



thruMYeyes

with PROF. BOLAJI AKINYEMI

THE WEEKLY FOREIGN-POLICY BRIEFING

SESSION 26 · THURSDAY 26 NOVEMBER 2020 · FROM THE ARCHIVE · Syncterface Media

FROM THE ARCHIVE · SESSION 26

PEOPLE I HAVE WORKED WITH BEFORE

He reads out two letters disagreeing with him, and then makes his own objection to a cabinet: the pool was larger than that.

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Syncterface Media · tmeinsights.com

Session 26 — recorded on American Thanksgiving, three days after the transition was formally ascertained.

FROM THE ARCHIVE

People I Have Worked With Before

He begins by reading out two letters that disagree with him — the only time in the archive so far that he does this — and then makes his own objection to a new cabinet: the phrase is being used to excuse a choice, not to explain one.

A solo broadcast recorded on 26 November 2020: American Thanksgiving, three days after the General Services Administration ascertained the apparent winner, one day after a pardon, a Supreme Court decision and a British aid cut, and one day after the death of Diego Maradona. **The hour has an unusual opening. Before any question is put to him he reads two viewer letters aloud that argue against his own analysis, and says why he is doing it.**

An archive edition, recorded 26 November 2020. One constitutional date and one primary-season sequence are slightly out, and are corrected below; a nomination made three weeks after this broadcast answers one of the gaps he names, and is noted.

01 · TWO LETTERS AGAINST HIM

He had prepared the alternative views for the previous week and then thought them overtaken by events — the transition had finally got on stream. Just before going on air he changed his mind and read them anyway, and gave the reason plainly: to let the audience know there is no I-know-it-all syndrome on this programme.

The first is from a retired professor living in Ohio, and it reframes the problem he had spent two weeks on. The issue, the writer says, is not the legal interpretation of the transition at all. It is

whether a loser must concede before the winner is accorded the rights of a victor — made worse by an agency director holding absolute power to declare the winner. Rules of that kind work perfectly when both contestants are civil and live under the rule of law; they become impossible when one does not. The writer's prescription is patience: wait it out and let him be self-destructive.

The second is from a retired ambassador living in Atlanta, and it is a direct rebuttal of the Professor's criticism of the appointments. These are only the first posts — the National Security Council and the Treasury. The ambassador to the United Nations is a Black woman with real African experience who had been ambassador to Liberia. The pattern is loyal and experienced hands the president-elect has worked with before. Wait for further appointments; he will do right by the constituencies you named.

The Professor invites more of the same. If you disagree with anything said here, send it in and it will be read.

"I read them for one reason — to let you know there is no I-know-it-all syndrome on this programme."

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

02 · A CALM VOICE, AND THE SAME WELL

Before the criticism he records the thing he thinks worth recording. After four years of irritating delivery from that podium, America and the world had just heard a calm voice delivering a calm message aimed at the positive side of humanity.

He is careful with the compliment. He is not calling the president-elect an orator — obviously he is not. But the address drew from the same well of humanism that he associates with Kennedy and with Obama, and it was comforting.

And what he singles out is not the rhetoric but the address. It was directed at America and at the world, without the ingratiating America-first undertone that had characterised almost every speech from that building for four years.

"He is not an orator. But he drew from the same well of humanism one associated with Kennedy and Obama."

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

03 · WHY THE FIRST TEAM IS THE ARGUMENT

The reason he will not wait for further appointments — the ambassador's request — is structural, and he states it in one line. The security and strategic team was appointed first. That tells you it is the grade-A team. Other appointments will follow, but the ranking has already been declared.

He is scrupulous about what he is not saying. The nomination to the United Nations is deserved. He is not ignoring the first Latina heading homeland security. His objection is quantitative and about the top tier: after forty years in Washington he expected a man of that experience to be confident enough to reach for a wider field of nominees.

And he names the sentence he does not accept as an answer: these are people I have worked with, they are experienced, and that is why the team looks less of a rainbow than it should. He does not buy it.

"That was the first team appointed. That tells you it is the grade-A team."

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

04 · THE PRECEDENTS HE BRINGS

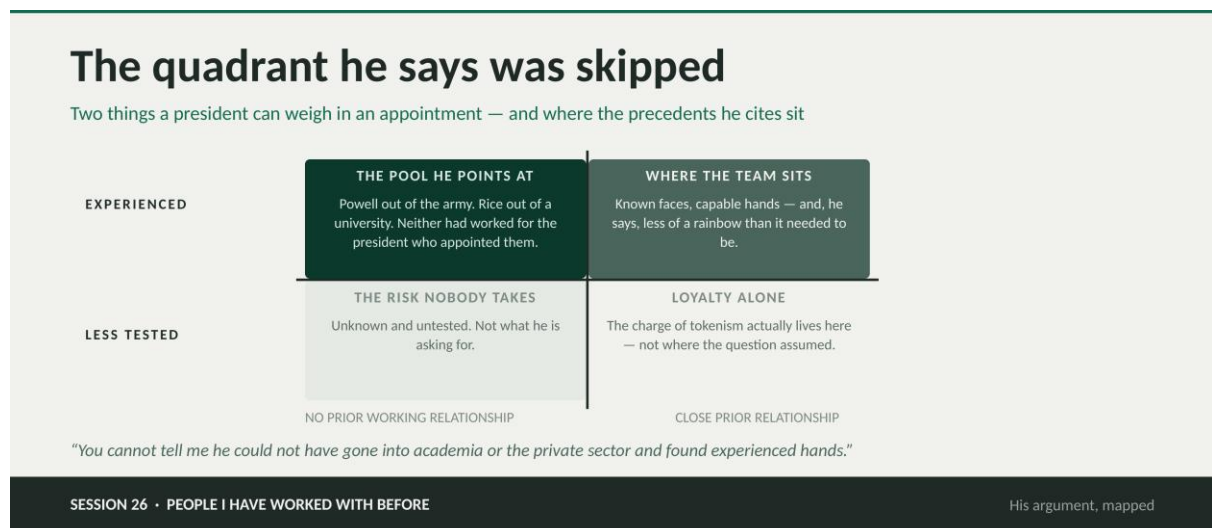
Rather than assert it, he goes and finds the counter-examples, and they are all Republican.

Reagan went into the military and brought out Colin Powell as national security adviser. The elder Bush made Powell chairman of the Joint Chiefs — and Powell had not worked for him before. The younger Bush brought Powell back as secretary of state, and went into the academy and pulled Condoleezza Rice out of a university, first to the National Security Council and then to the State Department.

The conclusion he draws from the set is the sentence the whole broadcast turns on: you cannot tell me he could not have gone into academia or the private sector and come up with more experienced hands that would also have reflected a rainbow configuration.

Then the political memory, which is the sharper half. After Iowa and New Hampshire — primaries whose electorates, he notes, look very much like the grade-A team — his political career was dead. It was the primaries with overwhelmingly Black Democratic electorates that resurrected it. He is not making a demand; he is registering a disappointment, and saying where the debt lies.

He also declines an easier move. He says he will not read out the names of people who served previous Democratic administrations and are now in academia and law firms, because he does not want to personalise it. But he names one absence precisely: no Native American on the team, and in particular none in the post given to John Kerry.



The two things he says a president can weigh — and why he thinks one quadrant went unvisited.

05 · WHERE TOKENISM ACTUALLY LIVES

The moderator puts the strongest objection: had he picked differently, would he not have been accused of tokenism — of appealing to a group rather than doing what the job needed?

His answer inverts it, and it is the cleanest thing he says all evening. No — it is now that he could be accused of tokenism.

The logic is the precedents he has just laid out. If men and women without prior office have repeatedly been pulled from outside and acquitted themselves creditably, then the pool of people who combine experience with a wider configuration demonstrably exists. Appointing a small number of representative faces from a narrow circle of former colleagues is the thing that looks like a gesture. Reaching into the field and finding qualified people is the thing that is not.

"No — in fact it is now that he could be accused of tokenism."

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

06 · DEMOCRACY ON HORSEBACK

The last of his reservations is the one that carries furthest. Both the president-elect and the advisers around him voted for, or argued for, American wars in the past. The younger advisers, he says, belong to the wing of the Democratic Party that likes the projection of American power through military intervention abroad — Libya, Iraq, Syria.

He puts the worry as an image rather than an accusation: I hope we are not going to get democracy riding on horseback into troubled areas of the world.

What he wants continued is the pulling back — the restraint on projecting American military power where it need not go.

“I hope we are not going to get democracy riding on horseback into troubled areas of the world.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

07 · REJOINING, WITHOUT PAYING TO REJOIN

Asked whether the president-elect is rushing back into agreements a changed world has moved past, he concedes something to the outgoing position before answering. There was a point in the complaint that other countries were riding on the back of the United States, and there is a domestic constituency that sees unilateral American concessions as having served neither America nor the world.

So the instruction he would give is not to withdraw and not to capitulate: set out the parameters of the communal concessions everyone should be making to each other, and expect them to be mutual.

On the specifics he distinguishes. Circumstances have changed in the case of Iran. On climate they have changed in the other direction — the situation is more frightening now than when the agreement was signed, which strengthens rather than weakens the case for returning.

And the framing of the return matters to him: we are back to occupy our seat at the table, and in conjunction with allies we will try to refashion a world order. Nobody will be bullied into the American way — which, given the power position of China and Russia, could not be done anyway.

“Occupy the seat at the table. But do not make unilateral concessions to sit in it.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

08 · PLAUSIBLE DENIABILITY, AND THE BIGGEST CATCH

On the reported flight of the Israeli prime minister to Saudi Arabia and the Saudi denial that any meeting took place, he explains the diplomacy of a non-event with some relish.

Saudi Arabia is the biggest catch, and the one country capable of pulling other Arab states along. As guardian of the two holiest sites in Islam it has to test the water very carefully.

So what happened is what the trade calls plausible deniability, and he sets out its parts. Nobody denies a private Israeli jet flew directly to a Saudi city — unique, never done before. Nobody says who was aboard. The Saudis deny only that a meeting took place between the two principals. Israeli sources say there was one. There is no proof, and everyone's face is saved.

His own reading is that there are enough signs that such a meeting took place, but that events have not matured to the point where both sides will say the same thing.

The signal being sent, he says, runs in both directions and is aimed at the incoming administration: the Middle East you left four years ago is not the field you are returning to. He expects the incoming president to try to bring the Palestinians on board, and identifies the obstacle honestly — the settlements built under the outgoing arrangement have made two states harder to achieve. Which raises the possibility that the man who allowed them may be prepared to pull some back if that is the price of both the Palestinians and the Saudis. The appointment he says he will be watching is the Middle East envoy: someone with the confidence of the president and knowledge of the region.

“Nobody denies the plane. Nobody says who was on it. That is plausible deniability, and everybody's face is saved.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

09 • THE MIDWIFE WHO WAS STANDING BY

Asked about the American secretary of state, who happened to be in the region at the time of the meeting that did not happen, he answers with one image and then a straight assessment.

The midwife was standing by, he says, in case the labour got that far. It did not.

On the man's future: some of his behaviour and statements suggest he is positioning himself for a role in the Republican Party, and specifically in its Trumpian wing. He then compares American primaries to Nigerian ones — all sorts of hats thrown into the ring, some merely so the name can be mentioned, others serious — and observes that a former secretary of state would not be an unusual candidate. Mrs Clinton came from exactly that background: senator, secretary of state, presidential candidate.

“The midwife was standing by, in case the labour got that far. It did not.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

10 • RECONCILIATION, AND WHAT A MANDATE IS NOT

A viewer asks how a president elected on reconciliation reconciles with an opposition on abortion, on gay rights, on the liberal agenda generally.

His answer separates the possible from the impossible with a piece of arithmetic. The House majority is slim. The Senate is unknown until January, and even winning both Georgia seats leaves conservative Democrats to be fought. So some liberal issues will simply not be expandable — and the obstacle will not only be Republicans.

What he says must happen anyway is the economic commitment: an increase in the labour wage, and a pandemic relief package — and he interrupts himself to say what he does not mean. Not a few crumbs dropped here and there. Something on the scale of what that administration did to rescue General Motors and the banks in the last collapse.

Then the point of the section. The president-elect won some eighty million votes and a margin of about seven million, but the configuration in Congress does not reflect that majority. So on the divisive questions he does not really have a mandate — not because the country did not vote for him, but because the institution he must legislate through did not move with him.

“The vote was massive. The configuration in Congress does not reflect it. So on divisive issues he has no mandate.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

11 • “A THIRD TERM” IS NOT AN ARGUMENT

The charge that this is simply a third term of the previous administration he dismisses by describing how the American system actually replenishes itself.

When a party is out of power, the people who served it go into academia, the private sector and law firms, prepare themselves, and wait. That is the pool from which an incoming president draws. It is not nepotism; it is the mechanism.

His examples are again Republican. Caspar Weinberger served three presidents in several roles, ending as secretary of defense. Colin Powell served Reagan, the elder Bush and the younger. Obama appointed people who had come from the Clinton administration. That is how the game is played — you do not rebuild from the foundation each time.

And he applies the same logic in reverse to expose the phrase: on that reasoning you might as well have called the elder Bush's presidency Reagan's third term. It is a category he does not think is doing any work.

It is worth noting where this leaves him, because it is not a contradiction. He accepts that experienced hands must come from the party's reserve; his objection in the earlier section was that the reserve is wider than a circle of former colleagues.

“On that reasoning you might as well call the elder Bush's term Reagan's third term.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

12 • ON AID, AND WHO ACTUALLY BENEFITS

The British government had cut aid from 0.7 to 0.5 per cent of national income the day before, prompting a ministerial resignation. He answers in three moves, and the first is the scholarship.

Students of aid programmes have long pointed out that there are two beneficiaries: the receiving country, and the businessmen and companies of the giving country — the people who supply the air conditioners, the computers, the technical personnel whose salaries are paid out of the package. Which of the two gains more is a fair question.

The second is his own position, stated without hedging: he has never signed on to aid as a development strategy. It removes the responsibility to look at your own resources and build your own country. Palliatives for unforeseen disasters, yes. Aid as a plan, no.

The third is the concession, and it is the reason he is not surprised. Every developed country now faces a crisis of allocation because of the pandemic. Relief has to come from the treasury, and the foreign budget is where governments look first. He expects more of this — and expects the packages to return only once those economies have stabilised.

“Aid as part of a development strategy — I have never really signed on to that.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

13 • THE PARDON, AND THE SELF-PARDON

Asked whether the pardon of the former national security adviser is troubling, he says no — and then does something characteristic. He reminds the audience that he is not one to defend this president on any issue, and defends him on this one anyway, on the record.

The worst offender in the abuse of the pardon power, he says, was Bill Clinton: the list was extensive, it included his own half-brother, and it included people accused of all sorts of criminal shenanigans. On this particular power, the outgoing president has not been the worst.

What he does think needs attention is the provision itself — and here he raises the question that was being floated by strict constructionists: can a president pardon himself? The text sets no limit on whom the power may be exercised over. The liberal reading invokes an overriding principle that no man may be a judge in his own cause, and a self-pardon for charges not yet brought makes him exactly that.

He assumes it would end up in the Supreme Court, and does not pretend to know how that court would rule. His evidence is the decision handed down the day before, five votes to four, on New York's restrictions and religious organisations. He was not surprised by the newest justice's vote, because she is a strict constructionist — and he characterises the reasoning, with some edge, as: if religious people want to kill themselves, let them, the constitution gives them religious freedom. The judgment made no sense to him. He can see the reasoning. That is precisely why he thinks a self-pardon might survive.

“The judgment made no sense to me. But I can see the reasoning — which is why a self-pardon might stand.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

14 • WHY HE WOULD PROSECUTE

Asked whether a former president could actually go to jail, he separates the constitutional from the ordinary. If he pardons himself it becomes a constitutional case. If he does not, the cases already in the offing concern conduct before the presidency — the foundation, the New York businesses, probable tax evasion, which Americans take very seriously. Those have nothing to do with presidential power. No American president has been charged, let alone jailed; this one may be the first.

Then he states his own position, and it is the most forward-leaning thing he says. Having seen what a man who does not believe in the rule of law can do with the powers of that office, and how close the country came to behaving like a banana republic — not because of the election but because of the conduct of a sitting president — Americans may need to make an example of him.

The reason he gives is not retribution and he says so twice. Not because of this man, but because of the next one who shares his worldview and may be preparing to behave as though he too is above the law. The signal is the point: that this impunity will not be allowed to happen again.

He is careful about the condition, which is worth keeping. The charges must be criminal matters strong enough to sustain a case. Not a gesture.

“Not because of him — because of the next person of that worldview who may be preparing to come in.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

15 • WHAT AFRICA SHOULD EXPECT — AND THE HONEST GAP

A viewer asks whether American billionaires invested in Africa might press the incoming administration towards a more favourable policy. He declines the premise, and does it by admitting ignorance: he is not aware that this is an issue capable of arresting an incoming administration's attention.

What he serves notice on instead is a list, and it has held up. Ethiopia, where a civil war is about to catch light. Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea and Tanzania, where the issues arise from elections that were

neither credible nor transparent. These, he says, are the immediate matters that would come to his attention were he occupying that chair.

His expectation of the new administration is stated as a prediction rather than a hope: it will be on the side of democracy and human rights, and will seek to exercise a restraining influence on African governments that breach their own constitutions — whether by term elongation or by conducting elections that are not credible.

“Term elongation, or elections that are not credible. Those are the breaches an adviser would have to address.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

16 · A FLAWED GENIUS

The last question is about Maradona, who had died the day before. He declines the sentimental obituary and gives a divided one.

He recognised him as a genius on the field but a flawed genius — the judgment is explicitly about combining what happened on the field with what happened off it.

Between him and Pelé he will not choose: fifty-fifty. What he grants without reservation is the description — he alone could dribble past eleven members of the opposition and still score. And then the aside that makes the passage: and I am not including the hand of God in that display of talent.

The verdict he ends on is the same shape as the one he gave about canonisation the week before. He had the Achilles heel of not being able to control his life off the field. It does not detract from the fact that he was a footballing genius. Both halves are kept.

“He alone could dribble past eleven men and still score — and I am not including the hand of God in that.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

THREADS TO PULL

- He reads out the letters that disagree with him and says why. How many commentators you follow have done that this year?
- The Ohio letter argues the rules were written for two civil contestants and break when one is not. Which other rules in your own institutions have that same design flaw?
- He says the accusation of tokenism attaches to the narrow choice, not the wide one. Does that inversion hold generally, or only where the wider pool is demonstrably qualified?
- He defends an opponent's use of the pardon power by pointing at a president he prefers. What does it cost a commentator to do that, and why is it so rare?
- He would prosecute a former president to deter the next one. Where is the line between deterrence and the criminalisation of losing?

Watch Session 26 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. Corrections: the pardon power comes from the 1787 Constitution, not 1778 as he says; the primaries that revived the president-elect's candidacy were South Carolina on 29 February 2020 and then Super Tuesday, of which Virginia was one — he treats Virginia as one of the rescuing primaries rather than a Super Tuesday state; Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice both had some prior federal service before the appointments he cites, though neither had been a close working colleague of the president who elevated them, which is his point; and the Supreme Court decision he dates to “yesterday” is Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn v. Cuomo, decided 25 November 2020 by five votes to four. One gap he names was closed after this broadcast: Deb Haaland was nominated as Secretary of the Interior in December 2020 and became the first Native American cabinet secretary. On the Saudi flight, the Saudi foreign minister denied that a meeting took place; his reading of the episode reflects the reporting as it stood.