

DURING Nigeria's international pariah days under Abacha's rule, a massive lobbying effort was undertaken in strategic places like Washington DC in attempts to launder Nigeria's declining image.

The effort was largely unsuccessful, and millions of dollars were wasted on uncoordinated lobbying efforts conducted simultaneously by the Presidency, the Nigerian Embassy, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The efforts by the three different bodies were often at cross purposes with each other and the end results were hardly more than the enrichment of a number of American lawyers and lobbyists.

In what many may describe as poetic justice, a number of the key figures in the pro-Nigeria lobby ended up in a bad way. Robert Washington, a lobbyist with close connections to the Democratic Party in the United States, was given a huge contract by Abacha to improve Nigeria's image.

After a time, Abacha felt that the money being paid to Mr. Washington was not being used to good effect, and so Abacha dropped him unceremoniously. Washington did win an out of court settlement from the Nigerian government for breaking the contract, but it could not save his lobbying firm, *Washington* and *Christian* from its eventual closure.

Senator Carol Mosely-Brown, the first African-American woman elected to the United States Senate, was denied a second term largely because of the accusations leveled against her relating to her Abacha image enhancing trips to Nigeria.

Rev. Henry Lyons, the head of the National Baptist Convention, another group which participated in nefarious attempts to improve Abacha's image, has since been imprisoned for embezzlement and more.

Louis Farakhan, the other high profile American used to promote Abacha's regime, has never been widely respected in the United States anyway, showing that even the people Abacha hoped would help improve his image were not well selected.

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Promoting Nigeria in Washington DC

On the day President Obasanjo arrived in the United States on his historic state visit in October, 1999, an article entitled "Betting on a New Nigeria" was published in *Legal Times*, an influential Washington DC legal news journal. The article described the scrambling that was going on in Washington DC as lobbyists and lawyers positioned themselves to get a piece of the expected Nigerian embassy business on Capitol Hill, the American equivalent of the National Assembly.

The firms in the hunt included Patton Boggs, a firm that had previously represented Abacha, and *Long, Aldridge & Norman*, a firm with close connections to Ambassador Andrew Young. One seasoned Washington lobbyist was quoted as saying, "I've never seen the dust-up that I've seen over this. It is fierce. The United States has finally said that it's not negative to represent the country." The article estimated that the Nigeria lobby could be worth as much as \$100,000 a month, a good explanation for the excitement.

Thus far, however, little has actually come of the scramble, and a coordinated lobbying effort in Washington DC on behalf of Nigeria is yet to begin. This is partially due to the new government's distaste for any activity that resembles how things were done in the past.

Furthermore, it is because even without much lobbying, Nigeria is presently a democratic darling on Capital Hill that can do no wrong. This status is unlikely to change in the next few months as the Clinton administration's relationship with Nigeria and the rest of Africa is a key component in securing the African-American vote for vice-president Al Gore in this



•Obasanjo

year's presidential election.

Hubert Shaiyen, the only Nigerian-American lobbyist on Capitol Hill, and a man who proves that lobbying does not have to be a dirty game, believes that Nigeria should not be complacent regarding her present positive, high profile image in the international community.

"Nigeria now has a window of opportunity," he says, "and the government needs to make sure that the opportunity is not lost."

Shaiyen has many years of experience working on Capitol Hill, and thus knows how the American system works, even while understanding the perspective from which the Nigerian and other African governments are coming. It was this unique combination that led him to set up his own lobbying firm largely dedicated to Africa-related issues, *Millennium Strategic Consulting*.

Wiebe Boer

Perspective of a Nigerian-American



According to Shaiyen, there are three key areas on which the Nigerian government must focus when their government relations efforts in Washington DC commence in full force. The first is the debt issue. This has been one of the major items on the Obasanjo government's foreign policy agenda. However, the Nigerian government is sending out different signals, at times calling for debt relief, at others for debt forgiveness. The two are very different requests, and before the United States will be able to respond positively, it has to be made clear which of these Nigeria is calling for.

The second key area regards the issue of Nigeria's recertification. Presently, Nigeria is still on the list of countries considered to be drug transit points because of lax border controls. Even though Nigeria has been temporarily recertified and direct flights are now allowed between the United States

and Nigeria, it remains an impermanent move which can easily be reversed.

The third and final key area Nigeria needs to concentrate on in government relations is the country's image. Sooner or later, Nigeria's international honeymoon will be over and the United States government will again focus on problems such as 419, and the ethnic and religious tension plaguing the country. Nigeria has to find a way to promote a positive image abroad in spite of such problems, and so far, there is no strategy to do so.

Even, once a strategy is developed, the efforts to promote these and other issues have to be conducted in a coherent and coordinated manner, rather than in the haphazard fashion of the Abacha regime where three government bodies were working at cross purposes.

Furthermore, Nigeria's international aims and goals need to be articulated in a sophisticated style appealing to

American politicians who are constantly inundated by well organized special interest groups representing everything from restaurant workers to the country of Uzbekistan.

Finally, Nigeria needs to approach the United States from the perspective of what American government cooperation with Nigeria will do to benefit the United States itself. We are now in the American dominated post-Cold War era, and thus such considerations need to be made when any country is trying to rise in stature in the international community.

So, ultimately, what is the purpose of wooing the American government to enhance Nigeria's relations with the world's only remaining super power? Why go through all this effort?

In spite of often hostile attitudes towards Americans around the world, the United States' status as the world's leading economic power entails that it has to be a major trading partner if a country is going to improve its economy.

Along with coordinated efforts to improve Nigeria's image and appeal to American interests, Nigeria's oil gives it the leverage it will need to secure open access to American markets. Also, if the American government continues its pro-Nigeria stance, that, more than any advertising the Nigerian government could do on its own, will encourage American investors to consider Nigeria as an option.

In short, the money that is eventually spent on enhancing Nigerian government relations on Capital Hill will be an investment in the future. Rather than only making a few nefarious American lawyers wealthy like Abacha's lobbying efforts did, the lobbying efforts of the new Nigeria could translate into a significant boost to the Nigerian economy.

This time around, however, the Nigerian government has to ensure that those doing the lobbying and securing the investment are people who truly think of Nigeria first and their own bank accounts second.