

Silence as the U.S. Strategic Response to Nigeria's Elections



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Under the administration of President George W. Bush, the United States made an important strategic decision about its relationship with Africa. U.S. policy toward the region would be built on two cornerstones: The bilateral relationships (1) between the U.S. and South Africa and (2) between the U.S. and Nigeria would be the keys to driving U.S. policy in Africa. South Africa held free multiracial elections in 1994 and was continuing along a steady path of democratization, and Nigeria had returned to civilian rule in 1999 after the death of military strongman Sani Abacha the previous year. Basing U.S. policy on relationships with two emerging democracies with large economies and large populations seemed to be a reasonable choice.

Over the course of the George W. Bush presidency (2001-2009), democracy in South Africa continued to strengthen. While there was some criticism of the large size and repeated electoral success of the African National Congress (ANC), most international and domestic observers accepted that the continuing return of the ANC to power represented the will of the South African people. Unfortunately, the situation in Nigeria was substantially more complicated. While the 1999 elections were seen as flawed, most observers believed that they reasonably represented the will of the Nigerian people.¹ The 2003 elections—which returned Olusegun Obasanjo to the presidency for a second term—were troubled, and the 2007 elections won by People’s Democratic Party (PDP) candidate and Obasanjo designee Umaru Musa Yar’Adua were widely reported to be seriously short of international standards. There were credible reports of problems with voter registration, polling stations not opening, paid thugs intimidating voters, and a host of other problems. As the U.S. State Department put it in their 2007 *Human Rights Report*:



The April 2007 presidential, national assembly, gubernatorial, and state-level elections were marred by poor organization, widespread fraud, and numerous incidents of violence. The government, through INEC, undertook voter registration; however, this effort was poorly organized, seriously flawed, incomplete, and not widely publicized. Although INEC claimed 60 percent voter turnout nationwide, most independent observers estimated it at less than 20 percent. In some states, local and international observers reported that they were unable to locate any open polling stations where voting was supposed to be taking place, despite INEC's later claims of voter turnout well above 50 percent for those polling stations.²



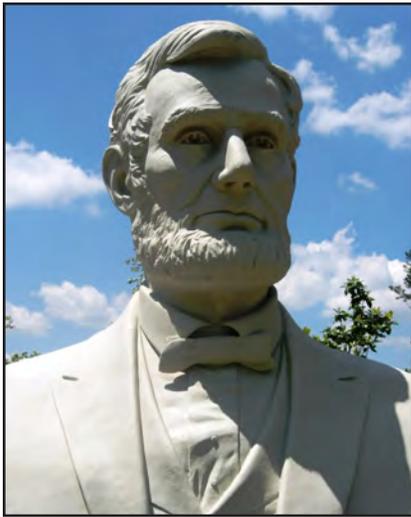
Nigeria’s failure to conduct fair elections presented a difficult choice for the Bush administration. Recognizing a tainted regime would undercut a key U.S. strategic goal of democratization, but harsh criticism of the results risked harming the bilateral relationship with a state important to advancing other U.S. policy goals of peacekeeping, anti-terrorism, petroleum production, and regional affairs. The choice still echoes, because there was an additional transition of power in Nigeria in 2010 when President Yar’Adua died after a long illness. Additionally, regular elections are scheduled for 2011 and new President Goodluck Jonathan may seek to extend his time in office. Understanding the recent past may serve as prologue to framing the U.S. response to the next planned transition in Africa’s most populous state.

While the U.S. State Department did issue a press release expressing regret about the conduct of the 2007 elections, the Bush administration was mostly silent in this situation. In order to better understand that choice, I will first explain why I am proposing “silence” is a rhetorical and strategic response by providing a frame for understanding it. I will do so by briefly reviewing the very limited scholarly literature on silence as the intentional strategic choice of an empowered actor. I will then explain the situation in Nigeria and how the actions of the Bush administration fit within this framework by reviewing the U.S. response to the 2007 elections. Finally, I will evaluate that choice as a matter of both practical and scholarly concern. My argument in this essay is that the U.S. decision to remain silent after these elections was a strategic mistake.

When Presidents do not Speak

Since the U.S. government did have something to say in the aftermath of Nigeria's 2007 elections, it is useful to provide a working definition of silence. Barry Brummett defines "political strategic silence" as "the refusal of a public figure to communicate verbally when that refusal (1) violates expectations, (2) draws public attributions of fairly predictable meanings, and (3) seems intentional and directed at an audience."³ He also notes that "silence is relative to what might be said,"⁴ meaning that a speaker may employ this strategy without being completely non-communicative. Despite a "plea for communication research" into the functions of silence issued by Richard Johannesen,⁵ few scholars have studied silence using Brummett's very specific definition. A political figure using public silence as an intentional persuasive tool is not the same as a group which has been silenced nor any of the other scholarly discussions of silence. As Aristotle put it more than two millennia ago, rhetoric is the search for the available means of persuasion. A few excellent case studies consider the question of when silence may have been the most effective persuasive technique.

Historian and rhetorical scholar Robert Gunderson examines President-Elect Lincoln's use of rhetorical silence between his November 1860 election and his inauguration in March 1861, concluding that Lincoln was justified in saying as little as possible since his words would be closely scrutinized even before he was able to take action as president.⁶ Rhetorical critic Edwin Black also studied silence as a rhetorical strategy by Lincoln. Black contends that during the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln had been able to use silence far more effectively than earlier in his presidency since by that point in his presidency Lincoln had a more refined sense of what to say and when to say it.⁷ In Lincoln's case, silence was an effective rhetorical tool because there were few words available which would have moved the audience.



Scholars have also examined the silence of twentieth century presidents. Martin Medhurst roundly criticizes President Truman for remaining largely silent on the question of Soviet expansion in the immediate aftermath of World War II.⁸ Truman was "given multiple opportunities to explain and justify his foreign policy," and instead failed to "define and regulate the rhetorical environment."⁹ Medhurst concludes that Truman's failure rhetorically to engage the Soviet Union early and often caused the United States to lose substantial ground in the early days of the Cold War. Rhetorical scholar Kurt Ritter argues that Lyndon Johnson more successfully employed rhetorical silence than did Truman.¹⁰ In the immediate aftermath of the death of John F. Kennedy, "Johnson said as little as possible in public."¹¹ In so doing, Johnson allowed the media to portray him as a strong leader with extensive government experience while he consolidated his power in the White House.

Two articles about South Africa have spoken to the question of when silence might have been an effective persuasive strategy. In 1982, John Dugard noted in *Foreign Policy* both the Reagan Administration's opposition to apartheid and their decision to attempt to influence the government in Pretoria through a policy of quiet diplomacy.¹² Dugard noted that many in the Reagan administration believed a loud denunciation of Pretoria's policies by the Carter administration had led to a landslide victory for the Nationalist Party in South Africa in 1977. Dugard, however, does not share that conclusion, arguing that "... the United States should focus attention on the growing evidence of renewed discrimination and repression in South Africa. Where quiet diplomacy has failed to produce reform, silence may not be wise."¹³ In acknowledging that the Reagan administration opposed apartheid, Dugard argues that the policy of silence was strategically ineffective because it failed to produce the desired reforms. Dugard also acknowledges that the Reagan administration was actively engaged in this issue via "quiet diplomacy," and argues that a more public response was necessary to the case. Writing about a period starting seven years later, I studied the first President Bush's failure to denounce apartheid.¹⁴ Similar to the Reagan Administration, Bush was keenly aware of the



situation and very much wanted it to change. However, circumstances had changed since Reagan confronted the issue. Bush had received back-channel assurances that the newly elected government of F.W. de Klerk would end apartheid in any event but could not be seen as taking orders from the Americans. Acting on that advice and intelligence reporting about the tenuous position of both black and white moderates in South Africa in the early 1990's, President Bush used silence as an intentional strategy by publicly removing himself from the situation so that it could continue moving in a favorable direction without interference from him.



Photo by: Attilio Ivan

I also examined the silence employed by the elder President Bush in response to the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989.¹⁵ Acting on intelligence that the Soviet Union was not yet ready to be declared the loser in the Cold War, the president intentionally decided to not give an epideictic speech celebrating the fall of the Wall and the potential reunification of the German people. I judged Bush's employment of intentional strategic silence to be a wise choice on practical grounds since it allowed a peaceful reunification process to play itself out without interference from the U.S. Had the U.S. president spoken in this case, it would have risked retaliation from the USSR as well as diplomatic difficulties for Washington with Bonn, London, and Paris.

While these case studies reach different conclusions about the effectiveness of silence as a strategy, the similarities are significant. None of these cases suggest that presidential silence equates to disengagement on a given issue. Rather, they offer that silence is quite frequently an intentional persuasive choice and can be effective when the president believes it will best advance the U.S. foreign policy agenda or his personal political fortunes. The consistent theme

in these studies is a similar frame for determining when silence is appropriate. Each study involved active attempts at persuasion. The key to success appears to be whether the other actor is already inclined to support U.S. policy goals. Given the benefit of hindsight, it seems clear that in the case of Nigeria's 2007 elections the government of Nigeria was not going to take favorable action and that a crisis already existed. As Chris Albin-Lackey of Human Rights Watch put it:

Rigging, violence, and intimidation were on such naked display that they made a mockery of the electoral process. In many areas, including large swathes of the oil-rich Niger Delta, officials did not even open polling stations. They later announced voter turnout of more than 90% and landslide victories for Yar'adua in the same areas. Where voting did take place, many voters stayed away from the polls. They were frightened off by a pre-election period that saw more than 100 people killed in election-related clashes. By the time voting ended, the body count had surpassed 300.¹⁶

Table 1:
Earlier Case Studies on Intentional Strategic Silence

President	When Silence Was Used
Abraham Lincoln	Before taking office After Gettysburg
Harry Truman	Failed to define early days of the Cold War
Lyndon Johnson	On the death of President Kennedy
Ronald Reagan	In response to apartheid in South Africa
George H.W. Bush	In response to apartheid in South Africa Fall of the Berlin Wall
George W. Bush	Nigeria's 2007 elections

Too little research literature is available to guide critics in evaluating of U.S. silence in regard to the 2007 Nigerian elections. However, the research reviewed here suggests two things. First, presidents who withdraw arguments from the public sphere do not stop the argument but instead shift from public rhetoric to a private dialectic. Second, private conversations with foreign governments seem better justified when the U.S. needs to create public space for a situation to resolve itself. Public rhetoric is called for when external pressure is needed to resolve an unfavorable situation. While a response to the 2007 elections happened, it was so quiet as to constitute silence. I will now explain the situation in Nigeria as well as the U.S. government's response to it.

The Situation in Nigeria

Nigeria declared formal independence from Great Britain on October 1, 1960, and organized itself as a federal republic in 1963. Nigeria elected Nnamdi Azikiwe as the first president of the federal republic, but unfortunately the Azikiwe government was replaced in a military coup and the next four decades would fail to see a civilian government replace itself with another civilian government. While there were various attempts at democracy, each was ended at the hands of military leaders. In 1998, military strongman and head of state General Sani Abacha died in the presidential residence in Abuja, the capital city.

While a caretaker military government quickly took charge, that government announced elections would be held in 1999 to allow a return to democracy. Part of the preparations for those elections involved releasing former head of state and General Olusegun Obasanjo from prison; Obasanjo had been put in prison for his criticism of the Abacha regime. While there was some criticism of the conduct of the 1999 elections, there was no serious dispute that the election of President Obasanjo and Vice President Atiku Abubakar represented broad popular opinion in Nigeria at the time. Obasanjo and Atiku ran again in 2003 in elections sharply criticized as unfair



by impartial observers, although there were no serious disturbances when the ticket was announced as the winners of a second term. Unfortunately, serious tensions in the Nigerian political process came to the surface between that time and

**Table 2:
Timeline of Events in Nigeria**

DATE	EVENT
19 th century	Britain consolidates control over the territory which will become Nigeria
1960	Nigeria declares independence from Great Britain
1966	Nigeria experiences its first military coup
1976	Olusegun Obasanjo heads the military government of Nigeria
1979	Olusegun Obasanjo relinquishes power to a civilian government
1993	Sani Abacha takes power at the head of a military government
1998	Sani Abacha dies in office
1999	Olusegun Obasanjo is elected president and Atiku Abubakar is elected vice president
2003	Obasanjo and Abubakar are re-elected
2007	Umaru Musa Yar'Adua elected president and Goodluck Jonathan elected vice president
2010	Yar'Adua dies in office and Jonathan assumes the presidency
2011	Fresh elections scheduled

politicians bent on compiling their own personal list of voters.”²²⁰

Improper registration extended beyond voter rolls to banning selected candidates who were running for office. As Human Rights Watch noted on April 4, 2007, “Abubakar has fallen out with President Olusegun Obasanjo.”²²¹ The same report went on to argue that an increasingly difficult relationship between the president and vice president had led to several candidates being disqualified from the election, with Abubakar chief among them. Those candidates barred from the elections were typically either “members of the opposition or ruling party supporters who are seen as being close to Vice President Atiku Abubakar.” Human Rights Watch added that members of the ruling party had typically not been disqualified even in the face of credible allegations that they had committed the same disqualifying acts as opposition leaders were accused of. As Jean Herskovits explained in *Foreign Affairs*, disqualifying the candidates was troubling: “It was unclear until just days before each election...



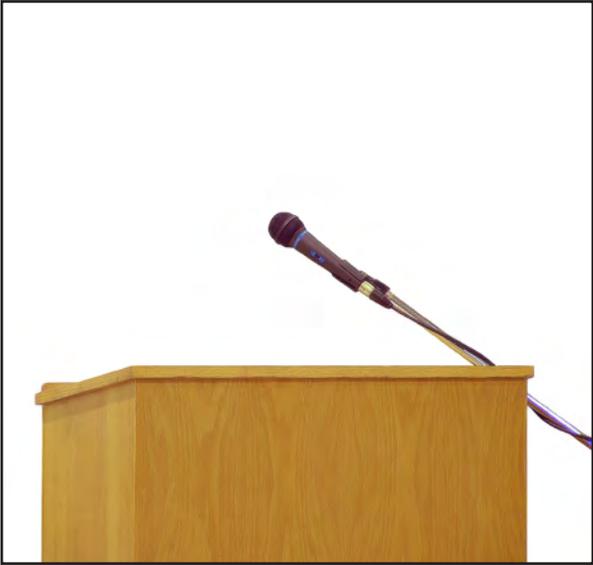
who the final candidates would be. On election day, the names of some contenders who had been reinstated by the courts were not on the ballots. The elections themselves were disastrous.”²²²

the 2007 elections.

Those tensions resulted in a political process so fractured that President Yar'Adua received 70% of the vote to 18% for his nearest opponent.¹⁷ If *The Economist* was correct, these vote totals were particularly impressive for the new president: “With hours to go before the polling stations were supposed to open, it emerged that no ballot papers were in the country.”¹⁸ Even more direct was this claim: “The elections which brought Mr. Yar'Adua to office last month were so badly run and marred by such widespread rigging that they lacked even a pretense of democratic plausibility.”¹⁹

One of those tensions was the failure to properly register voters. As the *New York Times* reported on August 31, 2010, failure to properly register voters in 2007 continues to plague Nigeria in preparations for the 2011 elections. The Nigerian electoral commission “has been sharply criticized for sluggishness in revamping a voters’ list seen as manipulated by local incumbents, stuffed with the names of the dead, children, celebrities, triple-voters and whoever else politicians thought would be useful in improving their chances. There have even been thefts of voter registration machines by local

In addition to an apparently uneven disqualification of candidates, there was also substantial intimidation of journalists in the run up to those elections. In 2006, journalists Gbenga Aruleba and Rotimi Durojaiye were charged with sedition for reporting on a potential corruption case where the Obasanjo government had purchased a used jet. The defendants were released on bail, but the charges were widely seen as an attempt to intimidate journalists prior to the elections scheduled for the following year.²³ An unsolved fire destroyed the Lagos corporate offices of the newspaper *This Day* in January 2007, and Editorial Board Chairman Godwin Agbroko was killed by unknown assailants.²⁴ A few days later, another unexplained fire gutted the Abuja offices of the same newspaper. Other incidents of journalist intimidation were reported. While the crimes committed were never solved, journalists worked in a tense atmosphere in preparation for the elections.



Other incidents of violence directly tied to the elections were reported. The U.S. State Department noted that in one state opposing political parties were involved in violent clashes, which caused the government to end campaigning in the state:

On March 10, groups affiliated with the PDP and DPP went on a 48-hour vandalism spree in Sokoto, destroying each other's party offices and members' vehicles. Several injuries were reported, and the police responded by banning all political rallies in the state, a decision that remained in effect through the April elections.²⁵

Unfortunately, this was not the only incident where the Government of Nigeria ended campaigning after an outbreak of violence. In the same report, the U.S. State Department also noted that the Nigerian State Security Services, or SSS, was directly involved in acts of intimidation:

On April 16, the SSS, backed by the police, forcefully entered the transmission studio of AIT and forced the staff to stop transmitting a documentary critical of President Obasanjo and the ruling PDP. In place of the documentary, a tape conveying campaign activities of PDP presidential candidate Yar'Adua and highlights of Obasanjo's achievements was played. SSS agents seized tapes of all commercially sponsored programs that were scheduled for that day and also shut down AIT's sister radio station, Ray Power FM. Press reports quoted SSS Spokesman Ado Muazu as saying that the programming had "security implications."



Even the transition from one civilian president to another did not completely transfer power. Herskovits argues that in December 2006 "Obasanjo engineered a change in the party's constitution to make himself its life chair with the authority to control party finances and call to account any elected PDP official, including a future president. He thus found a way to exercise presidential powers even if his term in office was formally to end."²⁶ There was little dispute that the 2007 elections in Nigeria were badly flawed. While they did achieve a first-ever transition of power from one civilian to another, political tensions, journalist intimidation, poor preparation, government campaign bans, and physical violence resulted in polls which were widely discredited. The civilian-to-civilian transfer which was achieved also kept power within the ruling party and was publicly supported by the outgoing Obasanjo administration. This caused a rhetorical problem for the U.S.—What should the response be to failed elections in a state which is otherwise critical to U.S. policy goals?

The U.S. Response to the Nigerian Elections

Obviously, the United States did not maintain complete silence in the aftermath of the 2007 elections in Nigeria—some of the information in this study comes from the State Department’s annual Human Rights Report. However, as Brummett points out, silence need not be an absolute condition. Words in a government report do not carry the same symbolic weight as something like a presidential speech, sanctions, or a public visit by a high level dignitary. Bush’s response—and by extension the response of the United States—to the election crisis in Nigeria would seem to fit each of Brummett’s criteria for political strategic silence. Bush violated expectations—at least among those observing the elections—by failing to respond to calls that he speak. *Foreign Affairs* explained one of the ways that expectation was created and later violated:

Because of Washington’s ongoing praise for these efforts and for Obasanjo’s macroeconomic reforms, Nigerians once believed that Washington could influence Obasanjo in ways they could not. But when they looked for signs that Washington would try to affect Obasanjo’s political agenda, they saw only unquestioning approval... In the lead-up to the elections this year, the U.S. embassy in Abuja issued a few warnings against election fraud, but the White House and the State Department were mostly silent.²⁷

The public attributions made about this silence reinforce the notion that something was expected from the president. The only question remaining is: Why did the president remain silent? A full answer cannot be known for many years—not until the archives of the Bush White House are declassified and publicly released. While it would be helpful to have access to those archives, they are not necessary to provide the initial and contemporary accounting this paper seeks to provide. The president lacks a luxury afforded every other American and does not speak on foreign policy topics as his own person—he speaks as the United States, and he remains silent as the United States. Once the expectation has been created that he speak, some deliberative process is involved in deciding whether to meet that expectation. Given the importance of Nigeria to the administration’s strategy in the region, it seems likely that the silence on the part of the United States was intentional. In congressional testimony, Assistant Secretary of State



Johnnie Carson explained that the same thing remains true today: “Nigeria is one of the two most important countries in sub-Saharan Africa and a country of great significance to the United States.”²⁸ Carson specifically mentioned issues such as petroleum, regional stability, and counter-terrorism that were important. The limited response which did come from the U.S. also reinforces the premise that the White House was aware of the situation and made a strategic choice. Even if the choice was not intentional, public attributions of Washington’s behavior assumed the silence was strategic.

Brummett’s claim that silence is relative to what might be said is also important here. It is obvious that the Bush administration was not completely non-communicative, and presidents certainly have subordinates speak on their behalf to communicate a message. However, the entire public response from Washington appears to consist of a Human Rights Report and a press release. The wide range of available public responses—what might have been said—suggests that the U.S. response was a largely silent one. For example, in 2009 a different U.S. administration sharply condemned the ouster of Honduran President José Manuel Zelaya in favor of Roberto Micheletti, demanding the return of the former president and revoking the U.S. travel visas of Micheletti and those serving in his new government. International meetings were organized, and the Secretary of State became directly involved in the issue. While that situation was certainly distinct from the situation in Nigeria, the basic premise

was the same. The U.S. government believed the government of a foreign state was illegitimate and took a wide range of responses to denounce it. In comparison, then, issuing a press release and an unfavorable report as the response to the Nigerian elections was as silent as a church mouse.

That press release was issued by the State Department on April 27, 2007 and noted that the “United States



regrets that Nigeria has missed an opportunity to strengthen an element of its democracy through a sound electoral process.”²⁹ While that press release did note “significant shortcomings” in the elections, it also said that “we are encouraged that on May 29 Nigeria will experience its first civilian-to-civilian transfer of power.” Showing the relative importance of the conduct of free and fair elections and the conduct of international diplomacy, the concluding paragraph of that press release noted that, “The United States is prepared to work with Nigeria’s next administration to build upon our excellent bilateral relations and to continue promotion (sic) peace and security throughout Africa.” Far from damning language, this press release noted shortcomings and then promised to continue business as usual.

While there would be other limited reactions, that press release and the annual Human Rights Report formed the bulk of the official reaction of the United States to Nigerian elections which resulted in the deaths of hundreds. Talking of silence more colloquially, Christopher Albin-Lackey and Ben Rawlence noted that the response of the U.S. and other western powers was essentially a silent one, even if some limited rhetoric was employed: Britain, along with the UN and the EU, helped finance these elections. And if the conduct of the elections is an insult to Nigerians, it is also an insult to those who tried to help in good faith. But Nigeria’s foreign partners are not without responsibility in helping to chart a way out of this debacle. Over the past eight years, allies like the US and Britain have remained largely silent in the face of massive human rights abuses, corruption and the rigging of elections. While Nigeria is far less susceptible to western pressure than some of its donor-dependent neighbors, the opinions of the international community still carry weight. Nigeria’s foreign partners should insist that the next government act urgently to repair the flawed institutions of governance that gave rise to the deplorable spectacle of these elections.³⁰

The Nigerian elections were deeply flawed, and the Bush administration remained silent about them. The final section of this essay attempts to understand that strategy of silence in light of the scholarly literature which speaks most directly to it.

Making Sense of Silence



Certainly, the administration's options in response to the 2007 elections were limited. The U.S. government had no option which would compel the government of Nigeria to schedule fair elections conducted in an environment free from physical violence and intimidation. U.S. action was further constrained by the need to keep Nigeria as a partner in peacekeeping, fighting terror, oil production, and the other affairs which formed the basis of our bilateral relationship. However, promotion of democracy and human rights has long been a cornerstone of U.S. diplomatic efforts. Even if there was no magic bullet which would bring democracy to Nigeria, there is a tension between the stated position of the U.S. government and the proffered response to these elections.

I argued earlier in this essay that the literature which speaks most directly about silence as an intentional rhetorical strategy emphasizes two things:

- 1) Presidents who are silent may shift arguments from the public to the private sphere while remaining engaged on the issue.
- 2) The appropriateness of silence as a strategy is largely determined by whether policy is already moving in a direction favorable to stated U.S. interests.

The first of these points is difficult to analyze regarding the Nigerian elections without access to better data. What is instructive, however, is the reminder that the Bush administration may well have been engaged in a persuasive effort to which we are not privy. That means that the judgment I pass here as a scholar has to be tempered by the knowledge that more data will one day be available. Presidential archives sometimes reveal presidents to be working hard on issues away from the public eye. However, it does not change the fundamental nature of the U.S. response as a silent one, or the fact that publicly, the U.S. strategy was silence. As such, I will now analyze the appropriateness of that strategy based on what is publicly known as of this writing.

As noted, when policy is moving in a direction favorable to the United States, studies suggest it will frequently be most strategically effective for the U.S. to use the quietest voice possible. The U.S. carries an outsize voice in world



affairs, and it makes sense that the leaders of other sovereign states would not want to be seen as taking orders from a larger power. However, the U.S. has the same right as any other state to assert its interests when policy does not seem to be moving as desired. The Dugard and Medhurst case studies seem particularly on point here.

Dugard argued that the Reagan administration should have put public pressure on the apartheid government in South Africa. While there are some obvious differences in the situations, the similarities are more important. In 1982 the U.S. desired free elections in South Africa and an end to the human rights abuses associated with apartheid. A recalcitrant government in South Africa was not willing to move in spite of private pressure from Washington, and public pressure might have forced their hand and caused them to move several years earlier than they did. Similarly, in 2007 the government in Abuja provided for elections which were, at best, deeply flawed. Only the passage of several more months will tell whether the 2011 elections are better. However, Dugard's analysis strongly suggests that the U.S. should have more loudly condemned Nigeria's elections. Nigeria's attempts at democracy were spread over 47 years

and resulted in the problems reported here. This represented little in the way of progress, and at some point the U.S. policy goal of democratization for Nigeria demands public pressure.

This goes to the heart of Medhurst's concern when he discussed Truman's failure to regulate the rhetorical



environment in the early days of the Cold War. When two ideas are presented in the public square, the effective rhetor will attempt to define the terms of that struggle in a manner favorable to himself or herself. If Medhurst is right, Truman lost an opportunity and let his opponents set the terms of the ideological debate starting the Cold War. When the U.S. failed sharply to condemn Nigeria's 2007 elections we lost a similar opportunity to help define the rhetorical environment in which the next political leadership will be chosen in Africa's most populous place. The rhetorical environment created here was one where elections can be manipulated without fear of condemnation from external powers.

Why didn't the Bush administration act more aggressively? It is possible that they did not want to strain the relationship between the U.S. and Nigeria. As Denise Bostdorff³¹ and Amos Kiewe³² point out, sometimes presidential speechmaking can create new problems or make an existing problem worse. However, political strategic silence is not some binary opposition of yes and no. The Honduras example shows that there are a wide range of possible responses. The question for the rhetor is where to place his or her response on the scale from absolute silence to presidential speechmaking, and the question for the critic is to evaluate the appropriateness of the choice made by the rhetor. In this case, I argue that the direction predicted by the literature is correct and a substantially more active response would have been a better strategic choice. Rigging and violence were rife, and silence was not going to change that. If a situation is not going to resolve itself, leaders should speak in an attempt to address the problem. Silence was, at best, not helpful to the establishment of democracy in Nigeria.

To be fair to the Bush administration, there were and are real concerns with which the government of Nigeria could be helpful to the United States. These concerns may suggest forgoing the U.S. goal of democratization in order to allow progress in those other areas. This is a difficult area for rhetoricians because we do not know the data being considered by the political decision-makers. However, for the administration's choice to be sound two things must be assumed to be true. First, one must assume that the United States is receiving actual benefit from Nigeria in other areas of strategic importance. This is not the same as saying that Nigeria could potentially be a helpful ally but instead demands evidence of actual cooperation on some tangible issue. Second, one must assume that we will continue to receive those benefits from a government which was unfairly chosen and which this lacks the stability of popular support. If either of those two assumptions



is untrue, then the United States has traded potential progress on democratic institutions for little of value. It is not enough for the United States to perceive some benefit now or hope for one in the future. Trading the measurable goal of democratization demands measurable progress on some other matter and it demands a government stable enough to continue delivering that progress.

Of course, it is impossible to argue the counterfactual—we can never really know what would have happened had the U.S. practiced a more active response. However, we can reasonably examine the range of other choices which were open to the administration to evaluate what might have worked better. The most direct option would have been for the president to speak directly to the issue. While presidential time is limited and not every subject can be addressed, a major failing in a state key to U.S. policy seems a likely candidate for a presidential address. However, as an editorial in the *New York Times* explained, other priorities were attended first: “Grateful for Nigeria’s contributions of peacekeepers for Somalia and Darfur—and ever mindful of its oil reserves—Washington and London have been far too tolerant of Mr. Obasanjo’s political machinations. Their silence does Nigeria no favors, and it certainly does not comport with the two countries’ own claims to be democracy’s defenders.”³³



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If the Bush administration wished to respond without directly involving the president, there were certainly other choices available. The last several presidents have very publicly sent high profile envoys to regions which they viewed as being of great concern, and President Obama has continued the same tradition. While the talks may ultimately have been private ones on those occasions, publicly sending someone for a specific purpose with a press conference held after the personal meeting achieves much the same affect of public rebuke. Messages could also have been sent through such symbolic gestures such as the revocation of entry visas to the United States. The Obama administration attempted this tactic with the *de facto* government of Honduras in 2009, and it very publicly sent the signal that the U.S. disapproved of the manner in which that transition of power was handled. A similar tactic could have been employed in Nigeria. While the immediate impact of doing so would be limited, the longer-term symbolic value would be unmistakable. The Bush administration had a wide range of choices available to them. Ultimately, the U.S. response was one of virtual silence.

As Chris Albin-Lackey of Human Rights Watch noted in an article quoted earlier in this essay, there was at least some sensitivity in Abuja to Western pressure. This may not have been as profound as in some other states, but perhaps it would have been sufficient to curb at least some of the abuses. International diplomacy is largely a business of signal sending. Even if the immediate impact was limited, a more vocal response would have sent a meaningful signal about the priorities of the United States to both Nigerians and others who would consider making the same choices.

Silence matters as a strategy because it sharply limits the ability of the rhetor to intervene in a deliberative dispute. Choosing silence can be strategically sound when deliberations are likely to yield a favorable result. It is also reasonable when the speaker could say little that would advance the policy debate. Indeed, some of the cases reviewed



here suggest that speaking may sometimes actually turn policy from a favorable course to an unfavorable one—when words from the United States cause another government to retrench for fear of protecting their public image. The power that speech has, however, is the ability to influence deliberations by publicly engaging in debate. Silence sacrifices much of that influence. The sacrifice is not worth the price when it requires the loss of a national strategic interest. The size, petroleum reserves, regional influence, and importance of Nigeria in fighting extremist influence in the north of their country makes a stable government in Abuja precisely such a national strategic interest for the United States. Official American silence in the aftermath of the 2007 elections sent a powerful signal that we would accept an illegitimate regime which put that stability at risk. I hope that the Nigerian elections scheduled for 2011 do not present the United States with the same difficult choice between speech and silence.

(ENDNOTES)

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