



thruMYeyes

with PROF. BOLAJI AKINYEMI

THE WEEKLY FOREIGN-POLICY BRIEFING

SESSION 27 · THURSDAY 3 DECEMBER 2020 · FROM THE ARCHIVE · Syncterface Media

FROM THE ARCHIVE · SESSION 27

CONGRATULATIONS TO THE HUMAN RACE

A vaccine arrives, and the first thing done with it is a race. He spends the hour separating achievements from the flags planted on them.

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Syncterface Media · tmeinsights.com

Session 27 — recorded the day after the first Western approval of a Covid-19 vaccine.

FROM THE ARCHIVE

Congratulations to the Human Race

A vaccine is approved and within a day three governments are arguing about who did it first. He spends the hour separating achievements from the flags people plant on them — and returns a verdict on his own earlier criticism.

A solo broadcast recorded on 3 December 2020, at the end of a week that contained an assassination in Tehran, the fall of a regional capital in Ethiopia, an attorney general breaking ranks, a Chinese landing on the Moon, the collapse of a famous telescope and the first approval of a vaccine. **It is also the week his complaint of a fortnight earlier is partly answered — and he says so, without taking the credit offered to him.**

An archive edition, recorded 3 December 2020. One official's title, one population figure and one point of American impeachment procedure are corrected below. An allegation he raises about the spouse of a sitting judge is reported as he put it — without names — with the procedural position set beside it.

01 · THE WRONG KIND OF FIRST

The United Kingdom had become the first Western country to authorise a vaccine the day before, and lorries were already moving. He gives the good news its due — good for human civilisation, a good Christmas present for the people of that country — and then says what he would have preferred.

He would have been more reassured, he says, if Britain, the European Union and the United States had coordinated the announcement, or made it within the same day. Not for diplomacy's sake. For

the ordinary man or woman who is jittery about vaccination — and he is careful to distinguish that person from anyone ideologically opposed to vaccines. A simultaneous announcement would have carried a global reassurance that a single national announcement cannot.

He notes that two European countries were ready and chose to wait so that the announcement could be made collectively, and calls that the more sensible approach.

His verdict on going alone is commercial rather than moral: you gain nothing. Whatever you think you gain in national pride, you lose to the muttering that immediately began in scientific communities elsewhere.

And then the line he ends the section on, which is the title of this issue: nevertheless, congratulations to the human race.

“For one country to run ahead trying to beat the gun — you gain nothing, really.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

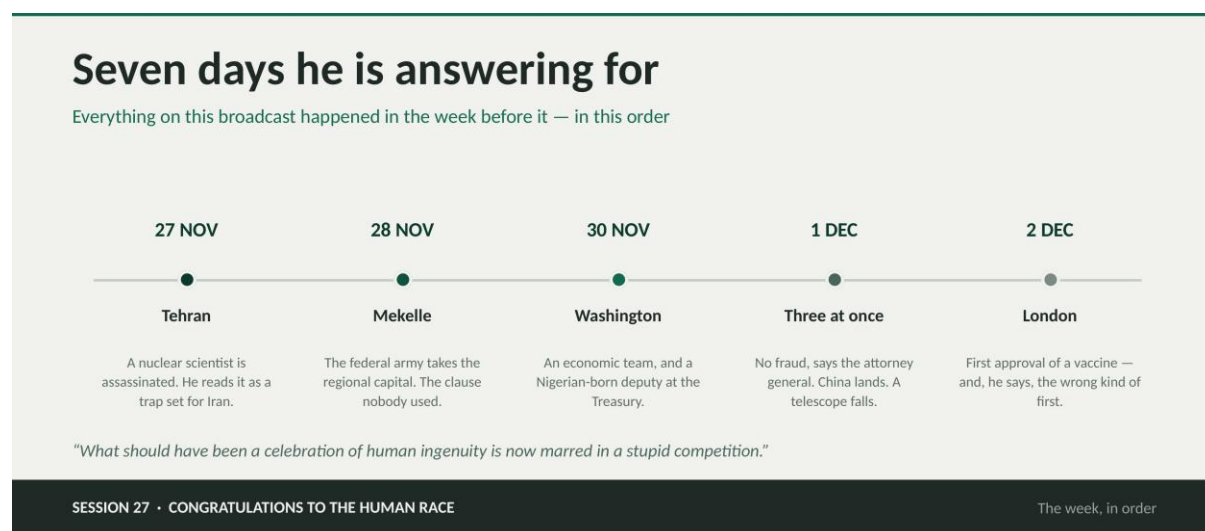
02 • GOLD STANDARD, SILVER STANDARD

Asked whether this was Britain scoring a goal against the European Union on the eve of departure, and whether the American claim to be the gold standard was fair, he does not take either side. He finds the whole exchange irritating and childish, and says British ministers started it.

The image he chooses is the sharpest of the evening. This is not a rugby match on the fields of Eton or Harrow. It is a vaccine against a virus that has infected and killed people in numbers he does not finish counting.

Then he follows the logic of the boast to where it becomes absurd. If America is the gold standard, what is Britain — the silver? Is the European Union the silver? Which leaves that little island offshore with the bronze.

His summary is the caption of the whole broadcast: what should have been a celebration of human ingenuity is being marred in a stupid competition. And he expects more of it, from people who should know better.



Every subject on this broadcast happened inside the seven days before it.

03 • WHY BUYING FOUR VACCINES WAS RIGHT

On governments buying up stocks of vaccines they had not developed, and several at once, he offers a defence that starts with the previous failure.

At the beginning of the pandemic almost every country found itself short of protective equipment, and was roundly condemned by its own citizens for it. No government intended to be caught short a second time. So when nobody could yet say which candidate would work, they bought forward stocks of several — and nobody was going to be blamed for investing in one that failed, because the whole world was in panic mode.

The second argument is the arithmetic of coverage, and it is the reason he thinks buying several was not merely defensive but correct. The capacity of the two vaccines then near approval does not cover a tenth of what is needed. You will still need the Chinese one, the Russian one, the Oxford one, all of them together.

He is disarming about his own standing here — not a scientist, not a medical man, somebody who listens and tries to use his common sense, which he notes has become a scarce commodity in this pandemic.

And he supplies the analogy that carries the point: if 349 people on an aeroplane of 350 are vaccinated and one is not, the one is a danger to the 349. He adds the honest unknown that made the calculation so hard at the time — nobody yet knew how long protection lasted, ninety days or six months or a year, or whether one dose or two were needed.

So, for once, he says: congratulate the governments that invested in several.

“If 349 on the plane are vaccinated and one is not, the one is a danger to the 349.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

04 · HE WOULD TAKE IT ON TELEVISION

Asked whether it would matter to him which vaccine he received, he first removes his own agency from the question: he lives in Nigeria, and the regulatory agencies there will decide what arrives. Then he admits a preference, and admits why. He hopes it is the Oxford one — because Oxford is his old university, and, he adds, we do rather well on these matters.

On whether he would follow the American former presidents who had offered to be vaccinated on live television, the answer is yes, on medical advice.

The reason he gives for the caveat is the best joke of the evening and also a real point about risk. He does not know their medical situations — but in terms of age, he outranks every one of them. So he will ask his doctor first, and then take it on television.

“In terms of age I outrank all of them. So I will ask my doctor — and then take it on television.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

05 · HE DOES NOT WITHDRAW THE CRITICISM

The moderator offers him the credit — his advice about diversity in the appointments appears to have been taken. He does not accept the framing, and what he does instead is the most careful thing in the broadcast.

He is pleased. The economic team shows a diversity the national security team did not. But he restates the original objection rather than dissolving it: his complaint was about the grade-A team, he knew at the time that further appointments were coming, and the observation about that first tier still stands.

He also explains the bias in his own attention rather than hiding it. International relations is his field; he is a professor of it and a former foreign minister; so he pays more attention to those appointments and regards that team as the first.

Then the reason the whole argument matters to him, which he has not stated this plainly before. Every child in America should be able to look at the cabinet and see a reflection of his or her own face — and say, I belong, among the people arranging my present and my future. He suspects the people who do not understand this are those who have never lived there.

He notes there are perhaps 2,500 appointments still to come, of which maybe thirty are of cabinet calibre. So far, so good.

“Every child in America should look at that cabinet and see a reflection of his own face — and say, I belong.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

06 • A NIGERIAN AT THE TREASURY

A clip is played of the president-elect naming his deputy secretary of the Treasury: a Nigerian-born immigrant, son of a nurse and a school principal, former chief of staff to a senator who set up the consumer protection bureau, then deputy national security adviser for economics, and now the highest-ranking African American in that department.

His first move is to widen it. He is very pleased — but he will not limit the pride to Nigeria. The man is an African, and any African given that introduction is an achievement for Africa.

He acknowledges the sour argument in the background and sets it aside for another day: whether he should have stayed at home, whether talent is recognised abroad because it is not recognised here. That is another issue entirely.

Then he uses the appointment as the worked example a viewer had asked him for. Somebody who follows the programme had told him that when he explained how people serve under successive administrations before rising, he did not give enough examples. Here is one — chief of staff to a senator, then a deputy national security adviser, now deputy secretary of the Treasury.

And he makes a prediction that is worth recording as a prediction. Keep an eye on him: he will be a full secretary of the Treasury two or three years from now, or under a President Harris.

“I am not going to limit this to Nigeria. He is an African. It is an achievement for Africa.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

07 • WHY GEORGIA DECIDES EVERYTHING

On reports that Senate Republicans would block nominations, he begins with the tradition being broken. Over generations, presidents were allowed the men and women they felt would help them run an administration — a respect owed to someone elected by the people.

He does not think that tradition survives in this caucus, which he calls a know-nothing formation whose only competence since the previous Democratic presidency has been to oppose and to derail — an extension, he says, of the outgoing president's personality and of the game being played over whether he won or lost.

So he returns to the two Senate seats in Georgia, and states the stakes as a list rather than a slogan. With them, cabinet nominations pass, judicial nominations pass, and an economic programme can move through Congress. Without them, two irritating years until the next Senate elections.

His closing judgment is not partisan: this kind of politics is not good for the United States.

“With those two seats the cabinet passes, the judges pass, the programme moves. Without them, two irritating years.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

08 • CONGRATULATIONS TO THE ATTORNEY GENERAL

The attorney general had said there was no evidence of fraud on a scale that would change the outcome. The Professor congratulates him — and defines what he is congratulating.

It is the concept of public service: the thing expected of a high-ranking cabinet member, which several of them, to his regret, had not shown. Service to the republic placed above service to a party or to an individual. He thinks it will be recorded in history as a credit to the man.

And he insists on the person who did it first. The official who said there was no evidence before anyone else, and was fired for it, will be on the right side of history — while those still hanging on and playing up to the president will find themselves on the wrong side of it. (The official was the head of the federal cybersecurity agency rather than the secretary of homeland security; the correction is below.)

“Service to the republic above service to a party or to a man. That is what is being congratulated.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

09 • SCRAMBLING FOR A PARDON

On reports that the president's personal lawyer had discussed a pardon, he first places the practice in its long tradition: outgoing presidents sign a flurry of pardons, and some presidents held in very high regard do not come out of that last act smelling of roses. There is nothing presidential about it, and it has been true since Washington.

What is unusual here is the direction of the scramble — people who have not been accused or charged seeking pardons in advance. And he draws the obvious inference without softening it: if your hands are clean and you have not been accused of anything, why would you be scrambling?

Then the two limits, which are the practically useful part. First, a federal pardon does not reach state courts, and a great many of the offences in view — tax evasion among them — can be charged at state level. Second, the constitutional question: can a pardon cover an anticipated offence, one for which no charge has been brought?

He supplies the single precedent and its defect. Ford pardoned Nixon before any charge — and it was never challenged, so nobody knows what a court would do with it. Given the composition of the present Supreme Court, he suspects one can guess the answer.

Which leads him to the thing he says Americans are not talking about. There is one justice, he says, over whom a question mark could be placed, because his wife worked in the White House and was central to a programme vetting public servants for political loyalty. He would want the conflict investigated. He declines to name anyone. (The procedural position — impeachment begins in the House, and recusal is the ordinary remedy for a conflict — is set out below.)

“If your hands are clean and you have not been accused of anything, why are you scrambling for a pardon?”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

10 • TIGRAY: THE CLAUSE NOBODY USED

On the fall of the regional capital he separates the political question from the humanitarian one at the outset, and says plainly that war is never pleasant.

The political question he puts as two rhetorical ones. Can a regional government militarily challenge the authority of the central government? Can that challenge extend to attacking the central government's barracks? Any state in the world answers the same way — the centre uses central power to bring the region back into compliance. It is why countries have civil wars. When the IRA began attacking the police, troops were sent, and when the troops were attacked, more were sent.

So the federal response does not surprise him. What surprises him — and he says he still has no answer — is the strategy chosen on the other side. The Ethiopian constitution, written after the war that ended in Eritrean independence, contains a clause giving any region the right to secede. Tigray did not activate it. It challenged the authority of the centre instead. He has no clue why.

He leaves the other half of the judgment open, and it is the half that has aged into the harder question. Did the central government act in good faith when it cancelled the election on account of the pandemic? He notes that elections were held in that same period in Tanzania, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea and the United States. So could they not have been held in Ethiopia? That, he says, is what broke the camel's back.

On the humanitarian argument he takes a position many will resist, and it is worth quoting rather than paraphrasing: the earlier the military phase ends, the sooner refugees and civilians can be dealt with. He understands the mandate of the agencies that push refugees to the front of the queue, but thinks that if the military phase is not allowed to conclude you simply create more refugees — a ceasefire being a suspension rather than an end.

He closes personally. He visited Tigray as a minister, attending conferences of the Organisation of African Unity. A beautiful region, friendly people. Ethiopia was the model federal constitution people held up as worth copying in Africa. It is a pity.

“The constitution gave Tigray the right to secede. It did not use it. I have no clue as to the choice of strategy.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

11 • A TRAP SET FOR IRAN

On the assassination of Iran's leading nuclear scientist, he asks for fingers crossed and prayers, and hopes caution will be the operative emotion on the Iranian side.

He is quick to pre-empt the misreading. People may feel he is blaming Iran. He is not. He believes a trap has been set — and he sets out how it works. Iran reacts; the reaction provokes an American military reply while the outgoing president is still in office; and the incoming administration then finds it extremely difficult to sit down at a table and negotiate a new agreement on the nuclear programme. That, he says, is precisely what whoever did this wants.

So the ball is in Iran's court, and what he is asking of it is patience — to wait for the new administration.

He does not pretend that is easy, and he is careful about the internal picture. Iran's government is not united on what the response should be, nor even on whether to return to the table at all. There are hardliners and there are what he calls soft-liners — he uses the plain words deliberately, rather than a convoluted analysis of Iranian politics — and the president is among the latter. He hopes they prevail, while noting that the final decision belongs to the Supreme Leader, who outranks the president.

His counsel to Tehran, in the end, is about sequencing rather than submission: calm down, wait, and then decide what to do, when to do it and where.

“A trap has been set. The trap is that Iran reacts — and the table is gone before the new president reaches it.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

12 • THE MOON BELONGS TO ALL OF US

China had landed a probe on the Moon in the same week that a famous American telescope collapsed, and the parallel being drawn was the rise of one power and the decline of another. He declines the parallel and does something else with the news.

Congratulations to the Chinese — and it could be congratulations to the human race, if they choose to share the research.

He then makes the diplomatic point the section exists for, and it is a corrective to the way he is often read on China. Whatever the shortcomings of Chinese foreign policy — and, he adds, they are not the only country with shortcomings in theirs — there are issues on which you need to engage them, and cards they can play. The specimens brought back from the Moon should be of interest to the whole world, and can be shared with the scientific community if you do not antagonise them. After all, the Moon belongs to all of us, not to one country.

His closing wish is aimed at home. He hopes African nations lagging in space research will let this focus their minds — away from whatever games are being played on Earth, and towards putting their brightest scientists on it.

Asked whether he would have liked to travel there, the answer is dated and cheerful. At thirty or forty, yes. At this age, he will stay here and look at the Moon from where he is.

“The Moon belongs to all of us. Not to one country.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

THREADS TO PULL

- He wanted one announcement made by three regulators on the same day. Would that have raised public confidence, or merely delayed the first doses?
- He says buying several unproven vaccines was rational because nobody would be blamed for the failures. What else does that logic justify, and where does it stop?
- His test for a cabinet is whether a child can see their own face in it. Is that a test of representation, or of legitimacy?
- He argues that letting the military phase end quickly produces fewer refugees than pressing for an early ceasefire. What would settle that question empirically?

- He reads the assassination as a trap whose target is a future negotiation. How should a government respond to a provocation designed to make its restraint look like weakness?

Watch Session 27 in full on the Syncturface 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 official fired for saying the election was secure was the director of the federal cybersecurity agency, which sits within the Department of Homeland Security, not the secretary of homeland security; the world population needing vaccination was about 7.8 billion, not the three billion he gives; and American impeachment originates in the House of Representatives rather than the Senate, with recusal being the remedy ordinarily discussed for a judicial conflict of interest. The Professor deliberately does not name the justice or the spouse he refers to, and no names are supplied here. The example he half-recalls of a defence secretary serving two presidents of different parties is Robert Gates.

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