

The man who would be governor

Wednesday, 08 November 2006

By Okey Ndibe

This is the sum of what we know about the administrative genius or political acumen of Mr. Andy Uba, President Olusegun Obasanjo's senior special assistant on domestic affairs: zilch.

By contrast, a picture is beginning to emerge of Uba as a man of questionable judgment and, quite possibly, impeachable conduct. Thanks to a report in *The Nation* and adept follow-up reporting by Sowore Omoyele of *saharareporters.com* (a young man whose irrepressible brand of journalism makes him a true Nigerian hero) we know that, on Sept. 20, 2003, Uba arrived in New York City hauling \$170,000 in cash. The money was smuggled in on a presidential plane, and under the nose of Obasanjo, who was in New York to attend a United Nations meeting.



Two days later, according to U.S. court documents obtained by *saharareporters.com* and posted online, Uba handed the currency to a woman named Loretta Mabinton who identified herself to U.S. investigators as the presidential assistant's fiancé.

From all accounts, Mabinton spent approximately \$100,000 of the money to purchase and ship a Mercedes Benz SL 500 to Uba. Interviewed by law enforcement authorities at New York's JFK Airport on November 6, 2003, Uba reportedly admitted that he had not declared his importation of such a large sum of money. U.S. law requires travelers to fill a form whenever they bring in, or take away, \$10,000 or more.

Uba's failure in this regard did not strike American investigators as an oversight. An affidavit sworn to by Guy Gino, the central investigator, revealed that Uba had in the past declared his movement of cash exceeding \$10,000. Since Uba is aware of the legal requirement, why did he seek to sneak in such a stupendous amount? He reportedly tried to claim diplomatic privileges, but U.S. officials pooh-poohed his claims.

Unable to invoke diplomatic exemption, Uba and Mabinton were embroiled in what could have been an embarrassing legal mess. What to do? This past September, they wriggled out of trouble

by consenting to an out-of-court settlement of the case. In addition to paying their legal fees, the two defendants agreed to forfeit \$26,000 to the U.S. government.

Uba's "dollargate" has come at an inconvenient time for a president whose self-advertisement as an anti-corruption crusader has in recent weeks taken a big beating. As the presidency catches its breath following a lull in the mutual savaging between Obasanjo and Vice President Atiku Abubakar, here is another proof that the nation's steward is trapped in an ethical labyrinth of his own weaving.

It is no surprise that Obasanjo and his cohorts, especially Uba, would like to wish away the specter of this case, but it won't be easy. Presidential apologist, Akin Osuntokun, a man who must believe that black is white if he or the president but says that's how it is, has already dismissed the scandal as "lacking in substance." Sadly for him and Uba, the whole sorry event happened in the United States where documents are readily available.

It may well be that the president and those in his inner circle are so used to splurging that \$170,000 seems to them like small change, but the rest of us who earn our keep ought not to borrow their nonchalance. \$170,000 is a big deal in a nation where most citizens subsist on less than one dollar per day.

One is intrigued by the president's (and his coterie's) capacity for affecting indifference while wallowing in muck.

Still, it behooves Nigerians to insist on full public accountability. Uba and the presidency ought to tell the nation where the money came from. If the money was acquired in a transparent and licit manner, why didn't Mr. Uba use one of the nation's banks to wire the funds? Since the money was devoted to Uba's personal business, principally on buying another expensive car for the presidential aide, how would the presidency justify the use of a public jet to ferry the funds? Did the president encourage Uba in his misperception of his diplomatic status?

If the president knew about Uba's hurling of cash of close to two hundred thousand dollars to the U.S., then it would only strengthen doubts about Obasanjo's fitness for office. And it is hard to conjecture that the president did not know. In this security-conscious time, did the president's secret service team and other security aides look the other way while Uba boarded a presidential plane with a dollar-padded parcel? Could the security agents have failed to ascertain what items were being brought into the presidential jet? Quite simply, the odds are extremely slim that the president was blissfully ignorant of Uba's atavistic choice in transporting hard cash in a presidential jet.

Even if we assume, for a moment, that Obasanjo was in the dark about his assistant's dollar haul, legitimate questions remain about the president's response once he found out what transpired. When did Obasanjo know that his special assistant was enmeshed in a legal battle in the U.S.? Why didn't he immediately relieve the man of his

position? Or did the president not recognize that Uba's action had the potential of bringing the presidency into suspicion as an accomplice in a potentially felonious act? Imagine the jokes that must have been told and retailed about Nigerian officials and their cash habits. Has the president weighed how hollow his anti-graft sentiments must ring to American officials who know about his conveyance of Uba and his undeclared dollars?

Aside from breaking American law, Uba's cash export was also a violation of Nigerian financial statutes that prohibit individuals holding 500,000 naira or more in cash. Central Bank Governor Charles Soludo ought to tell Nigerians how the apex bank intends to address, through legal prosecution, Uba's breach of the nation's financial regulations. After all, the presidential jet took off from Nigerian soil.

In essaying to minimize the import of Uba's (at the very least) atrocious sense of judgment, a presidency burdened by a burgeoning ethical deficit has only worsened its profile. Nigerians ought to contemplate, and combat, the tragic misdirection of their nation by men actuated solely by hedonistic passions.

A man's worth is often gauged from the company he keeps. On this score, Obasanjo cuts a most unflattering image. A few months ago, the president sought to entrust the job of recruiting his successor on his party's slate of governors. Obasanjo's choice to head that assignment was the disgraced Ayo Fayose of Ekiti, a man mired in

allegations of sponsoring ritual murder in addition to grave acts of corruption. More recently, on a visit to Anambra state, Obasanjo made no secret of his plan to rig Andy Uba into the governorship seat in 2007. Since the president must have known about Uba's cash scandal at the time he was championing his aide's gubernatorial fantasy, his sense of judgment must be called into grave question.

As part of the unholy plan to make a governor of a man who is more comfortable in the world of cash movement and wanton lifestyle, the president and Uba arranged for pliable members of the state assembly to move a motion pleading with the president to release Uba to enable the presidential aide to present himself for gubernatorial coronation. In moving the motion, the majority leader, Humphrey Nsofor, said that Uba had "acquired all the necessary experience to reproduce the achievements of the federal government here in Anambra state."

Like most politicians, Nsofor's shame account, I suspect, is in the red. Otherwise, he'd today be feeling like a goat for apotheosizing a man who is, on the strength of every public record, adept merely at conveying huge sums of cash in presidential jets and accomplished only in the tainted art of ostentation. If he has gained any insights on statecraft, he has so far taken scrupulous care not to demonstrate it. But given that President Obasanjo has been his teacher, he must be forgiven his obsession with crassness.

It is understandable that a man tutored by a morally inept instructor should hanker after lucre. Unless the people of Anambra are willing to settle for a governor who carts cash abroad and treats himself to sybaritic excesses, they must begin now to serve Obasanjo notice that Uba is far from the kind of governor they wish to recruit. They should tell Obasanjo that he is welcome to take his factotum home to Otta Farm.

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About Okey Ndibe



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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