



thruMYeyes

with PROF. BOLAJI AKINYEMI

THE WEEKLY FOREIGN-POLICY BRIEFING

SESSION 7 · THURSDAY 16 JULY 2020 · FROM THE ARCHIVE · Syncterface Media

FROM THE ARCHIVE · SESSION 7

JUST TELL US THE TRUTH

Governments insisting there is enough of everything, a vaccine race turning nationalistic, and a plea that the scientists be allowed to speak.

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Syncterface Media · tmeinsights.com

Session 7 — the week the vaccine race turned into an intelligence operation.

FROM THE ARCHIVE

Just Tell Us The Truth

Governments insisting there is enough of everything, a vaccine race turning nationalistic, and a Professor who wants the politicians to step back and let the scientists speak — because a public told the truth can take casualties on the chin.

A solo broadcast built from viewer questions across Facebook, YouTube and Dailymotion. Britain's cyber security centre had accused Russia of trying to steal vaccine research that morning; Bill Gates, Barack Obama and Joe Biden had had their Twitter accounts compromised the same week. **His answer to almost every question in the hour is the same instrument applied differently: stop managing the public and start informing it. Say there will be casualties. Let the scientists talk. And be honest that the vaccine race has already stopped being a shared human project.**

An archive edition, recorded 16 July 2020, when the recorded global death toll had just passed half a million and the United States had lost about 137,000 people. The vaccines then in trial had not yet reported. Events and figures are described as they stood that week.

01 · ANYONE WHOSE VIEW HAS NOT CHANGED IS NOT PAYING ATTENTION

Asked whether his position on Covid has shifted, he says it would be a foolish man who claimed otherwise. The virus continues to surprise, to develop, to baffle; whatever view anyone holds today will likely be outdated by the day after. He later attaches the same defence to Anthony Fauci, who was being attacked for changing his advice — the honest position when the evidence keeps moving is to move with it.

What he wants from governments is not confidence but candour. Tell the world there will be casualties before the response is mastered. Let the politicians step back and let the scientists do the talking. His analogy is military and unsentimental: when soldiers are sent to war, the soldiers know not all of them will come home, and their families know it too. Told the truth, people can absorb it.

“They should just tell us the truth — that there will continue to be casualties, that we are dealing with a vicious virus that neither the government nor the scientists have a handle on.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

02 · THREE THINGS THAT HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH POLITICS

Against the rhetoric he sets a short and unglamorous list: masks, washing hands, and distance. On the last he makes a point of vocabulary that has aged well. He dislikes "social distancing" because it carries a psychological charge, making the mere fact of encountering another person feel like a danger. He prefers physical distancing — you can still be human, still hold eye contact, still do what social animals do, at a distance.

He is blunt about two failures. Governments that keep insisting there is enough PPE, enough hospital capacity, enough of everything, are lying to their populations rather than equipping them. And heads of state telling their citizens this is nothing, just another cold, he calls foolish — apologising in advance for the harshness of the word and using it anyway.

On schools he is equally direct: forcing them open before they are ready exposes children and teachers, and the fact that children want to go back and parents want to return to work does not change the readiness question. No child will ever say they would rather not see their friends.

“I don't like the language social distancing. With physical distancing we can still be human — I can still maintain eye contact with you.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

03 · A COVID COLD WAR

On the accusation that Russia had been trying to steal vaccine research, he says he is not remotely surprised, and dates his own warning to months earlier: the thing to watch for was governments adopting a monopolistic attitude to medicine. It began, on his account, when the United States tried to buy up a German company's output, and continued through export bans on protective equipment.

He declines to make it simply a story about bad governments. There has been a backlash from populations blaming their own leaders for shortages, and you cannot share what you do not have. But once a state adopts that posture, theft follows logically — because whoever gets there first will restrict exports and price the rest of the world out.

The precedent he reaches for is the industrial espionage of the original cold war, updated to electronic form. He also notes, without claiming to know who was responsible, that Iran had been under electronic attack for a fortnight, and wonders aloud whether the wave of Twitter compromises might itself be a diversion from something happening in a vaccine laboratory. His closing thought on it is the one that stings: the developing world will be at the losing end of this game.

“So we are now having a Covid-19 cold war. A beggar-my-neighbour policy which in the long run is not going to be to the benefit of anybody.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

04 • WHERE A RIGHT STOPS

A viewer question about the British woman stripped of citizenship after leaving to join ISIS, and permitted to return to argue her case, produces an unusually procedural objection. He enters a caveat first — he does not know the statute being interpreted — and then asks the practical question the ruling seems to him to dodge: if she returns and loses, where is she flown to, and who accepts her? His own view of the underlying question is firm: allegiance pledged to a caliphate forfeits the allegiance you came with, because you cannot hold two sovereignties.

He then connects that case to one he expects to matter more. The same argument about individual rights against collective safety is about to arrive over masks, over movement, and over vaccination. If an effective vaccine is produced, can a government require it?

His answer runs through consequence rather than principle. Every drug has side effects, and the balance is struck against the harm avoided. A person who declines and boards a plane while asymptomatic exposes three hundred and fifty others. And the precedent he invokes is the American one: free speech does not extend to shouting fire in a crowded theatre, because the cost falls on other people in the room.

“Your right of free speech does not extend to shouting fire in a crowded cinema. I will transfer that same analogy to this.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

Where does your right stop?

Four claims of individual liberty, and the answer he gives to each

“Don’t tell me to wear a mask”

A claim about dress



If you are wrong, the cost falls on the stranger beside you, not on you.

“Don’t limit how far I travel”

A claim about movement



One infected passenger on a plane exposes three hundred and fifty people.

“Don’t make me take a vaccine”

A claim about medication



No drug is without side effects — but the balance is struck against the harm avoided.

The principle underneath

An American precedent



Free speech does not extend to shouting fire in a crowded theatre. He applies the same test here.

“Do my human rights extend to that?”

SESSION 7 • JUST TELL US THE TRUTH

As argued on this broadcast

The same test applied four ways, as he applied it on air.

05 • HE WOULD TAKE THE VACCINE, AND SAYS SO ON AIR

A viewer relays a report that French researchers had tested a vaccine on schoolchildren in Guinea with deaths and hospitalisations, and asks whether more might be killed by vaccines than by the virus. He does not dismiss it, and his sympathy for the bereaved is unqualified.

But he sets it against the arithmetic then available — more than half a million dead worldwide, about 137,000 in the United States alone — and explains dose escalation in plain terms: low dose, then medium, then high, each carrying risk, the scientists settling on the one with the least risk and the most benefit. They are not God, he says. They have to experiment before they know.

Then the moment that gives the section its weight. Asked whether he would sign the open letter urging accelerated trials, he says he has already signed it. Asked whether he would volunteer as a subject, he says yes — with the qualifier that volunteers must be volunteers and not conscripts, and the wry doubt that they would accept him.

“I have signed the letter. And yes, I would — if they will accept me.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

06 • THE STATUE THAT STOOD FOR ONE DAY

Asked whether the removal of the Bristol protester statue, put up days after the Colston statue came down, means the summer's gains are being lost, he is unbothered — and the reason is worth keeping. The photograph has already gone round the world. It will be in the history books and the encyclopaedias. It is too late to say it was never there.

His reading of what it represented is that the raised-fist salute honoured every person captured from Africa and enslaved, and that this is not undone by the statue standing a day rather than a decade. His practical suggestion is that the movement should now apply formally to Bristol City Council for permission to put it back.

He lists what he counts as movement: organisations committing to raise black and Latino representation at board level, companies that took part in or facilitated the slave trade promising money as compensation or reparation, an executive order signed even by a president unlikely to want to, and a bill in the House. He expects the objectives to be consolidated if the November election goes the other way.

“It's too late to say it was never there.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

07 • WHY A PSYCHOLOGICAL PROFILE MATTERS

On Mary Trump's book about her uncle — nearly a million copies in a day — he is asked whether reading it merely enriches an aggrieved relative. He refuses the framing entirely: the motive does not matter, only whether we are better off knowing. And we are, because this is the man whose finger is on the nuclear button.

His historical comparison is deliberately uncomfortable and he makes it explicitly about statecraft rather than insult: had statesmen understood Hitler's psychological profile, they might not have concluded they were dealing with an honourable man who would keep his word. Knowing what triggers a leader is a diplomatic instrument.

Asked what use the knowledge is once you have it, he gives the only answer available in July 2020 — it is useful in November, if voters use it. And he adds a correction the moderator accepts: it is not the case that Americans chose this president, since Clinton took the popular vote by about three million and only the electoral college produced the result. In most countries, he says, Trump would never have been president.

He ends the section by inviting viewers to write in with anything good the president had done, before or since taking office — an invitation left open until the following week.

“I want to know the psychological profile of the most powerful man in the world, whose action or inaction will affect me, my family, and the world.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

08 · HAGIA SOPHIA, AND NIGERIA'S QUIET CAMPAIGN

On the reversion of Hagia Sophia to a mosque he speaks partly as a visitor — he saw it as foreign minister and calls it magnificent — and traces its passage from cathedral to mosque after the Ottoman conquest, then to museum under a secularising republic, then back again. He sides with the Pope: a decision that should not have been made.

He is careful not to make it a religious quarrel, and reaches for an English precedent — Henry VIII destroying some Catholic churches and converting others to Anglican ones — to make the point that institutions change complexion and that people live with the consequences. His objection is practical as much as principled: Turkey has many mosques, another could have been built, and the controversy was avoidable.

The programme closes on something he is plainly pleased about: a slate of Nigerians being sponsored for international office — the International Court of Justice, the World Trade Organization, the African Development Bank and the International Criminal Court. He credits the government for it, and reads it as a possible return to an activist foreign policy after years in which, he says, Nigeria has been apologetic about its own size and its standing as a medium power.

“We are apologetic about our size. We are apologetic about our contribution as a medium power internationally.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

THREADS TO PULL

- He wants scientists to speak and politicians to step back. Who then carries the political cost of a forecast that turns out wrong — and would any elected government accept that trade?
- If whoever develops a vaccine first restricts exports and prices it high, what leverage does a country with no laboratory actually hold?
- The crowded-theatre principle justifies compulsion where harm falls on others. Where would he draw the line at which that reasoning stops being useful?
- A statue that stood for a day is now historical fact. Does that make the physical object less worth fighting for, or more?
- Four Nigerian candidacies in one season is either a coordinated foreign policy or four separate ambitions. What would distinguish them from the outside?

Watch Session 7 in full on the Syncterface Media channel. New episodes every Thursday, 7pm WAT (7pm UK, 2pm ET).

More analysis: tmeinsights.com · profbolajiakinyemi.com

An early broadcast with a correspondingly rough automatic transcript; quotations have been cleaned for readability — punctuation and obvious mis-transcriptions only, never sense — with the raw forms listed in the transcript header. THE FOUR NIGERIAN CANDIDATES discussed in the closing section are deliberately not named here: the audio garbles all four, and although the ICJ candidate is described as the son of the first African President of the World Court, both Igbo College men, the identification has not been asserted. The names must be supplied before circulation. The report of vaccine deaths among schoolchildren in Guinea is a viewer's assertion put to the Professor and is not verified. His comparison of a named head of state to Hitler is made explicitly as an argument about the diplomatic value of psychological profiling, and is reported here in those terms rather than adopted.

