960s, there is greater access to online videos, photos, and personal testimonials that certainly influence policy debates. Analytic challenges in other African hotspots are no different. The IC's experience during the Nigerian Civil War underscores why it is essential to deliver objective assessments supported by rigorous analytic tradecraft. It highlights how personal regard for African rulers or opposition leaders, particularly those that profess to subscribe to US values, often tilts analytical judgments. It shows how problematic it is to assume that an outcome is preordained based on past patterns. Finally, it is a reminder that new US administrations tend to enter office with strong views on foreign affairs and may initially question the value of intelligence analysis.

This briefing uses recently released Nixon Administration President's Daily Briefs (PDBs) and other declassified intelligence reports to evaluate the IC's record on the Nigerian Civil War.³ It examines the IC's analysis of the January 1966 coup d'état and July 1966 counter coup that preceded the civil war. It discusses the poor tradecraft that underpinned assessments of the war, as well as the IC's negative forecasts of Nigeria's postwar outlook. Finally, this briefing incorporates several previously published memoirs by and interviews with US officials in order to present an appraisal of the IC's influence on the policy process.

3. The US Central Intelligence Agency published the Central Intelligence Bulletin (CIB) from 1958 to 1974, and its primary audience included policymakers below the president. The President's Daily Brief (PDB) is an IC-coordinated product written for the President and designated recipients. During this period, PDB articles tended to be based on CIBs or later republished as CIBs, although the two formats differed in length and details. Some PDBs were never converted into CIBs because of the information's sensitivity, while many CIBs did not become PDBs because the analysis was deemed not critical reading for the President.

'This could mean communal disorders and even civil war'

The IC's most prescient calls on the Biafran conflict came early on. When junior officers of the Nigerian Army launched a coup d'état on 15 January 1966, US analysts warned that 'an early breakup of the federation' could follow.⁴ They repeated this concern in the PDB a few days later, flagging the potential for civil war. The analysts' foresight was unmatched by journalists.⁵ The *New York Times*, for instance, did not raise the prospects of 'political dissolution' until August.⁶ The IC's acumen also proved sharper than the media's on the staying power of Nigeria's new leader. The *New York Times* praised Major-General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi's 'infectious dynamism and dedication', while the IC in contrast rated him a poor administrator whose policies risked alienating northern soldiers.⁷ By April 1966, analysts concluded that Ironsi 'could be out of office fairly soon' and later warned of a mutiny by northern Nigerian soldiers.⁸ The IC's analysis was spot-on: northern soldiers rioted, killed Ironsi, and seized power in July 1966. The US analytic community even may have outperformed its UK counterpart. The former UK High Commissioner to Nigeria admitted he had been 'totally unaware of an impending coup'.⁹

From the second coup d'état on 29 July 1966 to the outbreak of hostilities on 6 July 1967, the IC's analysis was less revelatory. The analysts mirrored diplomatic and press reporting, warning on one hand that a conflict was inevitable while on the other hand suggesting a political compromise was attainable. The IC, as early as 8 August, asserted that the Igbos, the dominant ethnic group in Nigeria's eastern region, were 'charging ahead toward solution by partition'.¹⁰ Days later, the analysts reversed their position, claiming the Igbos had pulled back. Even after issuing a report entitled 'Eastern Nigeria on the brink of secession' in March 1967, the IC seemed unsure about the prospects for a breakup.¹¹ The analysts shied away from a consistent call on secession in part because diplomatic reporting indicated that rapprochement remained

4. 'Central Intelligence Bulletin', 16 January 1966, <<https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/>> (18 November 2012).

5. 'The President's Daily Brief,' 18 January 1966.

6. Lloyd Garrison, 'Political break-up looms in Nigeria as Ibos challenge regime,' *New York Times*, 3 August 1966, <<https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1966/08/03/82867021.html>> (3 March 2017).

7. Lloyd Garrison, 'A new dynamism sweeping Nigeria', *New York Times*, 18 February 1966, <<https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1966/02/18/83526412.html>> (26 February 2017).

8. Central Intelligence Agency, 'Special memorandum no. 6-66: A crisis ahead for Nigeria', 28 April 1966.

9. Michael Gould, *The Biafran War: The struggle for modern Nigeria* (I.B. Taurus, London, 2013).

10. 'Central Intelligence Bulletin', 3 August 1966.

11. Central Intelligence Agency, 'Weekly summary special reports: Eastern Nigeria on the brink of secession', 17 March 1967.

possible. The US Embassy in November 1966 asserted that prospects for continued unity were not ‘yet hopeless’,¹² and the UK High Commissioner reported that secession was ‘not yet certain’.¹³ While the IC’s performance was satisfactory in the prewar phase, two developments during this period—the anti-Igbo riots and the rise of Biafran leader Lieutenant Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu—sowed the seeds for subsequent intelligence failures.

‘The odds seem to be changing in Biafra’s favor’

From the onset of the civil war on 6 July 1967, the IC overestimated Biafra’s prospects of withstanding Nigeria’s military campaigns and attaining independence. The analysts assessed that Biafra held the advantage because of Ojukwu’s leadership and the fact that its forces included the bulk of Nigeria’s former officers and engineers. With the exception of one National Intelligence Estimate in May 1968 that dismissed the likelihood of a Biafran military victory,¹⁴ the IC repeatedly assessed that Biafra’s leadership and its soldiers were more competent and committed than their federal counterparts. A month before the war broke out, analysts predicted that Nigeria would be ‘unable to put down the East’s “rebellion”’.¹⁵ The IC cheered Biafra’s battlefield wins—calling one ‘a bold move’¹⁶—and minimized its losses as ‘grudgingly giving ground’.¹⁷ Even as Biafran territory shrunk to a fraction of its former size, the analysts continued to argue that neither side was capable of a decisive military victory. They appeared to be blinded by a series of cognitive and perceptual biases that caused them to reject or overlook information that was not aligned with their expectations and assumptions. The IC, along with many journalists and US officials, identified with Biafra, was charmed by its leadership, and anguished over its people’s plight. This dynamic contributed to repeated inaccurate calls and misjudgments.

US analysts failed to correctly forecast the war’s trajectory in part because they saw northern Nigerians as culturally backwards and violent, a sentiment that hardened following anti-Igbo riots in 1966. The IC described northerners as ‘feudal’ and ‘traditional’ compared to the Igbo who were ‘modernizing’ and ‘progressive’.¹⁸ When anti-Igbo violence erupted in the north, analysts used emotive language to describe the ‘massacres’ and ‘slaughtering’

12. ‘Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Nigeria’, November 9, 1966, *Foreign relations of the United States, 1964–1968*, vol. XXIV, Document 369.

13. Gould, *The Biafran War*.

14. ‘National Intelligence Estimate’, 2 May 1968, *Foreign relations of the United States, 1964–1968*, vol. XXIV, Document 397.

15. Central Intelligence Agency, ‘Memorandum for the Director: Probable consequences of a military conflict in Nigeria’, 15 June 1967.

16. ‘Central Intelligence Bulletin’, 10 August 1967.

17. ‘Central Intelligence Bulletin’, 28 September 1968.

18. Central Intelligence Agency, ‘Special report: Nigeria’s national election’, 18 December 1964.

of the Igbo people.¹⁹ While we lack analyst testimonies, the recollections of US diplomats and USAID officers serve as imperfect proxies for intelligence officers' personal reactions to the violence. US diplomats expressed horror at the riots and admitted to being 'haunted' by the violence.²⁰ One former diplomat said the unrest led to mental health problems, including suicide and alcoholism, for many of his fellow officers who lived 'through a holocaust'.²¹ He confessed that US diplomats posted to northern Nigeria became 'overly involved and overly supportive' of the Igbo people because of the violence.²²

These prejudices almost certainly distorted the IC's analysis on the war. Analysts blasted Nigeria's military leaders for being extremists and warlords. They were dismissive of Nigerian leader Lieutenant Colonel Yakubu Gowon, deriding him as weak and ineffective. In January 1968, the IC said Gowon's main accomplishment was 'surviving in office for a year and a half'.²³ US Ambassador Elbert Mathews confirmed this bias in a cable to Washington in March 1968, noting:

Our approach to the conflict between the FMG [Federal Military Government] and 'Biafra' has been colored by our revulsion, both official and personal, against the brutalities inflicted on the [Igbos] in 1966....The most serious effect of these attitudes on our approach to the conflict has been a consistent underrating of FMG capabilities.²⁴

In its analysis, the IC wrote off the Nigerian Army's prospects for defeating its Biafran adversaries. Before the war started, analysts assessed that federal forces lacked 'sufficient logistical support and discipline to sustain any but the briefest of campaigns against the East'.²⁵ As the war dragged on, the IC continued to disparage the Nigerian soldier who:

Is told to fight for the unity of a country he can barely conceive of. He probably joined the army not for the love of the country or even because he hated the [Igbo], but because pay is not bad and he can show off among the civilians.²⁶

Even as the US Embassy in Lagos started to churn out pro-Nigerian reporting during the war's final months—so much so that US officials asked the Canadian Government to share its reports²⁷—the IC routinely

19. 'Central Intelligence Bulletin', 12 October 1966 (18 November 2012).

20. 'Harold M. Jones', 2002, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, <<http://adst.org/oral-history/oral-history-interviews/>> (26 February 2017).

21. 'Thomas P. Gallagher', 2015, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, <<http://adst.org/oral-history/oral-history-interviews/>> (26 February 2017).

22. *Ibid.*

23. Central Intelligence Agency, 'Special memorandum no. 2-68: The outlook for Nigeria', 26 January 1968.

24. 'Airgram From the Embassy in Nigeria to the Department of State', *Foreign relations of the United States, 1964-1968*, vol. XXIV, Document 395.

25. Central Intelligence Agency, 'Memorandum for the Director'.

26. Central Intelligence Agency, 'Special memorandum no. 2-69: Nigeria - How the war may end', 3 February 1968, p. 9.

27. Robert Shephard, *Nigeria, Africa, and the United States: From Kennedy to Reagan* (Indiana University Press, Indiana, 1991).

interpreted events in Biafra's favor. Analysts lauded Biafra for its 'extraordinary inventiveness' and a 'national cohesion unique' in West Africa.²⁸ Former US diplomats recalled that they saw the Igbos as Westernized, highly educated, and individualistic. Analysts appeared to be as captivated with Biafran leader Ojukwu, as many diplomats and journalists were. In 1968, US Ambassador Mathews explained that Americans were drawn to Ojukwu's 'panache, quick intelligence, and an actor's voice and fluency'.²⁹ In June 1969, *New York Times* correspondent Lloyd Garrison wrote an article entitled 'Odumegwu Ojukwu is Biafra' that described the lieutenant colonel in heroic terms and concluded that Biafra (and by extension, Ojukwu) was a 'new symbol of African "black power"'.³⁰ US policymakers and IC analysts certainly read US newspaper coverage of the conflict, particularly articles penned by Garrison who was based in eastern Nigeria.³¹

Thus it is not surprising that analysts saw Ojukwu as 'confident' and reprinted his statements as proof of Biafra's fortitude.³² Before the war started, the IC declared that Biafra held an edge 'in communications, planning, and maintenance' because Igbos formerly made up the bulk of the Nigerian officer corps and technicians.³³ In a special report in 1968, analysts explained that the Biafran soldier is 'convinced he is fighting for his life and Colonel Ojukwu has come to symbolize the [Igbo] spirit of resistance'.³⁴ A month before Ojukwu fled Biafra in January 1970, most of the IC remained convinced that Biafran forces were well entrenched and that Nigerian advances had not greatly altered the military situation. Only the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) saw the writing on the wall, telling its readers in November 1969 that 'a collapse could come in a week, a month, or the better part of a year'.³⁵

'We see no national leadership in sight'

While bias hindered IC analysis during the war, linear thinking contributed to several intelligence failures regarding the postwar dispensation.

28. Central Intelligence Agency, 'Special memorandum no. 2-69'.

29. 'Airgram From the Embassy in Nigeria to the Department of State', *Foreign relations of the United States, 1964-1968*, vol. XXIV, Document 395.

30. Lloyd Garrison, 'Odumegwu Ojukwu is Biafra: It's a lot more than a civil war', *New York Times*, 22 June 1969, <<https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1969/06/22/90112482.html>> (28 March 2017).

31. 'Memorandum From Samuel E. Belk of National Security Council Staff to the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy)', *Foreign relations of the United States, 1964-1968*, vol. XXIV, Document 358.

32. 'Central Intelligence Bulletin,' 3 June 1967.

33. Central Intelligence Agency, 'Memorandum for the Director'.

34. Central Intelligence Agency, 'Special memorandum No. 2-68'.

35. 'Intelligence Note No. 830 From Director of the Bureau of Intelligence Research (Cline) to Secretary Rogers,' *Foreign relations of the United States, 1969-1976*, vol. E-5, Part 1, Document 142.

Extrapolating from events before and during the war, analysts warned that Nigerian troops would commit mass atrocities against the defeated Biafran population, a forecast that proved false. They also judged it inconceivable that reconciliation between Nigerians and Igbos was possible, another call that missed the mark. The IC failed to challenge its assumptions about Nigeria's leadership and relied on linear thinking to forecast the country's future, resulting in a series of faulty assessments presented to US policymakers.

By mid-1969, analysts started to warn that Nigerian forces would overrun and decimate Biafra's civilian population. The IC used the word 'bloodbath' to describe what it expected would happen when federal soldiers seized control of Biafran territory.³⁶ This conclusion had currency with policymakers because of the anti-Igbo riots and Nigeria's blocking of humanitarian deliveries into Biafra.³⁷ The IC reminded its readers that some Nigerian leaders regarded starvation as a legitimate weapon of war and believed aid would merely prolong the fighting.³⁸ In the PDB just before Biafra fell in January 1970, analysts warned that atrocities were most likely to occur in areas where federal troops responsible for the 1966 riots were deployed.³⁹ The IC also discounted Gowon's ability to control either his government's hardliners, who had an 'ingrained dislike for all southerners',⁴⁰ or his 'freewheeling'⁴¹ commanders who ran military campaigns as they saw fit.⁴² Biafran propaganda, which repeatedly hyped tales of genocide, probably reinforced this narrative, even though analysts never validated these claims.⁴³

The IC's fears turned out to be unfounded. When Biafra officially surrendered on 14 January 1970, analysts reported that Nigerian troops had refrained from deliberately mistreating civilians and had exhibited more discipline than expected.⁴⁴ The IC misdiagnosed the risk of mass atrocities because analysts assumed that the past animosity between the two sides would lead to a familiar pattern of violent retribution at the war's conclusion.

The IC's other intelligence failure is related to Nigeria's postwar prospects. The IC argued that Nigeria would not be able to recover from its civil conflict, rating its chances for political, economic, and social progress

36. *Ibid.*

37. John de St. Jorre, *The brothers' war: Biafra and Nigeria* (Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1972).

38. Central Intelligence Agency, 'Intelligence memorandum: The Biafran relief problem,' 29 January 1969.

39. 'The President's Daily Brief,' 13 January 1970.

40. 'Central Intelligence Bulletin,' 19 June 1968.

41. 'Central Intelligence Bulletin,' 29 August 1967.

42. Central Intelligence Agency, 'Special Memorandum No. 2-69'.

43. Marc-Antoine Perouse de Montclos, 'Humanitarian aid and the Biafra war: Lessons not learned', *Africa Development* 34, 1 (2009), pp. 69-82.

44. 'Central Intelligence Bulletin,' 15 January 1970; 'Central Intelligence Bulletin,' 23 January 1970.

as low. In a National Intelligence Estimate and two special reports, the IC repeated—almost verbatim—the following line: ‘it is difficult to see how a bitterly resentful and widely hated [Igbo] people can be reabsorbed into Nigeria’s polity and society.’⁴⁵ The analysts assessed that the civil war and political strife that preceded it had already ‘considerably damaged Nigeria’s postwar prospects for development’. Finally, the IC doubted that there was a national leader able to ‘deal effectively with the complicated tasks of political, social, and economic reconstruction’. Similar to the IC’s worries about postwar atrocities, this analytic misjudgment stemmed from linear thinking, a poor appraisal of Gowon’s leadership, and a failure to imagine the ameliorative effects of oil receipts on reconstruction.

The IC had little faith in Nigeria’s ability to reintegrate the defeated Igbo because of the war’s viciousness and the ethnic antagonism that preceded it. In an assessment in June 1966, the IC concluded ‘regional and tribal rivalries run too deep to permit any sort of lasting compromise’.⁴⁶ During the war, analysts doubled down on this judgment, informing readers that ‘aggravation of tribal hatreds will further complicate the task of nation building’.⁴⁷ The IC’s assumption about Nigerian ethnic enmities precluded them from envisioning a peaceful settlement. The disregard for Gowon’s leadership compounded this analytic mistake. Unlike the UK High Commissioner who described Gowon as ‘buoyant in temperament, quiet-spoken, physically fit and evidently intelligent...resembling a typical British officer’, the IC saw Gowon as feckless.⁴⁸ US Ambassador Mathews reported back to Washington that Gowon may have appeared unequal to the task because he was ‘painfully earnest and slow to react, hesitant and repetitive in speech’.⁴⁹ The IC also discounted signs that Gowon would welcome the Igbo back, as he did when Nigeria’s former President (and Igbo nationalist) Nnamdi Azikiwe returned in August 1969. In short, the IC could not fathom that Gowon could steer Nigeria to peace.

Yet Gowon proved to be magnanimous, inspiring, and effective. He pledged that there would be ‘no victor, no vanquished,’ issuing a blanket amnesty and undertaking a massive relief program. By March 1970, analysts revised their assessment of Gowon, admitting he had become ‘something of a national hero’ and noting that the food relief effort had done

45. ‘National Intelligence Estimate,’ 2 May 1968, *Foreign relations of the United States, 1964-1968*, vol. XXIV, Document 397; Central Intelligence Agency, ‘Special memorandum No. 9-67: Nigeria and the Congo – Implications for black Africa,’ 6 November 1967; Central Intelligence Agency, ‘Special memorandum No. 2-68’.

46. Central Intelligence Agency, ‘Memorandum for the Director’.

47. Central Intelligence Agency, ‘Special memorandum No. 9-67’.

48. Gould, *The Biafran War*.

49. ‘Airgram From the Embassy in Nigeria to the Department of State,’ *Foreign relations of the United States, 1964-1968*, vol. XXIV, Document 395.

much to convince Igbos that Gowon was serious about reconciliation.⁵⁰ Nigeria's growing oil production was also a factor. By 1970, Nigeria was producing one million barrels a day, which almost certainly helped to fund reconstruction and Igbo reintegration.⁵¹ The analysts, however, failed to consider how oil receipts could support reconciliation and contribute to a more just postwar settlement.

'I would be careful not to be overly impressed with ultra liberal attitudes'

Anticipating likely outcomes is only part of the challenge for intelligence officers. A second standard is whether analysts inform policy discussions and decisions. The IC's record on this benchmark was also mixed. It participated in policy deliberations and drafted assessments that answered pressing policy questions, but seemed to have had limited influence on decision making, especially in the Nixon White House. The IC's success in shaping public statements and updating policymakers on peace negotiations and humanitarian conditions did not extend to the more contentious issues such as Biafran independence or the Soviet role in the conflict.

Following the coup in January 1966, the State Department requested a memo on the coup's implications, including an assessment of the Army's ability to run the country.⁵² Throughout the war, the IC delivered timely products on topics such as potential arms embargoes, international relief efforts, and humanitarian conditions in Biafra. When President Nixon and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger decided to press for a negotiated settlement, the IC ramped up its coverage of peace negotiations.

The IC's policy impact, however, was minimal. Nixon was a skeptic of intelligence analysis and took to task CIA Director Richard Helms at a National Security Council (NSC) meeting on Nigeria. Nixon reportedly interrupted Helms during a briefing on countries that had recognized Biafra and said, 'Look, Dick, you've left out a couple of countries—Zambia and the Ivory Coast'. Nixon again stopped Helms on a point about ethnic rivalries, interjecting:

Yes. And this is a problem, which really goes back to the history of that country. The British colonial policy favored the Moslem Hausas in the north and that aggravated the tensions.⁵³

50. Central Intelligence Agency, 'Special report: Nigeria after the war,' 28 May 1970.

51. Eghosa Osaghae, *Crippled giant: Nigeria since independence* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1998).

52. 'Memorandum From the Deputy Director for Coordination, Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Koren) to the Director of the Bureau (Hughes)', *Foreign relations of the United States, 1964-1968*, vol. XXIV, Document 362.

53. Seymour Hersh, *The price of power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House* (Simon & Schuster, New York, 1983), p. 105.

Cabinet members also had reservations about analysis. Kissinger viewed the PDB as a competitor to his own insights and restricted its dissemination.⁵⁴ According to a former INR director, Secretary of State William Rogers was uninterested in intelligence unless it was covertly obtained. This posed a problem, the former officer recalled, because ‘four-fifths of that information is obtained by Embassy reports or from news services or overt reports from other governments’.⁵⁵

State Department officials did incorporate some IC analysis in press statements and congressional testimonies. However, on balance, the IC seemed to have limited influence. For example, in a memo in early February 1969, the IC argued that ‘a further disintegration of Nigerian unity is likely’ and that the West could probably live with a ‘loose confederation or formation of several completely independent countries’.⁵⁶ Nonetheless, a few days later, the NSC declined to approve policy options that would have moved the United States closer to Biafra and improved conditions for a negotiated settlement. The NSC would stick to this position until summer 1969 when Nixon reversed course and leaned toward Biafra and negotiations.

The IC’s judgment on the limits of the Soviet Union’s influence in Nigeria also failed to persuade policymakers. In April 1969, INR highlighted tensions between Lagos and Moscow, noting that Gowon had limited the size of the Soviet Embassy and called the Soviet Ambassador a ‘liar’.⁵⁷ INR analysts concluded that the ‘war may be nearing the end of its utility for the Soviets as a vehicle to improving their positions’. Kissinger ignored this judgment, writing to Nixon four months later:

The Soviets have everything to gain by a continuation of the war. Their stock rises steadily with the Federals in direct proportion to their arms supply and Nigerian resentment at the Western relief efforts in Biafra.⁵⁸

Finally, analysts seemed unable to sway the White House’s thinking on Nigeria’s occupation of Biafra. Despite several assessments, including a PDB on January 23, stating that Nigerian troops had not mistreated the Biafrans, the NSC disputed this judgment and the State Department

54. David Priess, *The president’s book of secrets: The untold story of intelligence briefings to America’s presidents* (Public Affairs, New York, 2016).

55. ‘Ambassador William C. Harrop’, 1998, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, <<http://adst.org/oral-history/oral-history-interviews/>> (26 February 2017).

56. Central Intelligence Agency, ‘Special memorandum no. 2–69’.

57. ‘Research memorandum from the Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Hughes) to Secretary of State Rogers, Washington, April 2, 1969’, *Foreign relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, vol. E-5, Part 1, Document 53.

58. ‘Memorandum from the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Washington, August 11, 1969’, *Foreign relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, vol. E-5, Part 1, Document 102, p.2 of the actual memo.

reports that underpinned it.⁵⁹ Al Haig, Deputy Assistant to the President, in February 1970 went as far as challenging a CIA product that said the Biafrans showed a willingness to 'forget the past' and were generally reassured by the federal troops' conduct.⁶⁰ Haig said the IC's language 'was less than judicious' and advised Kissinger to be cautious about listening to 'ultra liberal' views.⁶¹

Conclusion

The IC's record on the Nigerian Civil War was underwhelming. Despite its earlier successes, such as warning about the coming civil conflict and the July 1966 counter coup, the IC's prejudice against Gowon, its affinity for Ojukwu, and its tendency to analyze events in a linear fashion contributed to inaccurate assessments. Moreover, analysts broadly failed to affect policy discussions, especially during the Nixon White House, which had strong opinions about the war and little regard for the IC's views.

As Nigeria marks the 50th anniversary of its civil war this year, it presents an opportunity to reflect on contemporary challenges facing analysts on Nigeria in particular and Africa in general. In March 1968, Ambassador Mathews warned that sentiment beclouds policy. This platitude applies equally to intelligence analysis. The US analytic community is supposed to deliver impartial analysis regardless of personal preference or political exigencies. When analysts today are asked to explain and anticipate future developments in Nigeria, their task is arguably more difficult than their predecessors. While Nigeria does not consistently grab the public's attention, the current humanitarian crisis or Boko Haram's kidnaping of the Chibok girls affects the policy process. The IC's value, however, is not to be swayed by public sentiment or bend to political agendas but rather to remain impartial and produce assessments informed by the highest standards of analytic tradecraft.

The US intelligence community is also tasked to foresee alternative outcomes and prevent strategic surprise. The IC's record during the Nigerian conflict is instructive because it shows that the past is not always prologue. It is natural to expect more of the same: the safer bet is that incumbents will continue to hold power, sectarian violence will erupt again, or international relief efforts will remain far from effective. The Nigerian Civil

59. 'Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Washington, January 19, 1970', *Foreign relations of the United States, 1969-1976*, vol. E-5, Part 1, Document 170.

60. 'Central Intelligence Bulletin', 13 February 1970.

61. 'Memorandum from the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Haig) to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, February 16, 1970', *Foreign relations of the United States, 1969-1976*, vol. E-5, Part 1, Document 186.

War, however, tells a different story. It is a reminder that shifts in a country's economic fortunes, leadership competency, and public priorities can be transformative. Analysts, who already have the tough task of writing timely, sophisticated, and compelling briefs, must stay alert to these potential discontinuities and check their assumptions if they want to avoid future intelligence failures.