

Unpopular Essays

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AMERICAN President Kennedy once said of the British Winston Churchill, that at the darkest days of English history, when none but the English trusted the English, when the entire world held the English nation in doubt, "Winston Churchill mobilised the English language and sent it into battle."

Of all the catalysts of human conflicts, words count as the most potent immediate causes of misunderstanding.

When adequately deployed, words have served the composite function of averting crises and binding people together. (At least for a while)

Perhaps, the group of people that have had the most constant recourse to the efficacy of words, have been the people in government. The enormity of their responsibilities, sometimes calculated in terms of power over human life, has established for these avant-garde groups, a tradition of compulsive talking.

As government performs, it has to inform.

Nowhere is this duty of explanation more imperative for government than in its relations with other nations, with the world outside its area of legitimate compulsion.

The foreign ministry exists to fill this need. The foreign minister is a traditional talkative, a — larger than — life public relations man who explains the conducts of his nation. All too often, he is

even called upon to talk away the gap between performance and promise.

For some curious reason, this flank of government has been the weakest in Nigeria's history of "independence".

Jaja Wachukwu is said to have seen himself more as an American foreign secretary over the Congo crisis than as Nigeria's representative.

Okoi Arikpo was too reserved for the job. During the civil war, the regime in Lagos had to recruit Anthony Enahoro to help where Arikpo's colour was too dull to impress.

But by his own failures, Brigadier Joseph Garba has made Arikpo into a superstar. The crisis of understanding and confusion that have attended our foreign policy polemics in recent times have no precedence, save the First Republic confusion over the recognition of Israel.

Academics identify three dimensions of foreign policy. A nation's aspirations, they say, is consistent with the "operational" (how the country pursues its aspirations). The third dimension is called the "polemical" how the nation explains its conduct.

In Nigerian foreign policy, the "polemical" has since stopped serving the other two currents of foreign policy.

When sometime last year, Brigadier Garba proposed a South Atlantic Military pact involving Nigeria, Angola and Brazil, he opened the curtains on a comic drama that was bound to set a world audience laugh-

Brigadier Garba As Foreign Minister

ing at Nigeria's declared aspiration of helping all Africa free itself.

Brazil had only just concluded a similar arrangement with South Africa and the United States for military manoeuvres in the

South Atlantic! The ministry of external affairs was quick to absolve the government from Garba's amusing proposal, but a question of the minister's extent of understanding had already been posed. And the question was to repeat itself again and again.

Did Garba have coordinate knowledge of the head of state's speech at the Lagos Conference for Action Against Apartheid? Did he understand that Obasanjo's indictment of the West was an astute diplomatic game calculated at drawing concessions from a frightened block? Garba's subsequent effort to reassure America must have completely neutralised the advantage in Obasan-

jo's speech. The same Western policy which the head of state had characterised as hypocritical was reversed in respect of America (by Garba) to read "constructive".

So it was that when the nation was still

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smarting under Gowon's connections in Dimka's attempted coup, and patriots were calling for a break in diplomatic ties with Britain (which had refused to repatriate the culprit), Garba showed up at the air port in Lagos to describe the call as unrealistic.

What was the use breaking a diplomatic link you might later struggle to re-establish, he reasoned aloud.

While economists and political analysts might question the implied argument that we cannot do without Britain, a further question is posed regarding the diplomatic value of the statement itself.

International politics is a complex culture of threats, pronounced and implied. Nation

states have been known to exact concessions from each other on account of what they imagined the other party could do.

With so many British firms competing for contracts in Nigeria, the Nigerian government can always issue credible threats to Britain. It was therefore inept for Brigadier Garba to come out so openly to calm British nerves over the issue of Gowon when the other side still imagined we had a card to play.

Perhaps, Brigadier Garba's apparent confusion stems from the fact that his ministry provides him with a shaky home-base.

Last May, the "Daily Times", in a three part serial, read the charge of confusion against the ministry, and Garba pleaded not guilty. He insisted that his ministry's problem could only be seen in the shortage of man power.

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world and African affairs".

Be that as it may, it is very apparent that the ministry of external affairs has not been able to articulately address itself to policy issues. Brigadier Garba himself hardly applies the required leadership.

"The PUNCH" newspaper earlier this year wrote: "We frankly advise that the external affairs commissioner could sit down a little longer at home and help give the ministry the solid foundation which it requires. A foreign minister is not a diplomatic-bag courier. He does not need to live virtually in airplanes and run his office from jets."

But even the Brigadier's pattern of incessant travels is a solid factor in the crisis of Nigerian foreign policy. Whereas Africa is described as the centre-piece of that policy, and whereas the socialist countries have provided a reliable support for the liberation efforts in Southern Africa over the years, Brigadier Garba does not appear to have anything to do with them.

Apart from one visit to the German Democratic Republic and a few more, Garba's travel list does not include the socialist countries.

In May this year, a television interviewer relayed to him what is in fact becoming public feeling: That Nigeria's foreign policy has become an annexe of American policy. Garba denied.

But three months later, at the U.N. Conference for Action Against Apartheid, Garba became the first and only participant from the third world to speak up for American policy in Africa.

As that policy zeroes in on Zimbabwe, as America tries an old Korean game on the South African region, the test of Garba as the most powerful representative of the largest community of black people the world over, is on. As usual, history can be relied upon to issue the examination results in a short, short while.