

April 21, 2005

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MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

Date: February 24, 1970
Place: President's Office

SUBJECT: Meeting with President Houphouet-Boigny

PARTICIPANTS: His Excellency Felix Houphouet-Boigny, President
of the Republic of Ivory Coast
Arsene Assouan Usher, Minister of Foreign
AffairsMr. David D. Newsom, Assistant Secretary of
State for African Affairs
Ambassador John F. Root, Embassy
Mr. William F. Miller, Counselor for Economic
Affairs, Embassy

Mr. Newsom conveyed the respects of Secretary Rogers. He added that he had yesterday also received a message instructing him to convey to Houphouet the personal best wishes of President Nixon and his appreciation for Houphouet's counsel and his efforts to alleviate suffering during the Nigerian war. Mr. Newsom then read in translation the text of President Nixon's oral message (State 026971). President Nixon had also asked him to report back on Houphouet's impressions and advice concerning future U.S. relations with Africa. After stressing the historical and political significance of Secretary Rogers' visit to Africa, Mr. Newsom said that Secretary Rogers regretted that the need to return to Washington for the Pompidou visit had prevented him from stopping off in Ivory Coast. He had sent Mr. Newsom to Abidjan expressly to transmit to the GOIC the views of the USG.

Houphouet hoped that the Newsom visit would serve to make even closer the excellent relations existing between Ivory Coast and the U.S. Ivory Coast remains attached to principles which had guided its course since independence. It was leaving the colonial era behind by dint of hard work directed to its own legitimate interests. There had to be cooperation; even so great a power as the U.S. could not do without the cooperation of small countries such as Ivory Coast. Technical assistance and economic and financial aid from developed countries was needed. Houphouet recalled that he had told President Kennedy that Ivory Coast did not want to remain an oasis of prosperity, for such an oasis would not be viable. It is beside the point to pretend to view the problems of developing

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countries solely in terms of their internal difficulties; account must be taken of the youth and naivety of young countries. But even little countries are "citizens of the world," and aware that their own security and prosperity would be endangered by a world at war even if the little countries themselves might not be directly involved. For this reason Ivory Coast was very attached to world peace.

Houphouet then said that what set him apart from other African leaders was his concern over the future. He attached great importance to the role of U.S. policy in Africa and elsewhere in the world. President Nixon does not want to be the world's policeman, but unfortunately we are not at the stage where we can dispense with policemen. The U.S. has a certain position in the world today and it cannot escape its responsibilities. What was most to be feared in Africa today was the spread of Communism. He had told de Gaulle that he understood his desire to achieve detente with the Soviets but that Africans remained skeptical of the wisdom of following such a course themselves. He had therefore told de Gaulle that Ivory Coast would not follow French lead in recognizing Peking, and he (Houphouet) had actively lobbied with other African leaders to that end. The ChiComs and North Koreans were now in Paris; but Taipei and Seoul were represented in Abidjan.

History confirmed that the West had misjudged the Soviet threat ever since the October Revolution. Since World War II the Communists have gained ground everywhere. Communism remains the number one danger today. This is why the GOIC approves U.S. action in Viet Nam, and the only reproach it might make is that the U.S. did not intervene there soon enough. The big powers should have ensured respect of the partition of Palestine. They should have realized early on--as did the British and French at least at the time of Suez--the threat that Nasser posed. ("Nasser," remarked Houphouet, "is the only head of state whose prestige grows with each defeat.")

It was not Southeast Asia but the Middle East that today posed the greatest threat to world peace. It was once pretended that Communism had no chance to gain a foothold in the Middle East. But today the Communists are in Egypt (which had been the first African country to imprison Communists, Houphouet commented wryly). It had also been said that Communism could not catch hold and hence was not a danger in tropical Africa; but today the Communists were in Congo(B), Burundi, the CAR and Guinea. "The giant can't see the ant at his feet, but the child can," he said.

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We are today witnessing, continued Houphouet, a long, slow obstinate Communist penetration of Africa. A Communist is a Communist, regardless of differences in method between the Soviets and the Chinese, though--who knows?--perhaps race will one day predominate over doctrine--the Soviets grouped with the whites, the Chinese with the blacks. Communist influence was fanning out from the UAR and footholds had been established along the African coast. Ivorian youth had wanted the GOIC to show its independence, and so the Soviets had been permitted to establish diplomatic representation in Abidjan provided they did not interfere in Ivorian internal affairs. But the GOIC soon saw that the Soviets were up to their usual tricks and so they were summarily asked to leave. And they were not about to be admitted back, he said. DeGaulle's dream of detente with the Soviets is realized today, and Soviet ships cruise the Mediterranean. Everyone had said that Libya would not move to the left; it has. Ethiopia was encircled by Communist subversion in the UAR, Sudan, Somalia and Yemen, and Eritrea was a weak point within.

"Non-alignment" was not a policy for the GOIC. It was not by putting Odinga in to prison that Kenya's problems could be solved. Houphouet said that he was on close terms with Nyerere but had told him frankly that he could not understand his policy towards Communist China and hoped that Nyerere did not underestimate the threat. ChiCom cooperation on the TanZam railroad project troubles the GOIC. The railroad would be uneconomical; Zambian copper could be shipped more cheaply via Kinshasa, which is also more convenient for the buyers. In plugging the "peaceful co-existence" line the Communists think that time is on their side and others will be lulled into complacency: "Communism has been fought since the end of World War II, but the Soviets haven't lost a single man."

This, said Houphouet, was why he had intervened in the Nigerian question. He had been an old friend of Balewa and their positions had always been identical. A few months before Balewa's death Houphouet had asked him why he permitted a national communist party (the only legal one in Africa) when there was already so much poverty in northern Nigeria where Communist ideology could take root. Balewa had replied that he would be vigilant and in case of danger would ban the party. Even then, said Houphouet, he (Houphouet) feared what might happen in Nigeria because of Soviet influence. Later he had asked Tubman to go talk sense into the Nigerians. Tubman said that he had sent his Ambassador to Lagos three weeks previously but Gowon would not receive him. Then the Nigerian government announced that the country would be divided into twelve regions--

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one region for the Ibos and eleven regions for the 249 other Nigerian tribes. Fighting broke out. Gowon sent an emissary to Abidjan and to Monrovia to assure that only a simple police action was underway in Nigeria. "I didn't even know Ojukwu then," said Houphouet. Indeed, more than ten months afterwards arms for Gowon were moving through Ivory Coast: from the port at Abidjan they went by railroad to Ouagadougou and then on to Niamey for final shipment to the FMG.

During this time the GOIC had sought ways to end the war, and thought that it could be achieved by UN intervention in much the same way that this had been brought about in Cyprus. Then Houphouet had received a telegram from Senghor, commending to him the former President of Nigeria, Azikiwe, who had eloquently pleaded the cause of Biafra and urged its recognition. He had spoken of genocide; "I hadn't heard of this before," said Houphouet. Houphouet had responded to Azikiwe that if he recognized Biafra everyone would think that it was for reasons of francophone versus anglophone politics. Azikiwe argued that recognition would be a means of bringing in a UN expeditionary force. Nyerere arrived in Abidjan on his state visit (February 1968). Nyerere too said that some way had to be found to bring the Nigerian question before the UN. When Nyerere decided to recognize Biafra, he asked the GOIC to follow suit. But other African leaders--Mobuto, Ahidjo, for example--did not go along, for they saw the Nigerian conflict in terms of their own internal problems. They could not have acted differently and this did not bother us, said Houphouet.

What did bother was the worsening of the problem in Nigeria because of the Soviet presence. The Soviets had MIG's and heavy artillery pieces; why didn't they give them to the FMG three years earlier? Because it was in the Soviets' interest for the war to fester and to be prolonged. If the Soviets established a foothold in Nigeria, the Africans would work with the Communist Chinese, said Houphouet. "After all, the Soviets are white, and we were the slaves of the whites." Hence, if the West continues to remain indifferent it is not the Soviets but the Communist Chinese who will win out in the long run. And the West will be surprised, just as it was in Europe. What basis is there for any different appreciation of the problem in Africa today? The West has displayed inexcusable indifference. The West has force and unity, but in peacetime its thrust is diffusive. One mustn't take desire for reality. It is all very well for the USG now to say that it does not want to engage in ideological competition in Africa and to see problems there in terms of the East-West conflict; but it takes two to renounce competition.

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Houphouet then turned to the problem of South Africa. It is, he said, an internal problem that the people of South Africa must resolve. Apartheid was wrong. But other Africans could not change it by force. The other African states should help South Africa rethink the whole problem, for it is not a social or economic problem there but a human one and it will take time to solve. Black African states must avoid the fanaticism which has seized the Arab mind, and which the Soviets are now exploiting. "Our Arab brothers offer us for use against South Africa the legions which they can't muster to send against Israel." The whites of South Africa are superior technicians. Africa's problem today is economic development and the promotion of better material well-being. Why should black Africans involve themselves in a struggle against Portugal or South Africa, thus squandering resources that could better be used for their own economic development? Tomorrow the cleavage in Africa will be between those who are for and those who are against Communism. Those Africans who oppose Communism might one day regret that they don't have the whites of South Africa on their side.

Use of force to correct conditions in Southwest Africa was a comedy that black Africa could ill afford. In the UN, Ivory Coast refuses to condemn South Africa; the reason was not that the GOIC approves of South African policy but rather that condemnation itself is a poor policy. Africans, mused Houphouet, are prone to see the effect and never the cause; if one goes to the cause one can better understand the problem. So in condemning South Africa, these black Africans forget that Africans have sold one another as slaves and other Africans were buyers. They forget that there are also castes in black African society. A leading figure in the Senegalese Government is the son of a blacksmith, which in their tribal society is very low caste; as a result, some notables have objected to having to associate with him. No, said Houphouet, outsiders cannot pretend to be able to solve South Africa's race problems any more than they can substitute themselves for the American people in solving civil rights problems in the United States.


Mr. Newsom thanked Houphouet for his views. He said that while there might be ~~some~~ ~~points~~ of nuance on which US policy differed, in the main he thought that U.S. and Ivory Coast views on these important issues were much alike. On the question of the Communist threat, he stressed that the U.S. was not ~~unaware~~ of Communist activities in Africa but considered that it was important to view the problem in each country in terms of the local situation and needs. In the specific case of Nigeria, he warned against

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being deceived by the present tone of the Nigerian press. It did not necessarily reflect the considered views of the Nigerian Government. Mr. Newsom recalled that he had been in Lagos when the war ended. Gowon had told him at that time that he was well aware of the Soviet threat and would not be taken in by it.

(At the conclusion of the meeting, the group retired to the President's official residence nearby for luncheon, where they were joined by Philippe Yace, President of the National Assembly; Mamadou Coulibaly, President of the Economic and Social Council; and Alphonse Boni, President of the Supreme Court.)


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