

# Saturday Review



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## What Hope in Nigeria?

LIBREVILLE, GABON.

Nothing is more compelling about American history than its continuing magic for other peoples. Both the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution have served as models for the political forms of more states than the political documents of any other national society. At the Bandung Conference in 1955 marking the newly achieved freedom of most of the nations of Asia and Africa, the keynote address began with a recitation of Longfellow's "Paul Revere's Ride," in keeping with the description of the American Revolution as the prime inspiration for the independence movements of Asia and Africa.

The power of the American past is in abundant evidence today on both sides of the Nigerian civil war. In Lagos, capital of Nigeria, and in Owerri, provisional capital of Biafra, I had a number of conversations with government leaders, and I couldn't help being impressed by the extent to which major events in American history are points of reference in their thinking about the war.

On the Nigerian side, the American Civil War is more than a source of illumination; it is a stern historical prescription. Abraham Lincoln's conviction about the need to preserve the Union, despite all tragedy and travail, has become a mandate for leaders of the Nigerian government. Theirs is a struggle, as they see it, against dismemberment or fragmentation. They take heart from Lincoln's steadfast-

ness in facing up to the issue of secession, and from his ultimate success in holding the nation together. Indeed, when Nigerians attempt to explain to Americans the central issue of their war, they speak about America's conflict over the cause of national unity more than a century ago.

Biafrans are no less explicit in invoking American history. However, it is not the Civil War but the Revolutionary period of American history that they see as pertinent to their own struggle. They take inspiration from the heroic achievement of the American people in tearing themselves free from outside rule. They do not feel that secession is an accurate description of their own position today, any more than it would be a fair de-



scription of the refusal of the individual American states to give up their autonomy until an acceptable relationship to each other could be worked out. They contend that Nigeria under the British was an arbitrary geographical designation rather than a natural political fact. They also point to other areas, such as India, where British rule was not enough of a common bond to overcome important cultural, racial, and religious differences, and where separation facilitated rather than retarded the freedom of the peoples involved.

Whatever their validity, however, historical analogies will not resolve the present Nigerian conflict. The million or more people who have died in that war are victims, direct and indirect, of a long series of causes, including the wave of national freedom sweeping over Africa, the piled-up combustibles of tribal and religious differences, and the tendency of violence to feed on itself. Attempts to sort and assign precise weight to all these causes are a waste of precious time at this point. It is much too late, in fact, for anything except to try to stop the prodigious loss of life.

What are the chances for a non-military settlement? As in the Vietnam war, there is a natural reluctance on each side to do anything or propose anything that could be construed as weakness by the other. To the extent that an expressed desire to get into peace talks is apt to be regarded in this light, it is doubtful that there will be public pronouncements along this line. But there may be enough reasonable men on both sides who realize the war has long since passed the point where anything can be proved on the battlefield. Those who anticipated an early victory must reckon with the stern facts of the present situation. A great deal of territory has been captured by the Federal forces, but the Biafrans have displayed both tenacity and capacity, and have retaken some highly strategic areas. The military situation today may not be one of stalemate, but it is at least one of significant stabilization. Even if military victory in the usual sense could be achieved, the war could continue on the guerrilla level for years. In that event, Biafra would be in a state of occupation rather than pacification and re-incorporation.

This being the case, the central question today is whether the points at issue can yield to reasonable efforts of resolution. On the Nigerian side is the determination to keep Biafra—and all the other regions—inside a united government, and to build a great national society. On the Biafran side is the determination to protect the individual

in his right to live and work without fear of seizure or slaughter. The Biafrans are worried about a recurrence of the 1966 massacre in the north that resulted in the death of 40,000 Ibos. They fear that integration into Federal Nigeria will impose on them the status of a subjugated people.

Of course, there are other issues on both sides, but these problems are the ones that call most insistently for sustained and objective attention. Inasmuch as American history has become a standard point of reference for both sides, it may be pertinent to point out that for four years after the end of the successful American Revolution the states were in a condition of increasing disarray and even open conflict. The political arrangements of 1783 did not fit the existing situation. The Philadelphia Constitutional Convention was not the next step after freedom from Great Britain but the culmination of a long period of recriminations and hostilities among the sovereign American states. What the Philadelphia Convention tried to do was to arrive at a workable balance between the insistence of the individual states that they retain essential sovereignty and the recognition by individual statesmen that the relationships of the states to one another had to be carefully defined and ordered in the common good.

It is quite possible that none of the terms or concepts used to describe the relationship of closely connected states will fit the requirements of Nigeria and Biafra. No matter. New concepts and terms to fit can be devised. Biafra cannot exist as a walled-in entity. Neither can Nigeria survive as a Federal government if any of its citizens have to live in constant terror. The challenge, therefore, is to begin serious talks about specific problems rather than to carry on volatile debate over terms that have become catchwords, and that can only obstruct workable answers.

It would be a mistake, however, to suppose that the search for peace lies only with the leaders of the contending forces. Great Britain and the Soviet Union, which have been maintaining the military forces of Nigeria, and France, which has been supplying Biafra, have a crucial role to play in making talks possible. Great Britain especially is in an excellent position to help bring about a non-military resolution of the war. The United States may be too involved in the effort of extricating itself from the Vietnam war to feel it can play a major part in the Nigerian conflict. But it would be a mistake for Americans to underestimate the extent to which the African peoples continue to look to them on any questions involving national independence and individual freedom.

—N.C.

## Letters to the Editor

### Lack of Goals?

A GAP, MORE TELLING than the distance between the generations about which he wrote, occurred in Harrison Brown's editorial "Why the Generation Gap?" [SR, July 19] when, of the young, he said: "The rebels lack goals . . . in general, they really do not know what they are for. They are rebels with a cause, but without a program." From that point on I was sure the article had fallen mysteriously into the hands of a less sensitive writer.

The thrust of the same issue's article "Ivan Illich: The Christian as Rebel" makes it abundantly clear that *program* and *goals*, at least in the sense in which we have learned to think of them, offer no solution to the students' dilemma. In the article, Peter Schrag has discerned what Mr. Brown has missed, namely, that the aspirations of the young probably cannot be programed, certainly not to the satisfaction of their elders, at least not in this provisional era in which we now live.

EDWIN E. BEERS,  
Campus Ministry,  
United Church of Christ,  
University of Wisconsin,  
Madison, Wis.

HARRISON BROWN repeats the absurd rumor that the young rebels lack goals, and

that they know what they are against but not what they are for. He evidently has not been listening.

They are for peace and against war, for love and against hate, for people and against things gained at their expense. They believe violence and warfare over land and materials is absurd, childish, and obscene—and that sex is not. They believe in survival rather than in "profits." If this is not a cause and a program, then none exists.

If he means that programs of love and peace are not compatible with our way of life, or that they are not economically viable or possible in our greedy world, he is on firmer philosophical ground, but why doesn't he say so, and consequently carry the argument forward to a new dimension?

What he is really saying is that love is not practical. What could possibly be more practical than survival?

CLYDE MARTIN,  
Chelmsford, Mass.

I AM APPALLED at Harrison Brown's naïve conclusions following such a thorough catalogue of causes for youth's current discontent. What good is it to state one's objection to violence when youth (and blacks) regularly find that violence makes government listen when it has theretofore



"When we get there, let me do most of the pontificating."