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Existential Convergence in the Republic of Biafra: An Analysis of Civil-Military Relations, 1967–1970

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Abstract

This study extends Peter D. Feaver's principal-agent framework of civil-military relations to the Republic of Biafra during the Nigeria-Biafran War (1967-1970), arguing that the Biafran case reveals a distinctive modality of wartime agency, what this study terms "existential convergence" in which the survival interests of agents became indistinguishable from the principal's war objectives, thereby compressing the agency slack that characterises conventional civil-military delegation. Drawing on archival materials from National Archives, Enugu, wartime publications including Markpress News Feature Service, secondary literature, the work analyses how Gen. Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, as principal, constructed and sustained a network of specialised agents: the Research and Production (RAP) Directorate, the Propaganda Directorate, the Land Army, and Medical-Humanitarian agencies, whose collective compliance with the principal's mandate sustained a secessionist state against a vastly superior adversary for thirty months. The article demonstrates that three mechanisms distinguished the Biafran agency dynamic from Feaver's original American context first, existential convergence eliminated the preference divergence that normally incentivises shirking; second, Ojukwu's dual role as civilian and military head collapsed the civil-military boundary that typically produces agency tensions; and third, the Federal blockade paradoxically resolved the principal's monitoring problem by compressing all agents within a single besieged territory.

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***Related declarations are provided in the final section of this article.*

By demonstrating the analytical portability of Feaver's framework to an African secessionist context while identifying its theoretical limitations in conditions of existential threat, the study contributes to both civil-military relations theory and the historiography of African warfare.

Introduction

The Nigerian Civil War of 1967–1970 commonly referred to as the Nigeria-Biafran War remains one of the most consequential armed conflicts in post-independence Africa. A substantial body of scholarship has examined its political origins, humanitarian consequences, and diplomatic dimensions. Yet the internal governance mechanisms through which the Republic of Biafra, a secessionist state under comprehensive blockade, mobilised its human and material resources to sustain thirty months of armed resistance against a vastly superior adversary remain insufficiently theorised. The extant literature has tended to treat Biafran wartime innovations-indigenous weaponry, makeshift petroleum refineries, improvised broadcasting systems - as spontaneous or incidental responses to material scarcity and at worse isolated cases rather than as products of a deliberately structured institutional architecture of delegation, compliance, and oversight birthed by existential convergence.

This study addresses this analytical gap by applying Peter Feaver's principal-agent framework of civil-military relations to the Biafran war effort. Feaver's model, developed in his seminal work Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight, and Civil-Military Relations (2003), employs the principal-agent paradigm from economics and organisational theory to analyse the relationship between civilian political leaders (principals) and military officers and institutions (agents). The theory's core problematic is the tension between "working" which is the agent's faithful execution of the principal's preferences and "shirking" which entails the agent's pursuit of autonomous preferences in deviation from the principal's directives. The principal manages this tension through monitoring (intrusive or non-intrusive oversight) and punishment (imposing costs for detected shirking).

Feaver's framework was developed to explain American civil-military relations during the Cold War and post-Cold War periods - a context characterised by stable democratic institutions, professional military establishments, and peacetime or limited-war conditions. Its application to an African secessionist state under existential threat represents a significant extension, one that tests the theory's analytical portability while revealing dimensions of wartime agency that the original formulation does not fully capture. The Biafran case, this work argues, illuminates a distinctive modality of wartime civil-military relations that this article terms "existential convergence." This is a condition in which the existential nature of the conflict collapses the

preference divergence between principal and agents that normally incentivises shirking, producing extraordinary agent compliance under extreme resource constraints.interro

Feaver's Framework and the Problem of Portability

The study of civil-military relations has been shaped by two dominant traditions. The first, associated with Samuel Huntington's The Soldier and the State (1957), interrogates the institutional separation between civilian and military spheres and argues that military professionalism defined as expertise, responsibility, and corporations serves as the primary guarantor of civilian control. The second, associated with Morris Janowitz's The Professional Soldier (1960), advocates the convergence of military and civilian values and institutions in modern democratic societies. Feaver's contribution was to move beyond both traditions by recasting civil-military relations as a strategic interaction between rational actors, using the principal-agent framework to analyse the incentive structures that govern civilian-military delegation.

Feaver's model identifies several key variables. The principal (civilian leadership) delegates authority to the agent (military) because the agent possesses expertise - the "information asymmetry" that makes delegation necessary. However, this same asymmetry creates the conditions for shirking: the agent knows more about military operations than the principal, and may exploit this knowledge to pursue its own institutional, professional or personal preferences. The principal's challenge is to minimise shirking through monitoring (ranging from intrusive congressional oversight to non-intrusive reliance on professional norms) and the credible threat of punishment (ranging from budget cuts to dismissal of senior officers). The agent's behaviour, either working or shirking is determined by its calculation of the probability of detection, the expected severity of punishment, and the benefits of pursuing autonomous preferences (Feaver, 2003: 68–85).

Three features of Feaver's original formulation warrant attention when considering its application to non-Western and wartime contexts. First, the framework assumes a relatively stable institutional environment in which the principal-agent relationship is embedded within established constitutional and legal structures. Second, it assumes a clear distinction between the civilian principal and the military agent - a distinction that may not hold in contexts where political and military authority are fused, as is common in military regimes and secessionist states. Third, it assumes that the agent's temptation to shirk arises primarily from the divergence between civilian and military preferences - a divergence that may be radically compressed in

conditions of existential threat, where the survival of the principal and the survival of the agent become indistinguishable as it was in the Biafran example.

The Biafran case challenges all three assumptions. The Republic of Biafra was a secessionist state without established constitutional structures, governed by a military officer (Ojukwu) who served simultaneously as civilian and military head. Its principal-agent relationships were constructed ad hoc under conditions of extreme material deprivation, and the existential nature of the conflict meant that the distinction between working and shirking carried consequences not merely for institutional interests but for survival itself. These features make the Biafran case both a challenging and illuminating test of Feaver's framework.

Constructing the Biafran Agency Architecture

The Republic of Biafra was proclaimed on 30th May, 1967 by Gen. Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, Military Governor of the Eastern Region of Nigeria, following the anti-Igbo pogroms of 1966 and the failure of the Aburi Accord to resolve the political crisis between the Eastern Region and the Federal Government under General Yakubu Gowon (Achebe, 2012; Madiebo, 1980). The Nigeria-Biafran War commenced on 6th July, 1967 when Federal forces launched Operation UNICORD, the code name for the "police action" against the secessionist state. Contrary to the Federal Government's expectation of swift victory as captured in Usman Katsina's boast that it would be "a matter of hours before Ojukwu and his men are rounded up" (Thisweek, Lagos, July 13, 1987, p. 8), the war lasted thirty months, ending only with Biafra's surrender on 15th January, 1970.

The Biafran principal-agent architecture emerged from the intersection of necessity and deliberate institutional design. Ojukwu, as Head of State and Commander-in-Chief, occupied the apex office of the Biafran state, functioning as the supreme principal who delegated war responsibilities across a constellation of specialised agencies. This delegation was driven by two imperatives: the material and the strategic factors. The former being Biafra's acute weapons deficit and the comprehensive Federal blockade that severed the Republic from external supply lines and the latter being the recognition that the war could not be sustained by conventional military means alone but required the total mobilisation of Biafran society. Felix N.C. Oragwu, a key participant in the Research and Production (RAP) Directorate, conceptualised the resulting structure as the Biafran "war-machine" as "the total machinery and effort required to meet the challenges posed by a war situation" encompassing "the basic needs of the morale, mobilization and commitment of the civilian population and the fighting force" (Oragwu, 1989, p. 214). This war-machine comprised several principal agency nodes. They are briefly highlighted below.

The Research and Production (RAP) Directorate was the technological backbone of the Biafran state. Numbering approximately 1,400 workers across 40 specialised units (Asika, 2025, p. 156), RAP was mandated to harness scientific knowledge and local ingenuity for the research, modification, repair and production of weapons and other war material. Its agents included scientists, engineers, technicians, academics, and university students drawn from institutions such as the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and from public and private sector organisations. RAP's output included the famous and dreaded Ogbunigwe - a family of improvised explosive devices that became Biafra's most iconic weapon - armoured personnel carriers, petroleum refineries, and improvised broadcasting equipment.

The Propaganda Directorate, headed by Uche Chukwumerije and staffed by intellectuals including Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi, Uche Okeke and Okokon Ndem (the polyglot), was tasked with maintaining psychological balance through the Home Press Service, External Publicity Bureau, and Publications and Research Department (Chukwu, 2008, p. 95). The Directorate operated Radio Biafra and the Voice of Biafra - the latter housed in an underground bunker at Ugwunchara, Umuahia that remained invisible to Federal forces throughout the war.

The Land Army, established in 1969, mobilised the civilian population for food production. Working in tandem with the Essential Food Processes and Production Group, it coordinated agricultural cultivation, food preservation, and the discovery of alternative food sources — including the refinement of tree bark (uda) as a salt substitute after the Okposi and Uburu salt mines fell to Federal forces.

The Humanitarian and Medical Agencies developed improvised medical systems, including direct donor-to-patient transfusion techniques, sterilisation methods using boiling and fire, and the discovery and refinement of local medicinal plants such as lemon grass, Shrashra, and Nturukpa. They were also in-charge of the distribution of food and other essentials to Internally Displaced Persons camps as delivered by donor agencies.

The Diplomatic and Shuttle Diplomacy Apparatus deployed prominent Biafrans such as Christopher Okigbo, Chinua Achebe, Kenneth Dike, K.O. Mbadiwe, Matthew Mbu, Chike Obi, and C. C. Mojekwu. These individuals leveraged their personality capital and secure arms and diplomatic recognition from sympathetic nations.

In Feaver's standing, each of these agencies constituted an agent delegated a specific function within the principal's overarching directive: the survival of the Biafran Republic. The delegation was necessitated by the informational asymmetry that Feaver identifies as endemic to principal-agent relationships: Ojukwu, as a military officer and political leader, lacked the specialised

scientific, technical, medical, and agricultural knowledge that prosecution of the war required. He was therefore compelled to delegate to agents who possessed these competencies. The critical analytical question, to which the next section turns, is why these agents "worked" with such extraordinary fidelity rather than "shirking" - a question whose answer, this article contends, lies in the distinctive conditions of existential convergence.

Existential Convergence and the Compression of Agency Slack

In the theorist's original formulation, the agent's temptation to shirk arises from the divergence between the principal's preferences and the agent's own institutional or professional preferences. In the American context, this divergence takes familiar forms: military officers may prefer force structures, operational doctrines, or budgetary allocations that serve institutional interests at variance with civilian policy preferences. The principal manages this divergence through monitoring and the credible threat of punishment.

The Biafran example presents a radically different configuration. The existential nature of the conflict - Biafra fought not for policy preferences but for national survival — produced a condition in which the agents' own survival interests became indistinguishable from the principal's war objectives. A RAP scientist producing Ogbunigwe bombs was not merely "working" in the sense of complying with the principal's directives; he was producing the instruments of his own survival. A propagandist at Radio Biafra was not merely disseminating the principal's preferred narrative; he was sustaining the morale upon which his self-preservation and community's continuous existence depended. A farmer in the Land Army was not merely following government directives but the survival of her children depends on it and so forth.

This condition of "existential convergence" compressed the agency slack that Feaver identifies as endemic to civil-military delegation. In conventional settings, the agent calculates the costs and benefits of shirking against the probability of detection and the expected severity of punishment. In the Biafran context, the cost of shirking was not merely institutional sanction of demotion, dismissal, budget reduction but potential annihilation of oneself and the society at large. The existential stakes transformed the principal-agent calculation: the benefit of pursuing autonomous preferences (the incentive for shirking) was radically diminished when those preferences could only be enjoyed in a post-war future that required, first, survival. This existential compression explains why the Biafran agents produced outputs including indigenous weaponry, makeshift refineries, improvised broadcasting systems, and agricultural innovations that exceeded what conventional principal-agent theory would predict from agents operating under severe resource constraints.

This analysis does not suggest that Biafran agents were uniformly compliant or that shirking was entirely absent. The most dramatic instance of shirking - the alleged coup plot by Emmanuel Ifeajuna, Victor Banjo, Phillip Alale, and Sam Agbamuche in September 1967 - demonstrates that even under existential conditions, agents could deviate from the principal's mandate. As has been demonstrated in the following section, however, the principal's response to this shirking reinforced the compliance incentive structure in ways consistent with Feaver's framework. The existential convergence thesis carries implications for the broader applicability of this model. It suggests that the working-shirking dynamic that Feaver theorises as a general feature of civil-military relations is, in fact, conditioned by the degree of existential threat facing the political community. In low-threat environments, the preference divergence between principal and agents is wide, and the temptation to shirk is correspondingly strong. In high-threat environments, existential convergence compresses this divergence, producing conditions favourable to agents' compliance. This insight, while derived from the Biafran case, may have broader applicability to other secessionist, revolutionary, and total-war contexts in which the survival of the political community is at stake.

The Principal's Instruments: Monitoring, Punishment, and Normative Alignment

Feaver's framework identifies two principal instruments for managing agent behaviour: monitoring and punishment. The Biafran case illustrates both, while also revealing a third mechanism - normative alignment - that theorist's original formulation does not fully theorise.

Monitoring: The Federal blockade, paradoxically, resolved one of the principal's most persistent challenges: the monitoring problem. In conventional settings, the principal faces significant costs in monitoring the agent's behaviour, particularly in military operations where the agent operates in geographically distant theatres and possesses informational advantages. In the Biafran context, the blockade compressed all agents within a single besieged territory, allowing the principal to observe and coordinate their activities with a degree of directness rarely available in conventional civil-military settings. Ojukwu's dual role as Head of State and Commander-in-Chief further facilitated monitoring by eliminating the institutional separation between civilian and military chains of command.

Punishment: The execution of Ifeajuna, Banjo, Alale, and Agbamuche in September 1967 represents the most consequential exercise of the principal's punishment prerogative. The four men were accused of plotting a coup against Ojukwu - the most extreme form of shirking in Feaver's taxonomy, representing not merely the agent's pursuit of autonomous preferences but an attempt to replace the principal entirely. Ojukwu's response - execution - imposed the ultimate

cost for shirking and served as a credible deterrence to all other agents that deviation from the principal's mandate carried existential consequences. Ojukwu himself acknowledged the severity of the act, noting that he "did not allow personal friendship to intervene in the discharge of his official duties" (Ojukwu, 1989, p. 165). In Feaver's terms, this act of punishment functioned precisely as the theory predicts: by demonstrating the principal's willingness to impose maximum costs for shirking, it reinforced the incentive structure for working across the entire agents' network.

Normative Alignment: The Biafran case also reveals a third mechanism of principal control that theorist's original formulation does not fully theorise: the use of propaganda and ideological mobilisation to align agent preferences with the principal's objectives, thereby reducing the temptation to shirk not through the threat of punishment but through the internalisation of shared purpose. The Propaganda Directorate, in this reading, served a dual agency function: it was itself an agent producing narratives as directed by the principal, and simultaneously a mechanism of principal control over all other agents, constructing the ideological conditions for compliance by framing the war as a sacred cause, building a cult of personality around Ojukwu, and transforming survival itself into a patriotic duty. This process which this study termed "normative compliance" reduced the costs of monitoring by making agents want to comply, rather than merely calculating the costs and benefits of non-compliance. The mechanism operated through Radio Biafra's broadcasts, wartime literature, the symbolism of the rising sun on the Biafran flag, and the construction of a shared Biafran identity rooted in collective suffering and defiance. As Achebe (2012, pp. 224–226) recounts, Biafran propaganda framed hunger, sacrifice, and endurance as markers of national virtue, embedding compliance within a moral framework that went beyond the rational calculations of the model.

The interaction of these three mechanisms of monitoring facilitated by geographic compression, punishment demonstrated through the Ifeajuna affair, and normative alignment achieved through the propaganda apparatus produced the extraordinarily cohesive agency architecture that sustained the Biafran war effort for thirty months.

The Dissolution of the Principal-Agent Contract: Post-War Implications

The war ended on 15th January, 1970 with Philip Effiong's surrender on behalf of the Biafran state. Ojukwu had fled to Ivory Coast days earlier, and the Republic of Biafra ceased to exist. The dissolution of the Biafran state carried profound implications for the principal-agent relationships that had sustained it. In agency-theoretical terms, the end of the war dissolved the principal-agent contract that had governed the Biafran war-machine. The principal (the Biafran

state under Ojukwu) no longer existed; the agents (RAP scientists, propagandists, quasi-diplomats, military officers, farmers, medical workers) were absorbed into the victorious Nigerian state under the declared policy of "No Victor, No Vanquished" and the 3Rs programme of Reconciliation, Rehabilitation, and Reconstruction. However, the Nigerian state as the new principal had no institutional incentive to sustain the innovations produced by agents who had been mobilised against it. As Udeh, Emeh and Anioke (2024) have documented, the post-war period witnessed the systematic abandonment of Biafran wartime achievements in science and technology.

This outcome illustrates a dimension that the model did not take into cognisance: the fate of agent innovations when the principal-agent contract is dissolved. In the Biafran case, the agents' innovations: the Ogbunigwe, the miniature refineries, the makeshift broadcasting systems were products of a specific principal-agent relationship animated by existential convergence. When that relationship dissolved, the innovations lost their institutional sponsor and political patron. The new principal (the Nigerian federal government) viewed these innovations not as national assets to be preserved but as artifacts of a secessionist enterprise to be suppressed or neglected. The result was what could be termed "innovation orphaning" within the Nigerian state. The term is used to describe the condition of abandonment of technologically significant innovations due to the dissolution of the principal-agent relationship that produced them.

This phenomenon carries implications beyond the Biafran case. It suggests that wartime innovations, however significant their technological merits, are embedded within specific political and institutional relationships. The dissolution of this relationship, the method of dissolution notwithstanding, these innovations stand threatened regardless of their potential value. The post-war abandonment of Biafran innovations thus illustrates not merely a failure of Nigerian post-conflict policy but a structural feature of principal-agent dynamics: the dependence of agent innovation on the continued existence and interest of the principal who commissioned it.

Conclusion: Theoretical Contributions and Limitations

This treatise has extended Peter Feaver's principal-agent framework to the Republic of Biafra during the Nigeria-Biafran War, demonstrating both the analytical portability of the framework and its limitations when applied to context of existential threat. Three principal contributions emerge from the analysis. First, the article has identified a distinctive modality of wartime agency: "existential convergence." This refers to circumstances where the survival interests of agents become indistinguishable from the principal's objectives, compressing the agency slack

that characterises conventional civil-military delegation. This concept extends Feaver's framework by demonstrating that the working-shirking dynamic is conditioned by the degree of interest at stake facing the political community - a variable that Feaver's original formulation, developed in the context of American peacetime and limited-war politics, does not fully theorise.

Second, the paper has demonstrated the analytical utility of applying Feaver's framework to non-Western, non-democratic, and secessionist contexts. The Biafran case reveals mechanisms of agency management, particularly the use of normative alignment through propaganda and ideological mobilisation that goes beyond Feaver's categorisation on monitoring and punishment. The concept of normative compliance, suggests that principals can manage agent behaviour not only through external incentives but also through the internalisation of shared purpose. Third, the study has identified the phenomenon of "innovation orphaning" - the abandonment of technologically significant innovations following the dissolution of the principal-agent relationship that produced them. This concept carries implications for the study of post-conflict reconstruction, technology transfer, and the preservation of wartime innovations in context of regime change.

The analysis also reveals limitations. The existential convergence thesis, while analytically productive, risks overstating the degree of agent compliance in the Biafran context. The Ifeajuna affair demonstrates that shirking was not entirely absent, and the article's reliance on published sources may underestimate the extent of intra-Biafran dissent, factional conflict, and agent deviation that occurred beneath the surface of the official narrative. Further research, particularly drawing on the testimonies of rank-and-file agents and non-Igbo participants in the Biafran war effort, is needed to develop a more nuanced account of the working-shirking dynamics under conditions of existential convergence. The Biafran war-machine, sustained for thirty months against a vastly superior adversary through the collective compliance of agents animated by existential convergence, normative alignment, and the credible threat of punishment, represents a remarkable example in wartime civil-military relations. Its analysis through Feaver's framework enriches both agency theory and the historiography of African warfare, while demonstrating that the study of civil-military relations has much to gain from engagement with cases drawn from beyond the Western democratic tradition.

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