



thruMYeyes

with PROF. BOLAJI AKINYEMI

THE WEEKLY FOREIGN-POLICY BRIEFING

SESSION 30 · THURSDAY 7 JANUARY 2021 · FROM THE ARCHIVE · Syncterface Media

FROM THE ARCHIVE · SESSION 30

MEANT TO BE A CITY ON A HILL

The day after a mob took the Capitol, he says the shining city was never the reality — and then explains why that is not a reason to give up on it.

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Syncterface Media · tmeinsights.com

Session 30 — recorded the day after the Capitol was stormed, and three days after his 79th birthday.

FROM THE ARCHIVE

Meant to Be a City on a Hill

Seventy-nine years old and up until five in the morning watching, he says he never expected to see it. Then he does the harder thing: dismantles the idea America was ever the shining city, and explains why that is a reason to keep the phrase.

A solo broadcast recorded on 7 January 2021, the day after a mob took the United States Capitol while Congress was in session and the vice-president was in the chamber. He had watched it live until five in the morning. **It contains the most personal opening in the archive, the sharpest thing he has said about American self-description, and one piece of practical instruction he wants copied across the American South.**

An archive edition, recorded 7 January 2021. Three dates and one comparative claim are corrected below. One contested assertion — that a 2018 governor's election was stolen — is reported as his reading, with the record set beside it.

01 · HOW HE DOES IT AT SEVENTY-NINE

The moderator ambushes him with his birthday, and with a question viewers had been sending: how does he do it at seventy-nine?

The answer is not about diet or discipline. He finds the session intellectually stimulating, and says the stimulation is not merely mental — it seems to affect his whole condition. He feels alive when he is preparing.

Then he confesses something the archive is better for having on the record. He was very reluctant when the programme was proposed. Every week seemed a great deal. He assumed that after five or ten weeks the moderator would get fed up.

The reason he is still there, he says, is that the audience did not get fed up either — and the reaction from the platform has been encouraging enough to make him feel young.

“I was very, very reluctant. I thought after five or ten weeks you would get fed up. You did not.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

02 • NOT ONCE

Asked what went through his mind, he answers with a life rather than an opinion, and the structure of the answer is the argument.

He is seventy-nine. He lived a considerable number of years in the United States. He lived through the assassinations of a president, of his brother, of Martin Luther King, of several civil rights leaders. He lived through Vietnam and demonstrations that took over campuses and streets.

And not once, he says, was Congress attacked and breached. Not once did a sitting president set a mob on it.

The image that undid him was the flag. He sat and watched the flag of the secessionist South paraded through the corridors and the rotunda — and points out what that means historically. Confederate forces never took Washington; the closest they got was a fort on the edge of the city. The flag reached the rotunda in 2021 that never reached it in 1864.

His verdict on the man he holds responsible is put through the man's own slogan: he promised to make America great again, and the America shown on global television that day was not a great America.

“Even the southern forces never invaded Washington. And here was that flag, in the rotunda.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

03 • WHAT HE THINKS WAS ACTUALLY BEING ATTEMPTED

The comparison he reaches for is not American. Watching it, his mind went to the storming of the Spanish parliament by Civil Guard officers shortly after democracy was restored there, which ended only when the king personally ordered the army back to barracks.

The difference he insists on is the one that makes this worse. In Spain it was soldiers. Here it was the chief executive of the state setting a mob on the elected representatives of the people.

And he refuses the mitigating description that was already circulating. This was not an empty building. They were not on holiday. They had not closed for the day. Congress was in session — and the vice-president was in the chamber.

From which he draws the conclusion the section exists for. The vice-president is second in the line of succession and the speaker is third. Both were in the building. In a way, he says, what was being attempted was a decapitation of the American government — which would have left one man to rule.

He does not soften the word: it was treason, and it was committed criminally.

“Number two was in the chamber. Number three was in the chamber. That would have left him alone to rule America.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

04 • THE PEOPLE HE THINKS WERE USED

The second charge he brings is not treason but something he considers separately contemptible — and it is aimed at the leader rather than the crowd.

He played with the minds of simple human beings: poor, unemployed, farming people, who in that moment were not reasoning for themselves. The image he lands on is the emperor fiddling while the city burned.

It is worth noticing what he does not do here. He does not call the crowd stupid and leave it there. He treats being played upon as an injury done to them, and reserves the insanity charge for the man who did the playing.

Then the question that occurred to him while watching, which was practical rather than moral: where were the troops? Where was the airborne division? These were the forces that exist for exactly this, and they were not there.

“He played on their minds — like Nero fiddling while Rome burned.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

05 • THE COMPARISON THAT WAS IMPOSSIBLE TO MISS

The absence of force is where he turns to the comparison commentators were already making, and he makes it in full.

Set the handling of that crowd beside the handling of the racial-justice demonstrations of the previous summer. The same police who would dress like commandos and confront anyone brown who looked out of order were, on this day, nowhere to be found while a ragtag mob walked in.

The conclusion he draws is stated as something he had previously been slower to accept, which is what makes it worth quoting. When people say racism is endemic in Western societies, you often feel they are crying wolf. It takes an episode like this to make you ask: is this really how Congress is guarded?

He extends the same point beyond race, and it is an important extension. It was not only Black demonstrators who would have been dealt with. Any demonstrators for civil rights or human rights would have been. The difference on this day was not the cause but who was marching.

He does not leave it as a feeling. He ends the passage on his own state — he felt bad, very bad, very disturbed indeed.

“You often feel people are crying wolf about endemic racism. Then you ask: is this how Congress is guarded?”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

06 • FISH ROTS FROM THE HEAD — AND ELSEWHERE

Asked whether this proves that security had been neglected from the top, he agrees with the premise and then refuses to let it absorb the whole blame.

The African proverb he offers is that fish rots from the head, and the president has a large share of it. But the president is not the chief of the Capitol Police. He does not run the department. He is not the speaker of the House. He does not chair the committee that oversees the force.

So the failure is more endemic than one man — which is his word, and it is the same word he has just used about racism, deliberately.

The point is not exculpatory. It is the opposite: a great many people bear responsibility, and blaming only the loudest of them is a way of leaving the system intact.

“He has a large share of it. But he is not the chief of the Capitol Police. This is more endemic than that.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

07 · THE OBJECTIONS NOBODY WITHDREW

What he cannot get past is what happened after the building was cleared.

He had expected the reconvened chamber to hear a series of retractions — point of order, I withdraw my objection — and there were none. The appeals against certification were filed and pressed through the system anyway, and the count was not completed until the early hours.

Then he adds the observation that he clearly went looking for, and he is careful with the arithmetic before he makes it. Only seven senators out of fifty joined the objection; he concedes plainly that this is not all Republicans, and does not want to be misunderstood.

But all seven were white. That, he says, is a story in itself — and he says nothing more about it, which is the most effective form the point could take.

“I expected people to rise and withdraw their objections. Nobody did.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

08 · WE WERE FOOLED

Asked how the United States recovers its standing as the democratic standard, and who else we should look to, he refuses the premise entirely — and this is the passage the issue is named for.

We were fooled. It was never the shining city on the hill it purported to be. In a period before social media, what we had was whatever the American press and the American embassy told us, and we accepted it.

Then he tests the founding sentence against its own date. The document declaring that all men are created equal was adopted while slavery was legal; while women could not vote; while Native Americans, all but exterminated, could not vote; while white men without property could not vote. Every one of those groups had their humanity denied by the same country selling that declaration to the world as a description of itself.

And the franchise arrived slowly. He dates the guarantee of Black voting rights to legislation signed in the mid-1960s, and adds four words that give the whole passage its weight: I was in the US then. This is not a history lesson. It is testimony.

But he does not leave it as demolition, and the turn is the reason the argument matters. Grant them this — Americans now recognise that democracy is a work in progress, and may commit at each election to becoming that much more perfect, though never absolutely perfect.

So the correction he wants the rest of the world to make is a single word, and it is the most quotable thing he has said all year. Not that America is the shining city on the hill. That America is meant to be the shining city on the hill — and that we want them to be it.

“Not that America is the shining city on the hill. That America is meant to be it — and that we want them to be.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

09 • THE PUSHBACK THAT IS COMING

He is unusually specific about what the new administration should expect, and the specificity has aged well.

There will be pushback. It will take the form of accusations of being too pro-Black, too pro-Latino, too pro-Native American. And he reads the crowd at the Capitol as the leading edge of it: people fighting what they know to be a losing battle to preserve what they regard as their status.

Which produces his advice to the coalition that won. It must hold together, so that when the pushback comes it can push back in turn — and it must not buy what will be offered, because it will be decently wrapped and packaged. They must strip the packaging off to see what they are actually being sold.

That is a warning about legislation rather than about riots, and it is the more useful half of the section.

“It will be decently wrapped and packaged. Strip the package off and see what you are being sold.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

10 • WHY HE IS STILL OPTIMISTIC

A viewer asks the tired question honestly: the Me Too movement was supposed to bring justice, Black Lives Matter peaked and faded, and now this. Is anything actually changing?

He declares himself an optimist and then argues the case with facts rather than temperament.

The winning ticket took some seventy-eight million votes, the most any American presidential candidate had received. And two days earlier Georgia, which had never elected a Democratic senator in living memory, elected two — one Black, one Jewish. He asks the viewer to sit with what that means in the American South, where those were historically the two most persecuted communities. Both now represent the state.

Then the general law he draws out of it, which is the most portable idea in the broadcast: progress that comes by revolution does not last; progress that comes a step at a time tends to last, because each step becomes something the next one is built on.

And the honest qualification: four steps forward, two steps back, and then the human spirit rouses itself and takes more steps. That is not optimism about the trend. It is optimism about the recovery.

What she did instead of sulking

The Georgia method, as he sets it out — the one piece of instruction in the hour



"It is easy to suppress a thousand votes. It is not easy to suppress a margin you cannot reach."

SESSION 30 • MEANT TO BE A CITY ON A HILL

The lesson he draws from Georgia

The Georgia sequence as he sets it out — and the instruction he wants copied across the South.

11 • WHAT SHE DID INSTEAD OF SULKING

Asked what the lesson of Georgia is, he says he is glad to be asked — and gives the only piece of operational instruction in the hour.

He begins with a contested claim, and it should be flagged as his. He says the organiser behind the registration drive won the governorship two years earlier and that the Republicans stole it from her. The record is that she lost by about fifty-five thousand votes, never conceded, and alleged systematic suppression; no court found the result had been reversed. His reading is stated here as his.

What matters more is what he says she did next, and it is the sentence that carries the section. Rather than sitting in a drawing room weeping over spilled milk, she decided the way to stop elections being stolen was voter registration.

The logic is arithmetical and completely transferable. It is easy to suppress a thousand votes. It is easy to suppress two thousand. It is not easy to suppress a margin in the tens of thousands. So you do not litigate the theft; you build a majority too large to be worth stealing.

The method was door-to-door — reaching the rural Black community, the people most easily frightened away from voting, with civil rights activists knocking and preaching. He calls it hard work, and says it paid.

And then the instruction, addressed by name to states that had not done it: Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi — start preparing for the next election now. Get preachers to preach every Sunday on the sanctity of the ballot box, and on the ballot as the key to final emancipation.

"It is easy to suppress a thousand votes. It is not easy to suppress a margin of tens of thousands."

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

12 • SECRECY, SUNLIGHT, AND A NARROW GROUND

A London court had refused an American extradition request in the WikiLeaks case, and he is asked whether it is a diplomatic problem, and where journalism ends and national security begins.

He answers by declaring his own bias twice, which is the honest way to do it. Given his background in diplomacy, he understands and accepts that diplomacy cannot function without secrecy — of communication, of negotiation, of undertakings. And he accepts that democracy works on openness,

and that a serious school of thought holds peace to be better secured when negotiation is exposed to sunlight.

A balance must be struck. His own view is that publishing the cable traffic between embassies and their governments overstepped it: diplomacy cannot work under that kind of openness. But he concedes the other half without wriggling — secret agreements secretly entered into may themselves be inimical to peace.

Which is why he can see the judge's difficulty, and why he predicts exactly what happened. When the case is hard, a judiciary will find a very narrow ground on which to decide it, rather than ruling on the grand principle either way. The refusal did rest on narrow grounds and settled nothing.

He closes by conceding his own tilt again: perhaps this is the diplomat in him, leaning towards the sanctity of secrecy.

“When the case is difficult, judges look for a very narrow ground — not the grand principle.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

13 • WHY HE THINKS IRAN SHOULD SAY NOTHING

Iran had announced a return to twenty per cent enrichment. His first response is not about proliferation at all: between Iran and Israel, may God save the rest of us.

Then the tactical criticism, which is directed at the announcement rather than the enrichment. He does not know why Iran does not simply keep its mouth shut and get on with whatever it intends to do. Every public declaration of achievement rubs Israel's face in it and looks like an attempt at provocation.

And he explains the diplomatic convention being wasted — the winks and the nods. Governments are often prepared to look the other way provided you do not shout from the rooftop. A great many arrangements in the world are sustained exactly that way. Announcing it forecloses the option of being ignored.

“The winks and the nods. As long as you do not shout it from the rooftop, we will pretend not to know.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

14 • NOT GREAT AGAIN — GOOD AGAIN

On the principle, he is unequivocal, and it is a position he has held on this programme before: he has no objection to any country developing a nuclear capability, because the alternative is a claim he regards as sheer racism.

The claim is that some countries are sensible enough to be trusted with these weapons and others are not. He tests it against behaviour rather than assertion, and finds no relationship between being a nuclear power and behaving well. Nuclear powers tend to be bullies, precisely because the capability lets them clobber you when you step out of line. They have not demonstrated moral capability, or any visible moral index in their conduct.

So he does not accept a monopoly held by a particular civilisation or race.

But — and this is the qualification that makes the passage more than a grievance — he holds that nations should not make nuisances of themselves, and should be cooperating to make the world safer. From which comes the formula he repeats three times, with the countries changed each time.

Not making America great again, but making America good again. Not making Nigeria great again, but making Nigeria a good nation internationally. Not making China great again, but making China a good and cooperative nation.

And then he undercuts himself, cheerfully. He knows it is a tall order for any nation run by men — and men and women are not noted for being good. He starts to say what they are noted for, thinks better of it because of what people do on social media, and moderates his language.

“Not making America great again — making America good again. The same for Nigeria. The same for China.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

15 • WHY IRAN WILL NOT DO WHAT ISRAEL SAYS IT WILL

A viewer pushes back: Iran cannot be trusted, having said Israel should not exist. He repeats his prayer, and then explains the Iranian position from the inside rather than dismissing it.

Embedded deep in the Iranian psyche is that British and American intelligence jointly overthrew their government in the 1950s and installed the Shah. Iranians believe their country was hard done by, and that the revolution was the renaissance of a nation — and he reminds the audience which nation. Persia's civilisation is as old as Greece's. This is not some run-of-the-mill state.

His assessment of the threat is flat and repeated from earlier broadcasts. He does not believe the Iranians are stupid enough to want to destroy Israel; they would be committing suicide. They could not overrun it, and if they could, the United States would not permit it. That is a simple fact of Middle East diplomacy.

So what is the noise for? He reads it as a propaganda game played by both. It serves Israel to proclaim from the rooftop that Iran means to destroy it, because that proclamation is what keeps Washington and western Europe engaged — while Israel knows perfectly well that Iran could not act without being obliterated.

And he attaches an uncomfortable measurement that neither side likes. What has recognition of Israel's right to exist actually bought the Palestinians? Their position, he says, is worse now than before recognition was extended. Whatever the argument is achieving, it is not that.

Finally the deterrence claim, offered as consolation. India and Pakistan used to go to war, and everyone predicted catastrophe if both went nuclear. Being a nuclear power, he says, imposes its own sanity on a leadership. (They did in fact fight at Kargil after both tested; the correction is below.)

“It suits Israel to proclaim it from the rooftop. It knows Iran cannot act without being obliterated itself.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

16 • FIVE COLLEAGUES IN TWO WEEKS

The last question is about the new variants and rising deaths, and he has two minutes. He does not use them for analysis.

Behave responsibly. Avoid crowds. Wear your mask. Wash your hands. Or pay a heavy price personally.

His warning about the variant is blunt — this one is worse than the first, and in Nigeria and many other countries it is killing at a much higher rate than the first wave did.

And then he supplies the reason he is speaking this way, which lands harder than any statistic he could have given. He has lost about five Nigerian professors, colleagues of his, in the past two weeks to Covid complications. It is not funny. It is a loss to them, to their families, and to the country's work.

The last word of the broadcast, after a whole hour on insurrection and enrichment, is shalom.

"I have lost about five Nigerian professors, colleagues, in the past two weeks. It is not funny."

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

THREADS TO PULL

- He says progress by revolution does not last and progress by steps does. Which changes you value most arrived which way?
- He blames the man at the top and then insists the failure was endemic. How do you hold both without one dissolving the other?
- "Meant to be the shining city" rescues an ideal by demoting it to an aspiration. What else would that move rescue?
- The Georgia lesson is to build a margin too large to steal rather than litigate a theft. Where else does that apply?
- He argues that nuclear monopoly is racial rather than rational. What would a non-racial rule for who may hold these weapons actually look like?

Watch Session 30 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 Act signed in 1964 was the Civil Rights Act, with the Voting Rights Act following in 1965; six senators voted to sustain the objection to Arizona and seven to Pennsylvania, so his "seven of fifty" holds for the second vote; India and Pakistan did fight at Kargil in 1999 after both tested nuclear weapons in 1998, though neither has fought a full war of the 1965 or 1971 kind since; and the 2015 agreement capped Iranian enrichment at 3.67 per cent rather than the four per cent he gives. The claim that the 2018 Georgia governor's election was stolen is reported in section 11 as his reading, with the record beside it. Session 29 does not appear in the master index; Session 28 was 10 December 2020 and this is described on air as the first outing of the year.