



thruMYeyes

with PROF. BOLAJI AKINYEMI

THE WEEKLY FOREIGN-POLICY BRIEFING

SESSION 16 · THURSDAY 17 SEPTEMBER 2020 · FROM THE ARCHIVE · Syncterface Media

FROM THE ARCHIVE · SESSION 16

WHICH MANDELA ARE YOU JUDGING?

A rule for assessing great men, applied to Mandela, to Churchill —
and, before the evening is over, to a sitting American president.

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Session 16 — recorded two days after the Woodward tapes were published and the Abraham Accords signed.

FROM THE ARCHIVE

Which Mandela Are You Judging?

A rule for assessing great men — name the office before you name the verdict — applied to Mandela, to Churchill, and, before the hour is out, to a sitting American president whose conduct he declines to call a mistake.

A solo broadcast recorded on 17 September 2020, two days after the publication of the Woodward tapes and the signing of the Abraham Accords, and two weeks before Nigeria's sixtieth independence anniversary. **It is an evening of hard judgements delivered carefully. He will not flatten Mandela into a saint, will not flatten the Accords into a fraud, and will not extend to the President of the United States the benefit of the doubt he has extended all year.**

An archive edition, recorded 17 September 2020, in the seventh month of the Covid-19 emergency and six weeks before the US presidential election. 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 · THE WORD HE CHOOSES, AND WHY HE CHOOSES IT

The tapes published that week had the President telling an interviewer in February that the virus was more dangerous than influenza, while telling the public the opposite. Asked about it, the Professor begins by giving the defence its due, as he has done all year: a president does have to balance calming the public against saying something that starts a panic, and on that ground alone he would extend the benefit of the doubt.

What removes the benefit is the second half. Concealment is one thing; encouragement is another. He sets out, precisely, the announcement he would have expected — that the government is in control of whatever develops from a virus we do not yet understand, and that out of extreme caution people should wear a face mask, use hand sanitiser and avoid crowds. Those three instructions, he points out, are what you would say about ordinary influenza. Nobody would have panicked.

Instead the message was that there was nothing to worry about, that it would go away, that masks were unnecessary — look, I am not wearing one — and that crowds were fine. Knowing what the tapes show he knew.

Then the judgement, and he does not soften it. Making the mistake was a mistake. Discovering it was a mistake and persisting with it, up to and including the week of the broadcast, is in his view no longer a mistake at all. It is, in his word, treason.

“He made a mistake. Having discovered that it was a mistake, he has persisted. That is no longer a mistake. Frankly, in my view, it is treason.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

02 • WHAT IS LEFT WHEN THE VOTES ARE BESIDE THE POINT

Asked whether it is too late to retract, he takes the President at his own word — that nothing he does will shake his support — and treats the political question as closed. Which leaves a different one.

If the electorate cannot be moved, there is still the legacy, and, in a register the programme does not often use, the judgement of a maker that everybody eventually meets. Two hundred thousand Americans were dead or nearly so. His question is not how many might have been saved, but how many could still be saved between that week and January.

The retraction he sketches is a single sentence: I got it wrong, the scientists were right, please use the protections. And the model he offers is Kennedy accepting responsibility after the Bay of Pigs.

The distinction he draws to close the section is the one that gives the evening its spine — and it applies to every figure he goes on to assess. A politician looks after his own interests. A statesman looks after the interests of his nation. It takes the second to say plainly that he was wrong.

“A politician looks after his own interests. A statesman looks after the interests of his nation. It takes a statesman to say I was wrong.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

03 • PRIVATE VIEWS, PARTY VIEWS, AND WHY HE WENT ON TAPE

Asked where the line falls between a president's private remarks and his party's position, he says that in the American system there is no line. The president owns the party for the duration of his tenure — ask what the Republican view of the pandemic is and you will be quoted the President; ask what the Democratic view is and you will be quoted the nominee, or before him the Speaker.

What he cannot account for is the decision to be recorded at all. The President knew he was unpopular with the press, knew the interviewer's reputation, and knew that what he was saying on tape contradicted what he was saying in public — and that all of it was going into a book.

His explanation is offered as a layman's, with the disclaimer that he is not a psychologist: hubris. An ego trip on which whatever is said goes, and nothing said can be wrong. It is, he notes, an occupational hazard of a certain kind of public figure.

“Why would he go on tape, knowing it contradicted what he was saying in public and knowing it was going into a book? I can only call it hubris.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

04 • THREE MEN, ONE NAME

A second book that month, by the President's former lawyer, alleges disparaging remarks about Nelson Mandela — an allegation that is denied. Rather than adjudicate it, the Professor uses it to make a methodological point that is the best thing in the broadcast, and possibly in the run.

Public analysts, he says, have not got Mandela right, because they have not said which Mandela they are assessing. The freedom fighter, the president of South Africa, and the African statesman are three different subjects and take three different verdicts.

His control case is Churchill, and it is chosen precisely because the reputational direction runs the other way. The world regards him as a hero on the strength of one war. Set beside that his views on race, which the Professor calls despicable; his position on apartheid in South Africa, which he says would not survive a liberal dinner table; and his conduct over the Indian famine, including the refusal to let relief through. Which Churchill is the question.

Applied to Mandela, the freedom fighter is not in dispute: a hundred per cent, a man to be emulated, and rightly a Nobel laureate. The president is harder — and he asks for the pressure to be understood before the verdict is passed. The compromises made with the white elite were made under weight from Western economic powers, and they have not served the country: the economy stayed where it was, the mass of those who fought did not benefit, and a small number did.

The third lens produces the observation that will surprise readers most. While Southern Rhodesia became Zimbabwe, South West Africa became Namibia and the Gold Coast became Ghana, South Africa remained South Africa — and had Mandela asked for Azania, Azania is what it would be. He is scrupulous about his standing to say it: Nigerians expected their own country to shed the name it was given under colonial rule and take the name of an old empire, as Ghana and Mali did, and it has not happened either. He says it with no glee, and adds that Gandhi has the same problem. There is more to any of these men than one side, and not all the sides are positive.

Three men, one name

His rule: say which figure you are assessing before you assess him

THE FREEDOM FIGHTER

Unimpeachable, and rightly a Nobel laureate.

A hundred per cent. A man to be emulated, praised, and held up — and on this the record is not in dispute.

THE PRESIDENT

Harder, and pressed by people not in the room.

The compromises with the white elite left the economy where it was. Understand the pressure from Western economic powers before judging.

THE AFRICAN STATESMAN

The moment that was available, and was not taken.

Gold Coast became Ghana. Southern Rhodesia became Zimbabwe. Had he asked for Azania, it would be Azania.

“It is the same with Churchill. Which Churchill? The war leader, or the man who wrote about India?”

05 · GIVE THE DEVIL HIS DUE

On the Nobel nomination he separates the two occasions. The 2018 nomination he calls a farce — an exercise in balancing the prize given to a predecessor. This one rests on something that has actually happened.

He explains why the Middle East carries the weight it does: it is where the three Abrahamic religions originate, which means anything that moves there produces an emotional response from perhaps two-thirds of the world. Then he counts what has been achieved: agreements with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, a third state indicating it will follow, Saudi Arabia granting overflight permission between Israel and the Emirates for the first time and staying silent on the accords themselves, and perhaps five more countries in prospect.

If that is the basis of the nomination, he says, it will be difficult to attack — and he is candid about how it feels to say so, given who submitted it. It is one of those things where you hold your nose and vote yes, reluctantly and with a good deal of repulsion. But it is a major foreign policy achievement in the part of the world that has produced most of the wars since 1945.

Give the devil his due is his phrase, and it is worth noting that he uses it four minutes after calling the same man's pandemic conduct treason. Both judgements are meant.

“You hold your nose and you vote yes — reluctantly, and with a lot of repulsion. But give the devil his due.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

06 · THE SON-IN-LAW, AND THE MAN WHO CAN WALK INTO THE BEDROOM

Asked whether the accord vindicates putting family into a sensitive role, he notes first that American law prohibits appointing relatives to offices of state, and that the statute was passed after a president made his brother attorney general. Whether the son-in-law's role breaches it he leaves open; it is, he says, sailing close to the wind.

Then he makes the practical case, and it is more generous than the question expected. On a critical foreign policy question there is a real advantage in an envoy who can walk into the president's bedroom while he is in his pyjamas and say that the moment has come to agree — as against a political appointee from outside who must wait for an appointment in the Oval Office and then persuade the president both that he is right and that the president should adopt it.

Given a president whose character runs to ego and to suspicion of outsiders, he thinks the arrangement may well have helped. And he closes the point on the constitutional fact that survives all of it: the president signs, so the achievement is the president's, whoever conducted the negotiation.

Asked for an African case where family appointments have paid off, he says flatly that he cannot think of one. What he can think of — and volunteers, though it was not the question — are occasions in his own time as foreign minister when his head of state sent someone else on a diplomatic mission for reasons of his own: over Nigeria's role as an honorary frontline state on South Africa, and over the admission to the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, which he calls a diplomatic blunder.

“Someone who can walk into your bedroom while you are in your pyjamas has an advantage over a man waiting for an appointment in the Oval Office.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

07 · WHY MORE ARAB STATES WILL FOLLOW

He expects the accords to widen, and gives three reasons that have nothing to do with the White House.

The first is that much of the relationship already existed. Behind the public positions, a good many Arab states maintained cooperative relations with Israel throughout; what has changed is that circumstances now permit it to come out of the shadow.

The second is Iran. Fear of Tehran has pushed a number of Arab states into perceiving a community of interest with Israel, and for what he calls existential reasons they are prepared to say so. There are strategic, economic and technological gains available once it is open.

The third is the one that will be least comfortable for his audience, and he states it as a matter of record rather than of sympathy. Thirty or forty years of what he calls empty-chair diplomacy has been disastrous for the Palestinians: land lost in every encounter, and, with the current Israeli government, a real danger of being presented with a settlement in which two states are no longer feasible at all. He is critical of the Israeli attitude to the Palestinians in the same breath. But he will not condemn the Arab states for coming out of the shadow.

“The empty-chair diplomacy of thirty or forty years has been disastrous for the Palestinians. They have lost land in every encounter.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

08 · BARBADOS, AND A CROWN MOST PEOPLE NEVER HAD

On the announcement that Barbados will remove the Queen as head of state, he is almost dismissive, and the deflation is instructive. Most Commonwealth members do not have her as head of state and never did after independence — Nigeria among them. The Queen's position as head of the Commonwealth is a separate thing entirely from her position as head of state of individual realms.

He calls the change long overdue, notes that Australia has been arguing about it for years, and expects other Caribbean states to follow Barbados in installing one of their own as a non-executive president — provided, he adds with some care, that Her Majesty is not displeased.

“It is no big deal. The moment you become a republic, she is not your head of state — and most of the Commonwealth is already there.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

09 · WHY HE IS BREAKING HIS OWN RULE ABOUT NIGERIA

Asked about the mood in Nigeria before the first of October, he begins by explaining a policy the audience may have noticed. Churchill, asked a hostile question about Britain while abroad, said he made it a principle not to criticise his country on a foreign trip — and made up for it on returning. The Professor has followed the same rule on this programme, because he has other avenues at home.

This occasion he treats as different, and the reason is the calibre of the people who have spoken. A two-time former head of state, a Nobel laureate long known as an activist, a former chief of army staff who became the country's first chief of defence staff, and a long list of other eminent Nigerians have all drawn attention to what he calls not a coming rain but a coming hurricane. He would look ridiculous, he says, seeing the same dark clouds and pretending it was sunshine.

His defence of the messengers is as important as the message. They cannot all be wrong, and they cannot all be acting from ill motive. He knows these people; they are men of timber and calibre, experienced in government or in public analysis, and they are not driven by hatred or ill will towards the President. A great many Nigerians see what they see; these are the ones with a platform to say it.

His prescription is specific and, in the circumstances, modest. Go back to the report of the 2014 National Conference. He declares his interest immediately — he was its deputy chairman — and notes that he has said nothing about it since 2015. He is not asking for the report to be adopted; nobody adopts a whole report, and the National Assembly would not. He is asking for it to be taken off the shelf and read against the dangers these men have named, to see which recommendations answer them.

“They cannot all be wrong, and they cannot all be driven by ill motive. I can only urge the President to listen to them.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

10 • TOKYO, AND THE LESSON HE WANTS READ ELSEWHERE

On Japan's new prime minister he expects continuity rather than rupture: the man was cabinet secretary and right hand to his predecessor and cannot have held different views on the critical questions of China, the United States and South Korea. There will be modifications of manner, because people handle things differently even when they agree, and he is not yet an open book.

The issue to watch, he says, is the post-war constitution imposed by the Americans, under which Japanese forces may be used only for peacekeeping. His predecessor wanted a more activist defence posture, and whether that drive continues will do more than anything else to set the relationship with Beijing — and Washington, he notes, would not necessarily object.

Asked whether so many leadership changes at once are destabilising, he says no: changes are a fact of life, diplomats are used to handling them, and Europe has recently absorbed a run of them.

But he wants one thing taken from it, and it is aimed squarely at his own continent. A prime minister stepped down for health reasons rather than waiting to be incapacitated. In too many countries the sick head of state hangs on long after he can carry the responsibilities of government — practically waiting, he says, to be carried out in a coffin. The moment your health makes you unable to discharge the mandate, step down, while the applause is still at its height.

“Step down while the applause is still at its height. There has been a tendency for the sick head of state to hang on until he is carried out in a coffin.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

11 • SEVEN MASKS

The evening ends on tennis, and the answer is warmer than the question. He was rooting for Naomi Osaka at the US Open, and says he has family as witnesses that he said so beforehand.

What impressed him was not the tennis. Here was a young player who is by nature quiet and withdrawn, taking a public position that older and more established athletes had not — and doing it by wearing a different mask for each match, each carrying the name of a Black person killed by police.

He is candid about why the result mattered to him. Had she lost, the commentators would have said she should have concentrated on her tennis instead of her activism. She won, and they could not.

“A different mask every day, each with the name of a different person shot by the police. It made an impression on me, and I think on the world.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

THREADS TO PULL

- Naming the office before passing the verdict is a rule that protects reputations and complicates them at once. Which figures does it help most — and which does it let off?
- If Mandela could have made South Africa Azania by asking, the question is why he did not. Was the name a lower priority than the settlement, or part of the same compromise?
- Treason is a legal word used here as a moral one. Is there a version of the charge that a constitution could actually carry?
- He credits the Accords as a genuine achievement and notes the Palestinians were losing ground anyway. Does that make normalisation a recognition of reality, or an acceleration of it?
- He asks the President to read a report he helped write. What makes a national conference report worth revisiting six years on, when the government that received it did not act on it?

Watch Session 16 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. Three points are corrected against the record: American deaths stood at about 197,000 that week rather than over 200,000, a threshold crossed a few days later; the name Nigeria was coined by the journalist Flora Shaw, who later married Lord Lugard, rather than by Lugard himself; and while the 1967 anti-nepotism statute was indeed passed after a president appointed his brother attorney general, the Justice Department has advised that it does not cover White House staff, which is how the appointment in question was cleared. The allegation about remarks on Mandela comes from a memoir and is denied. The eminent Nigerians the Professor lists are garbled in the transcription and are identified in this issue from the descriptions he gives; the transcript header records the uncertainty. Sessions 13 and 15 do not appear in the master spreadsheet and have not been produced.