

Barbarism in Liberia is the result of American pragmatism

by Michael Gelber

The ongoing nine-month-old war in Liberia has been rightly called one of Africa's "most ruthless fratricidal wars." At least 25,000 people have died, untold thousands have been injured, approximately 300,000 have been displaced, and another 450,000 have fled to neighboring Guinea, Ivory Coast, and Sierra Leone. The population of Liberia before this conflict began was a mere 2.5 million.

Until 1987, Liberia, a nation originally created by freed American slaves in the mid-19th century, was considered a loyal ally of America. What happened?

Former President Samuel Doe, executed in September by rebels, was installed in power 10 years ago with full American acceptance. He was then a 28-year-old master sergeant who rose to the head of a coup to stem a wave of unrest apparently directed against the austerity policies of the preceding government of William Tolbert. In 1979, when Tolbert doubled the price of rice, thousands of students and others poured into the streets. Tolbert, who was head of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), arrested and then, according to a student leader at the time, offered amnesty to his opponents.

This degree of tolerance was opposed by Doe's faction, and a coup resulted. Unlike Tolbert, Doe began eliminating his adversaries. "Any anti-revolutionary element caught undermining the progress of the Liberian Revolution will be immediately executed," he warned.

Tolbert believed the destabilization of his regime went beyond the price increases, though he benefited as owner of one of Liberia's largest rice farms. After a call for a general strike, followed by the rice riots under the direction of the People's Progressive Party, Tolbert arrested 75 activists, charging them with sedition and treason, and expelled three Soviet diplomats for "reasons we felt were necessary for the benefit and security of the Republic of Liberia," he said.

Judging by the financial support provided the new President Samuel Doe, the U.S. looked at him as a vehicle to project U.S. geopolitical objectives in the region. According to an insider on the scene during this period, one of the State Department's concerns was the need to "wean him away from the influence of Qaddafi." Libya was one of the first nations to recognize the Doe regime, while he received little support from the OAU. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Richard Moose told a congressional subcommit-

tee following the coup that U.S. economic and military assistance "will counter the temptation to accept" offers of aid from Libya, Ethiopia, and the Soviet Union. The danger that Doe might be susceptible to Qaddafi, justified U.S. investment.

Bush lets pragmatism prevail

What has been America's thinking underlying relations with Africa? Then-vice presidential candidate George Bush expressed it succinctly in an interview in *Africa Report* in 1980: "Pragmatism should prevail. . . . My criteria for assistance would include: the importance to the U.S. of a given state in terms of its natural resources, strategic position, and influence in Africa."

President Doe received \$500 million between 1980-87, the highest per capita contribution to any sub-Saharan nation. The United States also arranged to have Doe's troops trained in Israel. In turn, Doe closed the Libyan embassy, and suspended diplomatic relations with Moscow.

America's primary interest has been to use Liberia as a listening post and communications center. The U.S. has an Omega communications and navigation relay station near the capital of Monrovia which transmits to submarines in the South Atlantic. Liberia has supplied the U.S. landing and refueling rights at Robertsfield International Airport, used to support the UNITA rebels in their insurgency against the pro-Soviet Angolan government. And, a 500-person staff at the U.S. embassy in Monrovia collects information for the CIA from the entire region and runs a Voice of America transmitter. In other words, Doe permitted the U.S. to run its intelligence operation for the continent out of Liberia. In return, the U.S. accepted virtually any kind of regime.

Opposition to Doe grew especially following 1985 elections in which the alleged victor, the Liberian Action Party (LAP), was defrauded and its ballots burned. Within the leadership of the LAP, was Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, an on-and-off World Bank executive since 1973. She was Tolbert's finance minister and, in December 1980, after a brief stay in Doe's administration, she became the World Bank's senior loan officer for Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. In 1981, she was running Citibank's office in Nairobi, Kenya for east and south Africa. It is an open question as to what extent the World Bank views the LAP as a means to reassert control in Liberia.

A failed coup in 1985 resulted in Doe's opponents being killed or thrown in jail. Doe, in revenge, annihilated an entire village of 6,000 people who had the misfortune to inhabit the town in which the leader of the coup lived.

Liberia's economy was also in shambles. Under U.S. and International Monetary Fund (IMF) pressure, the country has been maintained in strict colonial fashion as a raw materials exporter, primarily iron ore and rubber. (This was also one of the opposition's criticisms of the Tolbert regime.) In the unfolding world depression, such products were not in demand. Also, Doe controlled all foreign exchange earnings, and it is said that he personally pocketed upwards of 40% of the nation's revenues. Under pressure from exiles such as Amos Sawyer and Sirleaf, who fled to the U.S. following the coup, Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) convinced the Government Accounting Office to audit U.S. aid to Liberia. The result was the deployment of a team of 17 U.S. "experts" to Liberia to, in the words of Sirleaf, "run the country." Doe refused to adopt their proposals.

U.S., IMF target Doe

Increasingly, the U.S., the IMF, and World Bank began looking for alternatives to Doe. The decision to replace him with someone more amenable to World Bank objectives probably occurred sometime in 1987.

As it became more evident that Doe was not going to permit the U.S. and World Bank to set his agenda, military aid was cut. Doe's response was to go to Romania for his military needs. Ironically, Romania's barbaric President Ceausescu was the darling of the World Bank precisely because he met their debt repayment schedule.

By the late 1980s, the U.S., IMF, and World Bank had succeeded in creating a monster whose military capability was financed by the U.S., trained in Israel, and armed by Romania! According to one Liberian source, the State Department had invested so much in Doe that they were unwilling, until recently, to let go of him.

A coup was launched against Doe last Christmas by the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), led by Charles Taylor and Prince Yormie Johnson. To gain popular support, the NPFL took its name from the organization of the leader of the 1985 coup, and built its base in his former stronghold of Nimba County. Doe's response was to massacre the inhabitants of that region. Warfare reached its climax in August 1990 when 600 refugees, seeking asylum in a Lutheran church in Monrovia, were slaughtered. This only enlarged Doe's opposition.

NPFL leaders have also been trained in the United States. Charles Taylor, the leader of one faction, is a 42-year-old "economist" educated at Bentley College in Massachusetts. He was Doe's chief procurement officer who, in 1983, was accused of embezzling almost \$1 million, but claims he was framed by Doe. Another faction is allied to Prince Johnson, a military man trained at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. John-

son participated in the unsuccessful coup of 1985. The NPFL, which includes children as young as 10, has at its core 150 soldiers trained in Libya and neighboring Burkino Faso.

Officially, the U.S. is not supporting any faction because of atrocities committed on all sides, and considers the conflict a domestic dispute. Richard Boucher of the State Department told the Sept. 12 *New York Times*, "We continue to be in touch with the various factions in the Liberian conflict. . . . It's not for us to choose. At this point the situation as far as who's in control in Monrovia is very confused." Doe's supporters were no longer thought a good investment.

Currently, about 4,000 troops under the direction of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), have entered Liberia to impose a ceasefire and set up the context for negotiations amongst the rival factions. As of October, this deployment, which is dominated by Nigeria, had the support of Prince Johnson, but failed in securing the cooperation of Taylor. Nigerian President Babaginda has been unsuccessfully calling on the U.S. and France to bring Taylor to the negotiating table.

The conflict has entered a phase of "irregular warfare." ECOWAS forces are now engaged in combat with Taylor's rebels. Taylor's Minister of Defense Woewiyu, reflected this grisly reality: "We do not have a specific location and our fighting force is not concentrated in any spot where anybody can throw a bomb." Warning against parachuting troops into rebel territory, Woewiyu said such a plan "is like committing suicide because every living Liberian on our territory is a soldier."

A new government?

Most frequently identified as potential leaders of a new government are Amos Sawyer and Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf. Sawyer is being supported by ECOWAS.

An exchange student in the U.S., Sawyer completed his masters and Ph.D. in 1973 in political science from Northwestern University, Illinois. He has been a critic of the government since the early 1970s. Between 1981-83, he chaired a commission for a new constitution which was accepted in a national referendum in 1984. When he established the Liberian People's Party in 1984, it was banned by President Doe, and Sawyer was accused of masterminding a "communist plot" to install a socialist government. In 1986, Sawyer worked out of the African Studies Center of Indiana University. In January 1988, he helped establish the Association for Constitutional Democracy in Liberia (ACDL) operating out of Washington, D.C., conceived to shape American policy towards Liberia.

Tragically, Sawyer's people have no economic program to rebuild their nation. They support free enterprise, and little else. Sirleaf conceives of herself as the architect of the next government's economic program. Of course, that would place Liberia once again at the mercy of the World Bank.