That Old Bugbear

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I am not going to get into the rights and wrongs of former military president Ibrahim Babangida’s decision to run for office once again. Left to him and if he can have his way, he wants to be an elected president, like his senior colleague former President Olusegun Obasanjo. Suffice it to say, however, that the rate at which IBB’s media outfit is issuing statements of denials and explanations is an indication that the former president’s camp must be very worried about the turn of events in the country. The Goodluck Jonathan factor is definitely complicating matters for Babangida’s party - People’s Democratic Party - at the moment, especially now that blackmail has become the weapon of choice that is being freely used by our politicians in support of Jonathan’s undeclared intention to succeed himself next year. My own preference would be that because former president Babangida is such a polarising political figure (as many who adore him also loath his politics), he should find someone to back in the next presidential contest. In addition, he has really done the equivalent of two terms as president of this country. But politicians reason differently than mere mortals like us and they tend to see support where we see sycophancy and strength where we see political desperation and opportunism. However, that is not the point of this piece. The problem for the former president is that his ambition is resurrecting some of his old “sins,” which his critics want to use to rubbish him, his presidential ambition and possibly send him to jail. There are a few of them but I have been quite amazed by the strength of the debate on the so-called $12.4 billion Gulf War windfall. I remember it was once claimed that government didn’t have a copy of the report done by the late Pius Okigbo panel on the controversial subject. In fact, the Obasanjo government wasn’t prepared to touch the issue with barge pole. A copy of the report has now been sent to the current Minister of Justice and Attorney-General of the Federation, Mohammed Bello Adoke, who is being pressured by civil society groups to prosecute Babangida over the issue. At the time it was being claimed that the report had vanished into thin air, I recollected that Newswatch had access to it and had done two cover stories on the issue. The first was in the October 24, 1994 edition of the magazine, while the second was in the January 16, 1995 issue. And according to the Okigbo Report, by the time that IBB stepped aside in August 1993, there was only $206 million left in the dedicated accounts in which the $12.4 billion had been lodged. For curiosity sake, I took out the two stories last week to have another read of them. The man who started the ruckus over the affair was William Keeling, a freelance reporter for the Financial Times of London, who reported that at least $3 billion of the oil windfall had been mismanaged by the Babangida government. He was without much ceremony deported. But what jumped at me was what the Okigbo panel said some of the money had been spent on. And I will give examples here. Security gulped $59.72 million; Ministry of Defence $322.35 million; Defence Attaches $25.49 million; TV equipment for Ahmadu Bello University, $17.90 million; TV/Video for the presidency $18.30 million; Staff Welfare, Doddan Barracks and Aso Rock $23.98 million; President Babangida’s overseas trips $8.9 million; Overseas travels for the First Lady $.99 million, Gift to Liberia $1m and Gift to Ghana $.50 million. ABU, for example, claimed it didn’t know how much about the cost of its TV equipment because the money was not released directly to the university. It may be right to wonder if the disbursed money got to the right places and the right people. Little wonder then that Okigbo came to the conclusions that the windfall was frittered on “what could neither be adjudged genuine high priority or truly generative investment; that neither the president nor the governor (of the CBN Abdulkadir Ahmed) accounted to anyone for these massive extra-budgetary expenditures; that these disbursements were clandestinely undertaken while the country was openly reeling with crushing external debt overhang. These represent a gross abuse of public trust.” What the Okigbo panel also discovered was that the money was not paid into the federation account, as required by law “but into special dedicated accounts,” which, as it emphasised, only two people (Babangida and Ahmed) allegedly had access to. Interesting questions have been asked about the Okigbo report since it was submitted to the Abacha government in 1994. Among them is this one: Can the $12.4 billion be truly regarded as a windfall? There have been claims that the windfall (that is, the difference between what oil sold for before and during the war) was actually $571.78m, while a panel headed by General Emmanuel Abisoye put it at only $2.4 billion. No matter. Something seems amiss here, although I am not aware that former President Babangida was interviewed directly by the Okigbo panel. I also don’t know if the former leader put up a comprehensive defence of his administration’s management of Nigeria’s resources during the Gulf War, windfall or not. I have not come across such a defence. What is clear is that this controversy won’t go away and for once, we’ve got to bite the bullet on this and sort it out. So for the sake of IBB and for Nigeria’s sake, let’s put this issue to rest once and for all, especially now that the Jonathan government has promised to look into it. Let’s hope Nigerians would be told the final truth about what happened to their money. But I am not holding my breath. SMS: 08055001924