



thruMYeyes

with PROF. BOLAJI AKINYEMI

THE WEEKLY FOREIGN-POLICY BRIEFING

SESSION 14 · THURSDAY 3 SEPTEMBER 2020 · FROM THE ARCHIVE · Syncterface Media

FROM THE ARCHIVE · SESSION 14

WE ARE AFRICANS. THAT IS SETTLED.

A tribute to Chadwick Boseman ends a debate this programme has been having for months — and then the evening turns to two capitals in a hurry.

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Syncterface Media · tmeinsights.com

Session 14 — recorded six days after the death of Chadwick Boseman.

FROM THE ARCHIVE

We Are Africans. That Is Settled.

A tribute to Chadwick Boseman closes a question this programme had been circling for months — and produces, along the way, the most honest piece of film criticism the archive contains: he loved the film in the cinema and had changed his mind by morning.

A solo broadcast recorded on 3 September 2020, six days after Chadwick Boseman's death, three weeks after the disputed Belarusian election, and two months before the American one. **The Professor asks to speak before the questions begin, and the tribute turns into a decision: after weeks of debating what Africans should call themselves, he settles it. Africans. Hyphenate if you wish, but that is the noun.**

An archive edition, recorded 3 September 2020, in the seventh month of the Covid-19 emergency. Figures, offices and disputes are described as they stood that week; where the Professor's recollections differ from the record, the correction is noted rather than quietly fixed.

01 · HOW MUCH YOU PACK INTO IT

He begins with the saying that it is not the length of a life but how much is packed into it, and notes that as a political scientist he had always reached for Lincoln, for Kennedy, and — thankfully still living — for Obama. Reading about Chadwick Boseman changed the example.

His argument for the film's significance is chronological and worth keeping. Black Panther arrived long before the Black Lives Matter movement of that summer, and Boseman, having played the part,

came to stand for something larger than it: a positive image of African civilisation that black audiences of every age, everywhere, could take up.

What he says about the illness is the part he thinks the tributes have missed. Not only that Boseman acted through treatment, but that he never let it be known and never traded on it. Commentators asking publicly whether he was ill, or on drugs, or why he was shrinking, went unanswered — because, in the Professor's reading, he wanted people to look at the talent and not to pity him, or to suspect that pity had won him the part.

“He never let it be known. He never exploited it. He wanted people to concentrate on his talent.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

02 · HE LOVED THE FILM, AND CHANGED HIS MIND BY MORNING

The personal section is unusually candid. He did not want to go; he waits for films to arrive on television. His daughter insisted, kept on until he agreed for the sake of peace, and took him to the cinema.

He was fascinated. He came out cheering, and the whole audience came out doing the Wakanda salute, himself among them.

By the following day he had two objections, and both are about what the film argues rather than how it is made. The first is that the CIA character is given a sympathetic role — and there has been, in his account of the record, nothing sympathetic about that agency's conduct in Africa, where it fomented coups and continues to have a hand in conflicts that keep mineral extraction available to American companies.

The second is the resolution. The film's central conflict is what Wakanda should do with a resource only it possesses: share it, or keep it and use it to advance African interests. Boseman's character argues for sharing, and wins. He would have preferred the other ending — not to keep it in order to dominate anyone, but to keep it until Africa had been developed to the point where it could no longer be exploited. He is careful to add that he was not consulted, and that this was the film-makers' message to make.

None of which, he says, diminishes what the film did. The world embraced it, and Boseman became the epitome of a positive African civilisation.

“I would have preferred: we will keep this to ourselves, not to oppress anyone, but to develop Africa to the point where Africa cannot be exploited.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

03 · THE NAME, DECIDED

Then he pays what he calls the ultimate tribute, and it settles an argument this programme has run several times — most fully in the session on what the word black is made to carry.

He has resolved it in his own mind. We are Africans. There will be no more debate about what to call ourselves.

The generosity of the formulation is the point. He will share the noun with Arabs in North Africa who wish to be Arab Africans, and with whites in South Africa who wish to be white Africans. Hyphenate as you like; the second word does not change.

It is worth noticing what has happened here. Six weeks earlier he had traced the American sequence from Negro to black to African American and concluded that finding neutral terms might take generations. Presented with a death, he stops waiting for the consensus and simply decides.

“We are Africans. Africa forever.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

04 · INTERFERENCE, AND WHAT CAN ACTUALLY BE DONE ABOUT IT

On reports that intelligence about Russian activity against the Democratic candidate had been withheld within the American government, he connects it to a suspicion he had voiced a fortnight earlier about who might be behind the looting during the summer's protests. He says the reports have convinced him. It should be said plainly that this is an inference rather than a finding: nothing on the record links the looting to any foreign state, and this issue reports his suspicion as a suspicion.

What he says next is broader and better evidenced. If democracy is in danger, it is not only from Russia. Americans, Russians and Europeans all interfere in African electoral processes, and he treats the whole practice as a single problem rather than a partisan one.

Asked what the Democratic Party should have done to prevent a repeat, he is unusually sympathetic to the difficulty. The technology has moved beyond the capacity of even the domestic agencies to stop, at least without an involvement in the electoral process that would itself invite the charge of partisanship. If there were a way to block it, he says, they would have used it.

He notes the announcement made that day — that the largest social platform will carry no political advertising in the week before the vote, and has begun labelling material it judges false. It is something, and it makes the platforms into arbiters, which is where the difficulty starts. We are becoming prisoners of a technology whose negative attributes we have not learned to handle.

“Democracy is in danger — and not only because of the Russians. It is in danger from the nefarious activities of all the global powers.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

05 · WHAT A CAMPAIGN SHOULD AND SHOULD NOT TALK ABOUT

Republican endorsements of the Democratic ticket please him, but he immediately deflates their significance: in 2016 a good many senior Republicans refused to endorse their own nominee, and it made no difference, because the core support does not move. He recalls the candidate's own boast about shooting someone on Fifth Avenue and losing nobody, and says he was proved right.

His advice is therefore about message discipline, and it is aimed as much at the press as at the campaign. Continuing to lead on riots, violence and disorder is doing the incumbent's work for him: it lets him appear as the sheriff riding into town to restore order single-handed. It also keeps the conversation off the pandemic, off the handling of it, off an economy in collapse, and off the relief package that has not passed.

What the challenger should do instead is stay on his own ground — compassion, empathy, and a pandemic response driven by scientists. He notes the polls that day showing leads in four of five contested states, and treats holding a lead through a convention season as the real signal.

“The press should not play into his hands. Every hour spent on the riots is an hour not spent on the pandemic.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

06 · WHAT A SECOND TERM WOULD MEAN, AND WHAT IT WOULD NOT

Asked what a loss would mean, he answers for the world rather than for the country. It would mean, at the top of the American government, a person whose attributes negate what he was brought up to believe the United States was for.

He is careful about that belief rather than sentimental. Every country has an unacceptable underbelly, and the American one was real; what compensated was a set of policies that were advantageous to others as well as to itself — globalisation, participation in climate agreements, the habit of reducing conflict by treaty rather than by unilateral action.

Then he sets the limits of his own alarm, which is what makes the passage worth reading. It would be tragic; it would not be the end of the world, short of a world war. The United States has had unacceptable figures shaping policy before — though he adds, in his late seventies, that he cannot remember an occupant of that office being so negative and disruptive. The system will resist for four years and then rebuild, and forces elsewhere that hold firm can reduce the damage.

The one thing he cannot model is the war. He does not think it would be started deliberately. What worries him is the account given in every book by people who have worked there — an inability to hold focus on the strategic issues in a conflict — and a relationship with Moscow that nobody has been able to explain.

“The system will resist him, and the system will rebuild the United States. But nobody understands why Putin is allowed to get away with murder.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

07 · BELARUS, AND THE DEMAND THE PROTESTERS DID NOT MAKE

Belarus he calls an example of what happens when an election is stolen: a president who has been in place since the Soviet apparatus dissolved, in a country whose neighbours managed some transition and which did not. His question is the practical one — if the man has not achieved what he wanted in twenty-six years, what is another term going to deliver, at the cost of the country?

He wakes up, he says, holding his breath in case Russian troops have moved in. What impresses him is that the demonstrations were still going weeks after the vote, which tells you that the only way to suppress a determined popular will is sustained deadly force. He singles out the women on the streets, some carrying children, and says their courage will be read by every country where elections are stolen and people feel there is nothing to be done.

Asked whether Belarus should break with Moscow and align westward, he says no — and the reason he gives is the most useful piece of analysis in the section. The protesters have not asked for that. Belarus sits on Russia's frontier and constitutes the western edge of Russian strategic depth facing NATO, with Russian installations on its soil. Moscow cannot allow that to change overnight, and anyone pushing Minsk westward now would be inviting exactly the outcome the demonstrators are trying to avoid.

Which is also why he thinks Moscow has options. It stands openly with the government, but since no strategic realignment is being demanded, it may equally advise a deal with the street — or, if propping the man up becomes expensive, ease him out gracefully and live with a figure from the opposition. In diplomacy, he adds, you do not know what is being said privately; there may even be quiet communication between Russia and NATO about how both extract themselves.

The same shortcut, three weeks apart

The parallel he draws — and the difference he says he cannot find

THE TEST

MOSCOW, AUGUST

WASHINGTON, SEPTEMBER

● What was proposed	Approval of a vaccine before the third trial stage was finished.	Emergency authorisation before the third stage is finished.
● What that stage is for	A large population across several countries, peer-reviewed and published.	Exactly the same. The protocol does not change by jurisdiction.
● The reason underneath	To be first, with everything that being first is worth.	An election in November.
● Who pays if it fails	Russians.	Americans.

"American scientists rightly condemned what the Russians wanted to do. So what is the difference?"

SESSION 14 • WE ARE AFRICANS. THAT IS SETTLED.

As argued on this broadcast

The parallel that closes the evening, set out as he sets it out.

08 • ENVOYS WHO ARE NOT DIPLOMATS

Asked whether a president may conduct business abroad without the foreign ministry, he answers that of course he may, and lists the instruments: retired former presidents, security officers, senior military officers — particularly where those officers have friendships across the border in question.

The choice depends on what the president is comfortable with and what he is trying to achieve, and there are perfectly good reasons for not using a foreign minister in a given case. He indicates, without elaborating, that he knows what prompted the question.

His qualification is the interesting half. Whatever the practical merits, sending someone else is probably a slap in the face of the people who carry the constitutional responsibility for dealing with other countries — an observation from someone who once held that responsibility.

"It is up to the president. But it is probably a slap in the face of those who carry the constitutional responsibility."

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

09 • THE BORDER NOBODY CAN EXPLAIN

On the fighting between China and India he begins with the timing, because the timing is what he cannot make sense of. With an American election weeks away and an incumbent who might welcome a chance to assert leadership by using American forces, why would either party choose now?

So he asks who started it, and finds neither answer satisfactory. If China did, it makes no sense: it hands the American president an anti-China card at a moment when the polls have him weak. If India did, why provoke a country three times its size — unless the intention was precisely to provoke, and to create an opening for American protection. He declines to settle it, noting he has no access to the cables, and calls it an unwelcome provocation with a tendency towards uncontrolled and unforeseen consequences.

His proposal is institutional. A zone occupied by neither force, demilitarised and monitored by a United Nations observation or peacekeeping presence — and he immediately pities whoever would be posted to that terrain. He thinks Beijing might accept it more readily than Delhi, given the volatility of Indian public opinion on territory, and points to Kashmir as the measure of that. What has kept the dispute alive since the 1962 war, in his reading, is the arrogance of leaders on both sides, spurred by the militancy of their own populations.

He also refuses two viewer theories flatly and on principle: that China released the virus to damage the American president, and that the border flare-up was manufactured as a distraction. He is wary of conspiracy theories, does not believe either, and says he would rather have a conversation with whoever proposed them to find out what information they think they have. He has been critical of Chinese diplomacy all year, he adds — but the Chinese are not stupid.

“Whoever started it, it is an unwelcome provocation with a tendency to lead to uncontrolled and unforeseen circumstances.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

10 • THE SHORTCUT, THREE WEEKS APART

The evening ends on the sharpest thing he says. He declines to be drawn into American internal politics over states defying federal guidance — there is no leadership from the top and no consensus of views, with the President saying one thing and his scientific advisers another.

But he will not let the vaccine question go, because this programme had covered it a fortnight earlier. Then, Moscow proposed to approve a vaccine without completing the third trial stage, and the world condemned it, American scientists included and rightly. Now an American agency has said it may authorise use before that stage is complete, with an election in November.

He states the conclusion as a question and refuses to answer it, which is more effective than answering it would be. What is the difference between Moscow wanting to be first and Washington moving early to help a campaign? Both the same.

And he ends where the whole argument has been heading, with the people who are not in the argument at all. He said a fortnight ago he felt sorry for Russians; he now says the same of Americans, because they are the ones who pay if it goes wrong. A hundred and eighty-odd thousand had died by that week. Not half a million yet, he acknowledges — and then insists on what the number is made of: husbands, wives, grandfathers, grandmothers, children. Given what Americans attach to family, he says, he never expected to see politics played over it.

“A hundred and eighty-something thousand husbands, wives, grandfathers, grandmothers. And yet people are playing politics.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

THREADS TO PULL

- He wanted Wakanda to keep the resource until Africa could not be exploited. That is a development argument in the shape of a film ending. Which real resources is it actually about?
- Deciding the name rather than waiting for consensus is a different method from the one he recommends for Security Council seats. What makes a question ripe for decision rather than agreement?
- The suspicion about who financed the looting has no evidence behind it and he states it anyway. What standard should a public commentator hold themselves to when the pattern looks familiar but the proof is absent?
- Belarus stays where it is because the protesters did not ask to move. How much of a country's foreign policy can be settled by what its street movements decline to demand?

- The vaccine parallel is exact on the protocol and unequal on the institutions. Does a regulator with a history of independence deserve more benefit of the doubt, or is that precisely how the doubt gets spent?

Watch Session 14 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. Four points are corrected against the record rather than reproduced: Black Panther was released in China in March 2018 and took around \$105 million there, so the belief that it was not shown is mistaken; the Belarusian president had been in office twenty-six years, not twenty-eight; emergency authorisation of a vaccine in the United States is the FDA's power rather than the CDC's, though the CDC had asked states to be ready to distribute by 1 November; and while several senior Republicans declined to endorse the party's nominee in 2016, others did. There is no evidence connecting the looting during the summer's protests to any foreign state, and the Professor's inference is reported here as a suspicion. Session 13 does not appear in the master spreadsheet and has not been produced.

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