

## ARTICLE

# ‘To the benefit of Africa, the world, and ourselves’: The American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa (ANLCA) Mission to Nigeria, 1966–1968

James Austin Farquharson

Faculty of Education and Arts, Australian Catholic University, Sydney, Australia  
Corresponding author. E-mail: [james.farquharson@acu.edu.au](mailto:james.farquharson@acu.edu.au)

## Abstract

Far from having only marginal significance and generating a ‘subdued’ response among African Americans, as some historians have argued, the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) collided at full velocity with the conflicting discourses and ideas by which Black Americans sought to understand their place in the United States and the world in the late 1960s. One of the most significant aspects of African American engagement with the civil war was the American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa peace mission that sought to bring the Federal Military Government of Nigeria and the secessionist leadership of the Republic of Biafra together through the mediation of some of the leading Black civil rights leaders in the United States. Through the use of untapped primary sources, this article will reveal that while the mission was primarily focused on finding a just solution to the internecine struggle, it also intersected with broader domestic and international crosscurrents.

**Keywords:** African American; Nigeria; Biafra; Black Internationalism; Civil War

## Introduction

On 23 March 1968, a seemingly innocuous article appeared on page two of the *New York Amsterdam News*, the Harlem-based African American weekly newspaper. The article noted that after a year of planning and consultations, the four co-chairmen of the American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa (ANLCA) were to travel to Nigeria to help resolve the conflict between the Nigerian federal government and the self-declared Republic of Biafra. The political importance of the trip was made abundantly clear, with the article noting that:

Meanwhile Dr. King postponed his Poor People’s march on Washington to an 22 April starting date, partly to enable him to make the 15 April trip (to Nigeria and Biafra). Theodore E. Brown, executive director of the Leadership Conference, confirmed that the group was preparing to leave.<sup>1</sup>

The fact that Martin Luther King Jr., in the midst of organizing ‘a powerful, multiracial coalition of poor people to compel Congress to enact an economic bill of rights’, would be willing to act as an international peacemaker – to end an internecine African conflict – has been overlooked by historians.<sup>2</sup> Yet, King had long seen his US-based moral advocacy and activism as tied to war, militarism, race and economic inequality globally. In his famed ‘Beyond Vietnam’ speech on

<sup>1</sup>‘4 To Try For Peace in Nigeria’, *New York Amsterdam News*, 23 March 1968, 2.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Struggle for Economic Justice* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 330–1.

4 April 1967, King not only challenged the moral and political logic behind US intervention in Vietnam, but also outlined the need for global brotherhood to confront the main challenges that beset the international community. As King declared, the ‘call for worldwide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one’s tribe, race, class and nation is in reality a call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all mankind’.<sup>3</sup>

As King spoke these words, he was working alongside other major civil rights leaders in the ANLCA in an attempt to bring the bitterly divided Nigerian Federal Military Government and political leaders from Eastern Nigeria together to resolve their bloody tribal and religious divisions. Established in late 1962, the ANLCA was a pressure group organized around six of the leading civil rights organizations in the United States. Its aim was to attempt to influence US foreign policy towards Africa and connect the struggle for racial equality at home with decolonization abroad.<sup>4</sup> The mission to Nigeria was not only an example of an African American Black internationalism, but also an example of King’s desire to spread a message of peace and tolerance in a more universalist internationalist idiom, that of the ‘The World House’.<sup>5</sup> Novelist Chinua Achebe, in his memoir *There Was A Country*, reflected on his experience of the civil war from the Biafran side and recalled the significance of the intervention by ‘[t]he leaders of the African American civil rights community’:

On several occasions they came out forcefully against all forms of ferocity during the NigeriaBiafra conflict, reacting with dismay at the magnitude of the human suffering in Biafra. They sent numerous forms of communication both to Ojukwu and Gowon to put an end to the bloody civil war. They were particularly appalled by the widespread hunger and starvation of Biafrans and by the millions of stranded refugees, all of which they reiterated was ‘unacceptable to civilized world opinion’.<sup>6</sup>

Tellingly, it was not their mere taking of ‘moral positions’ that garnered Achebe’s appreciation. He noted especially African American leaders’ efforts toward ‘arbitration during the Biafran struggle – an intervention that brought succour to millions and helped place a moral lens on the atrocities taking place in my homeland’.<sup>7</sup>

Taking up the thread of Achebe’s remarks, this article uses the official papers of ANLCA, the underutilised oral history of Executive Director Theodore E. Brown, contemporary coverage in the Black press, as well as US government documents to explore the significant, but ultimately unsuccessful efforts of the ANLCA to end the civil war between March 1967 and April 1968. From the beginning of active ANLCA involvement, Theodore Brown, a highly regarded trouble shooter in the civil rights movement, and a talented diplomat, crisscrossed Africa from Accra to Lagos to Addis Ababa building diplomatic support for the mission. In the United States, the four co-chairmen of the Conference – Dr. King from the Southern Christian Leadership Council; Roy Wilkins of the NAACP; A. Philip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and Whitney Young of the National Urban League – met with Nigerian and Biafran officials to gain further insights into the conflict and how best to end it through a compromise agreement. The Conference leadership also met with senior figures in the State Department, including Assistant

<sup>3</sup>Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., ‘Beyond Vietnam’, (speech, New York, April 4, 1967), The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/kingpapers/documents/beyond-vietnam>. For a work that explores King’s global moral and political commitments see Lewis V. Baldwin, ed., ‘*In a Single Garment of Destiny*’: A Global Vision of Justice (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013).

<sup>4</sup>Brenda Gayle Plummer, *In Search of Power: African Americans in the Era of Decolonization, 1956–1974* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 122–3.

<sup>5</sup>See Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., ‘The World House’, (speech, 1967), The Pluralism Project, Harvard University, <http://pluralism.org/document/the-world-house-martin-luther-king-jr-1967/>.

<sup>6</sup>Chinua Achebe, *There Was A Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (London: Penguin Books, 2013), 103–104.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*

Secretary of State for African Affairs Joseph E. Palmer, II and Secretary of State Dean Rusk, to coordinate their efforts.

Even though King's involvement in the ANLCA peace mission reflected his abiding interest in Black internationalism, as well as non-violent resolutions to conflict, scholars have either ignored the mission, viewed it as part of the international response to the Nigerian Civil War, or written it off as the final act of a moribund organization. According to historian James Meriwether, the Nigerian Civil War marked the end of the ANLCA as 'it fell apart over the Biafran war in Nigeria'.<sup>8</sup> In her 2014 study of Black internationalism in the age of decolonization, historian Brenda Gayle Plummer noted the impact of the ANLCA in the mid-1960s on US policy towards Ian Smith's white supremacist regime in Rhodesia and the issue of US navy vessels visiting Cape Town, South Africa. However, the peace mission to Nigeria goes unmentioned.<sup>9</sup> This article challenges such a narrative and argues that the ANLCA maintained a consistent approach towards Nigeria. For almost a year, the leaders sought to bring both sides of the conflict together on 'humanitarian grounds' in order to end the fighting through a diplomatic settlement. The peace mission was built on firm foundations established between African Americans and Nigerians over several decades.

In addition to addressing the significance of the ANLCA mission on purely humanitarian grounds, this article also argues that the diplomatic efforts of the Conference cannot be understood without placing them within the context of the domestic civil rights struggle in the mid-to-late 1960s. By 1965, the liberal civil rights movement, with its goals of racial integration, interracialism, non-violence and co-operation with the Johnson Administration, found itself challenged by radical Black activists and the advent of the Black Power movement. With its commitment to Black Nationalism and cultural identity over alliances with white liberals, Black Power challenged the tactics and strategies that had defined the national civil rights coalition since the mid-1950s. However, the advent of Black Power also led to a period of cross-fertilization, as ideals and strategies of radical Black activists – particularly the importance of heightened engagement with the Third World to galvanise the Black freedom struggle at home – influenced and informed the thinking of liberal civil rights organizations, such as the ANLCA mission to Nigeria.<sup>10</sup> For the ANLCA, an organization that stood in the mainstream of the civil rights movement, the mission to mediate the conflict between the Federal Military Government of Nigeria and the Republic of Biafra, was arguably an attempt by integrationist civil rights leaders to reassert themselves both at home and abroad. In taking on the role as peacemakers in Nigeria, the ANLCA sought to burnish its credibility as an organization that stood for Black internationalism and Third World solidarity. By seeking to bring both the Nigerian government and the Biafran leadership together to resolve the conflict peacefully, the ANLCA and the civil rights organizations that made up the Conference hoped to show African Americans that they were not only as dedicated to the Third World as Black Power activists, but also that they could positively affect political change and social justice through compromise and diplomacy, a notion that was increasingly being challenged at home.

Since the end of hostilities in January 1970, historians have been cognisant of the international and transnational dimensions of the conflict, particularly regarding humanitarian relief and charges of genocide levelled at the Nigerian military regime by Biafran officials and supporters.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be Africans: Black Americans and Africa, 1935–1961* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 204–207.

<sup>9</sup>Plummer, *In Search of Power*, 194–9.

<sup>10</sup>For an example of how Black Power ideas reshaped the black internationalism of the African American community see Benjamin Talton's biography of Congressman Mickey Leland. See Benjamin Talton, *In This Land of Plenty: Mickey Leland and Africa in American Politics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019).

<sup>11</sup>Three early works that capture the international dimensions of the Nigerian Civil War are Frederick Forsyth, *The Biafra Story: The Making of an African Legend* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2015). The Biafra Story was originally published in 1969. See Also Suzanne Cronje, *The World and Nigeria: The Diplomatic History of the Biafra War 1967–1970* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1972); John de St. Jorre, *The Brothers War: Biafra and Nigeria* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1972).

This 'global' focus has neglected to sufficiently engage with how African Americans – the largest Black diasporic community outside of Africa – responded to the conflict. Historians that acknowledged that the civil war as a significant global event note that the responses of state and non-state actors – in both the Global North and South – to the crisis in West Africa was refracted through domestic concerns and shifting international discourses around humanitarianism, human rights and self-determination.<sup>12</sup> The ANLCA peace mission, rather than being an isolated diplomatic initiative, was also part of this global response, as it embodied trans-Atlantic concerns connecting the Black freedom struggle in the United States to the future of African decolonization in the aftermath of the Second World War.<sup>13</sup>

Scholars who have engaged on a limited basis with African American responses to the global dimensions of the Nigerian Civil War have tended to view African Americans as broadly disengaged or as overtly supportive of Nigerian territorial unity.<sup>14</sup> 'The Black diaspora response to the Nigerian Civil War', noted Plummer, 'was subdued. The conflict introduced indistinctness into the truths that freedom movements, both foreign and domestic, had laid down'.<sup>15</sup> This understanding of the civil war, was shaped by the lack of centrality of racial concerns in the conflict, compared to Rhodesia or Apartheid South Africa, which had more discernible links to the Black freedom struggle in the United States.<sup>16</sup> The Nigerian Civil War on the other hand 'was not legible in . . . racial binary terms to which most foreign policy audiences were accustomed'.<sup>17</sup> By excavating the neglected international diplomacy of the ANLCA mission, this article both challenges these understandings of African-American interactions with post-colonial Nigeria and expands the horizons of Black internationalist engagement with post-colonial Africa. The Black internationalism of the ANLCA peace mission was more multifaceted than standing on the sidelines of a 'black on black' conflict – that had its roots in state collapse and ethnic tensions – or providing carte blanche support for Nigerian political unity. Racial solidarity for the ANLCA leadership, to be sure, involved the importance of Nigeria, however it also meant actively assisting in supporting a diplomatic solution that ensure that the Nigerian political system could create conditions that would provide stability and safety for all citizens of Nigeria. Although the mission was unsuccessful in establishing a diplomatic framework for ending the bloodshed, it was not only an understudied component of the broader global response to the civil war but also reveals the various

<sup>12</sup>For works that explore this angle see Bonny Ibhawoh, 'Refugees, Evacuees, and repatriates: Biafran Children, UNHCR, and the Politics of International Humanitarianism in the Nigerian Civil War', *African Studies Review* 63, no. 3 (2020), 568–92; Brad Simpson, 'The Biafran Secession and the Limits of Selfdetermination', *Journal of Genocide Research* 16, no. 2–3 (2014), 337–54; See also Chapter Seven of Lasse Heerten, *The Biafran War and Postcolonial Humanitarianism: Spectacles of Suffering* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Brian McNeil, "'And Starvation is the Grim Reaper": The American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive and the Genocide Question During the Nigerian Civil War, 1968–1970', in *Postcolonial Conflict and the Question of Genocide: The Nigeria-Biafra War, 1967–1970*, eds. A. Dirk Moses and Lasse Heerten (New York: Routledge, 2018), 278–300.

<sup>13</sup>[T]he emergence of African states from colonial rule', wrote historian Kevin Gaines, 'further lent a sense of historic momentum to U.S.-based freedom struggles and inspired black diaspora solidarities'. See Kevin K. Gaines, 'African American Expatriates in Ghana and the Black Radical Tradition', in *Transnational Blackness: Navigating the Global Color Line*, eds. Vanessa Agard-Jones and Manning Marable (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 294.

<sup>14</sup>See Bayard Rustin, 'How Black Americans see Black Africa – and vice versa', in *Time of Two Crosses: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin*, eds., Devon W. Carbado and Donald Weise (San Francisco: Cleis Press Inc, 2003), 314–17; John A. Davis, 'Black Americans and United States Policy towards Africa', *Journal of International Affairs* 23, no. 2 (1969), 242–43; Plummer, *In Search of Power*, 199; Roy M. Melbourne, 'The American Response to the Nigerian conflict, 1968', *Issue: A Journal of Opinion* 3, no. 2 (1973), 39; Lasse Heerten, *The Biafran War and Postcolonial Humanitarianism: Spectacles of Suffering* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 14.

<sup>15</sup>Plummer, *In Search of Power*, 194.

<sup>16</sup>Meriwether noted that 'African Americans found that bringing attention to bear on liberation movements that were fighting readily identified proponents of white supremacy offered a much more effective rallying point than did independent countries that were struggling to combat subtler enemies – economic, political, and cultural conundrums that had no ready-made solution'. See Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be Africans*, 239240.

<sup>17</sup>Plummer, *In Search of Power*, 20.

iterations of Black internationalism, and also its limits, when confronting the challenges of the post-colonial Africa in the late 1960s and beyond.

### The ANLCA, post-colonial Africa and Nigeria in turmoil

'The Negro recognizes now that he lives in a world community', intoned Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. at the founding conference of the ANLCA at Columbia University's Arden House in November 1962.<sup>18</sup> 'There was a time' continued King:

when the intensity of our own problems excluded our awareness of the existence of injustice anywhere as a threat to justice everywhere. Colonialism and segregation are nearly synonymous . . . .

*The Biafran War*, 239; Martin Staniland, *American Intellectuals and African Nationalists, 1955–1970* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 204–209.

In many ways the future of the emergent African nations and the American Negro are intertwined. As long as segregation and discrimination exist in our nation, the longer the chances of survival are for colonialism and vice-versa.<sup>19</sup>

Bringing together a who's who of African American civil society including leading civil rights leaders and Black intellectuals as well as diplomats and observers from the United Nations and newly established African states, the gathering in the august surrounding of Arden House marked a significant event in trans-Atlantic Black internationalism. Evoking the Pan-Africanist intellectual W.E.B Du Bois, King called on the Black community to challenge 'racial provincialism' and look beyond '125th Street in New York or Beale Street in Memphis' particularly as the decolonization process in Africa fundamentally reshaped global politics. According to Plummer, '[w]hat distinguished the committee that drafted the call to create an Africa-orientated group from past efforts is the conscious linkage it made between decolonization and antiracism on the continent and civil rights in the United States'.<sup>20</sup> The *New York Times* reported in July 1964 that the ANLCA's primary goal was 'to make the views of America's 20 million Negroes an important element in the formulation of United States policy towards the newly independent countries of sub-Sahara [sic] Africa . . . . These [ANLCA] leaders believe that the cultural and political cohesiveness of the American Negro population is interrelated with the future of the African peoples'.<sup>21</sup> The lobbying efforts of the ANLCA reflected a more complex tradition of Black internationalist activism.<sup>22</sup> Rather than radical or leftist Black activists and organizations having a monopoly on anti-colonialism and engagement with the Global South, liberal civil rights organizations, such as the NAACP, demonstrated that lobbying, and sometimes cooperating, with the US government and international institutions could advance a global political vision closely intertwined with challenging racism at home.<sup>23</sup> This sense of interconnection was a critical element in defining how the

<sup>18</sup>'The Negro looks to America', *New York Amsterdam News*, 8 December 1962, 13.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup>Plummer, *In Search of Power*, 123.

<sup>21</sup>M.S. Handler, 'Negroes ask role in foreign policy: leaders to meet in capital – White House interested', *New York Times*, 9 July 1964, 15.

<sup>22</sup>For works exploring liberal black internationalism see Jason C. Parker, "'Made-in-America Revolutions'? The 'Black University' and the American role in the Decolonization of the Black Atlantic', *The Journal of American History* 96, no. 3 (2009), 727–50; James Meriwether, "'Worth a lot of Negro votes": Black voters, Africa, and the 1960 Presidential Campaign', *The Journal of American History* 95, no. 3 (2008), 737–63; Carol Anderson, 'Rethinking Radicalism: African Americans and the Liberation Struggles in Somalia, Libya, and Eritrea, 1945–1949', *Journal of The Historical Society* 11, no. 4 (2011), 385–423.

<sup>23</sup>Carol Anderson, *Bourgeois Radicals: The NAACP and the Struggle for Colonial Liberation, 1941–1960* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 2. Historian Manfred Berg also makes a similar point, but with more focus on domestic



ANLCA leaders would respond to the Nigerian Civil War, a conflict that shattered the early 1960s optimism many in the African American community had for Nigeria and post-colonial Africa. Throughout the first half of the 1960s the ANLCA, under the deft leadership of Theodore E. Brown, emerged at the forefront of African American engagement with post-colonial Africa.<sup>24</sup>

The conference's origins and mission reflected the ebullience of the 1960s in terms of the civil rights revolution and the concurrent end of European empire throughout Africa. Across the states of the old Confederacy, civil rights organizations and activists were challenging the racial inequality of Jim Crow through non-violent sit-ins, Freedom Rides and other forms of mass protest.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, across the Atlantic, beginning with Ghana in 1957, newly independent African states were emerging from European colonial rule to assert themselves on the world stage, with seventeen gaining their independence in 1960 alone, a year dubbed by the United Nations, the 'Year of Africa'.<sup>26</sup> The emergence of so many independent states from European colonial rule signalled that the normative legitimacy of colonialism, as a system of racial hierarchy and imperial domination, was no longer tenable.

Nigeria, a former British colony that was one of the seventeen to gain independence in the 'Year of Africa', had a special place in the worldview of African Americans. Beginning in the early twentieth century, African Americans and Nigerians had forged personal, educational, institutional and intellectual connections that had transcended the Black Atlantic.

The ideas and initiatives of the First Pan-African Congress organized by Du Bois in Paris in 1919 had helped spark the fires of early anti-colonial agitation in the British Crown colony. The Garveyite movement expanded from the Western Hemisphere to influence nascent anticolonial activists, intellectuals, religious figures, newspaper editors and students in Lagos and into the colonial hinterland. In 1925, Nnamdi Azikiwe, who would go on to be Nigeria's paramount independence leader, the so-called 'Nehru of West Africa', travelled to the United States to receive his formative education at both Howard and Lincoln Universities, two of the leading Black tertiary institutions in America, from some of the leading Black intellectuals of the mid-twentieth century including philosopher Alain Locke and historian William Hansberry. In Azikiwe's footsteps came other Nigerian students on the eve of the Second World War. These students, that included Kingsley Mbadiwe, Mazi Mbonu Ojike and Prince Abyssinia Akweke Nwafor Orizu, helped thicken the relationship between African Americans and Nigerians through developing new organizations such as the African Academy of Arts and Research (AAAR) to raise awareness about African affairs. They also forged links with the NAACP and used the Black press to articulate the importance of Nigerian independence for the Black diaspora. African Americans in turn became avid supporters for the cause of Nigerian independence, and in doing so linked it to their quest to achieve equal citizenship and end racial discrimination in the United States.

With independence achieved, Nigeria was viewed as one of the critical new nation-states in Africa by the African-American community, due to its commitment to parliamentary democracy, its status as the largest state (in terms of population in Africa), its economic potential and its active diplomacy – aimed at accelerating the process of decolonization and confronting white-minority regimes in Southern Africa and also calling out the lack of racial progress in the United States.

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civil rights. See Manfred Berg, 'Black Civil Rights and Liberal Anticommunism: The NAACP in the Early Cold War', *The Journal of American History* 94, no.1 (2007), 75–96.

<sup>24</sup>Robert Martin, 'Interview with Theodore E. Brown', transcript of an oral history conducted on August 20, 1968 by Robert Martin, Civil Rights Documentation Project, Moorland-Spangarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington DC, 1968, 1–9.

<sup>25</sup>See Nicholas Grant, *Winning Our Freedom Together: African Americans and Apartheid, 1945–1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017); Christopher Tinson, *Radical Intellect: Liberator Magazine and Black Activism in the 1960s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

<sup>26</sup>Paul Hoffmann, "Bunche says '60 is year of Africa: symposium finds new unity in anti-colonialism – U.N. membership rise seen", *New York Times*, 17 February 1960, 15.

However, within six years, the hopeful vision of Nigeria had fractured in an orgy of political, ethnic and religious violence that had the potential to lead to civil war.<sup>27</sup>

Nigeria was a heterogeneous colonial construct that included hundreds of different tribal and ethnic groups, with the three predominant ethnic groups being the Hausa and Fulani in the Northern region, the Igbo in the Eastern region and the Yoruba in the Western region. The origins of the coup of January 1966 and the subsequent coup of July that same year lie in the turbulent power dynamics that afflicted the relationships between these ethnic groups in post-colonial Nigeria. The first coup was launched by a group of middle-ranking predominantly Igbo army officers frustrated with how Hausa interests had dominated the post-independence polity. The second coup was a reaction to the first. Although the July coup plotters aimed to prevent the development of Nigeria as a unitary state, that had the potential to subsume Northern sectional interests, it rapidly evolved into a series of pogroms aimed at Igbo migrants living in the North, who were seen as complicit in provoking the political instability. Tens-of-thousands were killed in the ensuing violence that led to millions of Igbo fleeing back to their traditional homeland in the Eastern Region and provoking calls for secession, as the Republic of Biafra, as the only way to protect the Igbo minority.

### An opportunity to mediate

'It is generally agreed', wrote Theodore E. Brown in a letter addressed to the Call Committee of the ANLCA, 'that a very serious crisis is imminent regarding the future of the nationhood of Nigeria. Unfortunately, unless some new element, or elements, are introduced, this African state will experience, and the world will observe, a horrible civil war'. 'The situation', according to Brown, 'presents a unique but extremely vital opportunity for Negro American leaders to aid in a troubled situation'.<sup>28</sup> Brown became the central diplomatic figure in the search for a peaceful resolution to the crisis in Nigeria. While the members of the Call Committee were engaged in seeking a mediated solution to the conflict through their activities in the United States, Brown was at the coalface of the ANLCA campaign. He travelled to and from Africa on behalf of his colleagues, meeting with Nigerian and Biafran officials as well as heads of state of other crucial African countries such as Ethiopia and Ghana in an effort to build consensus behind the goal of the ANLCA leadership acting as a mediator between the divided parties.

Brown's letter outlining a potential role for the African American civil rights leaders in pursuing a peaceful settlement, dated 21 March 1967, came at a time when the political situation in Nigeria was approaching a dangerous crisis point. On 14 and 15 March, respectively, two articles appeared in the *New York Times* that exemplified the growing tensions between the Federal Military Government led by Lieutenant Colonel Yakubu 'Jack' Gowon, and the Regional Government of the Eastern Region, led by Lieutenant Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu (both articles appeared as clippings in the papers of the NAACP related to the role of the ANLCA in the Nigerian crisis).<sup>29</sup> The acrimony between the two men and their respective causes was palpable. Gowon denounced Ojukwu as 'the butcher [of] the [Federal] Constitution; while Ojukwu declared before a gathering of foreign correspondents in Enugu, the capital of the Eastern Region, that 'the East will secede if attacked – a physical attack

<sup>27</sup>For a more detailed analysis of the depth of this relationship see James Farquharson, "'Black America Cares": The Response of African Americans to the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970' (PhD diss., Australian Catholic University, 2019), 24-100.

<sup>28</sup>Memorandum From Theodore E. Brown to Dorothy Height, Martin Luther King, A. Philip Randolph, Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young, 21 March 1967, Box A42, File "NAACP Administration 1966- General Office File American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa 1966-69," The Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (TRNAACP), Library of Congress (LOC), Washington, DC.<sup>29</sup> Memorandum From Theodore E. Brown, 21 March 1967, TRNAACP, LOC.

or an economic blockade. We all know when you pick up a pistol and shoot a man it's called murder – and equally so when you strangle him'.<sup>29</sup>

At the centre of the inflammatory rhetoric used on both sides, and at the centre of the concern of the ANLCA, was the implementation of the Aburi Agreement, a diplomatic agreement signed in Ghana on 5 January 1967. The agreement negotiated between the Federal Government and the Eastern Region was an attempt to end the cycle of ethnic violence and establish greater political stability, which could serve as grounds for political reconciliation between the regions. The mass killings of Igbo throughout the North had had a deep physical, emotional and psychological impact on the Igbo majority in the Eastern Region. For Ojukwu and his advisors, there was acute concern about whether it was possible to integrate the East back into the Federal state after the indifference that Federal authorities had shown regarding the massacre of Igbo.<sup>30</sup>

In the United States, and particularly in the African-American community, the signing of the Aburi agreement provided a glimmer of optimism after the bloodshed of the anti-Igbo pogroms. In the Black press, after months of reporting on the slaughter of tens of thousands, Aburi presented an opportunity to resolve ethnic tensions peacefully and ensure Nigerian unity. Reacting to the Aburi agreement, an editorial in *The Chicago Defender* was optimistic that a compromise had been agreed to:

One redeeming feature of the whole tragic drama was the cry for national unity that pierced the air with great clarity and consistency. All through their intermittent periods of indecision and vicissitude, the masses of Nigerians did not lose sight of the ultimate need for a unified country if progress on the economic and political fronts was to have priority in the list of the country's achievements . . . . The meeting of Nigerian leaders in Ghana revives hope for the quick evolution of a federal system backed by a national constitution which defines in unequivocal terms the functions and responsibilities of each geographical segment of Nigeria.<sup>31</sup>

The fracturing of the slim consensus that had sustained the Aburi agreement provoked alarm in the African-American community, who had viewed the progress of post-colonial Nigeria as central to their own struggle for racial justice and a marker of the success of peoples of African descent gaining self-determination and equality in the post-1945 international system. 'The American Negro', wrote novelist James Baldwin, 'can no longer, nor will he ever again, be controlled by white America's image of him. This fact has everything to do with the rise of Africa in world affairs'.<sup>32</sup> This concern about the future of post-colonial Africa sparked the search for some way to prevent the slide towards civil war. Simon Anekwe wrote in the *New York Amsterdam News* that Nigerian Ambassador to the UN Chief, S.O. Adebó, after acknowledging that the current situation was 'rather desperate', had noted that 'the Federal Military Government would seriously evaluate any external private or governmental initiative calculated to help resolve the crisis'.<sup>33</sup> An editorial in the *New York Amsterdam News* on 25 March urgently called for some type of third party to bring both sides together, particularly following Lt. Col Ojukwu's declaration that if the Aburi agreement had not been implemented by 31 March, he would unilaterally implement them in the Eastern Region, a clear move toward secession from the federation. The article stated emphatically that:

<sup>29</sup>'Eastern Area warned by Leader of Nigeria', *New York Times*, 15 March 1967, 10; Lloyd Garrison, 'Lagos is warned by East Nigeria', *New York Times*, 14 March 1967, 11.

<sup>30</sup>Transcript of Aburi Conference, 7, Organisation of African Unity, Box 8, Nigeria Biafra Clearing House (NBCH), Swarthmore College Peace Collection (SCPC).

<sup>31</sup>'Nigerian Unity', *The Chicago Defender*, 28 January 1967, 10.

<sup>32</sup>James Baldwin, 'A Negro assays the Negro mood', *New York Times*, 21 March 1961, SM 25.

<sup>33</sup>Simon Anekwe, 'Two sides to Nigeria's troubles presented in conferences here', *New York Amsterdam News*, 25 March 1967, 20.



We think that Nigerians need help in order to settle their differences . . . It has been suggested to the Nigerian military leaders to request the assistance of an international mediatory committee, such as one composed of United Nations experts and African heads of state, to help negotiate and oversee the implementation of a settlement, with Nigeria absorbing the cost.<sup>34</sup>

Anticipating the concerns that some Nigerian officials may have entertained about a third-party entity interfering in the sovereignty of the Nigerian state, the author of the article hoped that:

An unofficial peace mission from the United States could convince the Nigerian leaders of the wisdom of calling in a referee group to assist them. Such a peace mission might consist of Negro civil rights leaders like A. Philip Randolph, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Roy Wilkins, together with Senator Robert F. Kennedy. Nigeria needs help, for herself and Africa. If such a mission departs now, we might avert a bloody tragedy and show that America can wage peace just as it can wage war.<sup>35</sup>

### Theodore E. Brown to Africa

Perceiving an imminent crisis, Theodore Brown's March 1967 letter to his fellow ANLCA members noted that 'the situation presents a unique but extremely vital opportunity for Negro American leaders to aid in a trouble situation'.<sup>36</sup> Brown recounted that the cable sent by the Call Committee to the five military governors on 21 March was:

a communication based solely on humanitarian concern of [sic] based on the fact that there were many Nigerians who had gone to the schools, the universities, like Howard and Lincoln. There were warm friendships on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean in this regard, that the Nigerians have given tremendous amounts of encouragement and inspiration to millions of black Americans and it was felt that if they could resolve their problems without conflict, it would much [sic] not only for the largest nation in Africa, for Africa, but also in the growing blackness, in cultural ancestry that is going on here.<sup>37</sup>

By invoking 'Howard and Lincoln', Brown was alluding to the transnational connections, made through education and travel, that bound African Americans to the future of Nigeria in a 'global race revolution'.<sup>38</sup> In September 1967, Brown noted that the initial cable was driven not only by the concerns of the ANLCA but also by outside influences. He wrote that 'we [senior African American civil rights leaders] were under mounting pressure not only from Nigerian students and other Nigerians in the United States but also from many American groups who felt that 22 million American Negroes could perform a unique role for Nigeria and the world as a peaceful force in finding a solution to the Nigerian problem'.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>34</sup>'Help for Nigeria', *New York Amsterdam News*, 25 March 1967, 14.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup>Memorandum From Theodore E. Brown to Dorothy Height, Martin Luther King, A. Philip Randolph, Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young, 21 March 1967, Box A42, File 'NAACP Administration 1966- General Office File American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa 1966-69,' The Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (TRNAACP), Library of Congress (LOC), Washington, DC.

<sup>37</sup>Martin, 'Interview with Theodore E. Brown', 10.

<sup>38</sup>See Parker, "'Made-in-America Revolutions'?", 728.

<sup>39</sup>Memorandum From Theodore E. Brown to Dorothy Height, Martin Luther King, A. Philip Randolph, Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young, 'The Nigerian Crisis', 13 September 1967, Box A42, File 'NAACP Administration 1966- General Office File American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa 1966-69', TRNAACP, LOC. <sup>41</sup> Letter from S.O. Adabo to Theodore Brown, 28 March 1967, Box A42, File 'NAACP Administration 1966- General Office File American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa 1966-69', TRNAACP, LOC.

The response of both the Nigerian Federal government and Eastern Region officials, to the offer of mediation by the ANLCA, was encouraging for the committee members. Less than a week after the official cable was despatched to all parties involved in the dispute, Brown received positive replies from S.O. Adabo, the Permanent Representative of Nigeria to the UN, and from Aggrey K. Oji, the Eastern Nigeria Liaison Officer based in New York.<sup>41</sup> Oji expressed his and the Eastern Region's appreciation in 'your interest in the problems of our country and share with you the hope that these problems will be solved quickly and peacefully so that all the peoples of Nigeria can develop and prosper'.<sup>40</sup> Three weeks later, the ANLCA received a lengthy correspondence from two community leaders in Old Calabar and Ogoja in the Eastern Region expressing their thanks for the decision of the Conference. The letter stated that:

Your offer to help affecting a settlement and in restoring normal life to the people of this country was . . . [a] divine intervention . . . It underscored once more what we of this community have more than once stressed, that the present crisis, which threatens the very existence of our nation, should also be viewed in terms of our world-wide responsibility – the responsibility of our race. Thus whether Nigeria continues to exist in unity or break up into principalities, our problem cannot and should not be complacently regarded by us as an issue of no concern to the rest of Africa, our race and the world at large.<sup>41</sup>

While not as effusive as the leaders from the Eastern Region, a cable from Lt Col Gowon on 26 April, sent through the Nigerian ambassador to the United States Ade Martins, declared that:

The Commander-In-Chief wishes to take this opportunity to assure you and the millions of American citizens of African descent with whom we are proud to have a blood affinity, that Nigerian leaders will allow no obstacles to stand in our way in the course of national reconstruction. In this connection, the Commander-In-Chief noted with pleasure your good gesture in offering to place at Nigeria's disposal your goodselves [sic] in an effort to mediate between us in resolving our problems.<sup>42</sup>

In a memorandum to King, Randolph, Wilkins and Young, Brown described the responses as 'thus far, all of it is favourable [sic]'.<sup>43</sup>

The Black press was aware of the historical significance of the ANLCA mediation efforts. The *New York Amsterdam News* called the offer of mediation:

an historically unprecedented opportunity [for African Americans] to do what governments and statesmen have been unable to do, namely, settle the quarrel involving the four regional governments and the federal, in that country of 56 million people. Not even UN Undersecretary Ralph Bunche was in such a unique position when he mediated the Arab-Israeli dispute in 1949, for he was the representative of the governments of the world.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>40</sup>Letter from Aggrey K. Oji to Theodore Brown, March 28, 1967, Box A42, File 'NAACP Administration 1966- General Office File American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa 1966-69', TRNAACP, LOC.

<sup>41</sup>Letter from Theodore Brown to Roy Wilkins, 21 April 1967, Box A42, File 'NAACP Administration 1966- General Office File American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa 1966-69' TRNAACP, LOC.

<sup>42</sup>Cablegram from Ade Martins to Theodore Brown, 26 April 1967, Box A42, File 'NAACP Administration 1966- General Office File American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa 1966-69', TRNAACP, LOC.

<sup>43</sup>Memorandum from Theodore Brown to King, Randolph, Wilkins & Young, 28 March 1967, Box A42, File 'NAACP Administration 1966- General Office File American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa 1966-69', TRNAACP, LOC.

<sup>44</sup>'Americans offer mediation of Nigeria division crisis', *New York Amsterdam News*, 20 May 1967, 34,<sup>47</sup> 'The Nigerian Tide', *New York Amsterdam News*, May 27, 1967, 16.

A further article in the *Amsterdam News*, three days before the Republic of Biafra was declared independent on 30 May, reflected on the importance of the mission:

The effect that civil war and disintegration would have on Nigeria, the rest of Africa and in the fortunes of the whole Black world, is so great that we urge the Leadership Conference to go one step further. We suggest that it send an emissary to consult with the Nigerians and determine whether or no they want mediation by the Conference.<sup>47</sup>

The article also noted that the offer of mediation had been positively received in Nigerian government newspapers, with one paper running a subheading, 'we believe that you will do your duty for Nigeria, Africa, your race and the world'.<sup>45</sup> In a 17 May memorandum in which Nigeria was the number one issue, Brown remarked that 'this offer on the part of the Conference met with virtually unanimous favourable world-wide reaction. Two principal daily Nigerian newspapers carried front page editorials thanking American Negroes for this effort'.<sup>46</sup>

In a letter to the Call Committee prior to his departure for Nigeria in June 1967, Brown reiterated this point: '[i]t is difficult to tell you the tremendously favourable and frankly unanimous reaction that I've had expressed from segments to your efforts in this critical situation. This favourable reaction has also been expressed by high officials in our State Department. The fact that our effort, as private citizens, is concerned solely with humanitarian objectives gives us a unique position'.<sup>47</sup> While it is problematic to believe that a single cable could dramatically affect the complex situation on the ground in West Africa, it was clearly much more than an empty gesture. What was needed, in the aftermath of the cable, were concrete diplomatic efforts, which built on the goodwill being expressed by both sides in Nigeria for the humanitarian objective of bringing both sides together around the negotiation table.

The 'unique position' of the ANLCA was something that Theodore Brown wished to use as diplomatic leverage as he flew to West Africa in June 1967 on his inaugural mission to Nigeria at the request of his colleagues in the Conference. As Brown noted in his lengthy report to the ANLCA in September 1967, '[b]oth in Nigeria and Ghana [where Brown also travelled to meet Biafran officials] there was often expressed the unique non-governmental role of the Americans. One distinct advantage that the Negro leaders had was the ability to confer with both sides without getting involved in the issue of recognition of who was or was not a sovereign state'.<sup>48</sup> Between June and November, Brown made three significant trips to Africa directly related to addressing the crisis in Nigeria. During his initial visit in June, his talks with [newly promoted] Brigadier General Gowon were highly publicised in the press in Lagos, as well as on television and radio. Brown wrote that 'Nigerians were enthusiastic about the interest and efforts of millions of Americans acting independently of their government. Nigerians of every region were grateful for the offer of the American Negro leaders'.<sup>49</sup> From Lagos, Brown travelled to Accra, the capital of Ghana, to discuss the situation with General Ankrah, who had been instrumental as a mediator during the infamous Aburi talks. This was also the first time that Brown engaged with officials from the so-called Republic of Biafra, whom he described as 'pretty determined'.<sup>50</sup>

Brown returned to the United States at the end of June and briefed his colleagues about the situation in Nigeria. According to his recollections, with no moves towards the use of force by

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup>Memorandum from Theodore Brown to all Conference Participants, 17 May 1967, Box A42, File 'NAACP Administration 1966- General Office File American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa 1966-69', TRNAACP, LOC.

<sup>47</sup>Memorandum from T.E. Brown to R. Wilkins, W. Young, A.P. Randolph, M.L. King, 'RE: Nigeria', 14 June 1967, Box A42, File 'NAACP Administration 1966- General Office File American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa 1966-69', TRNAACP, LOC.

<sup>48</sup>Memorandum from Brown, 13 September 1967, TRNAACP, LOC.

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup>Martin, 'Interview with Theodore E. Brown', 11.

either side, the ANLCA 'deemed it advisable that the Executive Director returns to Africa especially for the purpose of meeting with officials from the Eastern Region'.<sup>51</sup> As Brown returned to Africa to test the diplomatic waters with officials from Biafra, particularly Lt. Col Ojukwu, the tensions that had been growing for over a year since the second coup finally exploded into war. Following Biafra's declaration of independence on 30 May, Gowon had ordered a general mobilization of all Federal forces and instituted an air, land and sea blockade of the Eastern Region. After a month of 'phoney war', in early July, following a brief skirmish on the border between Benue Plateau State and the Eastern Central state, Nigerian forces commenced their 'police action' with a two-front advance into Biafran territory to quickly snuff out the so-called Republic and capture its leadership. The outbreak of fighting did not derail Brown's mission on behalf of the ANLCA leadership. Although he reported back that air of despondency gripped Lagos as hostilities got underway, Brown observed 'there was an increased feeling, especially in Ghana and among Biafrans and many Nigerians, that the efforts of American Negroes should be continued in an attempt to hasten the cessation of hostilities'.<sup>52</sup>

### Advancing peace abroad and confronting Black Power at home

The ANLCA mediation efforts, spearheaded by the diplomacy of Theodore E. Brown, were one of the most significant undertakings made by the Conference in its history. While issues related to Apartheid South Africa and Rhodesia were also of deep significance, Brown stated that, 'the conference has been sort of side tracked in the last year and a half because of the great horrors that are going on as a result of the conflict . . . between Nigeria and the area of Biafra. I should say that just about all of our time in the last year and a half has been engaged in that'.<sup>56</sup> The war in Nigeria was not just a matter that had deep implications for Africa and the Black diaspora; in the eyes of the key members of the ANLCA, it also had important domestic implications. While provoked by the fear that the disintegration of Nigeria would lead to untold human misery and a backward step for post-colonial Africa, the mission also reflected the domestic context of the battle for Black liberation in the United States. By 1967, the moderate agenda that the ANLCA espoused in international affairs was being challenged by emergent Black Power internationalism.

The Call Committee of the Conference was a veritable who's who of the liberal civil rights movement, which had assumed a dominant role in the Black freedom struggle since the end of the Second World War. The movement – whose leaders believed firmly in the integration of African Americans into broader American society – had achieved noteworthy legal and political victories such as the *Brown vs Board of Education* decision in 1954, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Yet, by the mid-1960s their approach was under threat by the growing militancy of the Black Power movement.

The emergence of Black Power leaders and their followers not only challenged the domestic integrationist model espoused by the leaders in the ANLCA; but also called into question their approach to international affairs. Imbued by the ideology and example of revolutionary armed struggles in the Third World, some of the individuals and groups that existed under the aegis of Black Power advocated armed resistance to challenge the racism and economic injustice in American society. In seeking to mediate the conflict in Nigeria, the ANLCA leadership hoped to show that seeking justice through peaceful means overseas was more effective than armed struggle, a lesson that was pertinent in Black America. Reflecting on the growing levels of urban unrest and racial violence in the United States, Theodore Brown drew a parallel with the civil war in Nigeria:

<sup>51</sup>Memorandum from Brown, 13 September 1967, TRNAACP, LOC.

<sup>52</sup>Memorandum from Brown, 13 September 1967, TRNAACP, LOC.<sup>56</sup> Martin, 'Interview with Theodore E. Brown', 9.

I don't think the best types of leadership in what might be called a white world or the black world will ever feel that this society is going to advance better by first having conflict . . . . I think an armed conflict means the death of both blacks and whites. Look at Nigeria for example. That's the very point of Nigeria. The Biafrans are only something like about less than five million and the rest of Nigeria is something like 40 million. No one can say that that war will end up with anybody having a total victory.<sup>53</sup>

While the analogy drawn by Brown is somewhat crude, it is important in assessing the link between the domestic crisis and the ANLCA mission to Nigeria. For Brown, Black Power's support for violence to overcome racism and economic injustice was counterproductive. The war in Nigeria, with its horrific death toll and destruction, was a tragedy for Nigeria, Africa and the Black diaspora. Brown and the ANLCA believed that their involvement in seeking a compromise peace that would re-establish a united Nigeria offered the best hope for the post-colonial future.

It is in this context of the growing appeal of solidarity with radical Third World regimes and revolutionary national liberation movements that the ANLCA mission to Nigeria must be viewed. Firstly, the mission should be understood as a determined effort to end the suffering of Nigerians of all regions and facilitate the peaceful reunification of the country. However, the mission also marked a more 'activist' phase in the organization's existence. Rather than focusing on lobbying the US government and the State Department in order to shape policy towards Africa, Plummer has argued that '[T]he ANLCA interests after 1966 reflected pressures by domestic nationalist organizations and civil rights activists committed to the immediatism [sic] of "Freedom Now"'.<sup>54</sup> Historian Komozi Woodard has highlighted the growing divergence between the younger generation of Black nationalist militants and the civil rights establishment, particularly in foreign affairs. Woodard contrasted the attitudes of Malcolm X with the ANLCA during the Congo Crisis (1960–1965). While Malcolm was forthright in denouncing imperialism and US policy in the Congo, 'the buzzwords for Martin Luther King Jr. and the American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa were civility and caution. In fact, the White House was attempting to *intimidate* and *condition* black leadership to accept its exclusive hegemony over foreign affairs, including colonialism and independence in Africa'.<sup>55</sup>

This growing disillusion with what had been thought to be the ineluctable process of self-determination throughout Africa caused the ANLCA to adopt this more activist approach to the continent. In a memorandum from Theodore Brown to the call committee of the ANLCA in June 1966, Brown wrote in the context of Southern Africa that 'Our efforts must be accelerated if we are to have a meaningful [sic] impact on the problem of racism in Africa generally, apartheid in South Africa, the Rhodesia crisis, Angola and Mozambique and the "after thought" approach of our own government in the formulation of United States-African policy'.<sup>56</sup> Historian Steven Metz also observed that the growing militancy of Congressman Charles Diggs – a Black politician closely aligned with moderate civil rights leaders – towards Apartheid South Africa, where he favoured total political and economic isolation and support for liberation groups, reflected:

<sup>53</sup>Martin, 'Interview with Theodore E. Brown', 53.

<sup>54</sup>Plummer, *In Search of Power*, 187.

<sup>55</sup>Komozi Woodard, 'Amiri Baraka, The Congress of Africa People, and the Black Power Politics from the 1961 United Nations Protest to the 1972 Gary Convention', in *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*, ed. Peniel E. Joseph (New York: Routledge, 2006), 56–57.

<sup>56</sup>Memorandum from Theodore E. Brown to Call Committee ANLCA, 'Third Biennial Conference and proposed permanent organization', 29 June 1966, Box A42, File 'NAACP Administration 1966- General Office File American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa 1966–69', TRNAACP, LOC.



[P]olitics within the black congressional group and the black community as a whole where a struggle was raging between the older, more moderate sectors of the leadership such as the NAACP and the Southern Christian Leadership Association [sic] and younger more radical elites who were dissatisfied with the pace of racial change in the United States. This challenge caught the first generation leadership unprepared . . . . Consequently, the ‘mainstream’ black leadership – including most congressmen – were pressured into increasingly radical positions on a range of issues . . . . [to] retain legitimacy within the black community . . . .<sup>57</sup>

To increase their assertiveness in African affairs and undercut the radical ‘Third Worldism’ of various Black militants, the ANLCA proposed a number of policy initiatives and programs that coincided with the Nigeria peace mission. The Conference proposed the establishment of a university exchange program between the United States and Africa, as well as the development of an extensive Africa-focused adult education program for the Black community. ‘This program is to be focused among American Negroes on African culture, Negro history and world affairs. Through this program, we would seek to accomplish an intelligent and well-informed American Negro knowledge of the culture of the Negro, and the nature of the political choices available to him’.<sup>58</sup> Besides improving educational standards in Africa, the ANLCA project – drawing on a deep reservoir of interest in the African American community in relation to Africa – sought to develop a more nuanced understanding of African affairs that aligned with the politics of the ANLCA. ‘In an effort to direct the natural ethnic expression into a constructive integrating program’, wrote Roy Wilkins and A. Philip Randolph in a letter to Secretary of State Dean Rusk:

[t]he American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa currently is completing the preparation of a broad, locally presented educational program on African history and Africa-American concerns which we hope will engage a substantial part of the actual Negro leadership community in most cities. From these seminars, classes and conferences, we foresee also the emergence of a State Department constituency in so far as African policies are concerned.<sup>59</sup>

Both Randolph and Wilkins rejected the ‘mischievous’ contributions of some African-American individuals and groups promoting Pan-Africanism and Third World solidarity as ‘contributing to . . . a dangerous commitment to divisiveness along color lines in the nation and in the world’.<sup>60</sup>

That this large-scale program was being suggested at the same time as the ANLCA leadership were attempting to mediate the civil war in Nigeria is reflective of how both initiatives were driven by the need of the Conference to avoid being outflanked in African affairs by more militant organizations and voices in the African-American community. While the Conference’s offer to help mediate the conflict was provoked by shocking accounts of violence and political disintegration reported in the mainstream and African-American press, the mission can best be viewed as a way for integrationist civil rights leaders to reassert themselves both at home and abroad. The Nigerian peace mission and the education outreach also allowed the ANLCA to remain on good terms with the Johnson Administration, although King’s relationship with Johnson had become increasingly strained due to his criticism of the Vietnam War. As noted by Theodore Brown, the ANLCA was unofficially supported by the State Department and the White House in seeking a peaceful

<sup>57</sup>Steven Metz, ‘Congress, the antiapartheid movement, and Nixon’, *Diplomatic History* 12, no. 2 (1988), 169.

<sup>58</sup>Letter from Roy Wilkins and A.P. Randolph to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, 28 September 1967, Box A42, File ‘NAACP Administration 1966- General Office File American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa 1966–69’, TRNAACP, LOC.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*

settlement in Nigeria and was in communication with Secretary of State Rusk regarding its education proposal.<sup>61</sup>

The importance of the connection between the Johnson Administration and the ANLCA was multifaceted. Firstly, for many of the senior leaders in the ANLCA, the Johnson Administration was still viewed as a vital ally in pushing forward a progressive domestic civil rights agenda; it was therefore essential to remain on good terms for the foreseeable future. Secondly, for the Johnson Administration, the activities of the ANLCA in relation to Africa allowed it to boost its prestige among the African-American community and potentially undermine the standing of more militant Black views. By taking concrete action on African affairs – mediation in Nigeria, educational outreach and lobbying the Johnson Administration to put more economic and political pressure on colonial and white supremacist regimes in Southern Africa – the moderate leaders of the ANLCA were presenting themselves as more effective than other groups and individuals in the Black community.

### The peace mission confronts diplomatic realities

By October 1967, following Brown's two consecutive trips to Africa, the diplomatic contours of the ANLCA peace mission were clearly visible. The leadership of the Conference sought to leverage the appeal the African-American mediators had with both sides to bring them to the negotiating table. The ANLCA hoped to do this by working alongside other African leaders who had expressed alarm about the conflict. During his visits to Africa, Theodore Brown had not only been able to engage with parties from both sides in the civil war, but also with senior African statesmen such as General Joseph Ankrah in Ghana, Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia and President William Tubman of Liberia. These discussions, as well as discussions that members of the ANLCA had with envoys from both Nigeria and Biafra (for example, A. Philip Randolph met with Biafran envoy Sir Louis Mbanefo, a preeminent jurist and former member of the International Court of Justice to discuss the involvement of the ANLCA), helped define the scope of the mission.<sup>62</sup> In a detailed memorandum to Randolph, King, Wilkins and Young, Brown outlined the next stage of the ANLCA's efforts. While Brown did not call for the leaders to travel to Nigeria, he felt that the continuing lobbying and campaigning of the ANLCA could yield significant results.

Brown believed the best course of action was for him to return to Africa to 'solicit help and seek advice, ways and means from other African leaders and solicit also their determined help in getting a conference underway between leaders of the two factions'. Brown also believed that major interest groups in the United States, such as churches, labour unions, businesses and humanitarian groups, needed to be courted by the ANLCA 'in order to develop interest and world pressure for a quick cessation of hostilities and a restoration of a peaceful and tranquil Nigerian society'. To accomplish these joint goals Brown proposed that the ANLCA raise \$15,000 (\$114,767 in 2019). However, Brown called for the money to be raised rapidly via business and corporate interests in the United States 'with investments in Africa and particularly in Nigeria . . . [that] share our concern in this endeavour'.<sup>63</sup>

Even as Theodore Brown and the leadership of the ANLCA outlined the scope of their diplomatic efforts and sought to aid African leaders and states in finding a peaceful solution, the military situation grew increasingly intractable and bloody, particularly following the Nigerian

<sup>61</sup>The government officials [including Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Joseph E. Palmer, II] expressed warm approval of the Negro leaders efforts in seeking ways and means to resolve the humanitarian aspects of the problem and they assured the American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa, through the Executive Director, that our efforts met with the approval of our government' See Memorandum from Theodore Brown, September 13, TRNAACP, LOC.

<sup>62</sup>Memorandum from Theodore Brown, 13 September 1967, TRNAACP, LOC.

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*

offensive that captured the Biafran capital of Enugu in October. This development prompted the ANLCA to ponder travelling directly to the warzone to act as mediators. 'The civil war', noted an editorial in *The Chicago Defender*:

which has been raging for months in Nigeria, taking the lives of thousands of men, women and children, has given a dismal picture of the outlook on the whole African continent south of the Sahara. Tribal conflicts of a deeper and more disastrous character than those that afflict other parts of independent Africa have brought complete disunity and frightful disorganization to Nigeria.<sup>64</sup>

A *Call and Post* editorial noted, sadly, that even a swift military victory by FMG forces without a long-term political reconciliation would mean that 'enmities are likely to be deepened – and an even greater tragedy could befall this anguished land . . . What is needed now is compassion, wisdom – and above all, mutual tolerance'.<sup>65</sup> A World Council of Churches appeal published in the *New Pittsburgh Courier* beseeched all combatants to pursue policies 'which will begin to dispel fear and bitterness and open the way to a future to which all can consent'.<sup>66</sup> In an interview published in the *New York Amsterdam News*, the Biafran 'diplomat' and former student at Lincoln University in the 1940s, Kingsley Mbadiwe, informed African American readers that '[t]he men who sit in Lagos today, are waging a war of extermination and genocide against those of us who contributed the most towards the building of one Nigeria'. Faced with these horrific circumstances, Mbadiwe called on 'the American people with their great concern for humanity to use their great world prestige to motivate those organisations, the OAU and UN, to take such action to prevent further genocide and bring about a peaceful settlement'.<sup>67</sup> In a cable sent to Lt. General Gowon on 30 October, the Conference leadership outlined their growing concerns. 'As the war goes on in Nigeria', stated the cable, 'Americans of African descent become increasingly alarmed at the mounting bloodshed and misery. We offer again our hand in friendship in any effort to bring the bloodshed to an immediate end . . . We hope that the six heads [of state] of the Organisation of African Unity will be able to undertake their mission as soon as possible'. This appeal for diplomacy and moderation in dealing with the civil war was combined with a unique offer from the ANLCA leader: 'the possibility of making an emergency trip to Africa if such a move will help to halt the fighting in Nigeria'.<sup>68</sup>

The potential mission to Nigeria received widespread circulation in the Black press. For many commentators in the African-American press, the mission was a significant event in highlighting the importance of Pan-Africanism to Black Americans and the significant role African Americans could play in relation to the Black diaspora.<sup>69</sup> 'Indicative of the American Negroes' deep concern about the civil war in Nigeria', stated an article in *The Crisis*, 'four of the nation's most prominent civil rights leaders revealed that they have been considering the possibility of making an emergency trip to Africa if such a move would help halt the fighting in Nigeria'. 'For the NAACP', continued the article, 'this involvement in African affairs is but an extension of a tradition dating back to the early years of the century and of the Association when Du Bois . . . called and the

<sup>64</sup>'Nigeria in trouble', *The Chicago Defender*, 28 October 1967, 10.

<sup>65</sup>Guest editorial: Nigeria's travails', *Call and Post*, 14 October 1967, 5B.

<sup>66</sup>WCC appeal for Nigeria', *New Pittsburgh Courier*, 21 October 1967, 6.

<sup>67</sup>Simon Anekwe, 'Africa Today – Search of Peace', *New York Amsterdam News*, 28 October 1967, 17.

<sup>68</sup>Press release: Four top rights leaders considering Africa trip', 17 December 1967, Box A42, File 'NAACP Administration 1966- General Office File American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa 1966-69', TRNAACP, LOC.

<sup>69</sup>4 top rights leaders consider Africa trip', *The Chicago Defender*, 23 December 1968, 32; 'civil rights leaders may go to Nigeria', *New York Amsterdam News*, 13 January 1968, 26; 'leaders may visit country: concern is shown over Nigeria war', *New Pittsburgh Courier*, 30 December 1967, 23; 'local churches to hear Dr. King', *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 14 March 1968, D4.

NAACP financed a Pan-African Congress which met in Paris in February 1919'.<sup>70</sup> By invoking the legacy of the 1919 Congress, *The Crisis* was linking activities of the ANLCA to the reformist Black internationalism that was espoused by Du Bois and other delegates in Paris. Rather than seeking complete liberation from European colonial rule, the Conference called on the Allied powers to improve colonial conditions as a pathway towards self-determination. Like Du Bois in Paris, the ANLCA hoped to work within existing international institutions and powers to improve the well-being of all sides in the civil war.<sup>71</sup> In the *New York Amsterdam News*, Simon Anekwe described the potential mission as 'historical in its impact on Nigeria and Biafra, the rest of Africa and on Afro-Americans themselves . . . . School children would read of it in history books and tales of black men from across the seas who rescued their fatherland from the sword and flaming torch would be told like a great sea sage'. According to Anekwe:

[the mission is] a manifestation of the concern and interest of 22 million Afro-Americans in the destiny of their ancestral continent, the mission would represent the finest expression of Black Power . . . . Such a mission would herald a new era of cooperation between African and AfroAmericans and launch black Americans on the course they must orbit as Americans in highlighting the importance of Africa and influencing decisions in Washington.<sup>72</sup>

Even as the Black press endorsed the efforts of the ANLCA leadership, the mission faced daunting diplomatic and domestic challenges that would circumscribe its scope and effectiveness. In his oral history, Brown made it clear that the mission saw the OAU as a critical element in securing a peaceful settlement. '[W]e placed a great deal of hope in the OAU efforts', stated Brown:

because this was an African solution to the problem, hopefully, if possible. It was not a European or big power pressured solution. Since so much of the future of Africa, and the relationship of Africa and the outside world [sic], it was hoped that people of the stature, Haile Selassie and other heads of state, would really be the motivating influencing force for solution [sic] to this problem rather than Europe or from Washington.<sup>77</sup>

While the ANLCA sought to work alongside the OAU, as a non-state actor the mission had to operate within the diplomatic parameters set by the Pan-African organization. This meant that the ANLCA adopted similar talking points and objectives to the OAU, a situation that placed it at odds with the Biafran leadership.

In September 1967, as fighting raged between Nigerian and Biafran forces, the heads of state of the OAU gathered in the Congolese capital, Kinshasa. This was the first gathering of the OAU since the outbreak of hostilities, and the civil war resonated deeply with many of the leaders who gathered. For many of the young post-colonial African nation-states secession posed an existential danger. While there was sympathy from some African heads of state for the situation the Biafrans found themselves in, there was unanimous agreement that secession posed a serious threat to the development of the continent and had the potential of turning the region into a

<sup>70</sup>'The American Negro community and the Nigerian Civil War', *The Crisis*, January 1968, 20.

<sup>71</sup>See Sarah Claire Dunstan, 'Conflicts of Interest: The 1919 Pan-African Congress and the Wilsonian Moment', *Callaloo* 39, no. 1 (2016), 133–50.

<sup>72</sup>Simon Anekwe, 'Africa Today – The Leadership', *New York Amsterdam News*, 27 January 1968, 15. In using the term 'Black Power', Anekwe demonstrates the malleability of the term both in a domestic and international context, and how it could be easily coopted by a broad spectrum of individual and groups – ranging from liberals to radicals – in the black freedom struggle. See Simon Hall, 'The NAACP, Black Power, and the African American Freedom Struggle, 1966–69', *The Historian* 69, no. 1 (2007): 49–82. <sup>77</sup> Martin, 'Interview with Theodore E. Brown', 17.

Cold War battlefield.<sup>73</sup> Territorial integrity and non-intervention, core ideas in the OAU Charter, defined the debates around the civil war in Kinshasa.

The resolution that emerged from the OAU meeting would define the policy of the organization for the duration of the civil war. Besides condemning secession and upholding the principles of sovereignty within colonial borders and non-intervention, the OAU established a 'consultative mission' of six African heads of state to assure General Gowon of the OAU's desire for 'the territorial integrity, unity and peace of Nigeria'.<sup>74</sup> According to the *New York Times*, the Kinshasa resolution adopted a two-track approach: the need to avoid a prolonged and bloody war that may irreparably undermine the viability of Nigeria, and the need to convince the Biafrans to abandon secession. 'Biafra must give up the secession and the Ibos must agree to help rebuild Nigerian unity', declared the editorial in the *Times*:

The Federal Government must demonstrate its determination to provide genuine security for the Ibos, who have suffered far more than any other group in the civil strife of the last two years. Lagos must also make good its promise to negotiate in good faith with leaders selected by the Ibos themselves and show flexibility about the size of the individual states and the powers to be allocated to them under a renewed Federal system.<sup>75</sup>

Two of the leading historians of the international dimensions of the civil war, Lasse Heerten and John J. Stremlau, acknowledge that this OAU initiative had a decisive impact on the diplomacy surrounding the civil war and its eventual outcome. The Kinshasa resolution remained the key component of OAU diplomacy throughout the conflict.<sup>76</sup>

For the ANLCA mission, the position of the OAU placed constraints on the arbiter role the civil rights leaders hoped to perform. While the ANLCA leadership was happy to meet with Biafran envoys in the United States, like the OAU, the ANLCA favoured a peaceful settlement that led to the reincorporation of Biafra into Nigeria. In supporting Nigerian unity, the ANLCA was tapping into a long historical tradition in the Black diaspora of supporting strong and viable Black-majority nation-states as a critical component of challenging racial inequality and colonialism.<sup>77</sup> In this context, Nigeria, the largest and most significant state in Africa, was a living – although deeply flawed – example of Black self-determination. With Southern Africa not yet liberated from colonial rule and superpower interventions roiling the continent, the ANLCA remained committed to Nigerian national unity. In his lengthy memorandum in September 1967, Theodore Brown reported that 'it is reasonable to believe that both sides are willing to come to a conference table if the proper means and setting could be found to respect the sovereignty of Nigeria as defined by General Gowon'.<sup>78</sup> In a January 1968 article in *The Crisis* outlining the intention of the civil rights leaders to travel to Nigeria, Roy Wilkins denied a Radio Biafra interpretation of the ANLCA appeal that stated that 'leaders of 20,000,000 Americans of African descent had sent a message

<sup>73</sup>For an overview of the dynamics of foreign intervention in postcolonial Africa see Chapter one of Elizabeth Schmidt, *Foreign interventions in Africa from the Cold War to the War on Terror* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 18–33; see also Odd Arne Westad, *Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 131–43.

<sup>74</sup>John J. Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967–1970* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 114.

<sup>75</sup>Nigeria needs the O.A.U', *New York Times*, 28 September 1967, 46.

<sup>76</sup>Heerten, *The Biafran War*, 72–76; Stremlau, *The International Politics*, 94–96.

<sup>77</sup>For further reading on this tradition in the black diaspora see Hollis R. Lynch, *Edward Wilmot Blyden: PanNegro Patriot 1832–1912* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 19; Brandon R. Byrd, 'Black Republicans, Black Republic: African-Americans, Haiti, and the promise of Reconstruction', *Slavery & Abolition* 36, no. 4 (2014), 546; Adam Ewing, *The Age of Garvey: How a Jamaican Activist Created a Mass Movement and Changed Global Black Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 83–84.

<sup>78</sup>Memorandum from Brown, 13 September 1967, TRNAACP, LOC.<sup>84</sup> 'The American Negro community and the Nigerian Civil War', 20.



expressing alarm because of “Nigeria’s aggression against Biafra”. The *Crisis* article noted that ‘Mr Wilkins pointed out that this message had carefully refrained from taking sides in the conflict and did not mention Biafra’.<sup>79</sup>

Kingsley Mbadiwe, acting as an envoy for the Republic of Biafra in the United States, according to his biographer, expressed his frustration at African American civil rights leaders who while rightly wanting ‘the Nigeria-Biafra conflict resolved,’ were of ‘little practical help’.<sup>79</sup> It can be deduced that Mbadiwe’s frustration was not a reflection of a lack of interest by Black leaders, but of a wariness to support a ceasefire that would leave Nigeria and Biafra as two distinct political entities without plans for Biafra’s reintegration – a situation at odds with the objectives of the OAU. Although the ANLCA leadership was genuine in their desire to see the war stop and the bloodshed end, for the Biafran leadership this was an option they were unwilling to countenance. With the military situation in the warzone in flux, and with Biafran leaders looking to the international community – both to the Global North and the Global South – to support their independence struggle, the notion of peaceful reintegration back into Nigeria seemed unlikely. Biafran officials and large swathes of the population within the enclave remained distrustful of claims that Igbo would be welcomed back peacefully into the Nigerian Federation.

Domestic pressures also added to the challenges the ANLCA mission encountered in trying to play a constructive role to end the civil war. On 1 April 1968, the *New York Times* reported that Dr. King, in the final stages of organizing the Poor People’s campaign in Washington DC and about to fly to Memphis to support striking Black sanitation workers, was reconsidering his role in the ANLCA mission. Speaking to journalists King said ‘that he would probably not be able to fly to Africa the week of 14 April on a peace mission to try and end the civil war in Nigeria. He said he might send his friend and associate, the Rev. Ralph Abernathy instead’.<sup>80</sup> Three days later King was assassinated at the Lorraine Motel in downtown Memphis.

Even though the peace mission collapsed following the death of King, the remaining ANLCA leaders remained engaged with the conflict until the end of hostilities in January 1970. They called for increased humanitarian aid to support victims of the war and supported a diplomatic settlement to the conflict either through US, OAU, or United Nations mediation.<sup>81</sup> Even as they called for expanded humanitarian aid and a peaceful settlement, they remained steadfast in their support for Nigerian sovereignty, a view shared by many in the Black community including Congressman Charles Diggs, Senator Edward Brooke and major newspapers, such as the *Afro-American*.<sup>82</sup> This position was attacked by Black Power activists including the former national director of CORE Floyd McKissick, the educator Mary Harden Umolu and Harlem-based militant Charles Kenyatta. Through the Joint Afro Committee on Biafra (JACB), established in February 1969 to build support in the Black community for Biafran independence, they attacked the position enunciated by the ANLCA during the peace mission as a betrayal of a Black republic that epitomised self-determination, economic self-sufficiency and a direct challenge to white supremacy.<sup>83</sup> However, the broader African American community remained wedded to the position of the ANLCA, supporting Nigerian unity, until hostilities ended with the surrender of the Republic of Biafra.

In the papers of the ANLCA, the mission to Nigeria disappears from the archival records following the announcement that the Call Committee would be travelling to the warzone. Due to this, it is difficult to deduce the factor or factors that led to its collapse. Drawing on the timeline

<sup>79</sup>Hollis R. Lynch, *K.O. Mbadiwe: A Nigerian Political Biography, 1915–1990* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 219.

<sup>80</sup>Ben A. Franklin, ‘Dr. King hints he’d cancel march if aid is offered’, *New York Times*, 1 April 1968, 20.

<sup>81</sup>‘US Leaders Urge End to Hunger in Biafra’, *The Crisis*, October 1968, 291; Roy Wilkins, ‘Wilkins Speaks: Nigerian War saddens all Blacks’, *Afro-American*, 31 December 1968, 4; Whitley M. Young, ‘To be equal: The Biafra crisis’, *New York Amsterdam News*, 21 September 1968, 14.

<sup>82</sup>Moses Newson, ‘Brooke says U.S can’t go into Nigeria at will’, *Afro-American*, 18 January 1969, 1; ‘Diggs blast idea of link to Biafra’, *Afro-American*, 24 May 1969, 1; ‘Biafra picture colored – Diggs’, *Afro-American*, 8 March 1969, 1.

<sup>83</sup>See Position Paper of the Joint Afro Committee on Biafra, undated, Box 3, Folder ‘Joint Afro Committee on Biafra, 1969’, American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive Collection, Hoover Institution Archive, Stanford, CA.

of events, it seems likely that the death of Dr. King and the growing racial unrest in the United States, combined with the growing realization of both the Nigerians and the Biafrans that only a military solution could decide the conflict, sapped the energy behind a peaceful settlement. However, the mission did set a precedent that shaped how African Americans engaged in the civil war. That being the importance of seeking to alleviate as much suffering in the warzone as possible through either humanitarian aid or supporting a peaceful diplomatic settlement, but at the same time viewing Nigerian unity as critical to not only Nigeria's future, but also the future of Africa and the broader Black diaspora.

## Conclusion

Between March 1967 and April 1968, leading African American civil rights leaders in the United States had attempted to assist in finding a peaceful settlement to the Nigerian Civil War. Although their efforts were unsuccessful and the war continued until January 1970 and cost thousands more lives, this article has explored in detail the scope of this unique undertaking, that forms part of the broader 'global' interpretation of the civil war. As reports in the Black press of unspeakable violence and terror reached American shores, the ANLCA, whose commitment to a liberal vision of Black internationalism had made it one of the most prominent Africa-orientated Black organizations in the United States, mobilized its personnel and resources to assist. Building on personal, institutional, educational, political and cultural connection with Nigeria, the members of the Call Committee devoted themselves to working for a solution that satisfied the concerns of the warring parties. In this, the ANLCA was eventually inhibited by the diplomatic realities of the war and the tug of domestic civil rights issues. In exploring the ANLCA mission to Nigeria, this article has attempted to uncover a Black internationalist initiative that has been neglected by historians, and potentially prompt a reassessment of the scope, challenges and limits of Black internationalism during this era of post-colonial crisis. The mission established a strong precedent for how African Americans should engage with the civil war. Theodore Brown described the mission as an expression of 'the ethnic relationship that exists between 56 million Nigerians and 22 million AfroAmericans'.<sup>84</sup> However, this transnational connection meant that the ANLCA mission was forced to grapple with principles and ideals that complicated understandings of Black internationalism.

The sense of racial solidarity, espoused by the ANLCA, became intertwined with competing ideals around human rights, governance, self-determination and sovereignty that would become part of the broader African American discourse on the civil war – the first, on the importance of protecting the rights and security of the Igbo, the second, the view that this should be achieved through a unified Nigeria. Although the mission failed in developing a diplomatic settlement that linked these goals, the ideals of solidarity and internationalism that inspired it cannot be doubted. In March 1967, as the ANLCA launched its first foray into the diplomacy of the Nigerian Civil War, its Black internationalist intentions were clearly on display. 'We offer our services', declared the ANLCA press release, 'in such an enterprise in the hope that this largest, richest, and in many respects most promising nation in Black Africa may fulfil the destiny it so richly deserves, to the benefit of Africa, the world, and ourselves'.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>84</sup>Memorandum from T.E. Brown to R. Wilkins, 14 June 1967, TRNAACP, LOC.

<sup>85</sup>Press release 'Negro leaders offer to mediate Nigerian civil crisis', 27 March 1967, TRNAACP, LOC.