

Liberia: America's Stepchild

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Author: Major J.E. Herring

## **LIBERIA: AMERICA'S STEPCHILD**

### **(Executive Summary)**

#### **Background**

In 1990, Liberia exploded into a bloody civil war that continues to this day. During this time, USMC forces have engaged in three incursions into Liberia, the last one occurring in May 1996. Despite these recent actions, most military officers remain largely unaware of the Liberian war, its causes, or the historical 'special relationship' existing between the United States and Liberia. To that end, this paper serves to provide an overview of the Liberian experience with an emphasis on analyzing the economic, political, and historical, casual factors that led to the initiation of the Liberian civil war as well as those factors which contribute to the continuation of the war to this day.

#### **Discussion**

Freed American slaves, calling themselves Americo-Liberians, laid the cornerstones for the Liberian state and in so doing proclaimed Liberia as a land of freedom and democracy for all her citizens. But, the term 'citizen' was perversely defined by the early forefathers so as to exclude the indigenous peoples who made up 95% of the population of Liberia. For the next 133 years, these Americo-Liberians continued to hold the reigns of power through a mix of political manipulation and strong-arm tactics. In absolute control of the tools of government, the Americo-Liberians garnered a monopoly on the Liberian economy as well. Mid-twentieth Century reforms ostensibly intended to breakdown the economic and political barriers existing between the Americo-Liberians and the indigenous population never bridged the chasm of inequity between the two groups.

In 1980, 150 years of Americo-Liberian rule came to a bloody end at the hands of an illiterate twenty-eight-year-old master sergeant named Samuel Kanyon Doe. Most Liberians assumed minority rule had ended with the Americo-Liberians; it had not. Doe merely replaced the Americo-Liberians with members of his own ethnic tribe and the masses remained as economically and as politically isolated as they were under Americo-Liberian rule. Into this boiling cauldron of discontent, Doe added his own unique ingredient, a large dash of ethnic division and hatred.

In 1990, Charles Taylor, a former compatriot of Doe, led a small band of well trained and well armed guerrillas into Liberia with the intent of toppling Doe's regime. Capitalizing on growing ethnic rage, Taylor soon built an army approaching 10,000 men.

As Taylor's force moved towards the capital city, atrocities of historic proportions occurred on both sides.

In a move to halt the savagery, 5 nations of the Economic Community of West African States formulated a peacekeeping force under the banner of the Economic Community Monitoring Group or ECOMOG. ECOMOG troops deployed to Liberia in September 1990. While ECOMOG was able to restore a sense of order inside the capital, the warlords maintained control over the remaining areas of Liberia. Intermittently, throughout the next seven years, Liberia continued to explode into all out war.

In August 1997, the 13<sup>th</sup> peace accord since 1990, was signed by all warring factions. The accord calls for the disarming of all combatants with elections to occur by 30 May 1997.

### **Conclusion**

The new peace accord promises free elections, peace, and property to the citizens of Liberia. But, in a land where ethnic hate and distrust abound and the basic questions regarding the economic future of the combatants remain unanswered, such optimism seems duly questionable. In any event, American military involvement in Liberia is almost guaranteed to continue.

## **LIBERIA: AMERICA'S STEPCHILD**

*Monrovia, Liberia- September 1990.* Most of the British diplomats went home. All of the French departed. A half dozen of the U.S. foreign service remained, and the (U.S.) Marines set up machine-gun positions around the embassy. The electricity went off in Monrovia. The water stopped running. The food ran out. The civil war turned nauseatingly murderous. An atmosphere of happy horror dominated the hours as Taylor's men, dressed in looted wedding gowns and shower caps, battled with the army for the mansion. The shower caps were for the rain. The wedding dresses were without explanation. Meanwhile, Johnson's troops, wearing red berets and women's hairpieces liberated from the wigmakers, raced through the streets in hot-wired Mercedes Benzes, spraying bullets. The people living around the British embassy grew bold enough to ask Johnson's rebels not to dump the corpses of their victims on the beach there because of the stink. The rebels said sure, okay. There are miles and miles of beaches in Liberia.<sup>1</sup>

During the late summer and early fall of 1990, news from the Persian Gulf dominated the media. Even so, the newsfootage which I remember most distinctly now, and watched with such fascination then, did not originate from the Persian Gulf, but from the small African country of Liberia. At the time, Liberia was just entering into a bloody

civil war and CNN's 'live feeds' from Liberia were teeming with horrific scenes of brutality and violence. Yet, what captivated my attention was not the panorama of bloodshed or even the bizarre 'battle dress' of the drugged-up combatants, but the names and symbols embedded in the newsclips. The warlords were men named Taylor, Johnson, and Doe. The flag (see Appendix A) they claimed as their own was a virtual duplicate of the American flag and the cities they fought to control; Monrovia, Buchanan, and Greenville, (see appendix B) were names seemingly more befitting of towns in Iowa than the steaming rain forests of Africa. There were too many similarities to be mere coincidence. This was not just another African tragedy. There was an obvious and deep American/Liberian connection at play. As a professional military officer, I was embarrassed I didn't know what it was.

Seven years later, Liberia still makes the occasional CNN 'Headline.' Tragically, the Liberian nightmare begun in 1990 continues unabated as her sons remain locked in a war that long ago lost any semblance of sanity. U.S. involvement in Liberia, likewise, continues. Just this past May saw yet another U.S. Marine incursion into Monrovia, the third such demonstration since 1990.

During the course of the war tens of thousands have died in Liberia, millions have been left homeless and starving, and the Marines have shown up every few years to perform another emergency evacuation. Yet, most Americans know virtually nothing about the Liberian war, its causes, or the historical 'special relationship' existing between the United States and Liberia. For most Americans, ignorance of the Liberian situation can be written off as 'unfortunate.' For the professional military officer, that same level of ignorance is inexcusable. Whether acting as protector, ally, or mentor, the U.S.

military has been continuously engaged in Liberian affairs throughout her 170-year-long history. Every branch of the U.S. military, including the Coast Guard, has seen service at one time or another inside Liberia's borders. If the recent past is any indicator, this is a trend which promises to continue.

A basic understanding of Liberia's past and the root causes of the continuing conflict is an essential 'tool' for any officer who could find himself involved, as so many of our past comrades have, in the affairs of Liberia. To that end, this paper serves to provide an overview of the Liberian experience with an emphasis on analyzing the economic, political, and historical, casual factors that led to the initiation of the Liberian civil war as well as those factors which contribute to the continuation of the war to this day. Most, if not all, of these casual factors are deeply rooted in Liberia's distinct ethnic and social heritage which resulted in decades of injustice to the vast majority of her population. Many of these injustices are traceable to the very foundation of the state. To understand the Liberia of today demands an appreciation of the Liberia of yesterday as both aspects are so intimately intertwined in the Liberian tragedy we now witness.

## **EARLY HISTORY**

“Oral tradition in most tribal groups confirms that the present inhabitants (of Liberia) are descendants of fairly recent arrivals.”<sup>2</sup> Of the sixteen indigenous tribes, the first are believed to have migrated from the interior of Africa to Liberia between the thirteenth and fifteenth century with subsequent waves continuing into the early nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Settling in “fragmented tribal clusters,” these early inhabitants of Liberia remained largely isolated from one another. Those who settled on the coast were mostly fishermen and farmers while those who settled further inland coupled subsistence

farming with hunting and gathering. The Mandingo tribe was the notable exception, acting as trade intermediaries between the various tribes inside Liberia and the Muslim caravans crossing the interior of Africa.”<sup>4</sup>

The Portuguese navigator Pedro de Sintra was “the first documented” European to visit Liberia, anchoring in the mouth of the Junk river in 1461.<sup>5</sup> Soon, trade with the Portuguese, principally ivory and spices, “reversed the former orientation of commerce inland toward the caravan routes and attracted greater numbers of people to settle along the coast.”<sup>6</sup> “By the seventeenth century French, English, Danish and Dutch traders displaced the Portuguese... while slaves to supply the new plantations in the Americas had become by far the most important trade item.”<sup>7</sup>

The Mandingo in particular, excelled as middlemen in the slave trade “selling slaves taken on raids in the interior to European traders who established posts in their territory.”<sup>8</sup> So thriving, in fact, was the slave trade, “it is estimated that about 12 percent of the slaves shipped out of Africa to the Americas in the eighteenth century came from”<sup>9</sup> Liberia. The dawn of the nineteenth century, however, would dramatically change tribal life in Liberia.

“In 1807 the British Parliament enacted legislation prohibiting the slave trade.”<sup>10</sup> While this law specifically forbade British ships from engaging in slaving, the intent of the legislation was elimination of all slaving operations in West Africa. To enforce the ban on slavery, British warships began patrolling and engaging suspect vessel off the west coast of Africa. In 1808, the United States Congress, likewise, passed legislation making

the importation of slaves into the United States illegal. In 1819, Congress passed an ‘Act in addition to the acts prohibiting the Slave Trade.’ This

act authorized the president to send a naval squadron to African waters to apprehend illegal slave traders and appropriated \$100,000 to resettle recaptured slaves in Africa.<sup>11</sup>

Against this historical backdrop the American Colonization Society (ACS) was founded in 1816 with the stated charter “to sponsor the settlement of ‘free persons of color’ in Africa.”<sup>12</sup> The ACS was a diverse group of individuals consisting of some of the most influential men of the time including, “Henry Clay, Francis Scott Key, and Supreme Court Justice Bushrod Washington, nephew of the first President.”<sup>13</sup> The motivations of the group were as diverse as the men who founded the ACS. Southern plantation owners viewed the ACS as a way to rid the country of the threat of “200,000 blacks already at liberty” while simultaneously raising the “market value of the remaining slaves.”<sup>14</sup> More benevolent Northerners, on the other hand, viewed the ACS as a means of righting the historical injustices of slavery through establishment of a colony where former slaves would be free to engage in self-government while “enlightening the dark minds of the natives, to whom they were superior...”<sup>15</sup>

In 1819, President James Monroe designated the ACS as the “custodian for the recaptives under its protection” and directed the funds appropriated by Congress be used in establishment of a “transit camp” similar to the British colony in Sierra Leone.<sup>16</sup> After two abortive attempts, a third expedition of freedmen under the command of Navy Lieutenant Robert F. Stockton landed near present day Monrovia (named after President Monroe) in December 1821. Bartering with native kings, Lt. Stockton negotiated on behalf of the ACS the sale of 60 miles of Liberian coast line for

“six muskets, one box beads, two hogsheads of tobacco, one cask gun powder, six bars iron...” The signing ceremony was delayed when the Americans were accused of slaving, but the captain put his pistol to King

Peter's head, forcing him to make his mark on the agreement. Thus was... Liberia born."<sup>17</sup>

By 1828, the ACS settlement had grown to “1200 black American settlers and a growing community of recaptives who chose to remain in Liberia.”<sup>18</sup> Based on the success of the ACS, several states began their own colonization societies. By 1838 Maryland, Virginia, Pennsylvania, New York, and Mississippi established colonies in Liberia increasing the population to over 2200 colonist.<sup>19</sup> 1838 also saw the first merger of individual settlements and by 1843 all the settlements, less the Maryland settlement, merged under the ACS umbrella to form the ‘Commonwealth’ of Liberia.<sup>20</sup> (The Maryland colony joined in 1857)

## **INDEPENDENCE**

“By the 1840's Liberia had become a financial burden on the ACS. In addition, Liberia faced political threats, chiefly from Britain”<sup>21</sup> with regard to Liberia's attempt to regulate trade and levy taxes on imports and exports. Britain declared that as Liberia was “neither a sovereign power nor a bona fide colony of any sovereign nation”<sup>22</sup> she could not legally levy taxes on another foreign power. Faced with the loss of her main source of internal revenue, Liberia severed ties with the founding Society and “established Liberia as the first sovereign and independent (black) state in Africa.”<sup>23</sup> “Britain was the first country to recognize the new state. Most European powers followed suit, but United States recognition was withheld—as it was explained, to avoid having to accredit a black diplomat in Washington—until 1862.”<sup>24</sup>

“The constitution of 1847, drafted by American law professor Simon Greenleaf of Harvard College, served as the basis and ideal for the government of Liberia.”<sup>25</sup> As such

the Liberian constitution was a replica of our own. The Liberian government was divided into federal and state arms, and embodied three branches of government; executive, legislative and judiciary. The legislative branch, in turn, was made up of a House of Representatives and a Senate. Representation in each house mirrored that of the U.S. Likewise the national flag adopted by Liberia is based on the U.S. flag. Even Liberia's first two political parties, the Whigs and the Republicans, took their names from those of the United States. So closely, in fact, did the early settlers and their descendants identify with America and her ideals that they referred to themselves as Americo-Liberians. Yet, the very Liberian foundation which appeared so promising was, in truth, flawed with injustices which would fissure in later years to provide the genesis of the conflict we now witness.

Ironically, the fathers of the Liberian Republic intentionally formulated a government and society on the very same principles of inequality and discrimination from which they themselves had endeavored to escape. Regardless of color or background, the founding fathers were hostages of the more unsavory aspects of their American experience “and their views of Africa and Africans were essentially those of nineteenth-century whites in the United States. The bonds of culture were stronger than the bonds of race, and the settlers clung tenaciously to the subtle differences that set them apart from the tribal ‘savages’ in their midst.”<sup>26</sup> Clearly stated in the Liberian Declaration of Independence—“we the people of Liberia were originally the inhabitants of the United States of North America”<sup>27</sup>—is the proclamation that this new republic was about and for the newly arrived Americo-Liberians, a concept reaffirmed by the Liberian Constitution. Article V, section 12 of the Liberian Constitution, “stated that ‘no person

shall be entitled to hold real estate in the Republic unless he be a citizen of the same.’ Article V, section 13, stated, ‘none but persons of Negro descent shall be eligible for citizenship in this Republic.’”<sup>28</sup> As the indigenous tribes were “officially designated ‘aborigines,’”<sup>29</sup> the constitution effectively denied 95% of Liberia’s population of the right to vote, hold title to land, or by extension participate in the political or social structure of Liberia. In short, these founding documents sanctified the Americo-Liberians, who would never exceed more than 5% of the population, as the ruling elite while relegating the indigenous peoples to second-class status. “Thus a void was created between the two elements of Liberia’s population from the very beginning. This gap was to become a hindrance to the emergence of a sense of nationalism and would remain a latent source of social unrest and, ultimately conflict.”<sup>30</sup>

#### **AFRICA - SOUTHERN STYLE**

Locked out of the political fabric of the Republic, the indigenous peoples also came into conflict with Americo-Liberians regarding economic and trade issues. Americo-Liberian efforts to rid the country of the abhorrent slave trade, in particular, resulted in numerous armed clashes between the early settlers and the Gola and Basa tribes. Likewise, Americo-Liberian efforts to break the Mandingo monopoly on the legitimate “trade among the tribes of the interior as well as the commerce between Europeans and others at the coast with the tribes of the hinterland”<sup>31</sup> met with bitter resistance. However by the 1870s, with the able assistance of the U.S. Navy, the Americo-Liberians were able to crush the tribal uprisings and had themselves achieved an economic monopoly of Liberia as well as an intense and lasting animosity of the tribes.

With the indigenous tribes suppressed the Americo-Liberians set about recreating an exclusive society whose architecture, dress, language, and customs were intended to replicate the lifestyle of the American Southern aristocracy. Likewise, the study of law and entry into the political/administrative structure of Liberian government was the means to success. Business, engineering, and the technical sciences were largely ignored and agriculture in particular was shunned.

“The educated Americo-Liberian would only associate himself with agriculture as the absentee landlord of a plantation of sugar cane, rice, or coffee cultivated by poorer settlers of African recaptives rescued from slave ships en route to the New World. The role of dirt farmer was decidedly beneath his station.”<sup>32</sup>

The result was a hollow economy devoid of industry and based on the limited production of a few agricultural products. A 1908 American Commission termed Liberia’s economy “chaotic, . . . where nearly everything, including food, was imported, while trade, industry, and agriculture languished.”<sup>33</sup> In an effort to stay financially afloat, Liberia increasingly turned to the world community for loans.

Regardless of the condition of the economy, the Americo-Liberian elite remained largely unaffected. The business of the Americo-Liberians was, after all, the business of government. As long as the government was funded, be it through loans, manipulation of tariffs, the granting of foreign franchises, the letting of contracts, or foreign corporation ‘kick-backs,’ the Americo-Liberians were likewise funded. Meanwhile, the indigenous peasants endured poverty and neglect surviving through subsistence farming or as laborers and maids of the Americo-Liberian elite.

By the late 1920s Americo-Liberian exploitation of the native tribes reached epidemic proportions. So troubling and widespread were the abuses that the League of

Nations formulated a committee, formally known as the Christy Commission, to investigate charges of human rights abuses in Liberia. In 1930 the Christy Commission substantiated many of the charges. Three areas in particular garnered the commission's scorn; the pawnage system, the portage system, and contract labor.

Many of the tribal chiefs as well as the Americo-Liberians engaged in a form of indentured servitude known as pawnage, whereby "an impoverished person could indenture himself or a relative until a debt had been paid."<sup>34</sup> Pawnage was a traditional West African practice; however, the Americo-Liberians had short-circuited many of the safeguards of the system with "instances of pawns remaining unredeemed for forty years or more."<sup>35</sup> Likewise, the government portage system was ripe with abuse. The portage system allowed government workers, i.e. Americo-Liberians, the right

"to impress able-bodied men to help carry them (in hammocks) and their supplies while on tour in the districts. The requests for porters as well as the recruitment of both males and females for unpaid labor on roads and other public projects frequently came at the peak of the planting and harvesting seasons. The treatment of laborers on these projects by unsupervised gang foremen was apparently quite ruthless."<sup>36</sup>

The most serious charge, however, concerned the practice of impressing native tribesmen to work on private projects. In 1914, the Liberian government signed an agreement with Spain to supply laborers to work the Spanish cocoa plantations on the island of Fernando Po. Under the terms of the agreement "Liberian contractors were paid a fee for each worker sent to Fernando Po, and wages accumulated over the two-year period of the worker's contract were deposited in gold in Monrovia to be paid in local currency when he returned to Liberia."<sup>37</sup> During the 1920s the demand for laborers rose dramatically. The Liberian government responded by sending Liberian soldiers on "midnight raids of tribal villages"<sup>38</sup> in order to 'secure' workers. "It was even charged...

that President King himself was involved in the lucrative enterprise, which brought \$45 a head for each of 3000 men exported and a bonus of \$5,000 for every additional group of 1500 recruited.”<sup>39</sup>

The Firestone Corporation, likewise, became embroiled in the controversy. In 1926, “Firestone secured a ninety-nine-year lease on a million acres in Liberia”<sup>40</sup> and built the worlds largest rubber plantation. In addition to providing “spacious homes”<sup>41</sup> and other financial perks for government officials, “the officers of Firestone acknowledged that, at least during the early years of their effort to produce rubber in Liberia, chiefs had assisted in the recruitment of involuntary labor.”<sup>42</sup>

The Cristy Commission’s findings resulted in the resignation of President King, his Vice President, and a number of other high ranking government officials. In turn, forced labor was outlawed and the practice of pawning was eliminated. A reorientation of world focus toward Europe and “the more friendly attitude of Franklin D. Roosevelt permitted the controversy to come to an inconclusive end in 1935.”<sup>43</sup> Inconclusive as far as world attention, but a continuing source of friction between the Americo-Liberians and the indigenous tribes.

## **THE TUBMAN YEARS**

The election of 1943 was a watershed event for Liberia as it ushered in the Presidency of William V. S. Tubman, a man who would rule Liberia for the next 28 years. In his inaugural address, Tubman pledged to erase the differences existing between the Americo-Liberian elite and the rest of the country while simultaneously developing Liberia’s economic potential. “The twin pillars of Tubman’s programs were the Unification Policy... and the subsequent Open Door Policy.”<sup>44</sup>

On the surface, Tubman's Unification Policy included several programs which promised to break down the barriers between the Americo-Liberians and the natives. Suffrage was extended to women and all natives who paid a 'hut tax'. The interior lands were organized into four new counties allowing natives direct representation in Congress for the first time. Moreover, Tubman regularly traveled to the interior to personally receive grievances and petitions and dispense 'immediate justice.' Tubman even took strides to embrace the native culture, appearing in tribal dress on civic occasions, taking a series of tribal names, and encouraging the appreciation of native dancing and art forms.<sup>45</sup> As such,

Tubman achieved a degree of popularity and stature in the public imagination that was unequaled by any other Liberian in history... to the masses of Liberian people, to whom he gave a sense of dignity and equality unknown before him, Tubman's image was that of the avuncular head of an extended family, and he was known popularly—and affectionately—as 'Uncle Shad.'<sup>46</sup>

Yet, as much as Tubman may have appeared to be a 'man of the people,' he was very much an Americo-Liberian first and his first loyalty was to ensure continuation of Americo-Liberian rule. His policies were never intended, nor would they ever accomplish, any "actual realignment of power... The old French proverb about 'the more things change, the more they remain the same' is certainly applicable to much of the reform that [took] place in Liberia during"<sup>47</sup> the Tubman years. In Liberia, real power laid not with the vote, but in the elaborate mechanisms of electoral control and manipulation which the Americo-Liberians devised to ensure their survivability. Americo-Liberians controlled who appeared on the ballots, all means of publicity, and—for good measure—tallied the ballots when elections were over. In the end, Liberian mass participation in the political process was nothing more than a façade produced for

foreign consumption. As in the past, the true decision making process of Liberia remained firmly in the hands of the Americo-Liberian minority.<sup>48</sup>

Tubman's Open Door Policy, by contrast, produced significant change in Liberia. Tubman recognized the need to upgrade the standard of living of the indigenous tribes, "but the president was also anxious to preserve the standard of living of the Americo-Liberian elite."<sup>49</sup> Taxation as a form of investment was out of the question. The answer, as Tubman saw it, was to use foreign investment as a means of unlocking Liberia's natural resources. To encourage foreign investment, Tubman passed legislation which allowed foreign investors nearly unlimited access into Liberia, minimal corporate restrictions, and "freedom to remit earnings without excessive restriction."<sup>50</sup> The results were impressive. "By the early 1960s there were 25 major foreign firms investing and operating in Liberia, compared with only one—the Firestone Plantation Company—when Tubman took office."<sup>51</sup>

Iron ore mining, in particular, was a success story. "Prior to 1951, no iron ore was mined in Liberia and no one even suspected the magnitude of Liberia's natural resource base. By 1967 Liberia had become not only the leading producer of iron ore in Africa, but also the third largest exporter of iron ore in the world."<sup>52</sup> In turn, several American steel firms, US Steel, Republic Steel, and Bethlehem Steel, made substantial investments into Liberia and profited accordingly under the Open Door Policy.

Another important source of revenue for Tubman's government was its 'flag of convenience' registry. The registry was begun after WWII at the prompting of American oil companies who were looking for ways to cut costs associated with expanding tanker fleets.<sup>53</sup> Sailing under the Liberian 'flag of convenience' was a means to that end. "The

principal advantage for the American ship-owners [was] that they [could] avoid paying wage rates imposed by maritime unions by hiring seaman from Third World countries.”<sup>54</sup> In turn, the Liberians profited through the registration and inspection fees. By the mid-1970s the Liberian registry maintained a fleet of 2500 ships, including a large part of the supertanker fleet, was the world’s largest registry in terms of deadweight tons, and was pumping over \$16 million per year into Liberian coffers.<sup>55</sup>

Despite the success Tubman’s Open Door Policy had in bringing “tens of thousands of jobs”<sup>56</sup> to Liberian natives, the policy was nonetheless burdened with several shortcomings. The fact that the vast majority of the jobs offered were unskilled low paying positions coupled with a lack of technical training opportunities within Liberia inevitably led to job stagnation for native Liberians at the lowest company levels. The result was the maintenance of the two-tiered society from which the average native Liberian had little chance of escaping. Secondly, the Open Door Policy failed to adequately diversify Liberia’s economy. By the end of the 1960s two products, rubber and iron ore, accounted for 90 percent of Liberia’s total exports.<sup>57</sup> Consequently, the Liberian economy remained highly vulnerable to fluctuating commodity prices and world market pressures. Finally, even though Liberia has a climate and soil considered favorable to agriculture, the country never managed to become agriculturally self-sufficient. As such, the progress the Liberian economy made during the Tubman years was barely able to keep up with payments on a mounting public and foreign debt attributable in large part to the import of food.<sup>58</sup>

By the late 1960s dissatisfaction with Tubman’s policies began to show as workers struck the rubber plantations and iron mines numerous times. The most serious

threat to Tubman, however, came from the military. “In 1963, 1966, 1969, and 1970, high-ranking officers were implicated in plots to kill the president and overthrow the government.”<sup>59</sup> In each case the conspirators involved were of native descent.

Yet, Tubman persisted through a coupling of his dynamic personality, the personal loyalties he garnered, manipulation of the political process, and when need be—through brutal force. Yet, as Gus Liebenow, reminded the world in 1969 in *The Evolution of Privilege*:

For all his authority, however, Tubman is not a dictator. He has served rather as the managing director of an experiment in controlled change, and he has not been able at any particular moment to stray far from the interests of the Americo-Liberian group that constitutes his main base of political power. Nevertheless, to the possible detriment of his own program of long-range reform, he has become the Indispensable Man. Tribal challengers have not lingered long on the scene, and few Americo-Liberians have been able to build substantial bases of support among the tribal people... The frequency of Tubman’s extended health leaves and his age compel the leadership of the Liberian state to ask the long-avoided question: ‘After Tubman, what?’<sup>60</sup>

## **TOLBERT CARRIES THE TORCH**

In 1971, William V. S. Tubman, 19<sup>th</sup> President of the Republic of Liberia, died of natural causes. He was proceeded by his Vice President of twenty years, William Richard Tolbert. Tolbert pursued Tubman’s programs while continuing to make modest reforms in the political, administrative, and civil service structures of Liberia. Tubman’s achievements, however, were overshadowed by the increasingly belligerent and corrupt Americo-Liberian elite of whom Tolbert was so inescapably a part. As was the case in each of the preceding administrations, government under Tolbert firmly remained ‘the family business’ of the Americo-Liberians and they continued to employ the powers of

government to their own personal ends. By the mid-1970s corruption in the upper reaches of the Liberian government was at an all time high.

High officials committed fraud in the letting of government contracts, involved themselves in questionable real estate acquisitions, charged personal expenses to government accounts, used government property for private use, evaded taxes and customs fees, and engaged in other illegal practices.<sup>61</sup>

During the same time, the Liberian economy began to crumble. Rising energy costs coupled with a global steel industry depression resulted in decreased profits and a 20% decrease in iron ore mining.<sup>62</sup> At the same time, falling prices for rubber and other Liberian commodities contributed to the general decline in government revenues. The shortsighted failures of past governments to adequately diversify the Liberian economy were ‘coming home to roost’.

Falling crop prices combined with layoffs in the iron mines eventually led to an exodus from the countryside to the cities in a vain attempt to find work. Monrovia in particular became a magnet to “large numbers of unemployed” who poured into a city ill-equipped to handle the sudden influx. From “a sleepy seaside town,” Monrovia, seemingly overnight evolved into a “crowded, chaotic city where housing was inadequate, sanitation was poor, and public facilities were ill-maintained.”<sup>63</sup> University students joined the ever increasing public clamor for change. Tolbert’s administration reacted by clamping down on opposition groups and arresting the more vocal leaders. As the 1970s closed out, Monrovia was teeming with an underemployed disenfranchised population grown weary of the slow pace of reforms and the corruption of the Americo-Liberian minority. The entire country was a virtual tinderbox waiting to explode. The spark came in 1979.

Rice had long been the staple of the Liberian diet. The Tolbert administration in an attempt to entice the natives back to the farms and cut spiraling rice imports, proposed a 20% increase in the rice subsidy. Rising prices combined with knowledge that the Tolbert family, as large-scale rice farmers, stood to benefit personally from the price increases,<sup>64</sup> led to widespread protests throughout the country. On April 14, 1979, about 2000 University activists led a peaceful protest of the proposed policy down the streets of Monrovia. Along the route, they were joined by “more than 10,000 underclass ‘back city boys’ who quickly transformed the orderly procession into an orgy of destruction.”<sup>65</sup> Tolbert responded by ordering the “police to fire on the unarmed demonstrators. More than forty protesters were killed and hundreds were injured.”<sup>66</sup> Liberia recoiled at Tolbert’s use of force. The army, in particular, was enraged at being ordered to shoot unarmed civilians.

## **DEMOCRACY DOE STYLE**

One year later, on April 12, 1980, an “illiterate twenty-eight-year-old master sergeant,”<sup>67</sup> Samuel Kanyon Doe, led a group of 17 non-commissioned officers into the Executive Mansion. Once inside, they eliminated Tolbert’s small security guard, “captured President Tolbert in his pajamas, and disemboweled him” in his bedroom.”<sup>68</sup> Ten days later, thirteen Americo-Liberian members of Tolbert’s cabinet were led to the beach, tied to telephone poles, and “mowed down by a drunken firing squad”<sup>69</sup>—the entire spectacle captured on TV for the benefit of the ‘liberated masses.’ In the days to come the bloodletting continued as soldiers, students, and the disenfranchised unleashed

decades of pent-up frustrations against anyone considered to be of the ‘old authority.’  
150 years of Americo-Liberian rule was over.

Doe moved quickly to suspend the constitution, ban all political activities, declare marshal law and set up a military government under the auspices of the People’s Redemption Council (PRC). By virtue of rank, MSgt Doe assumed the position of ‘Chairman’ of the PRC and concurrently the Liberian head-of-state.

Quick to reassure the people of their intentions, Doe and his compatriots announced the immediate goals of ending the country’s political and economic domination by a few Americo-Liberian families, stamping out corruption, and building a ‘new society’ in which the republic’s wealth would be distributed more equitably.<sup>70</sup>

To this end, the PRC promised open elections and a quick return to civilian rule.

In fact, however, Doe was more concerned with protecting his own power base than in political reform for Liberia. By January 1985 only eight of the original seventeen PRC members remained in power. Five were executed on charges of plotting against the head of state.<sup>71</sup> Other government leaders and civilian authority figures, likewise, came under suspicion and attack as “arbitrary arrests and prolonged detention without trial [became] common for anyone suspected of opposing Doe or violating the ban on political activity.”<sup>72</sup>

To fill the growing vacuum, Doe began systematically inserting members of his own ethnic group, the Krahn, into key positions of authority throughout Liberia. Even though the Krahn made up less than 4% of Liberia’s population (the smallest ethnic faction in Liberia), by the mid-1980s Krahn tribesmen were “represented disproportionately in the government, state corporations, and especially the leadership of

the armed forces.”<sup>73</sup> For the average Liberian, Doe’s ‘revolution’ was nothing more than a ‘changing of the guard’—Krahns replacing Americo-Liberians.

The under-educated Krahn tribesmen proved to be just as hapless and as disinterested in the economic matters of Liberia as had their predecessors. Predictably, the economic tailspin begun under Tolbert’s rule continued under Doe’s administration. Whatever his educational deficiencies, however, Doe was an excellent understudy of Americo-Liberian rule and maintained a keen grasp of world politics. Five months after taking power, Doe “warned Liberia’s ‘traditional friends’ that unless they increased their level of aid his government would be forced to look elsewhere for help.”<sup>74</sup> It was widely recognized that Liberia’s “two most persistent suitors,”<sup>75</sup> Libya and Ethiopia, were the ‘elsewhere.’ The Reagan administration, deeply embroiled in the Cold War, responded. Almost immediately, 100 Green Berets were sent to Liberia for a thirty day training exercise “to demonstrate U.S. support for the military government.”<sup>76</sup> In addition, the Reagan administration instituted dramatic increases in the level of Liberian foreign aid, increasing economic aid from “\$19 million in 1979 to \$72 million in 1983.”<sup>77</sup> In total, the U.S. military and economic aid package would surpass \$500 million in the five years between 1980 and 1985, equating to a full third of Liberia’s budget.<sup>78</sup> For his part, Doe closed the Libyan embassy, reduced the Soviet Embassy to a skeleton staff,<sup>79</sup> and provided the U.S. military unparalleled operating rights in and out of Liberia’s air fields.<sup>80</sup>

Military concessions, however, were the only tangible fruits of \$500 million in U.S. aid. As was the case under Americo-Liberian rule, money that went into Doe’s coffers seldom made its way to the intended beneficiaries. Vast sums intended to rebuild

the infrastructure of Liberia, for instance, simply disappeared. By 1986, only two of the dozens of funded building projects had been completed, a military barracks and a new police headquarters.<sup>81</sup> Widespread corruption also extended into the state-owned businesses where enterprising government appointees profited through a system of bribes, embezzlement, and the outright sale of public property for personal gain.<sup>82</sup> “The state sector, as one commentator wryly put it, has been ‘privatized.’”<sup>83</sup>

The coup had changed nothing. The man who promised to save Liberia was instead leading the pillage. Whatever their original intentions, Doe and the Krahn seemed inescapably tied to the Americo-Liberian system of government. Five years after the coupe, Liberia’s government was still the exclusive property of an ethnic minority whose focus was on exploiting positions of power in order to garner personal wealth. For the average Liberian, the difference between life under the Americo-Liberians and that under Doe and the Krahn was barely perceptible.

Patrick Seyon, the president of the University of Liberia, who in 1981 was flogged twice a day for eight days by Doe’s agents, emphasized the deep historical roots of the war. “Those who found themselves in power after 1980 went along with the world that had been set in place by the freed American slaves,” Seyon said. “No one saw that there was something systemic in the level of inequality that existed. They followed right in line.”<sup>84</sup>

The U.S., for their part, continued to push Doe for a return to civilian rule. In July 1984, Doe acquiesced to American wishes by disbanding the PRC, declaring his own candidacy, and scheduling elections for the fall of 1985. Doe’s concept of a ‘free and open election,’ however, was to replicate the Americo-Liberian electoral process. To that end, the elections would be held strictly on the newly self-promoted General Doe’s terms.

Elaborate bureaucratic and financial prerequisites were enacted which effectively blocked most competing political parties from registering. Where bureaucratic barriers left off, Doe resorted to intimidation, thuggery, and arrest to dissuade potential candidates from running. By July 1985, only Doe's National Democratic Party of Liberia (NDPL) had passed through all the 'wickets' necessary to garner spots on the upcoming ballots.<sup>85</sup> However as the election drew nearer, Doe bowed to increasing U.S. pressure allowing a few candidates onto the ballots at virtually the last minute.

Given the one-sidedness of the 'campaign,' most election observers were amazed at the enormous voter turnout as people stood in line up to 10 hours to vote.<sup>86</sup> As the polls closed it quickly became apparent that Doe was losing and losing badly. Doe promptly declared the vote count fraudulent and ordered the 'Special Election Commission' to burn all the "ballots in a huge bonfire. Vote counting stopped and a new count by hand-picked Doe supporters was ordered; to no one's surprise, they found Doe had received 50.9 percent of the vote and was Liberia's new president."<sup>87</sup> The Americo-Liberians couldn't have pulled it off any better.

One month later, in November 1995, Doe's rivals responded. Led by Thomas G. Quiwonkpa, Doe's former Armed forces Commander,<sup>88</sup> a "small group of less than 40... captured the undefended government radio station outside Monrovia and the military Barclay Training Center in Monrovia."<sup>89</sup> With their initial objectives secure, Quiwonkpa proclaimed himself the new leader of Liberia and appealed for assistance from the military. Backed by his equally small Executive Guard, Doe continued to resist and took up defensive positions on the grounds of the Executive Mansion all the while attempting to establish communication with military forces outside Monrovia. As Quiwonkpa's

forces moved on the Executive Mansion, the Liberian army took a “wait and see”<sup>90</sup> posture and remained in garrison.

The vast majority of the citizens of Monrovia were decidedly more enthusiastic with the seeming turn of events as Quiwonkpa’s broadcasts were met with “joyous celebrations”<sup>91</sup> throughout the city. Believing Quiwonkpa in full control of the government also led many to take the opportunity to settle numerous ‘old scores’ against members of Doe’s regime who found themselves isolated from Doe’s forces. In the ensuing hours, several “senior members of Doe’s government were brutally assaulted, threatened with execution, and their houses and other property taken or destroyed... [Likewise, there were] instances in Monrovia and throughout the country of retribution against Doe’s supporters.”<sup>92</sup>

If the Liberian regulars ever entertained thoughts of joining Quiwonkpa’s forces, those thoughts seemingly vanished with the “stiff resistance”<sup>93</sup> displayed by Doe’s forces on the grounds of the Executive Mansion. During the afternoon of the coup attempt, elements of the Liberian army left garrison and moved into the city in support of Doe’s Executive Guard. By nightfall, Doe was back in control.

As expected, Doe’s retribution was swift. However, the barbaric savagery and hatred unleashed by Doe’s forces coupled with the overt ethnic nature of his response was unique to the Liberian experience and would serve to fundamentally change the nature of the Liberian psyche. The consequence of Doe’s actions was an inevitable explosion of ethnic tensions into spasms of violence and revenge, “the aftershocks of which are still being felt.”<sup>94</sup>

“Quiwonkpa himself was captured, beaten to death, castrated, and dismembered.”<sup>95</sup> Quiwonkpa’s body was, in turn, “divided into pieces and the pieces were paraded around town, and then, in order to assume the strength of the bold pretender and in front of reliable witnesses, Doe’s men ate him.”<sup>96</sup>

The mere fact Quiwonkpa was of the Gio tribe, resulted in more bloodshed for both the Gio and the linguistically related Mano tribe. Immediately following the failed coup hundreds of Gio and Mano soldiers were mustered from the Liberian army and “summarily executed on the grounds of the Executive Mansion.”<sup>97</sup> It was the Gio and Mano civilians, however, who paid the highest price for Quiwonkpa’s ‘crime.’ Doe’s Krahn soldiers descended on Nimba county, Quiwonkpa’s home county, with particular vengeance. In the weeks to come hundreds of Gio and Mano were brutalized and massacred. “A 1986 study by the New York-based Lawyers Committee for Human Rights... found evidence that many (*Gio and Mano*) were detained, beaten, tortured, or killed for no apparent reason other than their ethnic affiliation.”<sup>98</sup> All of Liberia shook with fear and hatred, but Nimba county, in particular, would continue to seethe with “talk of revenge against the Krahn”<sup>99</sup> “‘I fear,’ a Gio historian told [an American reporter] when [he] visited Nimba County in March of 1986, ‘that if and when this man (Doe) is violently removed from power, it will be recorded in history that there was once a tribe called Krahn in Liberia.’”<sup>100</sup>

By 1986, the patience of Doe’s biggest benefactor, the United States Congress, was exhausted. Siphoning off American aid and strong arm tactics by leaders of America’s Cold War allies was a recognized part of the game during the Cold War, but the Cold War was winding down and the rules of the game were changing. “In the bold

new world envisioned by post-Cold War strategists, the new war [was] for market shares and not as in the old computations, ideological beach-heads in far-flung territories.”<sup>101</sup>

Budgetary restraint and domestic issues were the new realities. \$500 million in aid with nothing to show for it, but a legacy of human rights abuses and a list of atrocities was not in keeping with the ‘New World Order.’ In 1986, Congress began turning off the spigot and Liberian aid plummeted from \$53.6 million in 1986 to \$19.5 million in 1989 and by 1990 had reached zero except for \$10 million in food and humanitarian assistance.<sup>102</sup>

It is likely the shut-off in American aid had little impact on the average Liberian. After all, it’s hard to miss what you never had. For Doe, however, the shut-off of American aid was equivalent to “switching off power to his life support system.”<sup>103</sup> While Doe ruled with an ‘iron fist,’ the key to his ‘staying power’ was not his use of force, but an elaborate and generous patronage system, a system first crafted by the Americo-Liberians and meticulously duplicated by Doe. “In a country with Liberia’s economic difficulties” access to well paying government jobs or outright cash gifts were “persuasive arguments for political cooperation,”<sup>104</sup> arguments which tended to keep many of Doe’s potential enemies at bay. Without American aid, Doe was absent the reliable source of funds which fueled his patronage system. Lack of funds quickly equated to a lack of friends. Continuing to control a country ripe with ethnic hatred and talk of revenge in the face of evaporating funds and political allies was becoming increasingly problematic. By the late-1980s, Doe was operating on borrowed time.

## **INTO THE ABYSS**

On 26 December 1989, Charles Taylor, another of Doe’s former compatriots, initiated the final countdown on the ethnic time-bomb Doe had created. The son of an

American father and a Liberian mother, Taylor spent ten years in the United States as a student at Bentley College in Waltham, Massachusetts and, after graduation, as an auto mechanic in Boston.<sup>105</sup> Throughout his stay in America, Taylor was an activist in the Liberian anti-Tolbert campaign. When Doe staged his successful coup in 1980, Taylor returned to Liberia and was assigned head of the General Services Administration, the government's purchasing agency. In 1983, Doe accused Taylor of embezzling \$900,000 from the Liberian government. Fearing imminent arrest, Taylor fled back to the U.S. where he was arrested and held for extradition. Taylor managed to escape from a Massachusetts's jail in 1985 and made his way back to Africa and eventually Libya. Though Taylor denies any 'Libyan connection,' it seems certain that while in Libya Taylor finalized plans for his insurgency and received arms and military training.<sup>106</sup>

On Christmas Day 1989, Taylor led a group of 150 well trained and well armed guerrillas across the border of Côte d'Ivoire into Nimba county and launched a series of small scale attacks against Doe's encamped forces.<sup>107</sup> Doe responded with trademark brutality. Two infantry battalions of mostly Krahn soldiers were ordered back into Nimba county. Once deployed the government troops went on another rampage of murder, rape, and destruction targeted specifically at Gio and Mano civilians. Whole villages were burned to the ground and their inhabitants sent fleeing into 'the bush.' There was no mistaking the mission of the Krahn soldiers. "They had come back to finish what they had started in 1985."<sup>108</sup>

Taylor couldn't have planned it any better. Gio and Mano civilians consumed with hate for the Krahn poured into the rebel camp seeking arms. Taylor, flush with weapons, was eager to comply. "We didn't even have to act," said Taylor. "People came

to us and said, ‘Give me a gun. How can I kill the man who killed my mother?’”<sup>109</sup>

Within a matter of weeks, Taylor’s 150 man guerrilla band had exploded into the 10,000 man National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL).

From Nimba county the NPFL moved swiftly through Liberia, pushing Doe’s Krahn forces back towards Monrovia. But for Taylor’s marauding warriors, defeat of Doe’s forces on the battlefield was not their primary focus. They were bent on revenge and Krahn and Mandingo (considered allies of Doe and the Krahn) civilians were convenient outlets for the years of savage repression they had endured. If Taylor ever had the inclination or ability to restrain his warriors, he never displayed it. As the NPFL moved through Liberia, the carnage inflicted on the Krahn and Mandingo tribesmen was equal to anything Doe had imposed on the Gio and Mano tribes. Krahn and Mandingo fled by the tens-of-thousands before the onslaught of the NPFL and poured into refugee camps across the Liberian border. The refugees told “harrowing tales of Gio and Mano rebels wreaking bloody havoc against Krahn civilians with machetes and small arms”<sup>110</sup> and of shooting “people who ‘smelled’ Krahn.”<sup>111</sup>

Doe’s forces, in full retreat, retaliated against Gio and Mano civilians with equal lust. Monrovia in particular became a dungeon of horrors. Government soldiers conducted house to house searches for Gio and Mano civilians hauling whole families off to the Executive Mansion for ‘questioning.’ Many were never seen from again. On the streets of Monrovia the scene became gruesome as each morning’s light uncovered more “decapitated and disemboweled bodies.”<sup>112</sup> Most of those who could fled the city. However, approximately 2000 Gio opted to take refuge in a Monrovia Lutheran church. As the NPFL closed in on Monrovia, Krahn soldiers opened fire on the church,

massacring over 600 men, women, and children. “Corpses hung from the window,’ other bodies were discovered huddled under church pews. Said one witness: ‘This is genocide.’”<sup>113</sup>

By mid-July, NPFL forces were on the outskirts of Monrovia. During the push on Monrovia, Prince (in name only) Johnson, a Gio, and several hundred of Taylor’s forces broke off from the NPFL over a dispute in strategy and reformed under the banner of the Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL). As NPFL forces consolidated their gains outside Monrovia, INPFL forces fought their way into the city, “seized the capital, and isolated [Doe] in his mansion and most of [his] army into the space of a few blocks downtown.”<sup>114</sup> Monrovia was now the property of three competing armies.

NPFL forces, in turn, shut off all food supplies and cut power and water leading into the city. Krahn and Mandingo refugees now poured out of Monrovia hoping to avoid the bloodbath sure to follow. Many would not be so lucky.

Taylor’s rebels—boys from the Gio and Mano tribes, most of them between the ages of eleven and fifteen, armed with AK-47s and M-16s—had dedicated themselves to separating out and killing anyone from the Krahn or Mandingo tribe, and those from the president’s army or the former government. Thirty-eight miles out, in the town of Klay, refugees encountered the first check-point. ‘Do you smell that smell?’ the rebels asked, speaking of the stench of putrefaction on the breeze. ‘You’d better know who you are,’ they said, ‘or you’re going where the smell is coming from.’ Anybody who didn’t speak the right dialect, anybody who looked too prosperous or well fed was shot, beheaded, or set on fire with fuel oil... Refugees arrived in Sierra Leone telling of checkpoints fenced around with posts and the posts topped with severed heads.<sup>115</sup>

By August, the three armies had battled to a stalemate and the situation inside of Monrovia had deteriorated into utter chaos punctuated with scenes of bizarre and utter inhumanity. The streets of Monrovia were littered with dead and starving citizens who were either unable or too frightened to leave the city.

Doped up soldiers robed in the spoils of war; dresses, wigs, construction helmets, and swimming goggles, fired on civilians and rival factions with equal disdain. Into this anarchy, 225 Marines landed in Monrovia on August 5<sup>th</sup> and evacuated 300 American civilians.<sup>116</sup>

With this backdrop, the 16 nation Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) met and decided to formulate a peacekeeping force with the expressed intent to intervene, negotiate a cease-fire, and restore order in Liberia. Five nations; Nigeria, Ghana, Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Gambia agreed to provide forces. The 3000 member peacekeeping force was christened the Economic Community Monitoring Group or ECOMOG.<sup>117</sup>

During the first week of September 1990, ECOMOG forces began fanning out across Monrovia. Both Johnson and Doe welcomed the ECOMOG forces as they entered the city. Taylor, on the other hand, held a decidedly different viewpoint. With 90% of Liberia under his control and his NPFL forces poised to take Monrovia, ECOMOG intervention meant only one thing. Taylor would be stopped just short of securing all of Liberia for himself. Taylor vowed to resist the ‘foreign invasion.’ “We will use guns, machetes, knives,” Taylor declared. “We will kill them all.”<sup>118</sup>

On 9 September, President Doe left his compound to pay a visit to the ECOMOG leadership. While enroute Doe was ambushed by elements of Prince Johnson’s INPFL forces. Shot in both legs during the shoot-out, Doe was captured and brought before Johnson. That night during a brutal interrogation/torture session, which included the slicing off of both of Doe’s ears, Doe died of his wounds. In so doing, Doe joined 10,000 other Liberians who had been killed since the war began.<sup>119</sup>

Brigadier General Nimley, commander of the Presidential Guard, assumed control of Doe's loyalist forces remaining at the Executive Compound and proclaimed himself President of Liberia. Likewise, Prince Johnson claimed the Presidency for himself. Not to be outdone, Taylor proclaimed himself President in October and formulated his own government and cabinet at his new capital of Gbarnga, in central Liberia.<sup>120</sup>

In October, ECOMOG forces switched from peacekeeping to peacemaking, taking the offensive against Taylor and driving his forces out of Monrovia. By mid-November, ECOMOG had restored some semblance of order inside of Monrovia. An ECOMOG brokered cease-fire kept Johnson and Nimley in garrison. Taylor, meanwhile, rejected the cease-fire as well as the interim government installed by ECOMOG and remained in control of most of Liberia outside of Monrovia.

For the next six years ECOMOG troops would continue to stabilize the situation inside Monrovia while Doe and his NPFL forces maintained the defensive against rival factions. 'Stabilization' under ECOMOG, didn't exactly equate to 'peace and posterity' for the returning citizens of Monrovia however. Eventually building to a force of some 11,000 men, ECOMOG troops were largely under-trained and poorly paid. During their tenure there were numerous instances of ECOMOG troops standing-by while looters and fighters went about their business. There were also several reports of ECOMOG troops harassing the locals, running drugs, and participating in outright theft. A common joke in Monrovia was "ECOMOG stands for 'Every Car or Moving Object Gone.'"<sup>121</sup>

While life inside of Monrovia may have been difficult, life outside of Monrovia continued to be a living hell as NPFL forces engaged one faction after another in attempts to control territory. In March 1991, the reconstituted remnants of Doe's Krahn

and Mandingo army, known as the United Liberation Movement of Liberia (ULIMO) crossed into Liberia from Sierra Leone.<sup>122</sup> Led by Alhadji Kromah, ULIMO forces invaded NPFL held territory along the coast and were eventually successful in driving NPFL forces out of two counties. Taylor retaliated by turning the NPFL loose on Krahn and Mandingo civilians. Refugees again flowed out of Liberia. “It’s the systematic destruction of Grand Gedeh,’ one observer reported. “Every single town and farm village has been burned. There was no sign of life.”<sup>123</sup>

In 1994, another Krahn faction, the undeniably misnamed Liberian Peace Council (LPC) emerged on the scene. Led by former Doe minister, George Boley, the LPC attacked Taylor’s forces south of Monrovia and were successful in “securing the coastal areas east of Monrovia.”<sup>124</sup> Yet, the legacy of the LPC will not be its success in battle, but in the charges that the LPC took the Liberian conflict to its deepest chasm. The LPC, it seems, ate its enemies.

‘They broke his ankles, and then when he was on the ground they cut his throat,’ says Lucy, who is in her 40’s. As her husband, Solomon, bled into the dirt, he was approached by a ‘heart man,’ a witch doctor who steals hearts for ritual purposes. The other guerrillas called him Young Colonel Killer. ‘I’m taking your main machine,’ Lucy recalls Young Colonel Killer saying. Then he cut Solomon’s heart out. Lucy says Young Colonel Killer told the village women to scare up some cooking wood and boil the heart. The guerrillas ate it, beheaded two more men and ordered the villagers out. Lucy’s account was confirmed by seven other people who fled her village, which is not far from Buchanan.<sup>125</sup>

Dozens of reliable and collaborated eyewitness accounts of LPC members participating in similar acts of cannibalism were reported. “According to chiefs of the Bassa tribe, which [was] a frequent target of LPC atrocities, one or two ritual sacrifices can shock an entire web of villages into flight. In other words, the LPC [used] cannibalism the same way the Bosnian Serbs used rape—as a means of ethnic cleansing.”<sup>126</sup>

## IT'S SIMPLY ECONOMICS

And so the conflict continued with a seemingly endless series of acts of inhumanity. But, why did the conflict continue year after year with no real attempt at achieving a settlement? Obviously the cycle of revenge and hatred entailed its own momentum and was an essential ingredient for the initiation of the conflict and the savagery that ensued, but the reason the war continued was more complex than sheer human emotion. It was economics. Simply stated the warlords, and indeed the warriors, made a better living with a gun than without.

Taylor's forces, for example, control Nimba county, home of the abandoned iron mines. "A British firm, African Mining Consortium, Ltd.... paid Taylor \$10 million a month for permission to ship stockpiled ore on an existing railroad. A French-owned company, Sollac, also purchased stockpiled ore from Taylor."<sup>127</sup> Taylor also controls access to vast acres of Liberia's timber reserves which foreign investors, particularly the French, have paid immense sums to harvest. Subsequently, Taylor has amassed a personal fortune believed to worth millions from the deals. Likewise his so-called "arms for nature" program has been instrumental in keeping his forces well armed and supplied.<sup>128</sup>

ULIMO forces are likewise engaged, controlling access to numerous diamond and gold mines as well as timber reserves. The LPC is also involved in the timber trade and now controls many of the abandoned rubber plantations.<sup>129</sup> Even the ECOMOG seems to have a financial interest in the conflict with allegations they are "stripping Liberia of fixed assets—railroad stock, mining equipment, public utilities—and selling them abroad."<sup>130</sup>

### UNLUCKY 13

In August 1995, the 13<sup>th</sup> peace accord was signed by the major warring parties in Abuja, Nigeria. The Abuja Agreement called for the establishment of a transitional government led by a Council of State composed of three of the main rebel leaders—Taylor of the NPFL, Boley of the LPC, and Kromah of the ULIMO-K (ULIMO divided into two factions in 1994, ULIMO-K under Kromah made up of mostly Moslem Mandingos and ULIMO-J led by Roosevelt Johnson and made up mostly of Krahn)—and three civilian representatives. The presidency was to rotate among the three rebel leaders. In addition, all 60,000 members of the warring factions were to disarm, Monrovia was declared a ‘weapons free zone,’ and elections were set for the summer of 1996.<sup>131</sup>

Trouble began almost immediately. Roosevelt Johnson of the ULIMO-J faction controlled several diamond and gold mines in and around his stronghold near Tubmanburg. The local ECOMOG commander in the area had allegedly ‘turned a blind eye’ towards Johnson’s activities in exchange for a percentage of the profits. In January 1996, the ECOMOG commander rotated out of the area. The new commander refused to continue ‘the deal’ and began preliminary moves to disarm Johnson’s forces. Realizing he would be unable to control the mines without weapons, Johnson launched an attack on the ECOMOG force, killing as many as 60 soldiers.<sup>132</sup>

Back in Monrovia, the Council of State issued orders for Johnson’s arrest. On 6 April 1996, several of Taylor’s men attempted to carry out the warrant. Johnson and his men resisted the effort and fought their way back to the infamous Barclay Training Center Barracks where they took up defensive positions. In a matter of hours, Johnson’s

ULIMO-J fighters were joined by “ethnic Krahn from three different factions.”<sup>133</sup>

ULIMO-K and NPFL forces attacked the barracks. ECOMOG forces watched. The local citizens ran for the exits. In short order, Monrovia exploded into another all out war. As before, extensive human rights violations were reported on all sides.

In the midst of the chaos the USMC performed yet another Liberian NEO, airlifting “more than 2000 people, including 400 Americans, to Sierra Leone.”<sup>134</sup> Seven weeks later, ECOMOG forces began retaking Monrovia and brokered yet another cease-fire. By mid-May all rebel forces had left the city.<sup>135</sup>

## **CURRENT SITUATION**

On 17 August, all warring factions agreed to extend the Abuja Accord for another nine months, with elections to occur by 30 May 1997. As before, the accord called for the total disarming of all warring factions. This time the disarmament was to be completed no later than 31 January 1997.

In the ensuing months since the extension, Taylor, Kromah, and Boley have each announced their candidacy for President. “Roosevelt Johnson has declared he will go into business.”<sup>136</sup>

After a slow start, it appeared the disarmament process was making progress. The senior commander for ECOMOG, General Malu recently reported that 91% of the arms were turned end by 7 February (the 31 January deadline was extended one week). With the disarmament deemed successful, General Malu declared Liberia “safe for elections,” saying they should be held in May as scheduled.”<sup>137</sup>

Reports as of 4 March, however, indicate the warlords may be ‘hedging their bets.’ “Recently, a huge cache of arms was discovered in Lofa county,” allegedly under

the control of ULIMO-K leader Alhadji Kromah. Likewise, numerous sources indicate NPFL forces are busy hiding “huge quantities of arms in many parts of the country, especially in Bong and Nimba counties... Several arms and ammunition have [also] been discovered in the Executive Mansion... Disclosure has not been made yet as to which of the former factions stored the items.”<sup>138</sup>

Likewise, UN discussions regarding the delay of the scheduled May elections was met with ominous rhetoric from Taylor.

Everybody knew about the schedule of the implementation we signed. If there is deception involved, that means that everything is changed. I can tell you this much. When you begin to change things and schedules and plans, you open up a Pandora’s box. There is a possibility and even a probability of crisis.<sup>139</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

The roots of the Liberian civil war are embedded in a history of injustice existing since the founding of the state. For over 170 years one minority or another has attempted to dominate the entire spectrum of Liberian political, social, and economic life to the exclusion of the overwhelming majority.

Freed American slaves laid the cornerstones for the Liberian state and in so doing proclaimed Liberia as a land of freedom and democracy for all her citizens. But, the term ‘citizen’ was perversely defined by the early forefathers so as to exclude the indigenous peoples who made up 95% of the population of Liberia. For the next 133 years, the Americo-Liberians continued to hold the reigns of power through a mix of political manipulation and strong-arm tactics. In absolute control of the tools of government, the Americo-Liberians garnered a monopoly on the Liberian economy as well. Mid-twentieth Century reforms ostensibly intended to breakdown the economic and political

barriers existing between the Americo-Liberians and the indigenous population never bridged the chasm of inequity between the two groups.

When Doe launched his coup in 1980, most Liberians assumed minority rule had ended with the Americo-Liberians; it had not. Doe merely replaced one minority with another, and the masses remained as economically and as politically isolated as they were under Americo-Liberian rule. Into this boiling cauldron of discontent, Doe added his own unique ingredient, a large dash of ethnic division and hatred.

When Taylor arrived on the scene, no one was interested in politics or economics any longer, they were only interested in one thing—revenge. Drunk on revenge, the cycle of savagery on all sides escalated to seemingly inhuman levels. Between spasms of violence those with guns, by chance or by design, realized they controlled something denied them throughout their history, a piece of the Liberian dream. The new Liberian ‘Land Barons’ realized, regardless of the level of violence entailed in their new occupation, their ability to make a living with a gun was far greater than it had ever been, or was ever likely to be, without a gun.

The new peace accord promises free elections, peace, and property to the citizens of Liberia. But, in a land where ethnic hate and distrust abound and the basic questions regarding the economic future of the combatants remain unanswered, such optimism seems duly questionable. In any event, American military involvement in Liberia is almost guaranteed to continue.

## **EPILOGUE**

“The U.S. Agency for International Development (AID) estimates that 740,000 of Liberia’s 2.5 million inhabitants have become refugees, that 800,000 are internally

displaced, and that more than 150,000 people have been killed since the civil war started.”<sup>140</sup>

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Denis Johnson, “The Civil War in Hell,” Esquire, December 1990, 46.
- <sup>2</sup> J. Gus Liebenow, Liberia the Evolution of Privilege (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1969), 34.
- <sup>3</sup> Liberia: A Country Study, 3d ed., by Harold D. Nelson, Foreign Area Studies, The American University, DA Pam. No. 550-38 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1985), 5.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid., 6.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid., 7.
- <sup>11</sup> Library of Congress, Liberia: The African American Mosaic, A Library of Congress Resource Guide for the Study of Black History and Culture, downloaded from <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/african/liberia.html>.
- <sup>12</sup> Liberia: A Country Study, 8.
- <sup>13</sup> Bernard A. Weisberger, “America’s African Colony,” American Heritage, December 1995, 26.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup> Liberia: A Country Study, 9.
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