

A worthy savage war

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By Okey Ndibe

There is no question that the mudslinging between President Olusegun Obasanjo and Vice President Atiku Abubakar has brought both combatants – and the offices they hold – into grave disrepute. But Nigerians should not be sorry that this is happening. Both the president and vice president have eminently earned their public disgrace. Men who abuse their offices don't deserve to be shielded from this kind of comeuppance.

I reckon it a matter of poetic justice that the two men have, by their own hands, engineered this carnival of disgrace. The rest of us, long victims of their selfish politics, have been offered ringside seats from which to watch their vicious slugfest. In a sense, none but Obasanjo and Atiku could have done as superb a job of exposure as the duo themselves. All praise!

A friend called me the other day and suggested that Atiku was the worse for the battle. "He'll never smell the presidency," this fellow intoned. I had to disagree, not with his conclusion concerning Atiku's presidential aspirations, but his certitude that Obasanjo, as a two-term president, has nothing to lose. Perhaps I was guilty of misjudging the man, but I never thought that an Atiku presidency was ever on the cards. If Obasanjo's phobia for persons of

impressive intellectual and moral mettle had not led him to select Atiku in 1999 and 2003, the prospect of Atiku as vice president would have remained a laughable proposition. Fortunately for Obasanjo, but unfortunately for Nigeria, the president decided to share the limelight with somebody at his own moral level.

Shortly after Obasanjo re-rigged himself into office in 2003, I wrote a piece entitled "Next, Atiku?" There I suggested that, after eight years of Obasanjo's disastrous reign, Nigeria would be in no shape to survive four (or perhaps eight) years of an Atiku dispensation. That Nigeria had fallen into the hands of Obasanjo seemed to me tragic enough. For the nation to subsequently devolve to Atiku would be, quite simply, farcical.

In 2003, a group of PDP governors and party stalwarts had tried to recruit Atiku to, as Nigerian politicians say, gun for the presidency. Tired of the president's false piety and preachy sanctimoniousness, these men sought to convince Atiku to divorce Obasanjo. The vice president made no secret of the fact that he was tantalized by the idea. In the end, a chastened Obasanjo was reduced to cadging his way back into Atiku's graces. Atiku's public contemplation of a run, followed by recantation after Obasanjo's

desperate plea, must rank as one of the most naïve moments in a Nigerian politician's career.

If Atiku ever had a fog of a shot at the presidency, it effectively evaporated the very moment he compelled Obasanjo to grovel before him. It didn't require a person versed in divination arts to reach that conclusion. One of Obasanjo's chief gifts, acknowledged by friends and foes alike, is an elephant's memory of grievance and an elephantine capacity for vengeance and vindictiveness. Many expected that Obasanjo would mobilize all his political capital to thwart Atiku's presidential ambition.

Unless he's a fool, I suspect that the vice president has reconciled himself to his poor odds of becoming president under Obasanjo's watch. As political dreams go, this is an unfeasible one. In fact, I suspect that Obasanjo is far more wounded by the resounding defeat of his carefully orchestrated bid for a third term than Atiku is by the insurmountable roadblocks to the presidency.

That's one reason I questioned my friend's suggestion that Atiku was the grander loser from the orgy of mutual savaging and unmasking between him and the president. There was an even more pertinent factor. Until this very public falling out, the public had always believed, at any rate, that Atiku was corrupt. His antecedents as a former customs officer did not help. After all, for many Nigerians, the customs uniform is a synecdoche for corruption.

Until now, public perception was somewhat kinder to Obasanjo. While some of us have contended for years that the president was no better than Atiku, there was always a segment of Nigerians who thought that Obasanjo was spotless. Some of who championed the president simply believed that the man's untiring raillery against corruption and graft indicated a man who was beyond reproach.

Alas, Obasanjo took a fight to the one man who knows him in and out, and the president is not looking nearly as clean as he once did, even to his most inveterate apologists. For a president who's always sought to portray himself as a paragon of public virtue, the revelations of his profiting, direct and indirect, from the vice president's sleaze account are nothing short of damaging. Whether the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) wishes to recognize it, the vice president's public relations machinery has done a convincing job of tying the president to Atiku's Marine Float account. Not only were cars bought from the account for the president's mistress and buses for his private secondary school, but also Atiku has shown that the president's personal assistant drew liberally from it.

The president's response has been tepid, and shameful. In effect, his spokespeople have characterized the substantial windfall that accrued to the president's family, friends and businesses as a case of philanthropy on Atiku's part. Was Obasanjo not aware that a vice president he accuses of fiddling with public funds was signing huge cheques to people and

interests close to the president? Did he ever ask them to return the gifts? Why did he never query the vice president on these strange acts of philanthropy? Why was the president not perplexed when his mistress received a car from the vice president's account?

Atiku has demanded that the EFCC publish the history of transactions on the account, insisting that such airing would definitively expose the president's active interest in it. Why has not the presidency seconded this motion? And why has Nuhu Ribadu scoffed at what is a legitimate challenge to beam the searchlight on the president's curious benefits from an account owned by his veepee? Not since Orji Uzor Kalu, in a personal letter to Obasanjo, debunked the president's presumption to clean hands, has there been a remarkable opportunity to test the president's fidelity to his anti-corruption rhetoric. It would be more elegant, to say nothing of honest, if Ribadu confessed to his inability to investigate a sitting president. In pretending that Atiku has not asked compelling questions about the president's possible incrimination in questionable financial dealings, Ribadu and his agency risk creating the impression that they are the president's instruments.

If Ribadu doesn't know what questions to pose to the president, he can get some tips from Nigerian newspapers and online forums. Nigerians wish to know where a man who emerged from Sani Abacha's jail practically broke was able to afford two hundred million shares of Transcorp. When the EFCC was

investigating Plateau Governor Dariye's "campaign donation" of one hundred million naira from his state's ecological to Atiku's account, the president admitted giving the vice president a gift of fifty million naira to help refund the questionable donation. Where did Obasanjo find the money to play avuncular benefactor to Atiku? And, more to the point, what was the logic in giving millions to a man who had received an illicit donation? Presidential spokeswoman, Remi Oyo, even boasted that the president had on other occasions helped out the vice president with cash. Don't forget, this is the same man Obasanjo now accuses of being awash in stolen funds? Many of us want to know when (and how) the president's Ota Farm turned into a cash cow, making an amazing profit of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars a month.

The Nigerian people, not Obasanjo or Atiku, are the real winners in this pugilistic spectacle. At the very least, Nigerians are now armed with some anecdotal proof for their intuitive suspicion about the gluttony of those who presume to be leaders. The reason Nigerian politics is steeped in violence, with some office seekers to slaughter their opponents, is that public offices are a goldmine, a no-man's land, an invitation to gorge on the nation's resources, a ticket to mindless, primitive accumulation at the expense of millions of destitute citizens. This will be Obasanjo's grim legacy as much as it is Atiku's. These two actors will enter the sunset of their public careers justly diminished – and, than God, through self-inflicted injuries. It is an apt retribution,

for they have diminished their nation's
promise and devalued the public interest
to the size of their private greed.

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2. The war we ordered is here
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11. The education of Umar Yar'Adua
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13. Achebe's apt censure
14. Andy Uba Goes to War (1)
15. Andy Uba Goes to War (11): What OBJ taught Uba
16. Why I Take It Personally
17. Andy Uba's highest bid
18. The folly of the Nigerian elite
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Okey Ndibe is a novelist, poet, political activist from Yola, Nigeria. He is the author of *Arrows of Rain*, a critically reviewed novel published in 2000. Ndibe relocated to the United States in 1988, where he founded *African Commentary*, a magazine described as "award-winning and widely acclaimed." Ndibe is also a published poet, and a former associate professor of English at Bard College at Simon's Rock. He currently teaches fiction and African literature at Trinity College in Hartford, CT. Okey Ndibe is finishing his second novel titled *Foreign gods, incorporated*.

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