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The U.S. Press and Political Change in the Third World: The Coverage of Military Coups

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Abstract *One of the chief features of the Third World is how often regimes change. These regime changes have many implications both for internal political stability in the Third World and in the relationships between the Third World and the super-powers. In the United States, it is generally the media that inform the American people about these changes and their implications for the United States. This paper analyzes the coverage of the two most recent military coups in Nigeria by the U.S. press.*

Our analysis indicates that if a government that is supportive of American interests is overthrown, and the personalities and policies of the new leaders are not readily apparent to the press, the change is greeted with hostilities by the U.S. press. However, as soon as it becomes apparent that the new regime will not threaten the economic and political interests of the United States, the press rallies behind the new regime and begins to proclaim it as a savior. The press lamented the overthrow of Shagari's government and proclaimed the coup a setback for democracy in Africa. However, within a few weeks of this judgement, the coup that overthrew President Shagari was hailed as necessary for the political stability and economic prosperity of Nigeria. When the military government that seized power from Shagari was itself thrown out of office in a military coup, the new regime was welcomed by the press. We also found the U.S. press utilizes a biased and distorted framework in its coverage of political events in the Third World. The framework used in the Nigerian case asserts that all economic and political crises emanate from tribalism, corruption, and the criminal tendencies of Nigerians. We argue in this paper that this perspective, which informs the coverage of political events in Nigeria by the U.S. press, does not allow it to present valid and truthful explanations of political changes in Nigeria. We also argue that this shallow coverage is done deliberately so as to obscure the reality of political struggles in Nigeria. We assert that it is in the interests of both the Nigerian ruling class and international capitalism to attribute economic and political crises in Nigeria to tribalism, corruption, and nepotism.

Introduction

The flow of information across national borders is not a new journalistic practice. From the beginning of the establishment of the first newsheets, news purveyors have been

interested in reporting accounts of events in foreign countries. Those early newssheets sometimes relied on professional letter-writers located in important cities abroad for foreign news. Such letters were delivered by captains of ships. Frank Luther Mott, in an often-referenced work, noted that:

there were the letters of news written to merchants and men of position by friends abroad and in other colonies . . . but the writing of news-letters was also sometimes systematized by professional letter-writers located in important news centers, such as Boston . . . and London. This . . . had been common in Italy, Germany, England and other countries for hundreds of years. . . .¹

The titles of the first sheet of news ever printed (first in Holland and later in England) between December 23, 1620 and September 18, 1621 even point to the fact that foreign news coverage is as old as the earliest period of journalism history. The titles of some of those sheets of news included: *Courant Out of Italy, Germany; Courant Newes Out of Italy, Germany, Bohemia, Poland; Corante, Or, Newes from Italy, Germanie, Hungarie, Spaine and France.*² Edwin Emery points out that in England the corantos, the very rudimentary prototypes of the modern newspaper which appeared in the summer of 1621, "printed nothing but foreign news."³

Foreign news was also the great staple of colonial papers in America, and it was what newspaper readers chiefly expected of their papers because many of them had come from England and other parts of Europe and desired to be informed of accounts of events in Europe. This theme was well stated in the first but short-lived American newspaper titled *Publick Occurrences both Foreign and Domestick*, which was "designed, that the country shall be furnished once a moneth (or if any Glut of Occurrences happen, oftener) with an account of such considerable things as have arrived unto our Notice."⁴ When a press for the masses was born in the early 1830s in the United States, accounts of foreign news and human interest stories abroad were also reported by sensational writers like George Wisner.⁵

In Africa, the early newspapers contained accounts of events abroad. The first Nigerian newspaper, *Iwe Irohin* (established in 1859), and subsequent papers such as the *Anglo-African* and the *Lagos Times and Gold Coast Advertiser* (established in 1863 and 1880, respectively), for example, contained brilliant accounts of sociopolitical and economic events in England and other parts of West Africa.

All these accounts confirm the fact that the coverage and flow of news across national borders have been a journalistic phenomenon which dates as far back as the earliest period of journalism history. But there has been no time when this practice generated such untold torrent of debate, protest, and controversy as in the last decade or two. At the core of the controversy over international news coverage today is, as it was about seventy years ago when America vigorously protested against and complained that Reuters news agency of the United Kingdom gave a distorted image of America to the world, an image of a wild uncivilized country of Negro lynchings and racial violence. At that time, Reuters held a monopoly of world news, shutting off the Associated Press of USA from the international news arena. The then general manager of A.P., Kent Cooper, protested against what he described as a negative and distorted image of United States as reported to the world's media by Reuters, arguing: "Americans want to look at the world through their own eyes, and not through the British eyes."⁶

Ironically enough, the same complaint and protest made by the United States and

particularly the A.P. is being made today by the Third World countries against the United States and its media, including the A.P., which, along with three other Western-based news wire services—UPI (USA), Reuters (U.K.), and AFP (France)—account for about 80 percent of the total world news coverage. At the center of the controversy today is the Third World complaint that the Western media (especially U.S. media) coverage of events in Africa, Asia, and South America, is not only scanty, biased, and inadequate, but woefully misleading, stressing military coups, crises, strikes, earthquakes, street demonstrations, etc. Third World countries complain that this type of news coverage presents or leaves stereotyped images of their peoples and cultures.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the presentation of such stereotyped images of Africa, using the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal's* coverage of military coups in Nigeria as a case study.

We chose to use the *New York Times* on the basis of its circulation and its acknowledged opinion leadership, influence, and popularity in the United States and abroad. The *New York Times* was ranked number one among top ten leading quality newspapers in the world, according to a study by John C. Merrill.⁷ In this study, the *New York Times* outranked the other judged U.S. "quality" newspapers, including the *Christian Science Monitor*, the *Washington Post*, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, *Baltimore Sun*, and *Los Angeles Times*. We also chose the *New York Times* because it is believed to be widely read by opinion leaders and decision makers not only in government and business but also in academia and sociocultural circles in the United States. It is the paper that America's leaders read, concluded one study that sought to determine what America's leaders read.⁸ Apart from its recognized international journalistic stature and foreign-policy influence on U.S. government, the *Times* was also chosen for this study because it maintains stringers in its African bureau.

The *Washington Post* is also an influential paper, and we chose the *Wall Street Journal* to get the "business perspective" of political events.

Literature Review

Several studies have been done on Western media coverage of the Third World in general and Africa in particular. The studies tend to point out that Africa as a region is seen largely by the Western media, especially the Anglo-American press, as an area of incessant calamity, conflict, strife, and catastrophe. The studies also tend to point out that achievements in education, literacy, science, and technology are all but ignored by Western media, leaving biased and stereotyped images of the region. This negative form of news presentation is antithetical to Western media reporting of events in Western Europe and North America. This is supported by evidence from a study by Semmel⁹ which showed that U.S. media pays far greater (favorable) attention to countries that are economically affluent, politically powerful, and culturally similar to the U.S.—i.e., the image of the global system presented by the prestigious U.S. newspapers is basically Eurocentric, big-power dominant, and Western oriented. Hester¹⁰ also suggested that variables such as national rank in the power hierarchy of nations, dominance and weakness of nations, and cultural as well as economic affinities are causal factors in the patterns of information flow between nations. United States media's favorable coverage of Western Europe and unfavorable coverage of the Third World may be closely related to this factor. Rimmer¹¹ made similar conclusions in a study of foreign news on UPI's flagship, its "A" wire. He said, "The proportions of crime and disaster stories in re-

gional titles tend to increase as attention moves from the USA and Western Europe into Third World regions.”¹²

This conclusion supports the views of some scholars, including Mehra,¹³ Gunaratne,¹⁴ and Bill,¹⁵ that Western media coverage of Third World events is distorted and superficial, leaving a stereotyped image of Third World countries. In an examination of the coverage of Egypt during the late President Anwar Sadat’s crackdown on religious and political opposition (September 1, 1981 to November 1, 1981) by the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Times* of London, Mehra concluded that Western media (as represented by these three newspapers) coverage of events in the Third World was tinged with Western biases and stereotypes. Gunaratne found similar stereotypes in a longitudinal study of the reporting of events in the Third World by two Australian newspapers, the *Courier-Mail* and the *Age*. Writing about the coverage of Iran by major U.S. newspapers, including the *New York Times*, James Bill, a professor of Middle Eastern politics, concluded that: “The American mass media’s coverage of Iran has over the years been consistently sparse, superficial and distorted.”¹⁶

In a seminal work on the reportage and image of Africa in four British and American newspapers, Nwosu¹⁷ observed that Africa was still largely underreported in Western media. According to Nwosu, the emphasis was still on crisis with little or no reportage of cultural and developmental news. This observation is similar to the results of a later work by Pratt,¹⁸ who examined the depth of coverage of selected U.S. news and opinion magazines on Africa and what images they present to their readers. Pratt remarked that the contextual treatment of Africa by the sampled magazines—*Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News and World Report*, *The Nation*, the *New Republic*, and *National Review*—project the continent in an unfavorable image, emphasizing violence and neglecting inventions and scientific developments. This conclusion is supported by the result of a study by Kirat and Weaver¹⁹ in their examination of foreign news coverage in three wire services, including the Associated Press and United Press International. These wire services, according to the authors, emphasize “internal and armed conflicts and crises and crime” in their news presentation of the Third World. And in a study of U.S. media coverage of Bolivia, Knudson²⁰ remarked that Africa was the least favorably covered of the continents by the U.S. press. He noted, “Probably no other area of the world receives less coverage in the U.S. press than Latin America except Africa. . . .”²¹

The chairman of the *Daily Mirror* of London, John Beavan, attempted to understand why negative and stereotyped images of Africa have been a regular menu of Western media. He said lists of records of achievements in Africa were simply not interesting to readers outside the continent.²² In a discussion of Western media coverage of events in Africa, Peter Enahoro noted that the African continent had never enjoyed a fair balance between positive and negative in its coverage. He added, “The myths and legends with which Africa has been labeled persist, the only difference is that they have been brought up to date.”²³

Contributing to the discussion, one-time *New York Times* correspondent in Nairobi, Kenya, Laurence Fellows, explained that U.S. readers had no interest in the ordinary run of news from Africa, adding: “If we are writing about some great, agonizing human dislocation or some piece of violent political change, we get the space. If we write about less monumental things, we don’t get the space.”²⁴ Former director of Associated Press news agency, Harold A. Fitzgerald, made a similar remark when he said that “the amount of African news wanted by the world’s news agencies would be determined by what the newspapers wanted—and that was in turn determined by what the readers wanted.”²⁵ Two scholars whose works tend to agree with this remark are Cohen,²⁶ who

noted that Western media are interested in the dramatic, the controversial, the contentious, the personal element, and Kaplan,²⁷ who noted that the Western press as well as broadcast outlets "continue to play up spot and sensational news perpetuated by crisis reporting and hit-and-run journalism." Among such sensational news, Chu²⁸ pointed out, is the military coup. Professor Chu of the Chinese University in Hong Kong concluded that "in reporting political or military crises in a foreign country, the government is usually depicted as a villain while the opposition, irrespective of its popularity, would more often than not be portrayed as the hero."²⁹

Noam Chomsky and Edward Hennan contend that the Western media are part of the ideological institutions that "falsify, obscure, and reinterpret the facts in the interest of those who dominate the economy and political system."³⁰ Michael Parenti argues in a similar vein that the major role of the U.S. press "is to continually recreate a view of reality supportive of existing social and economic class power."³¹

How accurately are the above views validated in the Western media's coverage of Third World events? Do the Western media honestly and accurately report events in the Third World or are the reports and analyses full of errors and distortions? If errors and distortions are evident, are such errors and distortions random and unsystematic or do they reflect a deliberate attempt to falsify and recreate a reality that is supportive of the status quo?

This paper attempts to answer the above questions by examining the U.S. press coverage of military coups in Nigeria (specifically the December 31, 1983 and the August 29, 1985 coups). The analysis is based on the coverage of the coups by the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal* as reflected in these papers' editorials, news analysis, feature articles, and personality profiles of Nigerian leaders. The major periods of the coverage as analyzed in this paper are January to March 1984 and August to December 1985.

It is generally acknowledged that when it comes to the Third World, the Western media pay only selective attention. However, the same media accord a lot of coverage to Third World revolutions, coups, and other forms of political "instabilities." The Western media pay attention to military coups and revolutions in the Third World because such political events have the potential of fundamentally transforming Third World social formations. Does this perspective shape the way that the American press covers military coups in the Third World? Our hypothesis is that the realization by the U.S. media that military coups have the potential for radical changes in policies influences the manner and extent of the coverage of such events.

We also hypothesize that the overriding objective of the U.S. press in reporting about political events in Nigeria is to assess how such events will affect U.S. economic investments, U.S. citizens, and other Western economic interests in Nigeria.

The Coverage of Coups

The Nigerian military, on December 31, 1983, staged a coup against the civilian regime headed by President Shehu Shagari. The success of the coup led to the removal of Shagari and hundreds of other politicians from office. The military had, a little over four years earlier, handed over power to Shagari, who defeated a score of other candidates in a national election. This voluntary relinquishment of overt political power by the Nigerian military was hailed as a significant political development that portends the emergence of "democracy" in Africa. The fact that Nigeria's new constitution was fashioned after the U.S. constitution was an added source of satisfaction to many American commentators.

The announcement that the civilian government headed by Shehu Shagari had been overthrown by the military was greeted with alarm by the U.S. press. The *Washington Post* commented that the coup "ended one of the most important political milestones in black Africa in recent years."³² The *Post* informed its readers that the coup ended "four years of democratic civilian rule in Africa's most populous nation."

Writing in the *Washington Post*, Leon Dash boldly asserted that:

With a new constitution based on the U.S. model, it was felt that Nigeria's bold experiment with democracy could influence other West African countries to loosen the reins of their one-party states and military dictatorships, the prevalent form of government in Africa.³³

Dash did not bother to tell his readers how and why the "bold experiment with democracy" would influence other African countries. If one-party states and military dictatorships are the "prevalent form of government in Africa," then how would the bucking of this trend by Nigeria (through its bold experiment with democracy) serve as an example to other African countries? It seems more likely that if "one-party states and military dictatorships" are the norm in Africa, these other African countries could influence Nigeria to rejoin the fold more than Nigeria could exert influence to "wean" them away from "one-party states and military dictatorships."

Reacting to the coup of December 31, 1983, the *New York Times* editorialized that "Africa's biggest democracy became Africa's biggest dictatorship last weekend. The military overthrow of any popularly elected government is a setback for freedom but it is especially grievous coming in Nigeria."³⁴ The editorial flatly rejected the rationale that the Nigerian military advanced in justification of the coup. The military had justified the coup on the grounds that the civilian leadership was corrupt and inept and that it was necessary for the government to be overthrown in order to save Nigeria from corruption and ineptness. The *New York Times* editorial called this justification into question and opined that "corruption has seemed endemic in Nigeria under civilian and military rule alike—hard to avoid when huge oil revenues pour into an underdeveloped nation."³⁵ According to the *Times*, not only is corruption "hard to avoid" in Nigeria (after all, corruption seemed endemic and Nigeria is an underdeveloped nation receiving "huge oil revenues"), but corruption serves a very important function, because "patronage is probably an indispensable tool in stitching together a diverse and conflict-ridden society into a national political system."³⁶ So, since corruption is an indispensable instrument for nation-building, the Nigerian military should not castigate the civilian regime for its corruption or the military should find a better justification for overthrowing elected governments!

The *Wall Street Journal* lamented the demise of the civilian regime, and in an editorial titled "A Dead Democracy" said:

The only system of government with a proven record of accomplishment in the hard political world of contemporary history—democracy—is ironically the easiest system to shatter. Last week a single Nigerian, Major-General Mohammed Buhari, disenfranchised some 20 million other Nigerians.³⁷

John de St. Jorre, writing in the *New York Times*, described the coup as a "backward step in Nigeria's political development and a sad omen for democracy in Africa." Echoing what Leon Dash wrote in the *Washington Post*, de St. Jorre regretted that the

coup "ended Nigeria's brave experiment in democracy which, though flawed, sent a message of hope across a continent that is largely ruled by autocrats and oligarchies."³⁸ He too found the military's stated reasons for the coup untenable because "there are no easy solutions to Nigeria's problems and Nigerians are notoriously impatient people."³⁹ De St. Jorre is clearly suggesting that if Nigerians were complaining about the level of corruption and the worsening conditions of existence under the civilian regime, the fault did not lie in the regime but in the inherent nature of Nigerians to want the good life in a hurry! De St. Jorre did find a few faults with the Shagari administration, but concluded that "With all his faults, Mr. Shagari gave Nigeria stability, political freedom, and a sense of nationhood."⁴⁰ Given all these wonderful achievements, how could anybody think of removing such a man from power!

The *Times* of London echoed the same sentiments as the U.S. press. Arguing that no regime can "alter the basic Nigerian materialism that lies behind the endemic corruption," it suggested that the coup was a setback for democracy in Africa. The *Times* regretted that the Nigerian military did not give democracy a chance to survive in Nigeria. In the words of the *Times*, "Democracy might have been faltering, but it was not dead."⁴²

Although all the papers dismissed the military's claim that it had intervened because of the corruption of the Shagari regime, they did admit that the level and magnitude of corruption were quite extensive during the civilian rule. The *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal* unanimously asserted that the "global oil glut" was principally responsible for the economic crisis that precipitated the military coup. These papers claimed that the "glut" in the oil-market led to huge international debts, high inflation, extensive budget deficits, and high unemployment. The *Washington Post*, for example, informed its readers that

Nigeria's economy had gone into a steep nose dive recently when the current oil-glut on the world market reduced petroleum prices and demand, thereby cutting the country's oil revenues—over 90 percent of government income—by more than half.⁴³

The papers also enumerated a litany of troubles that they claimed faced the Shagari regime in addition to the precipitous decline in government revenues. Foremost among these litanies of troubles are mismanagement and "tribal rivalries."

As has been demonstrated above, the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal* greeted the news of the December 31, 1983 military coup in Nigeria with extreme hostility. As the personalities and policies of the new regime became known to the papers, however, these hostilities were quickly transformed into admiration. A little over a month after the coup, the *Wall Street Journal* informed its readers that the coup might have been necessary after all because, "Although it ended one of the world's largest democracies, it offered the hope that military discipline might end the chaos."⁴⁴

The papers were initially hostile to the coup because the Shagari administration was a conservative, pro-American regime (it could not even condemn the U.S. invasion of Grenada). The papers initially concluded that the objective of the coup was to end the conservative Shagari administration and establish a radical, nationalist regime. As it became clear that the policies of the new military regime were no different from the policies of the Shagari regime, the papers did a reevaluation of their stance regarding the military regime. To dress the military regime in a garb of legitimacy, they asserted that the De-

ember 31, 1983 coup was a preemptive move to prevent "young radical military officers" from staging a coup. The *Wall Street Journal* reported that "a Western diplomat" emphasized that the coup leaders "aren't a group of young colonels or hot-head majors."⁴⁵ The papers speculated that the new head of state, Major-General Mohammed Buhari, could not afford to alienate the "young colonels or hot-head majors" by being too soft on the politicians who had just been thrown out of office, but they warned that if Buhari dealt "too harshly" with the politicians, the "international community, from which he needs money" could be angered.

Although the papers were relieved that it was Buhari and not some "young colonel or hot-head majors" who had seized power, they were initially apprehensive about the probable policies of the new regime. The *Wall Street Journal* reported that "Western diplomats worry that General Buhari might follow General Murtala not only in toughness at home, but in nationalism in foreign affairs."⁴⁶ The same paper reported the said diplomats as warning that "the new government must tread lightly to avoid antagonizing its major donors in the West and allies at the International Monetary Fund."

The paper also speculated that Buhari would engage in foreign policy activism as a strategy to distract people from the internal socioeconomic problems. The *Wall Street Journal* went so far as to state that the course of Buhari's foreign policy will be a key indicator of the strength of his government. The argument was also advanced that Buhari would pursue an activist foreign policy in order to "preempt younger discontented officers from using nationalism as a rallying cry against Buhari."⁴⁷

The three newspapers were clearly concerned about the economic policies that the new regime might adopt. In the first few days after the coup when the identities of the key personnel associated with the coup had not been clearly established, the papers were concerned that the coup could lead to Nigeria defaulting on the billions of dollars it was "owing" to banks in the United States and Western Europe. As the *New York Times* put it, "If it decided to break off financial relations and default on loans, British and American banks would have to write off the debt and see their earnings decline."⁴⁸

Various actions and pronouncements of the new regime soon convinced the U.S. press that the overthrow of the Shagari regime and the suspension of certain provisions of the Nigerian constitution might make it easier for severe economic austerity measures to be imposed. Thus, rather than viewing the coup as a measure against the harsh economic policies announced by President Shagari two days before the coup, the papers now concluded that an authoritarian regime had a better chance of implementing such harsh economic policies. Buhari himself admitted that there was essentially no difference between his economic policies and Shagari's economic policies, but he argued that the Shagari regime "did not have the discipline or the will to arrest the deterioration of the economy."⁴⁹ The U.S. press wholeheartedly agreed with this assessment. The U.S. press, seeing that there were no radical departures between Shagari's and Buhari's economic and political policies, asserted that the military regime would execute these policies more effectively than had the civilian regime.

After having determined that the Buhari regime would continue to implement the conservative policies of the Shagari regime, the stage was then set to portray the Buhari regime in a favorable light.

The U.S. State Department prepared the grounds for this transformation when a State Department official was quoted as telling the media that "Obviously, we regret the removal of a constitutional government by force." He, however, assured the media that Major-General Buhari "is seen as ranging from moderate to conservative. We don't anticipate that this regime will take a sudden lurch to the left."⁵⁰

Having been convinced that Buhari's policies would not adversely affect the massive "Western" economic investments in Nigeria, Buhari was no longer seen as the autocrat who "disenfranchised some 20 million other Nigerians," but as a savior who would bring order to an "unruly" society. The *Wall Street Journal*, quoting an unnamed "London-based Western diplomat," described Buhari as an "honest, intelligent, straightforward career army officer . . . pro-Western and fairly conservative."⁵¹ He was also described as "consistent, a man with a clean reputation, a thorough administrator, pragmatic, not flashy, does not go for big rhetoric."

The *New York Times*, quoting an "American diplomat who knows Buhari," reported that Buhari is "an ardent nationalist, who is tough, self-assured and somewhat austere. If anyone was going to take things over, it would have been him. He has a lot of drive and a lot of interest in doing something for his country."⁵² The same newspaper quoted its former foreign correspondent, Carey Winfrey, who described Buhari as "a very cool customer, a man very much in control of himself."⁵³

Even John de St. Jorre, who seemingly abhorred the coup, proudly proclaimed that, "The good news is that General Buhari, a Hausa from the Moslem north, is a serious, efficient soldier with government experience."⁵⁴

The *New York Times* painted a very flattering portrait of Buhari, describing him as "tall, well-spoken and has a slender face. His English is marked by the accents picked up in his cadet days in Aldershot. He also acquired from those days a love of tennis and golf."⁵⁵ Who would not love to marry off his daughter to such a gentleman?! This is a description that one would have expected to see in "most eligible bachelors" profiles in a marriage catalogue.

The *New York Times*, quoting another unidentified "former high-ranking diplomat who served in Nigeria," reported that Buhari

thinks about what he says before he says it, and doesn't say things carelessly. He is a worldly, disciplined man, not your typical strongman. If you had to go into battle with somebody, you'd be delighted to go with him. You could count on him for sound judgment and disciplined leadership.⁵⁶

The *Wall Street Journal* boldly asserted that "Martial rule has its uses in restoring law and order." It described Buhari as "austere, levelheaded and conservative."⁵⁷ It also quoted a "Westerner" who knew Buhari as saying that "he learned diligently and quickly. . . . (oil people) have a lot of respect for him. He did his homework, which not all Nigerians do."⁵⁸

The *Washington Post* editorialized regretting the coup but concluded that "Economic and ethnic strains may push the central government toward coercion, but an African tradition of self-government and Britain's colonial teachings are still alive."⁵⁹ Indeed! An "elected, democratic government" had been overthrown, but all is not lost as an "African tradition of self-government and Britain's colonial teachings" would ensure that the status quo would be maintained. The irony of the phrase "Britain's colonial teachings" was apparently lost on the *Post* because, if anything, the military coup was a manifestation of these "teachings" since colonialism itself is a brutal usurpation of the rights and interests of the colonized by the colonizer. Secondly, there was nothing democratic about colonial rule and it is therefore absurd that the totalitarian and autocratic colonial administrations could teach the colonized democratic traditions. However, the myth still prevails in Europe and the United States that colonialism was a civilizing mission.

Twenty months after overthrowing the civilian regime, Buhari was himself overthrown in a military coup, and his successor was Major-General Ibrahim Babangida. Unlike the December 31, 1983 coup that was initially condemned by all the papers, the August 28, 1985 coup was wholeheartedly welcomed by the U.S. press. The *New York Times* said of this coup, "Military coups are not the ideal mechanism for changing political leadership, but to judge from the first signs, the latest change in Nigeria may be for the better."⁶⁰

Unlike the December 31 coup, whose leaders and policies were not immediately known to the U.S. media, the August 1985 coup only resulted in the removal of General Buhari and General Tunde Idiagbon as Head of State and Chief of Staff, Supreme Headquarters, respectively. General Ibrahim Babangida (who became the Head of State) and virtually all the members of the ruling body, the Armed Forces Ruling Council (AFRC), were members of the ruling body under the predecessor regime. Thus, the U.S. media knew immediately the personalities and possible policy directions of this new regime.

In his first broadcast, General Babangida (who adopted the title of President) announced that he would try to break the deadlock in Nigeria's negotiations with the International Monetary Fund for a \$2.5 billion loan. Babangida also gave assurances that Nigeria would continue to meet its debt obligations. "International bankers" were so reassured by this stance that they were not alarmed by Babangida's decision to commit about 30 percent of foreign-exchange earnings rather than the previous 44 percent (of foreign exchange earnings) to debt servicing. The American press seemed euphoric over Babangida's vow to end the deadlock in Nigeria's negotiations with the IMF.

This vow led the *Washington Post* to state that, "The new military government is believed to be led by a group of pragmatic senior Army Officers intent on reviving the economy."⁶¹

The *New York Times* boldly asserted that the previous military regime (headed by General Buhari) "worsened economic matters by trying to do without the IMF's financial assistance."⁶² Asserting that Babangida was a "popular military leader," the *Post* enthused that Babangida appeared more inclined than Buhari "to work out a deal with international lending agencies."

The *New York Times* reassured its readers that the August 28, 1985 coup was an "overhaul of the leadership of the armed forces."⁶³

Since the leadership and probable policy directions of this coup were immediately known to the major U.S. media, the U.S. newspapers under consideration wasted no time in lavishing praises on the leader of this coup. The President, General Ibrahim Babangida, was identified as a "popular," "pragmatic," "bold," "decisive military leader."

In addition to the flattering portraits of Babangida, the newspapers also heaped praises on the policies of his administration. The *New York Times* duly announced in an editorial that "Corruption and tribal conflict are certain to persist for years, if not decades. Yet the new regime has so far embarked on a more constructive course than its predecessor did."⁶⁴

If any American still had misgivings about this new regime in Nigeria, the U.S. State Department, as reported by the *Washington Post*, soon laid such misgivings to rest when the *Post* quoted Charles E. Redman as saying, "We have had a good relationship with Nigeria based on a convergence of enduring national interests. We expect that this relationship will continue."⁶⁵

Not only did these papers approve of Babangida's policies, they seemed relieved that it was Babangida's group that spearheaded the coup. As the *Washington Post* put it,

"There had been fears in the international community that rampant dissatisfaction with the Buhari regime would lead to a takeover by radical junior military officers incapable of managing Africa's most populous country."⁶⁶

Conclusion

The U.S. press coverage of the two most recent military coups in Nigeria demonstrates the biases and stereotypes that govern U.S. media coverage of political events in the Third World. First, in the media's eagerness to demonstrate the virtues of capitalism, no attempt is made to inform the readers that the fundamental causes of political instabilities in the Third World emanate from the structures and processes of its dependent capitalist systems. Instead, the U.S. media attribute political instabilities to "tribal animosities," "religious differences," and the "unruly" nature of Third World citizens.

Since Nigeria is a "multi-ethnic" country, the U.S. press finds it convenient to explain virtually every economic and political crisis as emanating from "ethnicity" or "tribalism." Even the massive corruption in Nigeria is explained either as a device to keep "diverse ethnic groups" together or as a manifestation of the general "lawlessness" of Nigerians. The *Wall Street Journal* asserted after the December 31 coup that "General Buhari has taken several swift measures to crack down on corruption and government spending, but many believe he can do little more than put a dent in a system of illegalities that has become part of the Nigerian structure."⁶⁷ If corruption is endemic in Nigeria, it is not because Nigerians are "undisciplined," "unruly," "congenital criminals," etc., but because in a dependent capitalist system such as Nigeria's the local dominant classes lack any firm base in production and rely on using the state as an instrument for private appropriation of wealth. Corruption is thus the most lucrative and most efficient strategy by which a dependent but indigenous "capitalist" in the Third World privately accumulates capital. Corruption is a symptom rather than a cause of Nigeria's economic and political malaise.

Although the Western media expend a lot of energy talking about corruption in Nigeria, they never point out the involvement of multinational corporations in the practices of corruption in Nigeria. The Western media are silent about the fact that much of the money stolen by the members of the Nigerian dominant classes and their foreign cohorts is invested in banks in Europe and North America or is spent in acquiring real estate and other forms of investment in Europe and North America. The American press also fails to inform the readers that the multinational corporations prefer a noncompetitive strategy (corruption) in winning contracts for the supply of goods and services to Third World governments.

Due to the massive Western "investments" in Nigeria, the U.S. press greeted the news of the December 31 coup with much alarm. The three newspapers whose coverage we examined pretended that they were lamenting the demise of democracy in Nigeria. However, they were actually concerned that a military coup could usher in a regime that could radically transform the dependent capitalist social formation in Nigeria, thereby jeopardizing the massive Western "investments" in Nigeria. The *Wall Street Journal*, which lamented immediately after the coup that "the West's major democratic leaders ought to have done more to confer legitimacy and status on President Shagari as one of their own," could two weeks later, in a story headlined "Unruly Land: Military Ruler Fights to Discipline Nigeria and End Corruption," praise the coup and hoped that it might end the "chaos" in Nigeria.⁶⁸

Western banks and trade "creditors" were initially alarmed by the news of the coup as they feared that Nigeria was going to default on the "loans" they had extended to Nigeria. The three newspapers that we studied reflected the fears of these bankers and trade "creditors." The papers have already prejudged that a coup led by "radical junior military officers" will be disastrous to Nigeria because such "young colonels or hot-head majors" being mere discontents and/or foolish cannot govern "Africa's most populous nation." This type of prejudgment will set the stage for American and European governments' hostilities to any such coups in Nigeria. What the papers, bankers, and other Western "investors" in Nigeria fear is not the ability of the "young military officers" to govern Nigeria but their apprehension that a military coup aimed at a radical societal transformation in Nigeria will end these "investors" exploitation of Nigeria and of Nigerians.

The biases, stereotypes, and misinformation exhibited in these papers' coverage of the Nigerian coup were not random and unsystematic. They reflect the determination of the American media to analyze political events in Nigeria in accordance with the interests of those who dominate the economy and the political system.

The biases, stereotypes, distortions, and deliberate falsehood put out by these papers do not result from the fact that they have few or no reporters directly based in Nigeria. They also do not occur as a result of the over-reliance of these papers on unnamed "Western diplomats" (Eastern diplomats never apparently have anything to say) or the news agencies for much of their analysis. It is as well not due to the fact that these papers, even when they send reporters to Nigeria, hardly ascertain the views and opinions of ordinary Nigerians about political events in Nigeria. It is in the interest of international capitalism and in the interest of the indigenous Nigerian dominant classes to blame political instabilities and economic difficulties on the "indiscipline," "unruliness," "criminality," and "tribalism and regional and religious differences" of the "average Nigerian." John de St. Jorre could, for example, proudly proclaim that "The new constitution, based on the American model, is a gem. Clearly, then, it was the Nigerians themselves who let Nigeria down."⁶⁹

The Nigerian leadership has itself on many occasions blamed these problems on the character traits of the Nigerian. Shehu Shagari, the former president, for example, claimed that Nigerians would complain about everything. Another Nigerian politician, Alhaji Isa Kaita, argued that "only God can save Nigeria," and the phrase "Nigeria is ungovernable" has become a popular refrain of the Nigerian leadership. The U.S. press plays up these and other themes to the delight of both the Nigerian dominant classes and international capitalism because by doing so it effectively obscures the fact that Nigeria's economic and political difficulties stem principally from the structures and processes of its dependent capitalist system.

The U.S. media recognize that the predatory activities of certain members of the Nigerian ruling class may occasionally doom the entire structures and processes of private capital accumulation in Nigeria and they are therefore willing to sacrifice such Nigerians or a whole regime when that is necessary to maintain the status quo. The U.S. press lamented the overthrow of Shehu Shagari, not because of its abhorrence of autocracy but because it initially concluded that the coup was designed to effect a radical societal transformation in Nigeria. When it soon became clear that that was not the objective of the coup, it threw its whole-hearted support behind the coup. Twenty months later, when that same military regime was overthrown in another military coup, it welcomed the new regime with open arms. So long as a military coup or other forms of political instabilities result in the change of one conservative, pro-Western regime for an

equally (or more) conservative pro-Western regime, the U.S. press is not alarmed. As in the Nigerian case, it may occasionally shed crocodile tears for the “death,” “demise,” and “end” of the “bold experiment in democracy,” but so long as the coup does not fundamentally threaten the interests of both the local and foreign bourgeoisie, such changes are enthusiastically welcomed.

Notes

1. Frank L. Mott, *American Journalism, A History: 1690–1960* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1962), pp. 7–8.
2. Willard G. Bleyer, *Main Currents in the History of American Journalism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1927), p. 4.
3. Edwin Emery and Michael Emery, *The Press and America: An Interpretative History of the Mass Media* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1978), p. 8.
4. James M. Lee, *History of American Journalism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1917), p. 10.
5. For accounts of some of those foreign stories, see, e.g., Edwin Emery and Michael Emery, *The Press and America*, p. 120.
6. Kent Cooper, *Barriers Down* (New York: Farrer and Rinehart, 1942), cited in D.R. Mankekar, “The nonaligned news pool,” in J. Richstad and M.H. Anderson, eds., *Crisis in International News: Policies and Prospects* (pp. 369–79) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 375.
7. For the criteria used in evaluating a “quality” newspaper in this study, see John C. Merrill, “U.S. panel names world’s ten leading ‘quality’ dailies,” *Journalism Quarterly* 41/4 (1964):570. The most significant criteria used included:
 - (a) Emphasis on political, economic, cultural news and views.
 - (b) Long tradition of freedom and editorial courage.
 - (c) Political and economic independence
 - (d) Strong editorial page and/or views-essay selection
 - (e) Enterprise of staff members in obtaining news and in writing commentary
 - (f) Large proportion of space given over to world affairs; lack of provincialism
 - (g) Good writing—regularly and in all sections
 - (h) Much quoted by opinion leaders and other publications
 - (i) Large, well-educated staff
 - (j) Typographical and printing excellence and general make-up dignity.
8. Carol H. Weiss, “What America’s Leaders Read,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 38/1 (1974):1–22.
9. Andrew K. Semmel, “Foreign News in Four U.S. Elite Dailies: Some Comparisons,” *Journalism Quarterly* 54/4 (1976):732–36.
10. Al Hester, “Theoretical Considerations in Predicting Volume and Direction of International Information Flow,” *Gazette* 19/3 (1973):238–49.
11. Tony Rimmer, “Foreign News on UPI’s ‘A’ Wire in the U.S.A.,” *Gazette* 28/1 (1981):35–49.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
13. Achal Mehra, “The Hero as Villain: Western Media Coverage of the Sadat Crackdown,” *Gazette* 29/3 (1982):137–53.
14. Shelton A. Gunaratne, “Reporting the Third World in the 1970s: A Longitudinal Content Analysis of Two Australian Dailies,” *Gazette* 29/1 (1982):15–29.
15. James A. Bill, “Iran and the Crisis of 1978,” *Foreign Affairs* 57/2 (1978):323–42.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 323.
17. Ikechuku Nwosu, “The Global News Flow Imbalance: A Comparative Study of the Reportage and Image of Black Africa in Four British and American Newspapers,” paper presented at the AEJMC (Houston, TX), August 1979.

18. C.B. Pratt, "The Reportage and Images of Africa in Six U.S. News and Opinion Magazines: A Comparative Study," *Gazette* 26/1 (1980):31-45.
19. Mohammed Kirat and David Weaver, "Foreign News Coverage in Three Wire Services: A Study of AP, UPI and the Nonaligned News Agencies Pool," *Gazette* 35/1 (1985):31-47.
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21. *Ibid.*, p. 196.
22. "Reporting Africa: Where Images Matter, Bans Are Risk," *IPI Report* 17/3-4 (1968):15.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
26. Bernard C. Cohen, *The Press and Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965).
27. Frank L. Kaplan, "The Plight of Foreign News in the U.S. Mass Media: An Assessment," *Gazette* 25/4 (1979):233-43.
28. Leonard L. Chu, "An Organizational Perspective on International News Flow: Some Generalizations, Hypotheses, and Questions for Research," *Gazette* 35/1 (1985):3-18.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
30. Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, *After the Cataclysm* (Boston: South and Press, 1979).
31. Michael Parenti, *Inventing Reality: The Politics of the Mass Media* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986).
32. *The Washington Post*, January 1, 1984, p. A18.
33. *Ibid.*
34. Editorial, *New York Times*, January 4, 1984, p. I18.
35. *Ibid.*
36. *Ibid.*
37. *The Wall Street Journal*, January 5, 1984, p. 22.
38. John de St. Jorre, "Nigeria's Unhappy Prospects," *New York Times*, January 7, 1984, p. 123.
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ibid.*
41. *The Times*, January 3, 1984, p. 6.
42. Editorial, *the Times*, January 2, 1984, p. 9.
43. *The Washington Post*, January 2, 1984, p. 2.
44. Steve Mofson, "Unruly Land: Military Ruler Fights to Discipline Nigeria and End Corruption," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 1, 1984, p. 1.
45. See "Nigeria Coup Seen as Risking Aid Package and Causing Uncertainty in Oil Markets," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 3, 1984, p. 3.
46. *The Wall Street Journal*, January 16, 1984, p. 26.
47. *Ibid.*
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49. *New York Times*, January 18, 1984, p. A11.
50. *The Wall Street Journal*, January 3, 1984, p. 3.
51. *The Wall Street Journal*, January 4, 1984, p. 29.
52. See Clyde H. Farnsworth, "A Nationalist for Nigerians," *New York Times*, January 2, 1984, p. 1.
53. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
54. de St. Jorre, *op. cit.*
55. *New York Times*, January 2, 1984, p. 7.
56. *Ibid.*
57. See "A Dead Democracy," *The Wall Street Journal* (editorial), January 5, 1984, p. 22.
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59. See "Struggling Giant," *The Washington Post* (editorial), January 3, 1984, p. A16.
60. *New York Times*, September 2, 1985, p. I20.
61. *Ibid.*, p. A30.
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63. *New York Times*, August 29, 1985, p. I8.
64. *New York Times*, September 2, 1985, p. I20.
65. *Ibid.*, p. A26.
66. *Ibid.*, p. A30.
67. *The Wall Street Journal*, February 1, 1984, p. 17.
68. See Steve Mufsun, *op. cit.*
69. John de St. Jorre, *op. cit.*