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Liberia: A Casualty of the Cold War's End?

by Reed Kramer

Half a decade ago, with the Berlin Wall coming down and the Soviet Union entering its final days, a small-scale conflict in West Africa quietly put post-cold war U.S. foreign policy to an early test. Liberia's civil war, which began with a cross-border raid by a tiny rebel band in late 1989, has claimed the lives of 1 out of every 17 people in the country, uprooted most of the rest, and destroyed a once-viable economic infrastructure. The strife has also spread to Liberia's neighbors, contributing to a slowing of the democratization that was progressing steadily through West Africa at the beginning of the decade and destabilizing a region that already was one of the world's most marginal. U.S. taxpayers have footed a sizable bill—over \$400 million to date—for emergency aid that arguably never would have been needed had Washington used its considerable clout to help end the killing.

As fighting escalated in early 1990, the Bush administration faced a serious conundrum. Western Europe and most of Africa looked to the United States to take the lead in seeking a peaceful resolution of the Liberian crisis, since the country's history bears an unmistakable "made in America" stamp. But senior administration officials, determined to limit U.S. involvement in what was viewed as a "brush fire," rejected the notion of inherent U.S. interest or responsibility.

"It was difficult to see how we could intervene without taking over and pacifying the country with a more-or-less permanent involvement of U.S. forces," Brent Scowcroft, President George Bush's national security adviser, said in a 1993 interview with the author after leaving office. In addition, Scowcroft continued, U.S. attention was "dedicated toward other areas most involved in ending the cold war." There was the fall of communism in Eastern Europe and, after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, the buildup to war in the Gulf. "You can only concentrate on so many things at once."

But a range of senior U.S. officials did focus considerable attention on Africa's oldest republic. During a crucial period of increasing carnage in mid-1990, Liberia was a regular item on the agenda of the Deputies Committee of the National Security Council, where most major foreign policy problems were handled. Later in the year, as the crisis deepened, the deputies dealt



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daily with both Liberia and Kuwait, according to participants in the sessions. "We missed an opportunity in Liberia," Herman J. Cohen, assistant secretary of state for African affairs in the Bush administration, said in an "exit interview" (*CSIS Africa Notes*, Number 147, April 1993). "We did not intervene either diplomatically or militarily."

The fate of a West African country, about the size of Tennessee with a prewar population of some 2.6 million, was of scant interest to most Americans. But Liberia was the first of a series of once-stable countries whose disintegration has seriously strained the world's peacekeeping capacity and tested international commitment to humanitarian relief. By an accident of timing, crisis management in the new age had its trial run in Africa.

The following account of the U.S. decision-making process during Liberia's disintegration is drawn from some 30 interviews with policymakers at all levels in Washington and abroad, and from a review of historical materials and public records. Some of the interviews were on the record, but most were with officials who agreed to talk only if their names and positions were not cited.

Born in the U.S.A.

Liberia's relationship with the United States is the most extensive and long-standing of any African nation. The first settlers to reach Liberia's shores arrived on a U.S. Navy ship supported by grants from the U.S. Treasury. Comprising freed slaves and a few African-Americans who had been born free, the group was sponsored by the American Colonization Society (ACS), which had been established in 1816 to spearhead African-American resettlement on Africa's west coast.

Among the founders of the ACS was the incoming U.S. president, James Monroe, as well as Supreme Court Justice Bushrod Washington (nephew and heir of the nation's first president) and such other notables as Andrew Jackson, Francis Scott Key, Henry Clay, and Daniel Webster. The motives of these ACS organizers were "decidedly mixed," according to Indiana University political scientist J. Gus Liebenow, author of *Liberia: The Quest for Democracy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987). Wealthy southern plantation owners who feared the impact on their slaves of free African-Americans lent backing, as did a number of church leaders "who saw American blacks as a beachhead in West Africa for Protestant Christianity."

Among the earliest settlers were Baptist, Presbyterian, and Methodist missionaries. "The first missionaries to go directly from the United States were blacks, and their efforts were directed toward Liberia," wrote Peter Duignan and L.H. Gann of the Hoover Institution (*The United States and Africa: A History*, New York: Cambridge University Press and Hoover Institution, 1984).

The ACS had regional offshoots with similar aims. For example, emigration efforts launched by the states of

Maryland and Pennsylvania led to the establishment of encampments that remained separate from the original settlement for years before opting for inclusion in Liberia.

The severe conditions (which included harsh climate and deadly diseases) took a high toll on both settlers and missionaries. Tom W. Shick, in *Behold the Promised Land: A History of Afro-American Settler Society in Nineteenth-Century Liberia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), cites census records suggesting that only about half of the 4,571 persons who emigrated under the tutelage of the ACS survived during the first 23 years after the initial landing. In addition, the newcomers faced fierce resistance to their presence from the indigenous population; the result was a simmering civil strife that festered for decades.

Still, the settlement endured. In 1847, the settlers severed their relationship with the sponsoring society and established Liberia as a sovereign state. Americo-Liberians, as they came to be called, eagerly emulated their former homeland, however painful their experience in the New World had been. They used the Declaration of Independence as the vehicle for launching their fledgling nation and the U.S. Constitution as the model for their new government. They designed a flag with red and white stripes and a single white star on a blue field and used the U.S. dollar as their currency, a practice that continued until the mid-1980s. They named their capital after the fifth president of the United States and gave other places American names as well.

Over the years, Americo-Liberians by the thousands—including 16 of the 19 men who have served as Liberia's president—were educated in U.S. high schools and colleges. Liberians have been singing American songs, reading American literature, and watching Hollywood films for as long as Americans themselves.

The equivocality that characterized U.S. attitudes in the beginning has persisted. The American Colonization

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Society, in spite of its pedigree, failed to persuade Congress to adopt the West African settlement as a colony. When Liberia claimed its independence with Washington's assent, the country had to wait 15 years for formal diplomatic recognition, finally extended by the Lincoln administration in 1862 (when, according to Liebenow, "the civil war had removed the principal objectors to the presence of a black envoy in Washington, D.C.").

Nevertheless, the U.S. mantle proved invaluable as the new Liberia struggled to survive its first decades. Resistance from indigenous groups continued, and occasional port calls by U.S. naval vessels provided, in the words of Duignan and Gann, "a definite object lesson" to restive locals. A case in point was the "sudden appearance of the USS *John Adams*" in 1852, which had "a noticeably quieting effect upon the chiefs at Grand Bassa," the coastal region to Monrovia's south. Whenever the British and French seemed intent on enlarging at Liberia's expense the neighboring territories they already controlled, periodic appearances by U.S. warships helped discourage encroachment, Liebenow notes, even though successive administrations rejected appeals from Monrovia for more forceful support.

President Grover Cleveland, in an 1886 message to Congress, spoke of the "moral right and duty of the United States" to help Liberia. "It must not be forgotten that this distant community is an offshoot of our own system," he said. But when Liberia asked for military assistance against an internal uprising, which the French were thought to have helped instigate, Cleveland's secretary of state refused on the grounds that Liberia lacked standing to make such a request. Eventually, what Duignan and Gann call "the French appetite for African territory," and the willingness of Paris to use military power to obtain it, forced Liberia to cede to the Ivory Coast a large area it had long controlled.

Ambivalence and Dependency

At the turn of the century, Liberia still faced serious challenges to its existence. As journalist Bill Berkeley wrote in the December 1992 *Atlantic Monthly*: "While the settlers along the coast developed an elaborate life-style reminiscent of the antebellum [U.S.] South, complete with top hats and morning coats and a society of Masons, the indigenous peasants endured poverty and neglect."

In 1903, the British forced a concession of Liberian territory to Sierra Leone, and tension along that border remained high. In addition to continued internal unrest, the country faced a severe economic crisis and huge indebtedness to European creditors. A three-person commission appointed by President Theodore Roosevelt recommended that the U.S. government help the African nation to reorganize its finances and to negotiate territorial settlements with European governments. As a signal of U.S. support, Roosevelt dispatched three warships to transport the commission to Monrovia.

But the commission firmly "recommended against

U.S. guarantees of Liberian independence or territorial integrity" (Duignan and Gann), upholding instead "the traditional U.S. policy of avoiding anything that might be considered an alliance." Liberia named an American to supervise the treasury, and Britain and France accepted U.S. proposals to resolve border disputes.

Washington also arranged a 40-year international loan totaling \$1.7 million, with the proviso that four outsiders (U.S., British, French, and German) be given control over customs receipts and taxes, which were earmarked for loan repayment. "The presence of foreign receivers was a major irritant to Liberian sensibilities, and violence was directed at Europeans and Americans in some parts of the country," according to *The Emergence of Autocracy in Liberia: Tragedy and Challenge* (San Francisco: Institute for Contemporary Studies Press, 1992), a book by Amos Sawyer, the Liberian political scientist who served as president of an interim government of national unity from 1990-1994 (see "A Conversation with Liberia's Interim President," *CSIS Africa Notes* no. 129, October 1991).

In 1912, President William Howard Taft opened a new chapter in U.S.-Liberian relations by sending three African-American former army officers to train the new Liberian army, then called the Frontier Force, which was charged with protecting the country's borders and suppressing internal opposition.

The international loan provided temporary relief but failed to solve Liberia's troubles. In 1915, the coastal Kru people, who had long resisted Monrovia's authority, rose in rebellion, declaring their loyalty to Great Britain and demanding annexation by Sierra Leone. The USS *Chester* (en route home from Turkey) was diverted to Africa to help quash the uprising.

By the early 1920s, Liberia's financial crisis had worsened and the Harding administration proposed a new \$5 million loan from the U.S. government. The House gave its approval but the Senate refused, creating what Sawyer calls "a sense of desperation among Liberian officials" worried that British and French designs on their country might now prove unstoppable. Liberia had become a charter member of the League of Nations in 1919, and Monrovia was determined to safeguard its sovereignty.

Instead of a European takeover, however, congressional inaction opened the way for a new U.S. foothold in the country—the establishment of the world's largest rubber plantation by the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company. Millionaire tire maker Harvey Firestone of Akron, Ohio was seeking new sources of supply to meet the rising needs of an expanding auto industry and to offset a British effort to gain control over world pricing. With British colonies dominating global production, Liberia offered an attractive alternative, and its rubber proved to be of high quality.

In 1926, after protracted negotiations, the government awarded Firestone a 99-year lease of a million acres of land as part of an agreement guaranteeing both the rubber and the labor the company

required for a long and profitable stay. The tenancy was not without controversy, however. Before the decade ended, Firestone was implicated in a scandal over forced-labor profiteering by the Liberian elite, who were accused of coercive recruitment of laborers for the domestic market and for export to neighboring countries. Despite Liberia's firm denials and a refusal to cooperate, the League of Nations initiated an inquiry and President Herbert Hoover briefly suspended relations to press Monrovia into compliance.

Firestone's presence in Liberia paved the way for another milestone in bilateral ties—the inauguration of air service by Pan American Airways. Alarmed by overtures to Liberia from Hitler's Germany, the Department of State official in charge of Africa, Henry Villard, journeyed to Monrovia in 1938 to shore up relations. Veteran Africa correspondent Russell Warren Howe, in *Along the Afric Shore: A Historic Review of Two Centuries of U.S.-African Relations* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), says that Villard sought to counter German interest in iron ore concessions and an air link by alerting the U.S. Bureau of Mines and Pan Am to the opportunities Liberia offered. In 1942, soon after the United States entered World War II, Pan Am reached agreement for construction of a modern airport, Roberts Field, which became a major wartime transit point for thousands of U.S. soldiers and for Allied operations in North Africa and southern Europe.

Following a stopover at Roberts Field by President Franklin Roosevelt in 1943 on route from a Casablanca meeting with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, the U.S. government provided Lend-Lease funds for the construction of a seaport at Monrovia, which in turn made accessible the country's huge iron ore deposits, just as the worldwide demand for steel was growing. Republic Steel took a major stake in the venture, prompting construction of a rail line and roadway and providing new openings to Liberia's interior. For the next phase of the country's history, iron ore paid the way to relative prosperity.

Ready-Made Cold Warrior

It became the job of William Tubman, a reform-minded career politician who was elected president in 1943 and inaugurated the following year, to lead the country into an era when the global spotlight turned toward Africa. As the doyen of the continent, Tubman's Liberia positioned itself as champion of African independence in various world forums—particularly the United Nations, of which Liberia was a founding member. For the first time, the country's elite built ties with leaders in the region and throughout the continent, and the government expanded economic and diplomatic links with Europe.

At home, rising revenue from iron, timber, and rubber enabled Tubman to widen his power base beyond the traditional constituency of the ruling True Whig Party. A native of Harper, Liberia's southernmost coastal town, he was the first president born outside the Monrovia area.

"His first move was to revise the law so that women

and members of indigenous communities could be enfranchised," writes Sawyer, "a radical departure from past practices." At the same time, the new president consolidated his hold on power with what Sawyer characterizes as "an enormous patronage network and an elaborate security network." Tubman also ruthlessly suppressed efforts to organize opposition parties, both by the growing indigenous intelligentsia and by dissident members of the Americo-Liberian elite.

The core of his platform was the "Open Door" policy, designed to promote the development of the country's largely undeveloped interior based on joint ventures between the government and foreign investors. According to Liebenow, the effect was "double-edged," providing such benefits as roads and education for rural residents, while at the same time making it easier for the government to collect taxes and recruit laborers and soldiers "under less than voluntary terms." The elite also was able to acquire vast acreage that had been occupied by the peasantry, in what Liebenow describes as eventually constituting one of the largest "land grabs" in African history.

It was during this period that Liberia began encouraging the registration of foreign ships with favorable laws on safety, employment, and taxation and thus emerged as a major maritime nation. According to Liebenow, "the system of Liberian registry was actually created at the urging of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff to encourage the building of ships which might be needed by the United States during wartime."

The Open Door policy attracted a greater diversity of investors, but Tubman also carefully cultivated ties with the country's chief patron. As it had done in the two world wars, Liberia steered a decidedly pro-American course as the cold war intensified. The United States set up a permanent mission to train the Liberian military and began bringing Liberian officers to U.S. institutions for further training. In 1959, Liberia concluded a mutual defense pact with the United States.

Over the next decade, the U.S. government built two sophisticated communications facilities (known as R-site and T-site) to handle diplomatic and intelligence traffic to and from Africa, to monitor radio and other broadcasts in the region, and to relay a powerful Voice of America signal throughout the continent. In 1976, the U.S. Coast Guard erected an Omega navigational station—one of eight around the world—to guide shipping traffic in the eastern Atlantic and up and down Africa's west coast.

Although Liberia was no longer the focus of U.S. interest in Africa (new nations such as Ghana and Nigeria and the antiapartheid struggle in South Africa claimed the bulk of official and media attention), U.S. aid grew steadily. From 1946 to 1961, Liberia received \$41 million in assistance, the fourth largest amount in sub-Saharan Africa (after Ethiopia, Zaire, and Sudan). Between 1962 and 1980, economic and military aid totaled \$278 million. In per capita terms, Liberia hosted the largest Peace Corps contingent and received the greatest level of aid of any country on the entire African continent.

Liberia voted with the United States on most key matters at the UN, although it sometimes sided with other African states, particularly on decolonization and antiapartheid issues. Tubman gradually extended ties to the Soviet bloc, but he supported the United States on Vietnam, as did his successor, William Tolbert, who took office on Tubman's death in 1971. In 1978, Jimmy Carter became the first U.S. president to make an official visit to Liberia (Franklin Roosevelt's stopover had been for refueling).

The Soldiers Take Control

Americo-Liberian political hegemony ended abruptly on April 12, 1980 when 17 young army officers of indigenous descent staged a bloody coup. Tolbert was slain in the Executive Mansion along with more than a score of others, mostly security personnel. Another 13 officials died in a nationally televised execution 10 days later on a Monrovia beach. Coming amid rising public pressure for political and economic reform and a crackdown on dissent by the Tolbert regime, the takeover was welcomed by many inside and outside Liberia as a significant shift favoring the 95 percent of the population excluded from power by Americo-Liberians.

"Liberians went wild in celebration of what seemed like our history's finest moment," according to one eyewitness, Cameroon-born journalist Bill Frank Enoanyi, who lived in Liberia for many years and wrote an account of the civil war, *Behold Uncle Sam's Step-Child* (Sacramento: SanMar Publications, 1991).

Doe, who turned 28 shortly after seizing power, became head of state and chairman of the ruling People's Redemption Council (PRC). The young soldiers reached out to the grass-roots opposition groups that had campaigned against Tolbert and named reform-minded politicians to senior government posts.

They faced a massive task, however. "The past rulers, bent on improving their own personal positions at the expense of the masses of the people, destroyed the economy," Minister of Planning and Economic Affairs Togba-Nah Tipoteh, one of the newly named civilians, said when interviewed in his office several weeks after the takeover. According to Sawyer, the new rulers vacillated between "a populist program of development" and "retaliatory indigenous hegemony. . . . The only consistency about military rule in Liberia was the repression rained upon the people and the looting of the society."

Caught off guard, the Carter administration reacted cautiously. After a policy review, an aid package was approved "to exercise influence on the course of events," Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Richard Moose told Congress in August 1980. "We have maintained an active, frank, and open dialogue with the new Liberian government," said Moose, who had visited Monrovia in June. He characterized the coup as a reaction to "the corruption of the Tolbert government" and "the general indifference of the ruling elite to the plight of the people at large."

After Ronald Reagan took office in 1981, support for Liberia was increased. Aid levels rose from about \$20 million in 1979 to \$75 million and then \$95 million, for a total of \$402 million between 1981 and 1985, more than the country received during the entire previous century. Ties with the Liberian army were strengthened; the military component of the aid package for this period was about \$15 million, which was used for a greatly enlarged training program, barracks construction, and equipment.

In 1982, Doe was invited to Washington for an Oval Office meeting with President Reagan. Although the gathering began on a miscue, with Reagan introducing his visitor as "Chairman Moe" during a photo session in the Rose Garden, Doe received what he wanted—a promise of continued U.S. backing.

The policy was based on a belief that Doe and his colleagues could be coaxed back to the barracks and Liberia set on the road to democracy. Doe, who had been trained by U.S. Green Berets, helped matters by embracing the new administration's "hot-button" concerns. Before coming to Washington, he had closed the Libyan mission in Monrovia, as Reagan had done in Washington. Doe also ordered reductions in the size of the Soviet embassy staff. His second-in-command, Thomas Weh Syen, who was said to favor a pro-Libyan tilt, had been tried and summarily executed along with four other Council members for plotting Doe's assassination. And politicians also considered to be "radicals," including Tipoteh, had been removed from the cabinet.

As part of the expanding relationship, Doe agreed to a modification of the mutual defense pact granting staging rights on 24-hour notice at Liberia's seaports and airports for the U.S. Rapid Deployment Force, which was trained to respond to security threats around the world. A year after the meeting with Reagan, Doe followed the precedent set by Zaire's President Mobutu Sese Seko in establishing diplomatic relations with Israel, thus breaking away from the isolationist stand adopted by most African countries in the wake of the 1973 Arab-Israeli war.

A Cog in the Anti-Qaddafi Machine

Exerting a pivotal impact on U.S. policy was the closely held fact that Doe and his small country had been drawn into an effort to oust Libya's Muammar al-Qaddafi from power. Within weeks after Reagan's inauguration, the CIA, under the direction of Reagan's trusted adviser William Casey, began encouraging and supporting anti-Qaddafi activity by Libyan opposition groups and friendly foreign governments.

Reagan administration officials were outspokenly critical of Qaddafi. However, the existence of a large-scale covert operation coordinated by a special CIA task force on Libya under Casey's personal direction came to light only after the 1986 bombing raid on Tripoli, when details were published in February 1987 by Bob Woodward and Don Oberdorfer in a front-page *Washington Post* article and by Seymour Hersh in the

New York Times Magazine.

According to Hersh, the Tripoli raid was directed by the same small group of officials who carried out the arms-for-hostages operation, which later erupted into the Iran-contra scandal, including National Security Adviser John Poindexter and Oliver North, an NSC aide. Hersh also asserted that the decision-making process within the White House and the CIA used "internal manipulation and deceit to shield true policy from the professionals in the State Department and Pentagon." In addition, the administration set up an interagency committee, headed by William Clark, who was then deputy secretary of state, to outline economic sanctions and other options for isolating Libya.

By the time Doe arrived at the White House in August 1982, the CIA task force had pinpointed Liberia as a key operational area—an easily accessible base for the CIA's heightened clandestine campaign against Libya throughout the area. According to government officials involved in Liberia at the time, one of the first steps taken was to make high-tech improvements in at least one of the communication facilities in Monrovia.

Liberia's usefulness as a regional linchpin already had been tested during a covert operation in support of Chadian leader Hissène Habré, who had successfully ousted his Libyan-backed rival, Goukouni Oueddei, in June 1982. In *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA 1981-1987* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), the *Washington Post's* Woodward says Casey launched the Chad operation after a national intelligence estimate he read on his third day in office convinced him that Chad could be Qaddafi's Achilles' heel.

According to Woodward, Casey selected Doe as one of 12 heads of state from around the world to receive support from a special security assistance program. The operations were designed to provide both extraordinary protection for the leaders and otherwise unobtainable information and access for the CIA. Unknown to almost everyone else involved in making decisions about Liberia for the administration, this gave the CIA and the White House a huge stake in keeping the Liberian regime in place.

That objective proved increasingly challenging. Although a 25-person constitutional commission headed by Amos Sawyer, then dean of the University of Liberia's College of Social Sciences and Humanities, presented its report in early 1983, the ruling PRC delayed the holding of a promised referendum, creating growing unease in the country. An assembly convened to review the constitutional draft made a number of controversial changes. "Not only did it remove from the draft every measure designed to exact greater accountability of public officials," Sawyer charges in his book, "but it altered the draft to suit the specific political ambitions of Doe." When a vote was finally held in July 1984, the draft passed overwhelmingly.

After tolerating a relatively free press immediately following the coup, the regime began to react more defensively, banning some editions of newspapers and jailing reporters. The PRC also used a ban on political

activity, enacted in the aftermath of the coup, to crack down on critics. Even after the ban was lifted at the time of the referendum, the authorities refused to let students engage in political activities.

In preparation for presidential elections, Doe set up an interim national assembly (with himself as president), changed the election timetable and his date of birth to meet the age eligibility requirement in the constitution, created his own political party, and declared his candidacy for office. In the run-up to the vote, the regime barred two of the largest parties from competing, including one headed by Sawyer, who was arrested for suggesting in an interview with a Monrovia newspaper that Doe should resign his job because he was requiring other government employees who stood for office to do so.

When the balloting took place in October 1985, Doe declared himself the winner by 50.9 percent of the vote, despite ample evidence that he had been defeated. Nevertheless, the Reagan administration accepted the results. "This performance established a beginning, however imperfect," Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Chester Crocker told Congress two months later, a "benchmark" by which the country can judge itself and be judged in the future.

Liberians were "baffled" by Washington's reaction and the "reluctance to concede the grimness of Doe's human rights record," Enoanyi says. The situation grew increasingly bad, particularly after a failed November 1985 coup attempt by Doe's exiled former second-in-command, Thomas Quiwonkpa, which was followed by stepped-up attacks on the opposition.

The deterioration in the situation provoked a congressional reaction in Washington. Prior to the election, Republican members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee wrote Doe protesting the trial of a leading opposition candidate, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, a former minister of finance and World Bank official. After the election results were announced, the House and Senate each passed nonbinding resolutions calling for an end to U.S. assistance, but the administration announced that aid would continue.

During Liberia's election spectacle, Washington again became preoccupied by Libya because of the hijacking of a Trans World Airlines flight from Athens to Rome. "Although there was no direct connection between Libya and the TWA hijacking," Woodward and Oberdorfer reported in the *Washington Post*, "top officials at the NSC and CIA became determined to get tough with Libya, the most vulnerable of the terrorism-generating states." A National Security Council staff proposal to support an invasion of Libya from Egypt aimed at removing Qaddafi led to further planning and eventually to the April 1986 air raid.

Meanwhile, the CIA activity in Liberia increased markedly. "We were prepared to use every lever against Tripoli, and Monrovia had an important part," said one intelligence official with on-the-ground experience in West Africa. But it wasn't only the Libya operation that vindicated Casey's pick of Liberia. The country proved

important for another covert action—the airlift to UNITA mounted after the 1985 repeal of the Clark Amendment, which had barred covert U.S. security assistance to any of the factions in Angola (see “Angola: The Road to Peace” by Shawn McCormick, *CSIS Africa Notes* no. 125, June 1991). Almost as soon as the votes were counted, the CIA began shipping materiel, with Roberts Field again playing a key support role as a transit point.

In early 1987, Secretary of State George Shultz landed at Roberts Field at the end of a six-nation African tour and, to the consternation of many, applauded “continued efforts toward political reconciliation” during a luncheon with Doe. The secretary, who also met opposition leaders, stressed that the government “must make changes in its economic policies.” In private discussions, Doe bemoaned his fiscal plight and told Shultz, according to one official who was present, “I don’t know who to trust.”

But Shultz’s warning was too late. A General Accounting Office audit released shortly after his return revealed massive mismanagement of U.S. aid funds, which, on top of an existing \$800,000 arrearage, forced the administration to change course. After lengthy negotiations, Liberia agreed in 1988 to hand over supervision of government spending for two years to a team of 17 experts from the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID). Before the year ended, however, Doe had scuttled the arrangement and the experts went home.

On December 24, 1989, two dozen armed insurgents quietly crossed into Liberia from Côte d’Ivoire, ushering in a new and tragic phase of the Liberian saga.

U.S. Policy in the 1990s

The connections spanning centuries and the particularly close ties of the 1980s led Liberians and others to expect that the United States would help when trouble came.

The 1989 insurgents were led by Charles Taylor, a former procurement clerk in Doe’s government who fled to the United States after being charged with embezzling a million dollars, was detained in Massachusetts for extradition, and escaped from jail while awaiting a hearing. The rebels expected to garner quick support and cover the 200 miles to Monrovia in a matter of weeks.

Doe’s army responded by rushing reinforcements to Nimba County, where the rebel force was advancing, but the soldiers, who were mostly Krahn (Doe’s ethnic group), helped stir antigovernment sentiment throughout the area by indiscriminately attacking villages and murdering civilians. Two U.S. military officers were dispatched to advise on “restoring and maintaining discipline” among the troops, the Department of State announced.

The unrest caused mild alarm in Washington. An interagency working group, chaired by Assistant Secretary Cohen, was convened to review the situation and reexamine options. This was followed by extensive discussions in the Deputies Committee. “There were

different views on how active we should be,” said one participant, “but ultimately, the prevailing view was that this was something for the Liberians to work out themselves.”

The policy that evolved throughout 1990 can be viewed through the prism of three guiding principles:

1. Reluctance to Break with Liberia’s Rulers.

As soon as the first reports arrived from Nimba, there were a few calls within the Bush administration for a course correction that would distance the United States from Doe’s unpopular rule. Many of the officials taking part in the early discussions at mid-level had direct experience in Liberia, and some had tutored Doe in everything from diplomatic protocol to separation of powers. Having directed the heavy investment in promoting Liberia’s “experiment in democracy,” most thought the policy was working and (in the words of one dissenter) “fought like hell to maintain it.”

As the deliberations moved up the policy chain, new global considerations took precedence. Liberia’s proven utility as a military staging base and intelligence monitoring site weighed in Doe’s favor. Moreover, policymakers were instinctively leery of Taylor, since they had intelligence indicating that he had received modest backing from Libya, including training for some of his men.

2. Disregard for the Potential Impact of Low-Level Engagement. U.S. prestige carried more sway in Liberia than most senior policymakers realized in their 1990 evaluations. The inclination was to downplay the significance of historical ties rather than employing them as tools for successful diplomacy.

“We deployed a large marine amphibious force near Liberia to evacuate U.S. citizens, an operation accomplished with great efficiency,” Cohen said in the previously cited interview. “A modest intervention at that point to end the fighting in Monrovia could have avoided the prolonged conflict.” The decision to deploy the four-ship task force was taken on May 31, 1990 by the Deputies Committee, chaired by Scowcroft’s number two, Robert Gates, and officials hoped the move was merely precautionary. “Gates worried that if we sent the marines ashore, desperate Liberians would rush the embassy and CNN would be there showing the grisly sight,” a participant in the deputies sessions said. Meanwhile, horror stories from Liberia received little attention in the United States, even though the fighting was moving into Monrovia and claiming hundreds of lives.

Although there was widespread disappointment in Liberia with the U.S. approach, respect for U.S. power remained high. In August 1990, the White House saw firsthand what direct involvement could achieve. Officials wanted to mount a rescue effort for Americans and other foreigners trapped by the fighting in Monrovia without landing marines in the capital. A convoy of vehicles was organized to travel from the U.S. embassy through an area of Monrovia where many other foreign embassies were located (and where foreigners had taken refuge) and then south 65 miles to Buchanan, Liberia’s second-

largest city. The plan required cooperation from rebel leader Taylor, whose forces controlled Buchanan.

Taylor had sent signals that he wanted to work with the U.S. government, but many officials remained skeptical of his intentions. His army, now swollen to thousands, was well known for capricious killing sprees. After lengthy discussion, Admiral David Jeremiah, deputy to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell, placed a call to Taylor by satellite phone. Taylor agreed to allow evacuation helicopters to land, and the rescue took place without incident.

A more dramatic demonstration of what Washington could do came the following month during a trip to West Africa by Assistant Secretary Cohen following the capture and killing of Doe by another rebel faction, headed by former Taylor protégé Prince Johnson. A multinational West African peacekeeping force dispatched to Liberia in late August had managed to separate combatants but was itself coming under heavy fire from Taylor's troops.

Mediation efforts had failed repeatedly, but Taylor told Cohen he would agree to a U.S.-brokered truce. "With the United States involved, we can have peace," Taylor's spokesman said when the cease-fire was announced. News of the breakthrough was not well received at the White House, where officials accused Cohen of exceeding policy guidance. "He was ordered to come home and explain his actions," according to an official involved in the incident.

Taylor felt tricked, as he confirmed during an interview with the author the following year. Asked in a tape-recorded session his attitude toward the United States, where he lived for several years, Taylor said "we appreciate America's concern." And he added: "We have had long ties, and we are not stupid enough to believe those ties should be broken."

The cease-fire incident left a scar. Tom Woewiyu, Taylor's defense minister until he broke away in 1994, said the rebel army, known as the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), had postponed a full-force assault on the capital for several months at the urging of U.S. officials. "The Americans told us, 'it looks like Doe is going to leave—why don't you hold off,' and we did because we didn't want to see Monrovia and its people destroyed."

After Taylor realized that Washington had no intention of actively backing the accord he had made with Cohen, he feared he had been the victim of a U.S. and Nigerian scheme to keep him from taking power. The delay probably cost the NPFL the chance to seize control of Monrovia, because the Nigerian-directed West African force was later able to push the rebels out of the capital, the only part of Liberia they never captured.

When hostilities returned to fever pitch in Monrovia, the city became a "killing field" of previously unimaginable proportions.

3. Preference for Arms-Length Diplomacy.

Forceful diplomatic engagement of the kind that has long been routinely employed by superpowers was never attempted in Liberia. Instead, U.S. involvement was

limited largely to the protection of U.S. lives and the provision of emergency aid. And there was not much public pressure to do anything more.

"Unless television images come into American living rooms of little starving babies," former President Jimmy Carter said in a 1993 interview with the author, "the U.S. government just looks the other way and pays very little attention to what's going on in Africa." In the case of Liberia, there was almost no TV coverage.

Several members of Congress did press the administration to seek additional avenues for action. One of those urging higher-level U.S. diplomatic activity in Liberia was Republican Senator Nancy Kassebaum, now chairman of the Subcommittee on African Affairs of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. "We have a responsibility to help fix some of the problems we helped create," she said in a 1992 interview.

One idea mentioned more and more frequently as fighting grew heavier toward the middle of 1990 was the "Marcos option"—a U.S.-managed departure for Doe resembling the one arranged by the Reagan administration for Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos. But the NSC Deputies Committee refused to let the Department of State make such an offer to Doe, fearing further entanglement. As an alternative to U.S. leadership, the administration gave encouragement to West African mediation and peacekeeping, initiated by the 16-nation Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), with Nigeria playing a leading role.

"ECOWAS said 'this is our responsibility' and they have been doing their best to handle what is a terrible situation," National Security Adviser Scowcroft said in the previously cited interview. "If it can be handled by states in the area then that is how it should be done."

West African governments, however, expected and wanted a more active U.S. role. "We could not understand how the U.S. government, with its long-standing relationship with Liberia, could remain so aloof," said Ambassador Joseph Iroha, a career Nigerian diplomat who represented ECOWAS in Monrovia for several years after the war began. West African states sent in troops to stop the fratricidal killing, he said, because "we couldn't allow this sort of thing to continue."

What Have We Learned From Liberia?

Unfortunately, by the time ECOWAS was able to organize an intervention force in late 1990, the country's dismemberment was far advanced and domestic division had been exacerbated by widespread bloody conflict. In addition, the peace force brought problems of its own. ECOWAS troops have been accused of various misdeeds, including some extensive looting in the early days, and they have at times turned brutal in the face of resistance to their authority, particularly from Taylor's NPFL.

Nevertheless, the West African initiative represents the first time that a regional body had intervened to stop a conflict in its own region, and there is little disagreement that the military and political actions of

ECOWAS have saved many lives, at considerable cost to the member states. With Nigeria in the lead in supplying funding and troops, participating nations have spent well in excess of \$500 million in Liberia, according to estimates by both U.S. and Nigerian government officials. The operation is one of the largest in the world and the only major peacekeeping effort not run by the United Nations.

Before the world body established a Liberian observer mission in late 1993, the only significant outside assistance for the West African effort was about \$30 million from the United States. After a lengthy interagency debate in early 1994, the Clinton administration approved another \$30 million to underwrite deployment of troops from outside the region. Critics of U.S. policy argue that even given the prior decision to limit direct U.S. involvement, Washington could have done much more, both materially and diplomatically, to bolster the West African effort and make it more successful.

No one can say whether the loss of an estimated 150,000 lives and the regional devastation spawned by the Liberian crisis could have been prevented without extended U.S. military engagement, but it is difficult to find a Liberian who doubts that firm U.S. leadership would have made a decisive difference. Many U.S. officials, too, now share Cohen's assessment that more could have been achieved without creating a quagmire.

What is certain is that failure to stop the fighting during 1990, before the entire country was devastated, erected barriers to a solution that still have not been overcome. The result was to condemn Liberia and much of the region to continuing suffering and to divert scarce international assistance from economic development to sustaining refugees.

The same tentativeness that characterized U.S. decision making on Liberia has been exhibited in a number of other crises in Africa and beyond. In Somalia, another cold war orphan, military action came so late that, as when all the king's men were confronted with a shattered Humpty-Dumpty, it proved impossible to put the pieces back together.

What could be interpreted as a tacit admission that a new approach is needed is contained in a reexamination of policy toward Africa, National Security Review 30, carried out by the Bush administration in the final months before Clinton took office. "There is little to be lost and much to be gained through an activist policy," the study concludes. "Our enormous relief efforts could be lessened by actions designed to eliminate the causes—political, environmental, and economic—of the crises to which we must respond. A diplomacy aimed at prevention and resolution of conflict is the sine qua non of an effective pursuit of all U.S. goals in the region."

Crisis prevention has been the watchword of Clinton policy as well. "In the face of all the tensions that are now gripping the continent," the president told the White House Conference on Africa in June 1994, "we need a new Africa policy based on the idea that we should help the nations of Africa identify and solve problems before they erupt." However, this administration, like its predecessor, has seldom found the political will to confront Africa's crises forcefully—even when they bear U.S. fingerprints.

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