ABSTRACT


The thesis focuses on the US-Liberian relationship from 1971-1985, a time when the cold war entered Africa. In 1975, Cuban troops poured into Angola, and in 1977 more Cubans entered Ethiopia. These events affected US relations with Liberia, long considered a dependable and stable American ally in Africa. William Tolbert, who governed Liberia from 1971 to 1980, strove to raise his country’s profile on the continent and to put some distance between Monrovia and Washington. In 1980, he was overthrown and murdered by Samuel Doe, the new leader of Liberia. Doe, who would rule for a decade, was a ruthless dictator who led his country to the onslaught of civil war. Nevertheless, during the Doe years, US aid to Liberia increased dramatically; under Reagan, Liberia became the largest recipient of US aid in sub-Saharan Africa. The cost of this aid was relatively low for the United States in comparison to its benefits: leverage over a pro-American ally in a strategic location.

Newly declassified documents from the Carter Library, the Reagan Library, and the Declassified Document Reference System, as well as interviews with State Department officials, and the US press enable me to present Liberia’s special relationship with the United States in a new light. This is a case study of the attempt of a client state to stake out an independent role despite its dependency. It is also an example of how US foreign policy is governed by a cost/benefit analysis. Finally, it provides an example of the moral ambiguities of foreign aid. While other analysts stress the historical ties between the Liberia and the United States, “Tragic Pragmatism” explains that Liberian friendship provided significant benefits for the United States.

by
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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
North Carolina State University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

History

Raleigh, North Carolina

2012

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BIOGRAPHY

Clifford Casper, raised in Idaho Falls, Idaho, graduated from Skyline High School in June 2000. That fall, he began his collegiate career at Rick’s College, a small junior college in Rexburg, Idaho. After his first year of college, he took a two-year hiatus to volunteer as a missionary for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints in Philadelphia. After his missionary service, he returned to Idaho in September 2003 to attend Brigham Young University – Idaho (which had transitioned from Ricks College). He soon met and married his wife, Krista, in May of 2004. In June 2006, they welcomed their first son, William.


Clifford started his Master’s program in History at North Carolina State University in the fall of 2008, under the direction of Dr. Nancy Mitchell. In May 2011, Clifford and Krista’s daughter, Cordelia, was born. In December 2011, Clifford successfully defended his thesis on US – Liberian relations and completed his Master’s Degree in history with emphasis on US foreign policy during the Cold War. Clifford takes great pride in his work and in his responsibilities as a father and husband.

Clifford does not have specific plans after graduation but is seeking a career in foreign policy or international relations.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank, first and foremost, Dr. Nancy Mitchell. Her help and guidance through this project was invaluable. Any success of this work is directly related to her. She continually pushed me, asking nothing less than my best work. She gave harsh and realistic critiques, often resulting in great anxiety; yet she has been kind and understanding in hard times, never letting me feel that I was less than able to do the work. I am immensely grateful she was my advisor.

I must also thank my patient and loving wife Krista. She stood by as this project grew larger and larger. She lovingly waited and supported me not understanding or knowing how long the thesis would take. She never questioned school projects or the time involved. When I told her I needed to fly to Los Angeles to do research, possibly unfunded, she willingly accepted. She encouraged me to continue and not to get bogged down in the problems of life. I also want to thank my two sons, William and Luke. They don’t understand why I am often unavailable or tired, but they love me anyway. I also want to acknowledge my daughter Cordelia. Whenever I think of my time completing this thesis, I will think of her.

I must also thank my extended family and friends whose help and support is greatly appreciated.

Thank you to North Carolina State University’s Department of History for accepting me into their program and providing funding for research.
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Introduction:
Beginning a Liberian Journey in Philadelphia

In 1822, the American Colonization Society sponsored a group of freed US slaves to return to Africa. The Society purchased a settlement for this purpose on the west coast of Africa. In 1847, the liberated American slaves living in this settlement organized a country, “Liberia,” in the image of the United States and set themselves up as elites. Liberia is the only state with this historical American connection and it, along with Ethiopia, is one of the only two states in Africa with no European colonial past. However, Washington largely ignored Liberia until World War II, when it needed Liberian rubber for the war effort. The Roosevelt administration also began to construct a deep-water port and airfield near Monrovia, the capital city. After the wave of decolonization in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the United States began to pay more attention to Africa, and the “special relationship” that Liberians had long thought they had with Washington finally began to take shape.

When asked about Liberia, many Americans mistake it for Libya. Others remember the feel good (though racist at its core) story of freed American slaves returning to Africa. I did not even know that about Liberia. I grew up in rural Idaho where our greatest concerns were the yield of the potato harvest and the reintroduction of wolves into Yellowstone Park. Africa was the farthest place in the world. Ten years ago, if you had told me my life would be linked to this small African nation, I would never have believed it. However, at the age of 19, I became a volunteer minister for my church and was sent to work in Philadelphia.
More people lived in a couple of square blocks of Philadelphia than in my entire hometown. It was a wonderful experience and opened my eyes to a world much different than what I knew. Philadelphia has a large Liberian population. While performing this volunteer service I began to make friends with many Liberian refugees. I was unaware of the issues that faced their country, and only now after my research and studies have I begun to understand the complexities of their ethnic background. However, one thing was clear: they all considered their country a part of the United States. Many called themselves, “America’s stepchild.”

They told me stories of their homeland, shared their exotic (and extremely hot) food, and one woman even told me how to survive an encounter with a baboon. However, most
stories of their homeland were not pleasant. Most of the Liberians I knew were refugees
from the civil war that had erupted in their country in 1989. They told stories of people
going to hospitals for simple procedures and having organs harvested. They told me of
vicious battles and attacks on refugee camps and churches. More than once I talked to
friends in distress, as they had not heard from a spouse or child for weeks after a raid. It was
not unusual to hear about the loss of a loved one.

I could not imagine the trouble in the country. Many of the Liberians worked harder
than anyone should have to, hoping to send money to their families and save enough to bring
family members to the United States. Just before I went back home to Idaho in late 2003, I
heard President George W. Bush order a handful of Marines to Liberia to help quell the civil
strife there. The warlord Charles Taylor immediately went into exile, and the 14-year civil
war came to an end. I was elated but also surprised that it had only taken a few marines to
lessen the enormous suffering of the Liberian people.

I returned to Idaho to attend college. I studied US history and took a broad survey
course on African history. In homage to my Liberian friends, I wrote a report on Liberia. I
thought this would be the extent of my historical research on Liberia, as my focus was on
modern US history and the Cold War. Eventually, I attended graduate school at North
Carolina State University. During my graduate studies, I casually asked my soon-to-be
advisor, Dr. Nancy Mitchell, about Liberia one day after a class discussion on US foreign
policy toward Africa during the Cold War. I didn’t think it would lead to a possible thesis
subject, but I was curious of what historians made of the closely Western aligned country.
We met weeks later to discuss possible thesis subjects, and the idea of writing on Liberia’s
involvement during the Cold War was brought up. Both of us thought the relationship between the US and Liberia was an anomaly in Africa policy as the country received a great amount of US aid with no communist threat. Liberia from 1980-1985 received almost half a billion dollars in aid, while the stalwart American ally, Zaire, received only $289 million.¹

I was curious to understand how, given this significant US commitment, Liberia could fall into such a brutal civil war. I wanted to understand how Liberia ended up the way it did. Why did the Carter administration support Samuel Doe, who led a brutal coup in 1980 against the pro-American government that preceded him, and why did the Reagan administration lavish so much aid – ten times more than Liberia previously received – on this incompetent dictator who led his country into a horrific civil war? This was the question I wanted to answer.

I did a quick look at possible sources and work on Liberia and the results were extremely limited. Dr. Mitchell encouraged me to look into doing thesis on Liberia. Due to the dearth of sources, I planned on doing a large overview of the US relationship with Liberia from WWII, when Roosevelt signed agreements for the use of the country’s rubber, through the civil war that lasted until 2003. However, I eventually decided to focus on two major times in Liberian history, the presidencies of William Tolbert (1971-1980) and Samuel Doe (1980-1990). Within this time frame there are three distinct periods of US involvement in Liberia, each represented by a chapter.

The first chapter deals with 1971-1980, when William Tolbert was president of Liberia. His presidency marked a new era of politics in Liberia, but that time also

corresponded to increasing Cold War problems in Africa as Cuban troops supported communist factions in Angola and Ethiopia. The increase of military activity by the Cubans caused a great shift of focus in the Cold War toward Africa. Liberia became an important strategic location for the United States. Tolbert also became a valuable asset by promoting American interests as he gained prestige in the African community. This chapter tells the story of a country that remained dependent on the United States, despite Tolbert’s desire to express his African nationalism. Though Tolbert walked a fine line between the US presidents and his African contemporaries, his tenure marked a period of stability and liberalization in Liberia. However, it also precipitated the greatest tragedy in Liberian history.

The second chapter deals with this tragedy. The 1980 coup in Liberia saw the assassination of Tolbert and the loss of Liberia’s stability. Samuel Doe would destroy the government of Liberia. He left the Carter administration scrambling to retain its interests in Liberia and save face. In Liberia, the remainder of Carter’s term was spent holding the hand of the young and inexperienced leader, Samuel Doe, to encourage him to make politically and economically responsible choices. The Carter administration slightly increased US aid to Liberia under Doe.

The third chapter details the continuation and expansion of funding for Samuel Doe under the Reagan administration. Doe became the largest recipient of aid in sub-Saharan Africa. The chapter explores the years 1981-1985. It shows the principles of a cost/benefit analysis in dealing with foreign policy. In 1981, helping Doe was a relatively cheap way for the United States to maintain its interest in Liberia, but by 1985, Doe’s erratic and dictatorial
behavior had raised the cost of friendship with him. Continuing to send him lavish aid could no longer be justified. US aid in the early 1980s helped Doe become a ruthless dictator whose rule eventually led to the onslaught of civil war.

The “Special Relationship” between the United States and Liberia is mentioned by Liberians and by Americans in almost every cable they exchange and meeting they hold. It is difficult, however to define exactly what the special relationship meant. The United States cared little for Africa outside of two periods of history, the slave trade, and the Cold War. Liberia was no exception. It makes sense that the special relationship the United States shared with Liberia existed only because of the Cold War. Under the guise of a shared historical past, both countries used the pretext of a special relationship to navigate the reality of Cold War politics.

Until the mid 1970s, there were only two countries in Africa where the United States could operate without stepping on European toes: Ethiopia and Liberia. In 1974, the fall of the pro-American emperor in Ethiopia left Liberia the only African country with which the United States had privileged access. (I omit South Africa, where the United States had important entrenched interests, because Washington had to take West European – especially British – interests into account when dealing with Pretoria.) Liberia was the only state where Washington could build facilities without arousing the suspicions of its allies. Tolbert was a useful ally. He promoted US policy in Africa, and the moderate amount of US aid was justified. The United States sustained the “special relationship” and used the country for a low cost. Tolbert also played on the special relationship in his solicitations for US aid.

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It is difficult, however, to understand the drastic increase in aid to Liberia in the Reagan administration. Washington must have been getting, or hoping to get, much more in return. It is most likely that this “return” involved Reagan’s efforts to rollback communism in Africa. Supporting the anticommmunist rebels in Angola was a cornerstone of Reagan’s policy toward the third world. There are hints that Liberia played a useful role in this struggle and that Doe understood, using subtle hints and threats to get his way. The special relationship was useful for both parties.

Sources for this study have been difficult to find. I was finally able to find useful sources, but their scarcity proved to be the greatest obstacle in writing this thesis. The majority of my research came from visits to the Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan Presidential Libraries. Both libraries had newly declassified documents which provided the most significant pieces to put the story together. However, they are incomplete as neither presidential library has declassified the bulk of its material, and Liberia rarely rose to presidential attention. The State Department archives have not yet been declassified, and CIA documents, which might reveal the true story, will probably never see the light of day.

Online documents from the Gerald Ford Library and the Declassified Document Reference System also helped to fill in missing pieces. Congressional Reports were particularly useful in unraveling the complexities of US aid for Liberia. A wonderful human element was added from the accounts of State Department employees in The Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training. Colin Legum’s volumes of Africa Contemporary Record were extremely useful as they described the main events in Liberia year after year. Memoirs of the involved figures rarely yielded
much information on Liberia. However the memoir of the current Liberian president, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, *This Child Will be Great: Memoir of a Remarkable Life by Africa’s First Woman President*, provided a personal look at the rule of Samuel Doe.

Foreign press coverage of Liberia was limited, as it had no colonial connection to Europe. US press coverage was also sporadic. Several key events in Liberia are simply not well reported. This left some holes in the narrative. For example, all authors and journalists describe the aftermath of the coup in Liberia as extremely violent and chaotic, yet I have not been able to find even an estimate of the number of people killed or hurt. This has been extremely frustrating.

Secondary sources about US-Liberian relations are scarce and for the most part repeat each other. I found no Ph.D. dissertations on the subject, and even the *Liberian Studies Journal* was silent on Liberian relations with the United States during the Tolbert and Doe administrations. There are a few secondary works on the US-Liberian relationship that helped to point me in the right direction. Hassan Sisay’s *Big Powers and Small Nations: A Case Study of United States-Liberian Relations*, written shortly after the Tolbert administration, provides an overview of the US-Liberian relationship from World War II, but does not place it in its Cold War context. The most comprehensive work on US relations with Liberia is by D. Elwood Dunn: *Liberia and the United States During the Cold War: Limits of Reciprocity*, which provides a broad look at the US relationship with Liberia.

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from World War II through the end of the Doe administration.\textsuperscript{5} This work came out after I began researching my thesis, and initially I was concerned that Dunn would scoop me. Although our subjects may focus on a similar time frame, we approach it from very different perspectives. Dunn, who is a Liberian, served in the Tolbert administration. His book, which is organized thematically, is told from the Liberian point of view. He emphasizes what he sees as the obligation of the United States to help Liberia. That is, he accepts the “special relationship” at face value; he asserts that it helped motivate US policy. His book is more a history of Liberia, which was heavily influenced by US policy, than a study of US foreign policy and diplomatic relations.

My thesis focuses on US policy. The newly declassified documents from the Carter and Reagan Libraries allow me to describe a relationship that was based on much more than historical connections. My thesis does not ignore the special relationship between Liberia and the United States, but shows that a more mundane equation was at work: Liberian friendship did not cost much and it provided significant benefits for the United States.

In 1973, two members of the United States House of Representatives visited Africa to investigate its need for aid. Representatives Jonathan B. Bingham, (D-NY), and Edward G. Biester Jr., (R-PA) represented the House Foreign Affairs Committee in this endeavor. One of the countries slated for assessment was Liberia. The two congressmen spent one day there to assess the country’s progress under the new president, William Tolbert. During the day, they visited many of the country’s infrastructure projects and facilities: the American built Roberts Airfield and Monrovia Free Port, as well as the University at Monrovia and the Firestone Rubber Plantation. They reported that Monrovia was a sad city. It was full of building plans, foundations, and even frames, but progress was stagnant with no funds to complete the construction.

Even with the bleak portrayal of the city, however, the American representatives mentioned that the people were very gracious and warm to them. Bingham and Biester reported on the great need Liberia had for US aid: “Liberia is an example of a country where it seems almost inconceivable that bilateral aid from the United States should be terminated at any time in the foreseeable future. The Liberian people, as long-time friends, allies, and one might well say, first cousins of the American people, would be wholly unable to understand such a seemingly callous step.”

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A few conclusions about the relationship between the United States and Liberia can be drawn from reading the congressmen’s report. First, Liberia’s most advanced structures and institutions came at the behest of the United States, and the United States continued to keep tabs on them. Second, the people of Liberia seemed to feel a sense of kinship with Americans. Third, the country was in extremely poor condition. Finally, the US representatives found Liberia to be worthy of only a one-day visit. This is striking, given that Liberia was “widely regarded by other Africans as kind of an appendage to the United States, or indeed, a colony of the United States,” according a former American ambassador to the country.  

Liberia as a state was comparable to the partially built buildings that littered its capital city. Liberia, the oldest republic in Africa, had the plans, foundation, and in many instances even the frame to rise out of the third world and become a thriving nation. But like the buildings in Monrovia, it lacked the funding, motivation, and support to achieve this. Liberia looked to the United States to help it become a great nation. However, American aspirations for Liberia and poor local leadership led to the decay that would accelerate with the death of William Tolbert. Liberia possessed the plans, but not the ability to grow into its potential.

The Beginnings of a Political Family in Liberia

William R. Tolbert Jr. became President of Liberia in 1971 following the death of President William Tubman. Tolbert, who had been Tubman’s vice president, was a

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charismatic leader with a unique background for a Liberian president. Like previous
Liberian leaders, he belonged to the established Amerco-Liberian ethnic group that ruled
Liberia for almost 150 years. As a part of this group, he held deep connections to the United
States, his family having emigrated from there. However, Tolbert’s family was not among
the Americans who had left for Liberia during or shortly after its founding in 1822.

Disillusioned with the continuing racism in the US south after the Civil War, his
family had left the United States in 1878 from Charleston, South Carolina. They were
among the 205 members of the African Exodus Organization who came aboard the ship,
Azor, to Liberia. Tolbert’s father, William Sr. was only ten years old at the time. The
Tolbert family established themselves in rural Bensonville, where Daniel Tolbert (President
Tolbert’s grandfather) immersed himself in his new culture. He learned the language,
Kpelle, of the local indigenous people and took several more wives as was customary in the
culture; Daniel reportedly had over 50 children. The Tolbert family became very powerful
and William Sr. made a name for himself in politics, where he was a member of the
legislature and became the chairman of the ruling True Whig Party.8

William Tolbert Jr. (future President Tolbert) was born May 13, 1913. He was an
ambitious and bright man who in 1934 was the valedictorian at Liberia College. Cognizant
of the issues facing Africa and Liberia, he said in his address to the graduating class, “If

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8 Richard Tolbert, “William R. Tolbert - 'In The Pantheon Of Great African Leaders’”
Liberia must be preserved, she must bask in the sunshine of national prosperity and always be able to dictate her own policies.”

After graduating in 1934, Tolbert gained employment as a clerk in the Liberian Treasury Department, despite his father’s wish that he pursue a military career. He performed well and quickly climbed the ladder until he was elected to the Liberian legislature in 1943, filling the seat left vacant when his father retired. Tolbert’s older brother, Frank, should have gained the seat by tradition, but William Jr. made the power play without the support of his father, older brother, and True Whig Party elites. Tolbert soon rose in the political arena and garnered the favor, through family ties and political support, of the powerful President William Tubman who just won a tough electoral battle. In return for his support, Tubman chose Tolbert to be the Special Advisor of the Liberia delegation at the United Nations in 1945. At the age of 39 in 1952, Tubman selected Tolbert to be his vice president, a position he would hold until his assumption of the presidency in 1971.

As Tubman’s vice president, Tolbert became internationally seasoned, traveling at the behest of the president to represent Liberia. Tolbert attended the 1953 coronation of Queen Elizabeth II and, in 1957, hosted Vice President Richard Nixon in Liberia. He represented President Tubman at the funeral of John F. Kennedy in 1963. Outside the political world, Tolbert was elected President of Baptist World Alliance, a group that promoted the Baptist religion around the world. A position of great prestige, the presidency was awarded every

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five years during the Baptist World Alliance conference. Tolbert was the Baptists’ first Black leader.¹⁰

**Domestic Changes**

William Tubman had ruled his country with a heavy hand and was well known for his repression of the indigenous people who made up more than ninety percent of the population. He died on July 23, 1971, and Tolbert assumed the position of president. Tolbert recognized the problem of the disparity between the elites and the indigenous people, which had existed ever since the founding of Liberia when the freed slaves had set themselves up as the elite class. According to historian Stephen Ellis, at the end of the Tubman era, Liberia no longer was a “beacon of hope.” During the Tubman years, Ellis wrote, Liberia “looked more like a corrupt and ramshackle neo-colony managed on behalf of the U.S. government and the Firestone rubber company.”¹¹

Tolbert immediately began taking steps to differentiate himself from his predecessor. He was ambitious, and he approached the presidency with big hopes and dreams to overcome Liberia’s problems. His lofty goals and ambitions were not just for the people of Liberia, but for himself as well. Tolbert wanted to change the caste system in Liberia, where only five to ten percent of the population (the Americo-Liberians) dominated the indigenous majority. The Americo-Liberians dressed in western clothes, almost as though they were separate from Africa. Tolbert tried visually to be more African, even wearing a Safari suit and fur to differentiate himself from the formal western garb of his predecessors. He made other

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symbolic changes. Since its creation, Liberia’s national motto had been “The Love of Liberty Brought us Here” a motto referring to the ancestry of the Americo-Liberians. Tolbert changed it to “Love, Liberty, Justice, and Equality.” He also announced his plans to wage war against poverty, ignorance, and disease.

Although Tolbert belonged to the Americo-Liberian elite, he was well connected to the indigenous population. He was the first president who spoke a tribal language, learning Kpelle as he grew up around indigenous peoples. He owned farms of rubber, palm, coffee, cocoa, oranges, and bananas. Tolbert adopted a son from the indigenous populations in the interior of Liberia, further enamoring him to the indigenous peoples. The story is told that Tolbert met the boy who had been born with no arms and brought him home to raise him with the rest of the Tolbert children. Stories like this abounded at the time he became president showing him to be compassionate and caring. Shortly after becoming president, he visited a prison in Monrovia and insisted on improved conditions for inmates. To show his empathy for the impoverished people, he spent an evening in the worst slum of Monrovia telling the residents, “I want you to know that I identify myself with you. If you are poor, I identify myself with your poverty, and together we should work to better our conditions.”

Tolbert did not just talk; he also enacted political reforms. He dismissed and replaced several cabinet members and officials who had served under Tubman, saying that they had been corrupt. He allowed freedom of the press and disbanded the organization of secret police informants. Tolbert placed term limits on the presidency and sold the presidential yacht to save over a quarter million dollars in maintenance costs. He even effected change in

the powerful True Whig Party, cutting the requirement for civil servants to contribute a whole month's salary every year for payment to the political party. One of his closest advisors said about the reforms, “The old guard is too corrupt and too identified with the past to do the things the President wants done.”

The Nixon administration noted the difference Tolbert made. A memorandum written for National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger informed him of Tolbert’s character. The US ambassador in Liberia, Samuel Westerfield, reported that the central theme of the new Tolbert administration was anti-corruption. Domestic policy would center on a theme of “the greatest good for the greatest number.” As far as Liberia’s foreign policy was concerned, the memo reported that Tolbert was “a loyal friend of the U.S. and his basic commitment to the West is unquestioned.” However, it noted, Tolbert believed, “it was not good for Liberia to be completely dependent on one country.”

**Building Liberia**

Tolbert began his administration on a wave of reform and domestic liberalization, and he also wanted to raise Liberia’s profile in Africa. This was a tricky situation for an African head of state. To be more relevant in African issues, Tolbert needed to seem less joined at the hip to the United States, but to enact his reforms he could ill afford to antagonize the United States that gave him $19.7 million in aid in 1972. On his desire for sovereignty, his advisor on African Affairs, T.O. Dosumu-Johnson said: “Tolbert sought to give new meaning

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to Liberian independence as complete freedom to determine its own internal and external policies and relations as a sovereign state, without embarrassing erstwhile and current friends.”

Tolbert needed to retain the special relationship between the United States and Liberia. During his inaugural ceremonies on January 4, 1972, he received many prominent Americans as his guests. Foremost were President Nixon’s wife, Pat, and Reverend Billy Graham. Upon Mrs. Nixon’s appearance, Tolbert said: “You have come among people who love the President and the people of the United States.”

After his inauguration, however, Tolbert took steps to make Liberia seem less like an appendage of the United States. To this end in 1972, he allowed the Soviet Union to open an embassy in Monrovia. “Liberia is now more concerned with asserting its personality than with ideologies,” Dosumu-Johnson explained. “Long neglected by American liberalism, she must of necessity move into a larger world, by having diplomatic relations with communist states, sending students to study there and even receiving aid from them; but this does not by any stretch of the imagination mean commitment to communist ideology.” Though the action of allowing a Soviet embassy did not signal any change in allegiance, it was a big step for the solidly American aligned Liberia.

Tolbert’s desire to make Liberia less closely aligned to the United States would prove very difficult. Liberia housed the only OMEGA navigational system transmitter in Africa, tracking ships’ movements on the Atlantic. The country contained one of the largest Voice of America relay stations that sent transmissions throughout Africa and the Middle East.

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This station was one of the only stations in the world for which the United States paid no rent.\textsuperscript{20} The country also housed large telecommunications offices for diplomatic purposes, and a major office for CIA operations in Africa was stationed in Liberia. The United States had access to Monrovia’s free port and Roberts Airfield. It also stationed diplomatic aircraft in Liberia for use all over Africa and claimed short-notice rights for military aircraft use at Roberts Airfield. In the 1970s, Liberia was still in many ways what one ambassador serving in the early 50s had called it: the “State Department’s jewel in all of Africa.”\textsuperscript{21} During Tolbert’s presidency 4500 Americans lived in Liberia and American companies invested over $340 million in industry including iron mining operations and the Firestone rubber plantation.\textsuperscript{22}

The United States also had great interest in Liberian shipping. Liberia itself was not a maritime power, but with 80 million gross tons flying under the Liberian flag, as a flag of convenience, Liberia possessed a major interest in world shipping.\textsuperscript{23} Not only was Liberia important in terms of US facilities, in 1973 an official from the Agency for International

Development (AID) said, “There are good opportunities for [Liberia] to become a showcase for the US foreign assistance program.”

Tolbert and African Affairs

On a trip to the United States on June 3, 1973, Tolbert criticized Western involvement in Africa and advocated the creation of an economic union of Africa similar to the emerging Western European union. He gave a speech in California proclaiming his optimism about the future of Africa and criticizing the reluctance of Western powers to help the continent. He cited the problems of minority rule in Rhodesia, South African control of Namibia, and the continuing wars in the Portuguese colonies. These were all issues that the Nixon administration, which tacitly supported the white-ruled states in Africa, was ignoring. Tolbert firmly stated that these African problems would be addressed with or without the help of colonial powers and the United States; Tolbert was trying to assert himself as an African nationalist.

US officials, on the other hand, wanted to make Liberia an example of US friendship. Liberia needed great help for domestic reforms and depended on US aid of $18.8 million in 1973. On June 5, 1973, Tolbert met President Nixon at the White House. Nixon had ignored black Africa, depending on the pro-American regimes in Zaire and Ethiopia to represent US interests; his administration also supported the heavy-handed Portuguese

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26 Dunn and Tarr, Liberia: A National Polity in Transition, p. 177
colonial control of Angola and Mozambique.\textsuperscript{27} The meeting with Tolbert indicated the special importance of Liberia for the United States. Tolbert used the occasion to try to solicit Nixon’s support for increasing aid, giving outlines of his plans to modernize and build Liberia with the help of the United States. Tolbert was clear about his focus in Liberia saying, “At a recent OAU [Organization of African Unity] meeting, they wanted me to be Chairman, but I need to concentrate on Liberia. I can lose myself in one cause – and now it must be Liberia, not Africa.”\textsuperscript{28}

Though Liberia’s connections with the United States ran deep, this meeting clearly shows that the two countries’ leaders were on different wavelengths. Tolbert wanted and needed aid including the large Peace Corps program. Nixon wanted Liberia to remain an anticommunist bulwark. “One thing is important” Nixon told Tolbert. “Nobody fears Liberia. You can be a friend to all and a moderating influence on radicalism.” He continued, “If you can influence your fellow presidents for progress, not extremism, the future of Africa will not be made by extremists but by those like you -- who are progressive.”\textsuperscript{29}

**Tolbert Tackles Big Business in Liberia**

Domestically, Tolbert began to challenge many of the foreign interests that exploited Liberia’s natural resources. Here again he had to strike a delicate balance. On the one hand


he fought hard to keep Tubman’s Open Door Policy because it had brought business to Liberia. On the other hand as the country sank into greater economic woes, Tolbert wanted to make foreign companies contribute more. This meant that many deals foreign companies had with the government of Liberia needed to be renegotiated. Only through increasing revenue could domestic projects – the war against ignorance, poverty, and disease – succeed.

First, Finance Minister Stephen Tolbert (President Tolbert’s younger brother) negotiated with the Liberian Mining Company, an affiliate of the US company, Republic Steel, acquiring two million dollars in back payments. This action set the stage for the Tolbert administration to re-negotiate with Firestone, a much larger and more privileged operation. By reviewing Firestone’s contracts, Tolbert hoped to eliminate many of the company’s exemptions on fees and taxes, force the company to pay Liberian farmers a fair wage, require Firestone to aid in the future of Liberian rubber processing and manufacturing, and make the company employ more Liberians and buy more Liberian supplies.

Tolbert’s government sent Firestone an announcement of its plans to re-negotiate early in 1974. The management of Firestone was enraged by the attempts of an ungrateful Government of Liberia to procure more money from the company. The executives sent a response, and their stance was clear: they would fight any attempts to extract further payments from their company.

The negotiations with Firestone proceeded very slowly and were further stalled when, in April 1975, Finance Minister Stephen Tolbert died in a mysterious plane crash off the

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coast of Liberia. He had been a powerful negotiator and successful capitalist. He had long been a thorn in the side of Firestone, and many of Firestone’s top managers were elated at hearing of his demise. Negotiations staggered into the next year, and eventually in 1976, Firestone caved to some of the concessions and agreed to be taxed at a much higher rate.

**Tolbert and the South Africa Problem.**

While Tolbert was facing domestic problems, the African continent began to change. In April 1974, a coup in Portugal began the process of independence for Mozambique, Angola, and Guinea Bissau. The fight for Angola became very heated between local factions positioning themselves for control when the colony gained independence. With the coup in Lisbon, South Africa lost friendly neighbors in Angola and Mozambique, a protective barrier from the rest of Africa. The powerful Apartheid nation needed to improve relations with black African nations.

During this time of turmoil in Africa, in late 1974, Tolbert traveled to the United States. The visit came as he was given an honorary degree by Fairleigh Dickinson University, and the “Family of Man” award from the Council of Churches of Greater New York City. President Ford took the opportunity to meet Tolbert for the first time. The meeting, at the behest of Ford, showed that Liberia still held some significance for the United States. In the pre-meeting notes from Henry Kissinger, Ford was told “Liberia is often helpful to us in international forums.” Kissinger mentioned asking Tolbert to vote favorably in the UN. He warned, however, “while their criticism is low-key, the Liberians increasingly

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33 Dunn, *Liberia and the United States During the Cold War: Limits of Reciprocity*, p. 109
join other Africans in expressing concern about the US posture toward southern African issues.” He finished by writing, “[Tolbert] perceives himself as a major figure on the African continent and has deep convictions about human rights and the dignity of man.”

The meeting on November 5, 1974 showed Tolbert’s understanding of African problems, and his suspicions about the American president’s indifference toward them. Tolbert followed instructions from Nixon and Kissinger in African affairs, yet he spoke out against the US connections to Rhodesia and Pretoria’s control over Namibia. Tolbert also discussed problems concerning Portuguese decolonization.

The following February, South African President Johannes Vorster reached out to Liberia as one of the nations with which he sought détente. He traveled to Monrovia to talk with Tolbert, but Tolbert was unpersuaded. Prior to his meeting with Vorster, he had met with many of the black leaders of southern Africa to develop a greater understanding of the situation, including Chief Gatsha Buthelezi of the KwaZulu homeland, and Sam Nujoma, of SWAPO, the Namibian independence movement. Tolbert told Vorster that Liberian relations with South Africa were conditional on three points: eradication of apartheid policies, independence of Namibia, and withdrawal of support for the Smith regime in Rhodesia.

Vorster appealed to Tolbert to attend a meeting with other African leaders in South Africa to achieve “peace, unity, and cooperation.” Tolbert demurred. The South Africans’

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problems intensified as they sent their military into Angola during civil war to bolster a
group friendly to Pretoria. The fight intensified as Cuba responded by sending its military to
support the communist faction, the MPLA, fighting against South Africa. In October 1975,
Angola became a Cold War hot spot in an area of the world nobody expected. Cuba fought
with the belated support of the Soviet Union. South Africa fought with the support of the
United States. The eyes of the two great superpowers were on Africa, as Cuba and South
Africa squared off.\(^{40}\)

Tolbert’s stance on South Africa became resolute. He opposed foreign occupation
and influence all over Africa, and he supported majority rule. Tolbert gave his opinion of the
Angolan crisis when he announced in 1975 that all foreign powers should withdraw from
Angola, and an immediate cease-fire should be enacted among the factions.\(^{41}\) Tolbert’s
statement showed his own growing initiative in African diplomacy.\(^{42}\) He faced a juncture:
how could he reconcile his dreams for the continent with his dependence on the United
States? The two seemed to be on completely opposite paths, yet, soon Tolbert would find a
way to graft them in one policy.

**Expanding Liberia’s influence**

Perhaps Tolbert’s involvement in international affairs evolved in 1976 because in
October 1975, he had won election for president in his own right. In his inaugural address on
January 5, 1976, Tolbert said, “Liberia’s foreign policy shall continuingly be based…upon

the immutable principles of peace, of noninterference in the internal affairs of other sovereign states, of respect for territorial integrity, and of genuine non-alignment and meaningful friendship with all nations.” Tolbert began to focus on foreign policy instead of domestic issues. On January 11, 1976, he vowed support to the president of SWAPO. Then on February 13, the government of Liberia sent a letter to President Agostinho Neto of Angola, leader of the Cuban-backed MPLA, recognizing his government as the legitimate government of Angola. Tolbert met with Cuban diplomats and opened diplomatic relations with Cuba on April 1, 1976. Liberia was forming new friendships and performing diplomacy outside of the confines of the United States.

However, behind the scenes, Tolbert was allowing Liberia to be used to support the US involvement in Angola. The United States used Roberts Airfield to help fight Neto’s government. CIA officer John Stockwell described the process in his explosive memoir, *In Search of Enemies.* Cargo planes full of arms would stop to refuel and receive cables in Monrovia then proceed to Kinshasa, Zaire for delivery to those fighting against the Cubans and the MPLA. Liberia was an important staging ground during the war in Angola. This was in direct opposition to Tolbert’s emerging nationalistic ideology. One wonders how Tolbert could reconcile the contradiction between his words and actions. It must have fueled resentment toward US policy in Africa.

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In Angola, the Cuban-backed faction pushed the South African troops to the Namibian border in March 1976. The “loss” of Angola affected the Ford Administration, which had ignored the problems of majority rule in Southern Africa. After Angola, Washington was eager to prevent new Cold War conflicts emerging in Africa. Henry Kissinger decided to fly to Africa in April 1976 in his first visit to the continent south of the Sahara. The object of this visit was to inform African nations that the United States would support majority rule in Rhodesia and Namibia, which entailed supporting the repeal of the controversial Byrd Amendment that allowed the United States to import chrome from sanctioned Rhodesia. Many African leaders were upset at Dr. Kissinger for his previous callous attitude toward African affairs. Kissinger decided to visit Liberia and spent time there after being “uninvited” by Ghana and refused permission to land in Nigeria.

Tolbert met with Kissinger immediately after the Secretary of State gave a speech in Lusaka in support of majority rule in Rhodesia. Due to the special relationship between the two countries, Kissinger was welcome in Monrovia, but the US Embassy in Monrovia sent a telegram to Kissinger before the meeting informing him of Liberia’s new leeriness toward the United States. The cable said, “Liberians are trying hard to shed image of being under the tutelage of the U.S. They would resent both effort on our part to create Liberia as a

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‘showcase of U.S.’ assistance and perception on anyone’s part that Liberia is such.”

Tolbert now acted less like a puppet, yet he still needed the United States.

Kissinger and Tolbert met at the Executive Mansion in Monrovia. Tolbert was gracious, saying, “if there is one country that should spread the red carpet for you, it is Liberia…Our special relationship is such that your enemies are our enemies as well.”

Kissinger took a hard line. He told Tolbert, “If you want to cooperate with the United States you can’t kick it around all the time. You can’t beat us to death in an international forum…and expect our help.” Tolbert took the opportunity to urge Kissinger to support SWAPO in Namibia, which was fighting against the illegal South African occupation, something to which Kissinger would never agree. However, the meeting soon turned toward Tolbert’s need of the United States. Tolbert softened his approach and talked about renewing his efforts to promote the benefits of American friendship to other African nations. In return, Kissinger promised help for Tolbert’s domestic reforms.

Upon Kissinger’s return to the United States, he did not have good things to say about Tolbert and Liberia. In his report to the President and the Bipartisan Congressional Leadership he wrote, “This is not a country the United States can be proud of. It has no major political problems and it is strongly on our side. While it is virtually a ward of the United States, it was the most backward country economically that we visited.”

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50 Tolbert, Presidential Papers: Documents, Diary, and Record of Activities of the Chief Executive: The first two years of the second administration, January 1, 1976-December 31, 1977, p. 61.
51 Memorandum of Conversation, (Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and President William R Tolbert Jr. of Liberia) Executive Mansion, Monrovia, Liberia, April 30, 1976, Digital National Security Archives (DSNA).
52 Memorandum of Conversation, (President Ford, Secretary Kissinger, and Bipartisan Congressional Leadership) May 12, 1976, The White House, Report on Secretary Kissinger’s trip to Africa, From the National
country with the closest American ties was also the most backward, a sad comment on Liberia as well as on the United States.

Kissinger was clear that he wanted Tolbert to be more supportive of the United States, but Tolbert continued in his support of southern African liberation. In a move characteristic of an African nationalist, on June 17, 1976, he announced, during a discussion of Rhodesia’s lack of majority rule: “Liberia is prepared to send troops there to fight alongside African liberation movements.” Tolbert continued to walk the fine line of non-alignment with an American tilt, showing a nationalist streak while seeking US aid.

Tolbert was selected to represent Africa, by the White House, at the celebration of the American bicentennial. One State Department official explained that due to the special relationship, Tolbert was the obvious choice for this distinction. He returned to the United States just two months later and made an official state visit to the United States in September 1976. During his visit, Tolbert reaffirmed Liberia’s ties to the United States and met with President Ford in the Oval Office on September 21, 1976. He spoke frankly to Ford about US policies in Africa. He said Ford’s decision to change direction in Africa, supporting majority rule, was welcome. “America’s presence should never be absent in Africa.” He expressed his concern over the civil war and foreign intervention in Angola. “My African colleagues sometimes doubt the United States. I am telling them they must have faith. You have started now, and if you continue, I think this psychological attitude of doubt will evaporate.” Tolbert told President Ford, “In all sincerity I think whatever aid is forthcoming


53 Tolbert, Presidential Papers: Documents, Diary, and Record of Activities of the Chief Executive: The first two years of the second administration, January 1, 1976-December 31, 1977, p. 80.

will not only help the [Liberian] economy but will help the image of your country…

sometimes the spotlight is on the Soviets and I want to be able to tell them [other African leaders] what a meaningful relationship can be.”

During his trip to the United States, Tolbert addressed a joint session of congress. His speech, however, was overshadowed by a casual conversation between Vice President Nelson Rockefeller and Speaker of the House Carl Albert (D-OK). As Senator Ed Brooke (R-MA) escorted Tolbert in, an open microphone picked up some unfortunate words of the two men.

Albert: Are there many Liberians that are Mulattoes? There are?
Rockefeller: Most are strictly blacks.
Albert: Real black huh?
Rockefeller: But they’ve got a class system—the blacks that went back to Liberia and took on all the characteristics of the Southern Whites. And they treated the local blacks.
Albert: They never let the local blacks get in on anything?
Rockefeller: Oh, no. They’ve slightly changed their speech, but only slightly.
Albert: But only slightly.
[Speaking about Ed Brooke, the only black member of the Senate.]
Rockefeller: Ed Brooke is a one-man receiving committee.
Albert: Yeah, he’d be a slave if here were over there. (laughter)

The gaffe overshadowed the first African head of state to address a joint session of congress. The press emphasized the insult to Senator Brooke, whereas the insults to Liberia and the disrespect for the Liberian executive were downplayed. The gaffe showed an important aspect of the US Liberian relationship. The incident was insensitive, racist, and disrespectful. The same could be said of the Nixon and Ford administrations’ attitude toward Africa. Though the Ford administration changed course in Africa, it came only after being

pressed by the Cuban intervention in Angola. Tolbert was the friendliest, and closest ally from Black Africa, and the only black head of state invited to the American bicentennial celebration. The United States and Liberia shared a “special relationship,” a description given to only a handful of nations. However, Tolbert was not given the proper respect of a head of state, and even when the gaffe was discussed, the focus was not on the disrespect for the African, but for the American. Rockefeller met with Liberian Senator William Tubman Jr. (son of the late President Tubman, and son-in-law of Tolbert) to help defuse the “open microphone” incident.\(^5^7\) Although Tolbert did not address this insult, clearly he was growing weary of the Ford administration, and he welcomed the change that was promised with the election of Jimmy Carter.\(^5^8\)

**Carter and a New Era for the United States and Africa**

Both Carter and Tolbert were staunch Baptists and both grew up in rural agricultural settings. Carter came into office pledging greater attention to African issues, and touting an American commitment to human rights. His ambassador to the United Nations, Andrew Young, was the first black man to occupy the position and was very active in African issues, including declaring that the Carter Administration would be “aggressive” toward obtaining majority rule in southern Africa.\(^5^9\) Carter’s election brought great hope to many in black

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\(^5^7\) Jon Howe, Vice President’s Office, “Meeting with William V.S. Tubman, Jr. Liberian Senator,” October 1976, DDRS.

\(^5^8\) Dunn, *Liberia and the United States: Limits of Reciprocity*, p. 95.

Africa, not just due to his rhetoric, but also because it meant the end of Henry Kissinger’s involvement in the continent.60

Tolbert also was aggressive in his rhetoric about the changes he would enact in Liberia that he hoped would later sweep throughout Africa. He announced on January 27, 1977, in an address to the legislature, a new ideology for Liberia that he called “Humanistic Capitalism.” Humanist Capitalism was based on Christianity and the need to care for one another, but it also embraced capitalism as the best system to bring prosperity to a nation. Humanism and capitalism, Tolbert asserted, needed each other. “Humanism by itself will end in meaningless abstractions; to take capitalism by itself will make a society hedonistic materialist. The two aspects of man, his mind-spirit and body, are interdependent entities and must be fused to make them harmonious in a dynamic and changing world.” The goal was to make Liberia and Liberians self-reliant. It would start in Liberia and that example would spread it to the world.

Tolbert offered very few details about how the system was to be implemented. It was basically another rhetorical tool to motivate his people to self-reliance, like his war against, poverty, ignorance, and disease. Tolbert’s close advisor commented on the program, “The implementation of our philosophy of Humanistic Capitalism is the task before us; and given the good will of leaders, it will outshine all other social and economic systems since the days of feudalism.” One of the only clear parts of Humanistic Capitalism was that the United States would fund it. The advisor continued, “In addition to contributions from the private sector, the United States government, it is hoped, will assume greater responsibility for the

infrastructural and socioeconomic development of a traditionally friendly Liberia...she is and will remain the United States’ gateway to the continent by her positive performance.”  

The United States did provide $22 million in aid for 1977, but Tolbert’s espousal of Humanistic Capitalism indicated a growing hubris, and a misunderstanding of Carter’s fiscally conservative worldview.

Tolbert continued to exert himself in international affairs. In February 1977, he established relations with The People’s Republic of China. This move angered the Taiwanese who were involved in development of the sugar industry in Liberia, as well as providing agricultural advisors. It was a slap in the face to the Taiwanese who were paid by the United States to teach Liberians the best techniques to grow rice. Taiwan broke its relations with Liberia in protest. Tolbert also became involved in peacekeeping all over Africa. In 1977, he hosted delegations of five nations, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Senegal, Togo, and Gambia, in reconciling long standing bad blood between Senegal, Ivory Coast, and Guinea. He also wrote to President Idi Amin of Uganda in September, petitioning him to stay the execution of prisoners accused of plotting against the government. Tolbert reminded Amin of his own mercy when he had released men who had been plotting his assassination early in his presidency. He said the men were fully rehabilitated and now contributing to Liberia’s society.

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It is indicative of Tolbert’s self-confidence that in 1977 he invited the leaders of the Progressive Alliance of Liberia, a group of Liberian exiles in Philadelphia critical of his government, to Liberia and asked them to report on their findings. The group came and reported that Liberia had greatly improved in the time Tolbert had been president, but still needed improvement. Tolbert even encouraged them to stay and establish themselves as a legal political party. Tolbert was riding a high heading into 1978. However, Carter and the United States faced mounting problems in Africa due to Cold War positioning.

The Horn of Africa became problematic as Ethiopia, a previously strong American ally, came under power of Colonel Mengistu who aligned himself with the Soviet Union. This problem escalated because Somalia, Ethiopia’s traditional enemy, was also a Soviet ally. In 1977, Somalia courted the United States, but did not break ties with the Soviet Union. In July 1977, it invaded Ethiopia. In late 1977, Cuban troops poured into Ethiopia to repel the Somali invasion. The Kremlin sent Ethiopia over $1 billion of military aid. Somalia finally broke ties with the Soviet Union, but the Carter administration still refused to help it because it disapproved of its invasion of Ethiopia. The situation in the Horn emphasized two very important points; Carter would not support a war of aggression, even against a Soviet satellite, and the Cubans were a force to be reckoned with in Africa. With the alignment of Ethiopia with the Soviet Union, Liberia’s friendship became more important for the United States.

deadth warrants of several Liberians during his tenure. However, he said, “anyone who does not want to be killed should not kill.” Colin Legum, Editor, Africa Contemporary Record [Volume 11], p. B682.
Carter’s effort in Africa also extended economically as Nigerian oil was very important to the US economy. President Carter planned a historic trip to Nigeria proving the US commitment to African problems, a diplomatic feat itself given Nigeria’s denial of Kissinger’s visits. \(^{68}\) The importance of Liberia to the United States would be recognized during this historic trip when President Carter visited Liberia in April 1978. Every president of the United States since Franklin Roosevelt had met with the President of Liberia in the United States, but Carter would be only the second US President to visit the country. Carter originally had not planned on visiting Liberia during his trip to Africa. However, the embassy staff in Monrovia, led by Ambassador Beverly Carter Jr. said, "There's no way that President Carter can come to this continent and not visit Liberia." \(^{69}\) After some politicking by the embassy staff and letters from American business interests in Liberia, the White House agreed that President Carter would stop over at Roberts Field for a quick lunch. However, the State Department felt the President of the United States should give much more time to Liberia. Franklin Roosevelt, the only US president to have visited Liberia, had only stopped at the airport during a layover on his way to the Cairo conference. Eventually, the White House agreed to let Carter arrive at the airport and make the 30-mile trip to Monrovia for an official luncheon with Tolbert. \(^{70}\)

On March 14, 1978, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance sent a memo to President Carter to prep him for his visit to Monrovia. “Liberia is the most U.S. oriented of all African countries, and Liberia’s relationship with the U.S. is the cornerstone of its foreign policy.”

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\(^{69}\) Harold E. Horan, interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy, March 30, 1989, Frontline Diplomacy.

\(^{70}\) Harold E. Horan, interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy, March 30, 1989, Frontline Diplomacy.
Vance informed the president of the access to ports and airfields that the United States had to Liberia, writing, “It would be extremely difficult and expensive if not impossible to reproduce these arrangements elsewhere on the continent.”\(^\text{71}\)

Vance also informed Carter that Liberia was becoming bitter about the US involvement in the country. Vance wrote, “Liberians feel they have been shortchanged, because they did not receive from us the considerable physical infrastructure that other African nations inherited from the metropole at independence. This fact is most apparent in the physical appearance of Monrovia which suffers greatly by comparison with other African capitals – a fact which Liberians repeatedly, and remorsefully, make to visiting American officials.” Vance listed African issues and specified US and Liberian objectives in each area, noting that they were often very similar.\(^\text{72}\)

Carter met Tolbert in Monrovia on April 3, 1978. Liberians were ecstatic about the president’s visit, where he was the most popular and well-received head of state ever to visit Liberia. Over 150,000 people – one tenth of the population – lined the streets from Roberts Airfield to the Executive Mansion.\(^\text{73}\) President Carter commented on the outpouring of love from the people and on the amazing lack of security Tolbert required.\(^\text{74}\) He extolled President Tolbert at the welcoming ceremony saying, “His idealism, his determination, and his energy have won widespread admiration in Africa, in America, and around the world...He has worked tirelessly for national self-determination, racial justice, and a better

\(^{71}\) Cyrus Vance, Secretary of State, Memorandum for The President, “Your Visit to Liberian on April 3, 1978,” March 14, 1978, DDRS.

\(^{72}\) Cyrus Vance, Secretary of State, Memorandum for The President, “Your Visit to Liberian on April 3, 1978,” March 14, 1978, DDRS.


life for all the people of the African Continent.” The speech was flowery diplo-talk, but Carter may have truly admired Tolbert. He and Tolbert shared a common religion. Carter may have been impressed by Tolbert’s desire to improve the domestic situation in Liberia. Carter said the aid from the American government was best served by helping those in poverty who needed it most.  

Tolbert took the occasion of meeting with President Carter to explain why Liberia needed and deserved greater funding. Liberia was a friendly voice in African issues, and the country also had provided its land and resources for the Ford administration’s controversial involvement in Angola. In a letter presented to President Carter in Monrovia, Tolbert wrote, “In ardently supporting United States positions at international forums, Liberia has often incurred the chagrin of Third World and other members of the international community.” He mentioned possible changes in the Liberian public perception of the United States. “After 130 years of existence…Liberia still lags far behind many developing countries. One would think that a country 130 years old with a friend having means such as the United States should be far more advanced than she is today. Liberia has a vibrant and dynamic generation of young people who are beginning to assess the realities of today’s alliances to the extent of questioning whether the present economic system is the best for Liberians.” Tolbert was beginning to demand more in the way of recognition. He was not opposed to dropping subtle threats to back up his request.

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76 William Tolbert, the Executive Mansion, Liberia, “Briefing Notes and Proposals from The President of Liberia to The President of the United States of America,” April 3, 1978, DDRS.
In response to Tolbert’s letter, Henry Richardson, the NSC officer in charge of Africa policy, wrote Zbigniew Brzezinski to inform him of Tolbert’s changing attitude. Richardson praised Tolbert for the “moderating and mediating” role he long played in African politics. He pointed out Tolbert’s new policy that “Liberians will henceforth conceive of aid to the U.S. more in quid pro quo terms, that is, more explicitly linked to the unwavering Liberian friendship and broad privileges that the U.S. currently enjoys.” Richardson continued, “We will no longer be able to take explicit Liberian agreement to whatever we do for granted; we may wish to consider relying on, supporting and indeed trying to expand Tolbert’s mediating role, and that we may wish to carry the process of quid pro quo one step further and after any increases in aid, look for some more return in terms of overall U.S./Liberian policy.”

On June 20, 1978, President Carter sent a response to Tolbert. The letter was very kind and cordial. However, Carter suggested Tolbert take more responsibility himself for improving the domestic situation in Liberia for all Liberians, and he vowed US commitment in helping in these areas, “We are interested in assisting in this area if it is your wish, and if you are prepared to commit substantial resources to the program.” Carter also offered to expand US interests in Liberia writing, “Although the subject was not raised in your memorandum, I have asked our Aeronautics and Space Administration to see whether our space capability could be of benefit to Liberia.”

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77 Henry Richardson to Zbigniew Brzezinski, NSC, “Notes From Liberian Bilaterals,” April 12, 1978, DDRS.
78 Jimmy Carter letter to William Tolbert of Liberia, June 20, 1978, DDRS.
Liberia’s Growth Hits a Major Snag

Tolbert’s growth in international prestige continued as the 1979 OAU summit meeting, to be held in Monrovia, approached. Tolbert was determined to display Monrovia at its best. He spent more than $200 million in construction and beautification projects in Monrovia, money many believed should have gone to more pressing domestic needs. However, many of these improvements were not just for the summit meeting, but also addressed infrastructure issues. Moreover, there were rumors that the OAU might move its headquarters from Addis Ababa, embroiled in turbulent and left-leaning revolution, to Monrovia. Liberia was Africa’s oldest republic and was considered a neutral site because of its lack of long-standing ties to Arabs, French, or the British. Many of the freedoms that existed in Liberia were considered an incentive as well. Tolbert hoped that the beautification of Monrovia would strengthen his country’s case.

The United States also stepped up its commitment to Liberia for 1979 allocating $19 million for the country, an increase from the $7.5 given in 1978. Part of this aid was to improve Liberia’s security, as Liberia was the only African state with which the United States had a formal defense agreement. Upon request from President Tolbert, the United States planned to send more military aid to Liberia for gunboats to patrol the coast. Tolbert feared Soviet and Cuban trawlers overfishing in Liberian waters. Also, members of Congress recognized the potential for the United States to gain influence from Monrovia’s

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upcoming OAU summit. House Foreign Affairs Committee members urged US AID to start development projects demonstrating to African leaders American support for Liberia. They recommended reprogramming $1 or $2 million for such causes.\textsuperscript{83}

Although Tolbert was trying to present Monrovia as the great façade of Liberia, the city faced massive unemployment of fifty percent.\textsuperscript{84} President Tolbert made the situation worse with his greatest blunder. Following advice of his Minister of Agriculture, he increased the price of a bag of rice from $22 a bag to $30. The rationale of the price increase was to make rice farming more profitable, thus stemming the flood of rice farmers to the rubber plantations. This would reduce the need to import rice. The plan backfired. On Easter Day, April 14, 1979, large groups of people stormed Monrovia to protest the price increase of their staple food. Protest turned into riots, and rioting continued on into the night, when many of the city's businesses were ransacked and looted. In response, Tolbert sent riot police to quell the protest. A firestorm ensued ending with the deaths of forty people. Hundreds more were wounded.\textsuperscript{85} The riots caused more than $50 million dollars of damage to Monrovia. Worse than the destruction of buildings was the blow to Liberia’s reputation. One of the biggest problems the riots exposed was the lack of professionalism of the military in Liberia. Under Tolbert’s administration, Liberia had an army of only 5000 soldiers. As

\textsuperscript{83} US Congress, House, “Foreign Assistance Legislation for Fiscal Years 1980-81 (Part 6),” Hearings and Markup before the Subcommittee on Africa of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, Economic and Military Assistance Programs in Africa 1979, 96\textsuperscript{th} Congress, 1\textsuperscript{st} Session, February 13, 14, 21, 22, 27, 28, March 5, 6, 7, 12, 1979, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1979), pp. xi, xvii.
the riots broke out, these military men joined looters and rioters and were reported to be responsible for the deaths and injuries.\textsuperscript{86}

Tolbert blamed the universities for inciting a spirit of rioting in the population. He called the classrooms a “breeding ground of revolutionary ideas alien to our democratic form of government.”\textsuperscript{87} Instead of accepting responsibility for his bad decision to raise the price of the nation's staple food, Tolbert blamed educators. He saw the work of his administration begin to unravel. His conservative base blamed him for the riots because he had allowed greater freedom for other political parties and indigenous peoples.

Above all, the riots showed the government of Liberia had little control over its people and could not rely on its military. This was a major blow to a country touted for its stability, and it may have doomed Monrovia’s chances to be the new home of the OAU.\textsuperscript{88} It is unclear exactly when the popular sentiment toward Tolbert changed, but by this time people in Monrovia no longer supported their president.

The riots greatly affected Tolbert and changed the way he ran his government. He requested 200 Guinean troops to maintain order, and on April 16, 1979 they arrived, occupying Monrovia.\textsuperscript{89} The legislature enacted emergency powers for a year, suspending habeas corpus. The riots and the pressure received from his conservative base caused Tolbert to reverse many of the reforms that had brought greater freedom to Liberia. He would no


longer allow opposition groups to operate or speak freely, and the idea of allowing a second political party was dropped.\textsuperscript{90}

Tolbert suspected that many of the rioters had been encouraged by the Soviets. He expelled all non-essential staff from the Soviet Embassy, leaving only five diplomats. This did not adversely affect Liberia, which traded little with and received no assistance from the USSR. Tolbert then asked the Carter Administration for more help. He called upon the special relationship. In a National Intelligence Briefing, President Carter was told on April 28, 1979 -- two weeks after the riots -- that because Liberia was such a close client of the United States, other countries in the area would be watching to see the response of the Americans to this disaster in Monrovia. The Liberian ruling class was fearful that the people would riot again. The economy was further damaged, and the weakness of Tolbert’s rule was revealed.\textsuperscript{91}

Though the riots shook the foundations of Liberia, the United States was much more focused on another issue facing Africa at the time. In April 1979, elections in Rhodesia forecast a major move toward majority rule in southern Africa. The Carter Administration had spent great amounts of time and energy with the British pursuing a solution in Rhodesia. The winner of the election was a moderate black leader who seemed to many western observers to be an acceptable replacement for the exiting white minority government.

Carter was not happy with the elections, however, because the guerillas had been excluded and the new constitution entrenched white privilege. In June, Carter defied the


Senate and declared the elections flawed. His decision was based on two principles, the need to find a solution that would end the war which provided an opportunity for Cuban intervention and his own beliefs about racial equality.\(^2\) Rhodesia was Carter’s first priority in Africa as Liberia picked up the pieces of its broken reputation and prepared for the summit.

Liberia’s call for aid in cleaning up Monrovia and preparing for the OAU summit did not go unnoticed however. President Carter on May 8 declared that he wanted to send assistance.\(^3\) The administration granted a $5 million Economic Support Fund grant to Liberia. The funds were funneled from the stalled Maqarin Dam project on the border of Syria and Jordan.\(^4\) However Tolbert was panicked, and this aid may have been too little, too late.

**The OAU Summit and Tolbert’s Disillusionment with the United States**

Tolbert’s harsh response to the riots was dialed down after the dust settled and the Summit neared. On June 27, 1979, Tolbert released all those who had been arrested in connection to the rioting, reopened the University, and reduced the price of rice.\(^5\) Liberia was able to achieve some temporary stability just in time for the much-anticipated OAU summit in July. The meeting went smoothly. Liberia was the center of politics in Africa –

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\(^3\) Department of State, Memorandum for Zbigniew Brzezinski, “Interim Reply from President Carter to Liberian President Tolbert’s Letter,” May 8, 1979, DDRS.

\(^4\) James T. McIntyre, Jr, Office for Management and Budget, Memorandum for Zbigniew Brzezinski, “Possible Financial Commitment by the United States,” May 18, 1979, DDRS.

for a brief moment. Tolbert’s effort to be a power player in international affairs paid off in
grand style. Because Monrovia hosted the OAU summit, Tolbert would be the president of
the organization until the next summit. At the end of the meeting, he presented the keynote
address and relayed to the African leaders that Africa needed to give more attention to human
rights. The theme of the OAU Summit centered on the problems in South Africa, and
Tolbert’s cry for greater human rights was in clear alignment with this theme.96

The rest of the year was relatively quiet for Liberia. The United States was still very
active in Liberia as the former US ambassador to the UN, Andrew Young visited Monrovia
in September.97 Congressman Stephen Solarz (D-NY) also visited Tolbert. The report on
their meeting said nothing of aid and improvement projects in Liberia, but focused greatly on
the changes in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe, Western Sahara/Moroccan conflict, and the
Soviet/Cuban presence in Angola and Ethiopia.98 The United States appeared to be more
interested in working with Liberia. Tolbert was gaining prominence and prestige in Africa.
On October 13, 1979, Carter proposed sending a Presidential Commission to Liberia for the
purpose of strengthening relations. The delegation would not recommend increases in aid,
but would address three major objectives: “Assess our overall relationship with Liberia;
identify problem areas and constraints to a better functioning relationship; and develop

96 US Congress, House, “Briefing on OAU Summit at Monrovia,” Hearing before the Subcommittee on Africa
of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, 96th Congress, 1st Session, July 27, 1979, (Washington DC: US
97 US Congress, Congressional Research Service, Foreign Affairs Committee Print, Chronologies of Major
98 Julius Walker, US Embassy Monrovia to Department of State, Washington DC, “Solarz Discussion with
President Tolbert,” August 1979, DDRS.
approaches to deal with these problems.”99 The Carter administration was aware of the changing dynamic between the two countries, especially the evolution of Tolbert, and sought to find new ways that the United States could continue to use its valuable assets in Liberia without raising tension between the two states.

The Carter administration, hoping to improve the relationship with Liberia, was quick to support Tolbert and his government when Congress raised questions. In testimony to the House of Representatives Subcommittee of the Committee on Government Operations on February 16, 1980, the ambassador to Liberia, Robert Smith said, “Liberia is important to a degree quite disproportionate to its small size and population. US facilities in Liberia would be difficult if not impossible to locate elsewhere on the continent.”100 Smith explained that the United States also needed Roberts Airfield. He continued saying Liberia held the “largest communications set up anywhere in Africa at the embassy in Monrovia, and large numbers of communication technicians.” He also mentioned that Liberians considered themselves to be the 51st state, and expected very friendly relations.101

The United States also professed a need for Liberia politically. During his congressional testimony Smith spoke about Tolbert’s support for the United States. Tolbert, Smith explained, walked a fine line with the OAU, showing other African nations what it was like to be a strong ally of the United States, while also showing he was no puppet. Liberia, Smith said, demanded to be treated as more important than other African nations.

99 Department of State Memorandum for Zbigniew Brzezinski, “Presidential Commission on US-Liberian Relations,” October 13, 1979, DDRS.
This Smith said, was “a very important element in our relations with Liberia.“ When questioned about the stability of the country after the riots, Smith responded, “We believe the terrorist threat in Monrovia to be minimal. It is not a source of concern of us.”

On February 22, Carter announced the formation of the President’s Commission on Liberian-American Relations, which would relay a comprehensive view of US dealings with Liberia. This commission had been long in planning, and the formation had been slower than hoped. Forming the commission showed the US commitment to Liberia and awareness of the emerging rifts in the special relationship with Liberia.

Political problems began to rear their ugly head in Liberia on March 9, 1980. Liberian authorities arrested leaders of the opposition party, the People’s Progressive Party, for conspiring to overthrow the government. Feeling increased pressure, Tolbert unloaded a series of grievances on Ambassador Smith. Only a month after his congressional testimony, Ambassador Smith reported on Tolbert's grievances. The Liberian president complained that the relationship had become one-sided. He was tired of touting the American line, supporting Carter on issues such as the hostage situation in Iran, protesting the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and supporting the boycott of the Olympics. Tolbert questioned inequalities in aid, arguing that he was neglected while the United States readily gave Kenya aid, a point that led President Carter to scrawl in the margin that he agreed.

Tolbert was upset that the United States had not contributed to his OAU summit in Monrovia. Tolbert also complained about the Carter Administration’s delayed and minimal response to the rice riots. The Special Relationship was showing major signs of deterioration despite its public image. Smith predicted there was going to be some “rough water ahead.”\(^\text{105}\)

Jerry Funk, the NSC Africa expert, reported to Zbigniew Brzezinski that Tolbert felt the United States was “taking Liberia for granted.” He reported that Tolbert was receiving backlash from his conservative base for giving the indigenous people more rights. Tolbert was upset about the economic situation in Liberia, and his first response was to run to the United States. Tolbert was threatening that the United States could no longer use Liberia as a one-way street. Funk noted that Tolbert was over-reacting to some degree and would be more reasonable once he cooled down.\(^\text{106}\) Tolbert had faced both his greatest challenge in the Easter riots, and his greatest achievement in the OAU Summit, and he felt his patriarchal ally had seemed indifferent to both. Tolbert’s words became more than just threats when he cut off the United States use of the Roberts Airfield to bunker troops for a rapid deployment force the beginning of April. This greatly angered the CIA and Pentagon.\(^\text{107}\)

The State Department, however, was not agitated. It believed that the riots and the erosion of popular support meant that Tolbert would not last past the summer. Many


predicted a palace coup. Tolbert was much less corrupt than his predecessors, and his
tenure marked new attention to human rights and freedoms. Tolbert, according to Liberian
journalist G. Henry Andrews, was a contradiction. He had every intention of doing what he
thought was right, but he thought he was above the rules. He abhorred nepotism and
corruption, but saw nothing wrong with appointing his own family members to highly paid
government positions. By 1980, many Liberians looked nostalgically at the Tubman years
which had been much more repressive. Tubman, however, was remembered as having taken
better care of the people. The Liberians said that when Tubman climbed a tree to eat he
would shake some branches so apples would fall for the people, but when Tolbert was in the
trees, he didn’t shake the branches. Tolbert’s foreign priorities left many Liberians feeling
ignored.

Conclusion

Former Nigerian President Olusengun Obasanjo said of Tolbert, "Dr. William R.
Tolbert, Jr. ranks in the same category as Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Julius Nyerere of
Tanzania and Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia in the pantheon of great African leaders." He
was loved and hated by US State Department officials from Ambassador Robert Smith who
declared him a very dear friend, to Former Deputy Chief of Mission Edward Perkins who
said he was “Nothing short of a psychopath.” Perkins remarked he had an appetite for young

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111 Richard Tolbert, “William R. Tolbert - 'In The Pantheon Of Great African Leaders’”
girls, and the first time Perkins met Tolbert’s wife she was recovering from a severe beating.¹¹³

Tolbert wore many different faces. He helped heal relations between several West African states, and he played a major part in the founding of ECOWAS. The white South African regime hoped he would help them with Détente, but he rebuffed them. He also was a client of the United States whose initial involvement with African affairs came at the behest of President Nixon. Unfortunately, as he increased his involvement in international affairs, he mismanaged and neglected the terrible problems at home.

Tolbert allowed greater freedoms in Liberia than had any other previous president. He enacted reforms and also tried to put Liberia on a footing of self-reliance. However, his ambition for international recognition caused him to neglect the needs of his people.

Looking at the timeline of Tolbert’s administration, one can see the evolution of a leader and of his relationship with the United States. When first in power, dealing with the indifferent Nixon administration, Tolbert relied on the “special relationship” to receive aid and help, this required him to be subservient to US wants and wishes. As Ethiopia began to move to the left in 1974, the United States began to pay more attention to Liberia. Tolbert’s understanding of Cold War politics caused him to take a harder line in African affairs. He understood the United States did not want to lose Liberia, and he also understood if he promoted American policy, he would continue to receive aid. With the election of Carter, and the alignment of Ethiopia with the Soviet Union, Tolbert understood that his country had gained leverage. He was not above dropping subtle hints about the possibility communist
growth. He also began to demand that his country would have to receive more for his continued involvement with the United States. This caused the United States to pay greater attention to Liberia, the only friendly country in Africa with no European ties. The “special relationship” had evolved.
Chapter II
All the King’s Horses and All the King’s Men Couldn’t Put Liberia Back Together Again:
The Coup

The night of April 12, 1980 started no differently than most nights at the Executive Mansion in Monrovia. The wet season was coming upon Liberia, and short thunderstorms with intense lightning were common, setting an ominous scene for what would become one of Liberia’s most tragic moments. President William Tolbert worked long into the night preoccupied with issues facing his country. Outside the mansion a group of sinister men organized a plan of extreme violence and brutality. Tolbert went to bed that night just like every other night, completely unaware of what the next few hours would bring. He kissed his wife goodnight, not knowing that it would be for the last time.

Maybe Tolbert should have been more aware of the danger he faced. He had become unpopular in Liberia as massive unemployment and poverty consumed his capital city. Tolbert had been committed to improving the situation for Liberians, but he had been swept up in issues outside of his country. Tolbert’s international activism did not help Liberia resolve its crushing problems and accounted for much of the president’s unpopularity. The people of Liberia began to despise their president, resentful of the time he spent abroad. Tolbert responded by ruling with a heavy hand.114 On April 9, 1980, Amnesty International criticized the Liberian government for issuing “an open invitation to political murder” by offering rewards, dead or alive, for members of the People’s Progressive Party suspected of

planning a coup.115 This was not the leader Tolbert had wanted to be, but this was who he had become.

During that long night of April 12, the fates shattered any hope of Tolbert fixing Liberia’s problems. Late in the night, seventeen soldiers attacked the executive mansion. This ill-equipped and ill-trained militia made its way to Tolbert and found him in his bed. The group, led by Master Sergeant Samuel Doe, disemboweled the president with a bayonet, cutting him open from stomach to throat. They then shot him in the head three times and arrested his wife, Victoria.116 As fighting raged in the Executive Mansion, triumphant martial music played on the radio. Finally at seven in the morning, Samuel K. Doe broadcast to the people that he was now in charge of Liberia.117 The stability for which Liberia was famous had been shattered. The same military that was not disciplined enough to quell the Easter riot had successfully destroyed the government of Liberia. Tolbert was dead and the streets of Monrovia filled with cheering and celebration at the death of their fallen leader. They tore down statues of Tolbert and yelled, “We are now free!” “Our eyes are open!” and “No more monkey work!”118

117 Julius Walker Jr., interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, April 2, 1992, Frontline Diplomacy.
Shock in the Embassy and the American Response

The American embassy staff was unsure how to respond to the coup. The embassy was under Chargé d’Affaires Julius Walker, as Ambassador Robert Smith was in the United States on sick leave. Walker immediately tried to figure out who Doe was. No one had expected the military to enact a coup; soldiers were the bottom of Liberian society; they were poorly housed and inadequately armed. Doe was an inexperienced, illiterate, lowly master sergeant who lived in horrendous conditions in the barracks with his two wives and children. They were jammed into one room and shared washing facilities with numerous other families. This man now controlled Liberia. Violence against Americo-Liberians began immediately; many were killed. At ten in the morning, Doe came over the radio again announcing he wanted to see the “American and Russian ambassadors.”

Walker went to the Executive Mansion. Unable to receive any word of the US position on the coup, Walker would have to improvise. Soldiers escorted him through the bullet-ridden Executive Mansion, which Walker remembered was filled with the smell of “perspiration and fear.” Walker thought Doe seemed scared; “he had not really expected to be where he was, but once there he didn't intend to give it up easily.” Doe feared attacks would come from all sides and demanded the United States send strong support. Walker said he would have to await instructions, but the United States would not support any regime killing its own people, the killing needed to stop.

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120 Julius Walker Jr., interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, April 2, 1992, Frontline Diplomacy.
121 Julius Walker Jr., interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, April 2, 1992, Frontline Diplomacy.
Meet the PRC

The coup members established themselves as the Peoples Redemption Council (PRC) and promised to implement social justice and fair treatment for all of its citizens. But this clearly did not apply to all Liberians because violence against the Americo-Liberians continued. Doe announced that he would retain Liberia’s open policy toward foreign business. He called on his troops to cease harassing businessmen and foreigners. To the extent that the PRC had any organized program, it seemed to be focused on improving the lot of indigenous Liberians rather than changing the orientation of Liberia’s foreign relations.122

Doe and the other PRC members appointed a varied group of people to their cabinet of ministers, including ex prisoners. Most of those appointed were members of parties opposed to the ruling True Whig Party. The new foreign minister, Gabriel Baccus Matthews, was the leader of the People’s Progress Party and had been arrested for his involvement in a supposed coup attempt in March.123 Although it might have been wise to include disenfranchised elements of Liberia, most had no government experience and they espoused extremely divergent ideologies.124

Monrovia was a scene of anarchy as soldiers shot randomly at houses where Americo-Liberians were thought to be. Crews dug mass graves and dumped bodies of countless Liberians, including President Tolbert, into them. Doe intensified the bedlam by issuing an order that all personnel, police and military, no longer were obligated to listen to their commanding officers. This resulted in complete chaos as people ran wildly into houses

dragging some people out of their beds and murdering them.\footnote{Robert P Smith, interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, February 28, 1989, Frontline Diplomacy.} One US Army Colonel, Bob Gosney, tried to help restore order. He and his group of US military advisors approached armed Liberians asking their purpose; if they couldn’t answer, the Americans took their weapons.\footnote{Julius Walker Jr., interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, April 2, 1992, Frontline Diplomacy.}

In the United States, many Liberian immigrants rejoiced at the fall of the Tolbert government. In New York City a group of ten unarmed men arrived at the office of the Liberian Consulate at 3:30 am, right after the coup, and attempted to gain access. They had to wait four hours for a consular officer to come to work; he was then asked for his keys so they could occupy the office. As members of a political party opposing the True Whigs, they received instructions from Doe to “protect property and documents of the Liberian people...so that the corruptive [sic] people won’t come back and pick up things that the Redemption Council might need.” Led by a Columbia University student, the Liberians ate pizza and drank soda in celebration. They showed the press a picture of a poor, barefoot Liberian peasant, and then showed a pair of alligator shoes belonging to the chief Liberian delegate to the UN. “This is why the revolution occurred...our people are going barefoot while the corruptive [sic] Government wears alligator shoes.”\footnote{“Students Acting on ‘Instructions,’ Seize Liberian Offices in New York,” \textit{New York Times}, April 13, 1980; Pranay B. Gutpe, “New Liberia Rulers Press Populist Line,” \textit{New York Times}, April 20, 1980.}  

A few days after the coup, Foreign Minister Matthews called the US embassy telling Walker that Doe urgently needed to see him. Walker said he would come to the Mansion. Matthews insisted Doe instead would visit the US embassy. The Master Sergeant arrived at the embassy with full motorcade at 3:00 in the morning. As the armed entourage filled the
embassy, Doe told Walker he feared that the Ivory Coast was about to invade. (Tolbert’s son, A.B., was married to the foster daughter of President Houphouet-Boigny of Ivory Coast.) Walker sent an immediate cable to the US embassy in Ivory Coast.¹²⁸ In fact, Ivory Coast had no plan to invade, but having seized his position by violence, Doe lived in constant fear that he would meet the same end.

Doe’s paranoia became a keynote during his rule of Liberia. Doe also asked the Americans for help to stop some of the turmoil in Monrovia. Though it was his impetuous declaration to remove authority of officers that had set off the firestorm of riots and looting, Doe recognized it needed to stop. He established a curfew and enacted new security measures threatening to shoot unruly solders and violent civilians.¹²⁹ Doe stood by this commitment to clamp down on lawlessness when just two days later, on April 17, he had one civilian and three soldiers executed by firing squad for looting and murder.¹³⁰ When facing a difficult situation, he ran to the American embassy first, even though the United States did not have an official relationship with Doe at this time.

**Executions on the Beach**

When Ambassador Robert Smith returned to Monrovia a week after the coup, Liberia was a mess, and the ambassador sought to work with Doe on stabilizing his country. On April 22, 1980, Smith brought Doe a personal appeal from President Carter asking for killing and lawlessness to stop. Doe made no response.¹³¹ Later the same day, Samuel Doe gave his

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¹²⁸ Julius Walker Jr., interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, April 2, 1992, Frontline Diplomacy.
first news conference announcing his intention to return Liberia to civilian rule when “things have calmed down.” He then led thousands of Monrovians to the beach where he and the PRC took thirteen high-ranking government officials from the Tolbert administration to be executed. A military tribunal had sentenced four of the men to death, but Doe’s soldiers tied nine of them to telephone poles. It took more than a half hour to clear enough room among the crowds for a firing squad. Doe declared all thirteen men should die as enemies of the state. Among the men were President Tolbert’s older brother Frank, the president of the Senate, and Cecil Dennis, the respected foreign minister. Doe’s soldiers, reportedly drunk and high at the time of the execution, took an extremely long time to shot all of the men, nine at first, while the remaining four watched and waited in a bus. It was rumored Frank Tolbert had a heart attack before a bullet ever hit him. The final four were tied to the poles and then more than four minutes of gunfire poured upon them. The term “overkill” would be an understatement. After the executions, a cry rose from the crowd, “Freedom! At last we have our freedom.” The PRC cut the executed men down and began beating the corpses.\footnote{Associated Press, “Liberian Firing Squad Executes 13 Officials As Thousands Cheer,” \textit{New York Times}, April 23, 1980.} \footnote{Julius Walker Jr., interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, April 2, 1992, Frontline Diplomacy; Robert P. Smith, interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, February 28, 1989, Frontline Diplomacy; “Liberia: Savage Hours,” \textit{Time}, May 5, 1980.}
Figure 2: Post coup executed civilian

Figure 3: Tolbert officials awaiting execution, April 22, 1980

Figure 4: Executions on the beach, April 22, 1980
After the executions, Doe declared martial law and suspended the 133-year-old constitution “until further notice.” The new justice minister, Chea Cheapoo, also indicated that the heads of state-owned corporations (including foreign nationals) would be under house arrest until the new government decided their future. Doe exempted American businessmen, saying they could continue work without fear of arrest. The new government professed a commitment to the private enterprise system. The minister of the economy, Togba Nah Tipoteh, was adamant that Liberia wanted to continue to work with foreign businesses and declared “the Government has no intention of making any changes in the economic structure at this time.”

At the same time, Minister Cheapoo read the names of more than eighty people with connections to the Tolbert administration who were slated to “face trial for treason,

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135 Photos of the executions on the beach from Larry C. Price. Price won the Pulitzer Prize in 1981 for these photos while he was working for the Fort Worth Star-Telegram.
corruption and violation of human rights.” While Doe, the PRC, and the cabinet began to focus on governing Liberia, they continued to promote violence against the Americo-Liberians.\(^{138}\)

**Liberia’s Dissolving Connection to West Africa**

The executions on the beach set off a firestorm of anger in Africa. The OAU sent Doe a personal plea from the Secretary-General Edem Kodjo of Togo, asking that Liberia show clemency toward members of the former government.\(^{139}\) OAU members had known Tolbert well, and many prominent African leaders had worked closely with Foreign Minister Cecil Dennis. Doe’s relations with the OAU were already stormy as he claimed to be the new OAU chairman succeeding Tolbert, the chairman at the time of his death.\(^{140}\)

The OAU universally rejected Doe’s assertion, but there was no official protocol determining what to do in these circumstances. The military coup troubled the OAU; it was reluctant to recognize a leader who seized power through violence. All the OAU member states, except Ethiopia, refused to recognize Doe. To add insult to injury, the executions in Monrovia were broadcast live in Lagos, Nigeria where the OAU Council of Ministers was preparing for a summit meeting. The ministers spoke openly about their disgust and sent a

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letter to Doe declaring their objections to the violence. Foreign Minister Matthews was refused permission to participate in the OAU Economic Summit in Lagos on April 28.\textsuperscript{141}

Doe sent a message to the OAU. He indicated that he would stop executions, but said, “It is indeed regrettable that the international community maintained silence about human rights when poor people of Liberia were suffering and being murdered in cold blood for over 100 years, particularly during the corrupt Tolbert Government.”\textsuperscript{142}

In May, ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) refused to allow Doe to attend its summit meeting in Lome, Togo.\textsuperscript{143} Doe ignored the rebuff and arrived in Togo uninvited. To further damage his reputation, he arrived in full combat gear, brandishing pistols. His actions and disrespect for the Community greatly angered President Gnassingbe Eyadema of Togo.\textsuperscript{144} Doe was immediately turned away. He vented his frustration by recalling Liberia’s ambassadors from Nigeria, Ivory Coast, and Sierra Leone.\textsuperscript{145}

The \textit{New York Times} reported on Doe’s isolation in the West African community and gave two reasons for the snub. First, Tolbert had been extremely popular among African leaders. Second, Doe’s coup frightened many of Liberia’s western African neighbors whose civilian governments were fragile. The coup particularly frightened Sierra Leone and Ghana. Sierra Leone’s economy and stability were very dependent on Liberia. Ghana’s civilian

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government was on shaky ground after just being handed power from Lt. Rawlings, who had seized power in a coup a year earlier. Doe and the Liberian PRC modeled much of their coup and subsequent executions on the actions of Rawlings. The Liberian PRC even solicited advice from Rawlings. Rawlings was still very popular in Ghana, and its civilian government feared that he might return.146

The United States Begins to Take Action in Liberia

US Ambassador Robert Smith was distraught at the execution of Tolbert and members of his administration. Doe seemed out of control, but Smith had to figure out how to work with this man who had killed his friends. Smith worked hard to try to stabilize Liberia. His problems were compounded by the slim possibility that Liberia, the “51st state,” could become communist. Speaking about this worry, Smith said, “We had the obvious concern about these ignorant, poorly educated, almost illiterate enlisted men being gotten to by the other side and being turned around and having Liberia wind up as a communist state. “ Doe himself seemed to have no political ideology, but he would accept assistance from anyone who offered it. After the coup, the Soviets did try to capitalize on the opportunity to align with Liberia. Smith wisely leaned on Colonel Bob Gosney, who had helped to quell violence immediately after the coup, to counter Soviet inroads.147

The US military mission in Liberia had trained the Liberian Army for years. Doe was one of the men whom Col. Gosney had trained. Smith discovered that when he met with Doe, if he brought Col. Gosney, Doe was much more malleable. Doe and his cohorts looked

fondly on Gosney and referred to him as “Chief.” Smith explained the amazing effect
Gosney had on the new Liberian leadership, saying, “I think one of the major things that
saved us there was not, certainly, the charm or good looks of the American ambassador, but
rather the presence of… a tough, charming Texas [sic] full colonel in the Army named Bob
Gosney.” Doe was so enamored with Gosney at one point he gave the order: “Whatever the
chief says, goes.” Smith couldn’t emphasize enough how helpful and important Gosney was
in helping the US cause in Liberia.  

On May 5, a memorandum to the White House suggested a strategy for dealing with
Doe. It stated that the political outlook was positive: Doe was popular with the Liberian
people. The majority of members of the People’s Redemption Council were pro-American,
and the coup was “motivated primarily by a desire to reverse Americo-Liberian dominance.”
The council allowed many of the ministries in the Liberian government to operate with a
“large degree of autonomy.” This enabled Liberia to have some semblance of a government.
The outlook on working with Doe was positive: “Doe appears to be confident and respected
by his colleagues. He seems to recognize his limitations, solicits advice, and has played a
moderating role in the Council.” However, there were some concerns about the make-up of
the PRC. Doe’s promise to halt executions indicated that he might be a moderating
influence, but there were hardliners in the council.

Even at this early stage, the United States was aware that the PRC would not give up
power easily. Though Doe promised to return the government to civilian control quickly, US
intelligence acknowledged that the “recent declaration of martial law and suspension of the

constitution suggest the military leaders, enjoying their new-found power, may become more reluctant to return to civilian rule, in spite of public assurances.” Whatever the political outlook, the economic situation was crippling, as the new government inherited a $700 million debt from the Tolbert administration.

The memorandum recommended that the United States commit to be a major player in the rebuilding of Liberia for several reasons. First, the large number of private US and government installations made it important that the United States stay involved. Second, in the chaos, there was a possibility that the Soviets would make a move; Liberian officials “frequently hinted” that the government would turn elsewhere if the US response was not satisfactory. Third, however distasteful Doe might be, his successor – or chaos – could be worse. “Leadership changes may occur as a result of growing tribal tensions within the military or friction between military and civilian elements. Any threat to the ruling military council’s power, however, either from the civilian or from rival military figures, would probably cause the Council to revert to more hard-line policies and tactics. It is also possible the more radical Council members could decide to challenge Doe’s authority.” The Carter administration wanted, above all, to maintain stability in Liberia. And supporting Doe seemed to be the best option.149

Carter did not need any more instability in the world. On November 4, 1979 a group of Iranians stormed the US Embassy and took the staff hostage. Fifty-two people remained hostages in Iran, and the Carter administration looked lame as attempts to negotiate their return failed. Then the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. To complicate matters even

more, twelve days after the Liberian coup, Carter was reeling from a failed operation to rescue the hostages in Iran that cost the lives of eight American servicemen. Moreover, 1980 was an election year. Liberia did not compare in strategic and political importance with Iran, but chaos in Liberia, the closest ally of the United States in Africa, or its “loss” to communism would have added to Carter’s woes.

On May 7, a Policy Review Committee – with representatives from the State Department, the Defense Department, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the CIA, and the National Security Council -- met in the White House Situation Room to discuss the crisis in Liberia. The administration had suspended aid to Liberia after the coup, and the group needed to figure out what policy to pursue in Liberia. Acting Secretary of State Warren Christopher, who chaired the meeting (Vance having resigned after the failed rescue mission), presented three options: “to distance ourselves from the Doe government, to maintain the present relationship, or to augment the present relationship.” Christopher expressed a strong preference for option three, but stated it was much easier to say than to actually fund, “given our scarce resources.” The other agencies agreed with the State Department.

The discussion turned to the means of augmenting the US relationship with Doe, with no dispute about funding Doe. Reprogramming aid would be necessary, though the agencies were not sure where that aid would come from. The committee recognized the need to keep congress aware of the Liberian situation, and it discussed how to handle the delicate subject of the Doe administration’s disregard for basic human rights. Christopher said “Public condemnation was clearly not useful in this case; we should stay with our present policy of muted public criticism, coupled with direct and forceful admonitions to the Doe regime to
initiate and maintain a policy of respect for human rights and rule of law.” The committee members were in agreement; however, some questioned the effect US support of Doe would have on the African countries that were unhappy with him. Jerry Funk, the Africa specialist on the NSC, addressed this concern saying, “as long as our aid and guidance was perceived by other Africans as being directed toward the promotion of stability -- internally and in the region -- our intervention would be welcomed, and more, expected.”\(^{150}\)

The Committee sent the points to the president for agreement, and the United States had an official policy toward Doe’s Liberia. Washington would strengthen the current relationship with Liberia.\(^{151}\) The administration would hold off on enacting this policy until violence would decrease and a US mission could establish the parameters for resuming aid.\(^{152}\) That the usually tight-fisted Carter administration wanted to increase aid to Doe indicates the importance of Liberia. On the basis of the declassified documents, it is impossible to tell to what extent the decision to support Doe was motivated by the amount of US business and investment in Liberia, and to what extent it was motivated by domestic concerns in an increasingly brutal re-election year. In any case, the Carter administration tied itself to Doe’s future.

There was really no alternative to Doe. The coup leaders had killed almost everyone who possessed the experience or the ability to run a country. One exception, Tolbert’s Vice President Benny Warner, was in the United States during the coup. He moved to Ivory Coast and began to build an opposition movement to challenge Doe. However, the United States


began working with Doe, and Warner’s threats were in vain as his opposition was unpopular in Liberia where the people rejoiced at the fall of the Americo-Liberians.\textsuperscript{153} Even Warner admitted to the BBC while trying to garner support in Ivory Coast that the coup had been inevitable and the Americo-Liberians were on the losing side of history.\textsuperscript{154} To ensure no other challenges existed, Doe hunted down everyone who posed a threat. William Jerbo, an American trained and popular soldier, tried with some of his soldiers to oppose the coup; instead he was killed trying to cross the Mano River into Sierra Leone. Several other military officers were suspected of staging efforts against Doe, but all were dismissed.\textsuperscript{155}

In Liberia, the US embassy began to take a large role in helping shape and influence the direction of the government. Doe professed a stance of non-alignment, but he was dependant on the United States, not just for aid but for political advice as well. Ambassador Smith recalled how Doe would call him at all hours of the night exclaiming, “Mr. Ambassador, we have a problem.” Doe would explain the various problems and, according to Smith, wait for the ambassador to tell him what to do. Smith said that communication with Doe was often difficult. He possessed little education and was illiterate; US diplomats often complained they had to talk to him in the pidgin English used among the lower classes of Liberians. Smith felt uneasy telling Doe what choices to make. He felt sometimes that he


\textsuperscript{155}Legum, “Liberia: The Revolution Marks Time,” \textit{Africa Contemporary Record, [Volume 13]}, 1980-1981, p. B628. It should be noted as well that Jerbo was thought by a few historians to have been planning a coup of his own before the Doe coup. His coup was to be bloodless and backed by either the United States, or the old guard of the True Whig Party trying to remove Tolbert from office.
was running the country, a position he did not feel comfortable assuming.\textsuperscript{156} However, Liberia’s future depended more on the United States than ever.

The Carter administration went out on a limb for the young leader, telling American businesses in Liberia to be patient. The administration told Chase Bank to hold steady. Given the assurances of the Carter administration, the bank then encouraged Chemical Bank and other American businesses to “hang in there.”\textsuperscript{157} However, at the end of May, Doe indicated that he may not yet have been firmly in the American’s pocket. On May 30, 1980 the US Embassy in Ethiopia reported that Liberian Foreign Minister Matthews had brought an eleven-page note to Mengistu, the pro-Soviet Ethiopian leader, requesting that Liberian officers receive military training in Ethiopia. The note indicated that Doe was dissatisfied with US military aid and wished to be “non-aligned.” The news came to the United States with a note from Matthews declaring that the United States government “should not make the same mistake in Liberia that [it] did in Ethiopia, that is, fail to talk with the new government because of outrage at excessive violence.”\textsuperscript{158}

A few days later, the United States sent its first mission to Liberia since the coup. The goal of this mission was to talk with Doe and the PRC to encourage the “rulers to forgo further violence in return for American cooperation and assistance.” It was headed by Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Richard Moose and composed of William H. Gray, Democrat from Pennsylvania who had chaired the Presidential Commission on United States-Liberian Relations and was a member of Congressional Black Caucus, and Jerry Funk

\textsuperscript{156} Robert P Smith, interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, February 28, 1989, Frontline Diplomacy.
of the NSC. The Carter Administration had already decided to support the Doe regime, but Doe didn’t know this, and the mission needed to persuade him that he needed to change his ways in order to receive the allocated $6 million economic and $1.6 million military aid for the fiscal year that was being held in abeyance. The mission also encouraged Doe to end the violence; it urged him to establish a stable system, and it made “clear to the military leaders that there will be alternative sources for economic assistance to that being offered by the revolutionary Governments of Libya and Ethiopia.”

Turbulent Times Continue for Doe and Liberia

Although Doe promised the US mission as well as African leaders that the lawlessness would stop, he remained obsessed with his crusade against anyone associated with Tolbert. On the morning of June 14, a group of Doe’s soldiers charged into the French embassy in Monrovia and arrested A.B. Tolbert, the son of the former president, who had taken refuge there. A.B. and the French had tried to keep his whereabouts secret. The embassy staff even told the houseboys not to clean the area of the residence where he hid. However, one night A.B. made some noise and a houseboy thought a burglar had broken in and called the local police. A.B. was discovered. Soon thereafter, armed soldiers gathered outside the embassy with rifles firing in celebration of their find. A.B. Tolbert was taken and imprisoned. The PRC declared he would be given a fair and speedy trial, but never acted

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161 Julius Walker Jr., interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, April 2, 1992, Frontline Diplomacy.
on the promise.\textsuperscript{162} Although his execution was not public, Chargé Walker was sure that the military “did him in.”\textsuperscript{163}

A.B. Tolbert’s arrest and disappearance affected Doe’s image in many adverse ways. France was outraged at the soldiers’ assault on the embassy and protested the violation of diplomatic immunity. The act strained relationships between Liberia, France and the European Economic Community, injuring more than just the Franco-Liberian relationship. Liberia asked France to recall its ambassador. Foreign Minister Matthews declared: “The action of the French Ambassador [in giving asylum to A.B. Tolbert] is viewed clearly incompatible with his diplomatic status and the Government of France has been requested to effect his recall.”\textsuperscript{164} Neighboring states like Ivory Coast, Nigeria, and Burkina Faso tried intervening, but the PRC refused to release Tolbert, who was the son-in-law of the president of Ivory Coast. The leaders of Ivory Coast, Guinea, Togo, and Sierra Leone even met with Doe in Yamoussoukro, Ivory Coast, telling him “acceptance of the new Government might hinge on its treatment of Mr. Tolbert’s son.”\textsuperscript{165} Doe never gave in. This angered many of the states that were already disenchanted with Liberia. Liberia had already upset the OAU and ECOWAS, but this action led to further estrangement especially with France, Nigeria – a regional power and overseer of stability in the region – and Ivory Coast.\textsuperscript{166}

During this turbulent time in Liberia and before the US mission arrived there, five ministers in the Doe government led by Dr. Togba Nah Tipoteh, the Minister of Planning and

\textsuperscript{163} Julius Walker Jr., interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, April 2, 1992, Frontline Diplomacy.
Economic Affairs, went to Washington to seek emergency loans of $50 million dollars. The delegation also sought to assure American business and government officials that Liberia’s new government was stable, even though Dr. Tipoteh admitted to “problems of confidence” with the United States and the West African nations. Dr. Tipoteh had a difficult task. Many government officials and business sources questioned the stability of the Liberian government. Citing problems of corruption and abuses by the military, one official said of supporting Liberia, “Another very important matter is the fact that the Liberian Government is now in a running battle with its African neighbors who have refused to deal with the new President.” Dr. Tipoteh responded that he himself and many others in government positions were not military men and had a great interest in building their nation saying, “Three-quarters of the cabinet members are civilians, and we are trying to make certain that the Government runs smoothly.” Addressing the issues of Liberia’s problems in West Africa, he said they were only “symbolic” and would soon disappear.167

In Liberia the Carter Administration built what became a house of cards. A CIA National Intelligence Report from June 27, 1980 expressed great concerns about the fledgling government. It outlined three problematic areas. The first centered on the different factions within the PRC. The regime was unstable with infighting among the governing body. Second, Doe was isolated: other West African nations were not willing to work with him and his government. The presidents of Sierra Leone, Guinea, Ivory Coast, and Togo demanded that Doe take the lead in mending Liberia’s relationships with France and Nigeria, as well as

release political prisoners (including A.B. Tolbert). Third, Doe’s search for arms and military training raised the Agency’s anxieties.\textsuperscript{168}

While the United States turned toward the unlikely leadership of Doe, those in Liberia tried to assess the situation and how they could improve the government. Some Americo-Liberians felt obligated to stay in Liberia and work in the ranks of the Doe government. Many Liberians were encouraged by the support the United States gave to Doe, and decided they could help the country.\textsuperscript{169} A prominent Americo-Liberian and Liberian delegate to the UN, Winston Tubman, was typical of this group. Tubman was the delegate whose office had been seized by the Liberian students after the coup, and as the students relinquished his office on April 19, Tubman was asked if he was serving the new government. He replied, “Of course…there is no other government to be serving.”\textsuperscript{170} Perhaps many of the Americo-Liberians declared allegiance due to their fear of Doe’s crusade against them. The native Liberians had reasons to support Doe despite the violence of his first weeks in power. Since he destroyed the political hold of the True Whig Party and the Americo-Liberians, many natives who had been left out of the upper echelon of the political scene suddenly had access to power. Though the violence and bloodshed were massive, Doe declared one of his goals was to return the government to the people. He promised the have-nots of the past a new chance to be a part of the solution, if they could just be patient.

There were numerous doubters. Many Liberians fled the country. Those of Americo-Liberian heritage feared corruption trials, imprisonment, and the disappearances of hundreds

of their fellow countrymen including ninety-one former associates of President Tolbert. \(^{171}\)

Many Americo-Liberians fled to the United States in an exodus described as 1822 in reverse. \(^{172}\) Doe said he was willing to work with former members of the Tolbert Administration, even keeping a few low-level members on, but most were very wary. Who could trust Doe’s promises, with the Liberian jails full of political prisoners, and an incredibly inexperienced gang running the country?

Gradually African leaders came to terms with the new Liberia, but they, too, remained wary of Doe. Liberia was allowed to take its place at the OAU summit meeting in Freetown, Sierra Leone in July, but the OAU asked Doe to excuse himself from the meeting. Liberia’s relations with Nigeria and ECOWAS became normalized in August. \(^{173}\)

The US support of Doe reassured the African nations. Just as the Carter administration advised American business interests in Liberia to be patient and not abandon Liberia, Washington’s support helped other nations to be patient as well. Many hoped that the Americans would be able to tame Doe’s unpredictability and irrational behavior. Doe, however, did not do everything the Americans asked. He sought more money for military equipment and took funding from wherever he could find it. On August 8, he announced that he would be visiting Ethiopia in September. \(^{174}\) The United States was determined to help Doe, and willing to work with him.


Congress and the Full Support of the United States

Members of the Carter administration testified to Congress on August 19 in support of increased assistance for the brutal military junta. Ambassador Robert Smith presented the House Committee on Appropriations with a statement from Assistant Secretary of State Richard Moose. Moose’s statement described the coup leaders’ efforts to re-build Liberia. The PRC was accepted by the people and recognized the issues facing the country. Moose explained that the coup had been motivated by anger toward the previous government, and particularly toward its treatment of the indigenous populations. Moose spoke positively about the new make up of the government stating, “The post coup government is a diverse mixture of ideologies, levels of sophistication, political ambitions and tribal identification. They are far more concerned about economic, social and political equities than their predecessors, but are decidedly not ‘radical.’” Moose was very critical of the Tolbert administration, which just months before the Carter administration had supported.  

Moose’s statement expressed concern about the country’s economy. International business was already leery after the Rice Riots of 1979, and the coup all but crippled the Liberian economy. In order to help the economy, Moose asked for increases in aid for Liberia for the next fiscal year. This was the crux of Moose’s challenge: the Carter administration had decided that it made sense to increase aid to Doe, but that meant that it had to convince congress that he was respecting human rights, which, clearly, he was not. “Liberia is at a critical juncture,” Moose explained. “Responsible, constructive leaders are in the ascendency, popular support for the new government is holding, and life outside the

capital city remains essentially normal.” The statement continued, “The government is experiencing internal tension, however, and external temptations could weaken U.S. – Liberian ties, frustrate economic recovery, and undermine prospects of progress toward restoration of civil and political rights.”

During the Tolbert years, the US aid to Liberia had fluctuated: $19 million in 1973 to $6 million in 1974 and back to $18 million in 1975. This was a pattern that existed from the Nixon to Ford to Carter administrations. Total aid in 1979 had been $19.1 million. That figure would increase to $26.2 million 1980, defying the normal pattern. Moose was also requesting increased aid for 1981. The numbers were not large, but Liberia was an unstable military dictatorship.

Moose outlined the objectives of the Carter administration’s policy toward Liberia. First, the administration wanted to prevent an economic collapse. Second, it wanted to procure a transition to a civilian government, the release of political prisoners, and fair treatment of international business. Third, it wanted to ensure Liberia’s security. Fourth, it wanted to promote the long-term development of the country. Moose also outlined the history of US interest in Liberia. Not only did the US government have millions of dollars invested in Liberia, (such as the Omega tracking system, VOA broadcast towers, Freeport, and Robert’s Airfield), but it would be prohibitively costly to relocate these assets if Liberia were to collapse. Moreover, Moose stated US aid would help keep Liberia from accepting aid from Libya, Ethiopia, and the Soviet Union, all of whom had been in contact, though

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177 The aid statistics are confusing. I am relying on Dunn and Tarr, Liberia: A National Polity in Transition, p. 177.

Moose’s call for increased aid would be a hard sell in congress. Ambassador Robert Smith would have to convince the members of congress that it was in America’s best interest to help Doe. The ambassador fielded questions from the committee. He described the poor conditions of the military barracks, which was one of the reasons the soldiers had staged the coup. He gave a realistic assessment of Liberia, telling the representatives that aid was not a panacea and the country had a long way to go, and though Doe arrested more than 150 people after the coup, Smith explained that the embassy had been able to convince him to stay executions of all but thirteen men. The members of the committee expressed concern about the United States supporting a government that had a history of violence. Smith assured them that Doe and the PRC had learned their lesson and renounced violence.\footnote{US Congress, House, “Foreign Assistance and Related Programs Appropriations for 1981,” pp. 117-143.}

Congressman Bill Young (R-FL), expressed concern about supporting a regime that had overthrown a very pro American government. Smith assured him that the coup leaders were not anti-American. He bluntly stated that nothing could be done to bring the old government back, and thus it was important to bolster a new pro-American government. Smith, whose close contact with Doe and the other sixteen members of the PRC enabled him to speak with authority, described him as humble and down to earth, completely aware of his inexperience in government procedures.\footnote{US Congress, House, “Foreign Assistance and Related Programs Appropriations for 1981,” pp. 117-143.}

Smith did his best to explain why the United States needed to support Doe despite the
coup and subsequent violence. However, as Smith talked about the Doe government, his displeasure and skepticism were evident. Doe had murdered Tolbert, one of Smith’s friends. Smith’s heart must have laid heavy in defending the Doe regime, especially when Representative Long, talking about the men killed on the beach (and ignoring the hundreds of other Liberians killed) asked “Can you think of any other revolution, Ambassador, in which there have been any smaller number of executions than what occurred here in Liberia? It strikes me that 13 is a rather small number compared with most revolutions.” Smith replied, “I think that is true, Mr. Chairman. I am not a historian, but I do not honestly think of any others, either on the initial night of the coup or in the subsequent executions, as horrible as they were. Thank goodness they were small in numbers.” To Long, the dead were just numbers, to Smith they were real people. 181

At the end of his career, Smith made it clear he never liked the Doe administration. And it is clear in his congressional testimony that he could not bring himself to praise Doe. When Congressman William Lehman (D-FL) asked: “Is this government better than the last one?” Smith said he could not answer the question and would try to deflect it if asked by the press. 182

**Doe Shows his True Colors**

The United States sent budget advisors to Monrovia, and in early September Doe accepted a budget that qualified Liberia for help from the International Monetary Fund. It

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seemed the economic crisis would ease. However, just as Doe was accepting a budget that would allow him to bring economic security to his country, he reneged on his promises to bring political stability to Liberia. On September 1, Doe declared Liberia would resume executions of those deemed enemies of the state. Doe said, “Any antirevolutionary element caught undermining the progress of the Liberian revolution would be immediately executed.” This showed the true nature of the man the Americans had decided to support. Doe was erratic and unpredictable. Threatening executions was in direct contradiction to the terms of continued US aid. This, as well as his planned visits to Ethiopia and Moscow showed that Doe’s commitment to the United States wavered according to his whims.

Doe visited Ethiopia for a week in mid-September, where he allegedly met with Soviet advisors to ask for military aid. The NSC reported that the Soviets told Doe, if the United States were unable to meet their needs, they would be more than happy to provide for the security of the Liberian revolution. Doe promised to give the offer serious consideration. This conversation was not an official meeting and there is little evidence of future flirtation with the Soviets, but in Washington, it did raise a red flag. When Doe returned to Liberia he criticized the Americans for their “token” assistance and threatened to turn toward “other sources.” However, at the same time, he allowed the French ambassador to return to Liberia.

Soon after Doe’s return from Ethiopia, the United States sent Liberia a shipment of 541 M-16 rifles. This was the first shipment of arms since the coup. The rifles were delivered with a message from the Ambassador to Doe referring to a statement Doe made about the weapons providing “psychological support necessary for human rights improvement.”187 The shipment of weapons helped to cool the ardor of those in the Liberian government who wanted to seek weapons from Moscow. As the shipment reached Liberia, Foreign Minister Matthews began to sing the praises of the United States. He said that the aid showed “a reaffirmation of confidence” that would help other nations to be friendlier to the Doe regime. That the aid arrived immediately after Doe’s meeting with the Soviets caused many to speculate that the trip to Ethiopia had been Doe’s way to exert leverage in the United States.

Matthews, however, denied that reaching out to the USSR had forced the hand of the Carter administration, saying, “That would be a cheap form of blackmail.” Instead he asserted that Doe’s visit to Ethiopia had been one of African solidarity as the country had been the first to recognize the new government. Matthews denied that Doe had held any talks with the Soviets or the Cubans in Ethiopia, and he proclaimed that the Liberians were not soliciting aid from them. He did confirm that President Doe “accepted in principle” an invitation to visit Moscow, but with no timeframe. Matthews declared that the Liberian government “is committed to free enterprise, is demonstrating a sense of social responsibility and that Liberia represents far greater prospects for true stability now than ever before.”188

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Continued US Investment in Liberia

Liberia was firmly rooted in Western alignment. Even when Tolbert paraded as an African nationalist, the idea of Soviet influence in Liberia was far-fetched. The Soviets knew the firm grasp the United States had on Liberia, and they showed no serious attempts to disrupt it. The United States did what was needed to keep US influence in Liberia. This, however, did not stop the Soviets from making their presence known.

On October 16, 1980, a memo for Zbigniew Brzezinski from the White House Situation Room reported that in late September, two senior Soviet foreign ministry officials visited Monrovia on an unofficial visit. The officials, who did not meet with Doe, were assessing the situation in post-coup Liberia. They met with the Soviet embassy staff, Soviet Bloc diplomats, and several Liberians. The report stated, “The officials expressed interest in the stability of Doe government, the ideological orientation of key individuals, and projections as to who would be likely to succeed Doe, should he be removed from office.”

The report also stated that Doe had asked the Soviets for help with patrol boats, transports, helicopters, and medical supplies, but the only item that the Soviets had openly provided was medical supplies. The Soviet threat in Liberia was very limited, but it was not off the radar of Americans watching the events in Liberia.

Although the United States helped Doe create a budget, and made strenuous efforts to stabilize Liberia, it all was for naught. Bad news continually showed the futility of the US government’s actions. The CIA International Economic and Energy Weekly report for

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October 16, 1980 stated that Liberia’s problems were much deeper than the United States had originally thought. The country faced its “worst financial crisis since the new government seized power.” Liberian officials claimed they needed $35-40 million by the end of the year to cover their debts. The National Bank of Liberia was unable to pay its debt of $23 million. The problems extended far beyond the economic situation. CIA Deputy Director of Operations for Africa Clair George, who had just returned from Liberia, exclaimed in frustration, “There is no government [in Liberia].” A report from NSC’s Jerry Funk to Brzezinski following up on George’s assessment announced that Dick Moose would visit Liberia and push hard for Doe to accept a tough advisor. On the eve of the presidential election in the United States, the Carter administration faced a daunting problem in Liberia. Despite all its efforts, Liberia was no better in October than it had been when Doe had taken over in April.

Shortly after Carter lost his bid for reelection, the Situation Room sent a report to Brzezinski about the nagging troubles of the administration’s Liberian project. The outlook was bleak. On top of the economic crisis, the memo reported continued disputes among the leadership. The PRC’s inexperience and stubbornness made it unable to make political decisions. The result was chaos and confusion. “The leaders of the PRC seem able to do little except muddle through one ‘crisis’ after another, gambling on the belief that the U.S. Government and foreign investors will not allow Liberia’s economy to collapse.”

Carter Administration worried about the future of US investment in Liberia and feared becoming a scapegoat for the regime’s failures.

Carter administration officials did not have high hopes for Liberia, but they saw no alternative to Doe. Doe faced a tough situation with the fiscally conservative Carter administration. On November 17, Doe told the Liberian people that those making over $750 a month would have to give up two months’ of salary to help with the economic situation, and those making less than $750 would have to forego one month’s salary.¹⁹³ This was a crisis of Doe’s making: immediately after the coup, he had increased military salaries by 150% and civil service salaries by 100%.¹⁹⁴ Taking money out of people’s pockets could make the economic situation turn into an ugly political situation as well. Close eyes would have to watch the situation and try to continue to help Doe keep Liberia stable.

Carter Finishes His Efforts in Liberia

The Carter Administration continued to support Doe. Although he asked for economic assistance, it was military aid, such as a shipment of military transport trucks, which pleased him most. In December with the arrival of the trucks, Jerry Funk from the NSC reported, “no immediate crisis for a change, now that the trucks are on the way.”¹⁹⁵ Funk’s assessment suggests the administration’s attitude toward Doe: he was a child like figure. The administration could only douse the small fires he lit one at a time. There was no predicting Doe’s new demands or the next crisis. Yet it was clear there would be another

¹⁹⁴ Pham, Liberia: Portrait of a Failed State, p. 81.

In the outgoing administration’s final update on Liberia, penned on January 14, 1981, Brzezinski outlined the situation facing Liberia, surely less for Carter than his successor. It identified four main points for continuing a relationship with Liberia.

First, Brzezinski explained why it was in the US interest to maintain a relationship with Liberia. This included the access rights and facilities that could not be duplicated. It also pointed out that if Liberia became disappointed with US assistance it would turn to other sources. Second, stability in Liberia depended on solving the near-term fiscal crisis. The report pointed out that in order to obtain long-term stability there must be a return of foreign investor confidence. Third, while communist and radical African regimes made some effort to exploit the situation in Liberia, they had been unsuccessful because the “continued attachment” Liberia had to the United States, as well as Doe’s paranoia about communist motives. Fourth, there would be no civilian rule in Liberia until the economic situation improved “to a point where civilians and military alike can count on some benefits from the system.”\footnote{Zbigniew Brzezinski, Memorandum for The President, “Daily Report,” January 14, 1981, NLC-1-18-4-8-9, The Jimmy Carter Library.}

This report summed up the Carter policy toward Liberia. On balance, it made sense to continue to try to maintain a presence in the country and to try to stabilize it economically.
and politically. No other African state allowed the United States as much access. The facilities in Liberia were valuable, and the cost of retaining the Liberian government’s friendship was low. It helped US business interests in Liberia and it provided an example to the world of the reliability of the friendship of the United States.

The Carter administration had attempted to forge Doe into a capable leader. On the day of Reagan’s inauguration, the New York Times published an article about Liberia. It quoted Amos Dawson, the dean of Liberia College: “If it weren’t for the bloodshed and the enormous economic problems, you could characterize a lot of what has happened as amusing.” Another high civilian official in the government told the Times “to cope, you have to regard a lot of what goes on as comedic.” The stories in Liberia about Doe and his inept administration abounded as the educated Liberians commented their country was being run by the “Keystone Kops.” Doe made many outlandish threats such as telling the national soccer team they would be imprisoned if they did not win their match with Gambia; they tied, barely escaping incarceration. To make up for lost revenue, 700 civil servants were jailed and charged $8.50 a day for the privilege. The PRC crashed so many cars that a new policy was instituted, “Wreck one and the Government buys you a replacement; wreck two and you buy your own.” Liberia had avoided bankruptcy thanks to an American emergency grant of $7 million; however, the country still owed more than $700 million in foreign debt. Although the Times reported that Doe wanted to return Liberia to civilian rule and solve the economic crisis, it made it clear that these tasks were beyond the capacity of the unschooled president. Doe was, at best, an extremely rough work in progress. The article showed the
comical side to the revolution, but sad truth remained that people died and incompetent men were in control.\textsuperscript{198}

The coup placed the United States in a difficult position. As Chargé d’Affaires Walker said, trying to explain US support for Doe, “We were not rewarding the monster. I can see how there could be that feeling, but he was all we had. There was no way for us to do anything other than through him unless we were going to put troops in there and wipe him and his group out…We had too much interest there.”\textsuperscript{199} Supporting Doe was a hard and messy choice. Doe was not an ideal candidate for running a country, and the Carter administration recognized that. One wonders if the same choices would have been made looking through the lens of history. The people of Liberia paid a horrible price as Doe destroyed their nation. The funding enabled a monster. Liberia was a mess before Doe; Tolbert wasn’t the poster child for human rights and was reliant on the United States, but Doe took these characteristics to an extreme. The Reagan Administration inherited a mess. However, the sins of Carter in Liberia pale in comparison to what the Reagan administration would do. If Carter freed a monster, Reagan strengthened and groomed that monster to become the terror that led to the complete destruction of Liberia.

Doe was in power, and the Carter administration wanted to maintain its interests in Liberia. Hence there was no real debate in the administration about the need to augment aid. The United States did not want Doe to slip out of the US sphere. Given Doe’s inexperience, the Carter administration hoped to be able to control to and mold him. Doe soon realized he

\textsuperscript{199} Julius Walker Jr., interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, April 2, 1992, Frontline Diplomacy.
could command aid and still rule as he saw fit. This attitude would color Doe’s relations with the Reagan administration.
Chapter III
A Cheap Date:
Doe and Reagan

Foreign aid can be justified for many different reasons, yet at its core, the principles of cost-benefit analysis often come into play. The country providing aid must weigh the cost of supporting another nation against the benefits it receives. Despite claims of a special relationship, or the idea that the United States had an obligation to help Liberia, the Reagan administration supported the Doe regime in Liberia because it was beneficial to the United States. From 1980-1985, the United States provided record amounts of aid to Liberia, making it the largest recipient of aid in sub-Saharan Africa. However, the cost of supporting Doe eventually outweighed the benefits when Doe refused to hold free elections. Despite the great increase in aid and the amplified interest from the United States, Liberia became a failed state. The Reagan administration’s policy mixed with Samuel Doe’s dangerous aspirations created a deadly cocktail that destroyed the country, led to thousands of deaths, and created ripples felt by Liberians even today.

Carter to Reagan

Jimmy Carter left a huge problem in Liberia. The Carter administration had deemed the young and inexperienced Doe as malleable and took the gamble to back him in order to preserve US access and installations in Liberia. As the Carter administration increased aid, Doe seemingly sabotaged its efforts by creating one problem after another. Yet the Carter administration continued to support Doe because it wanted stability in Liberia; US interests
and investment in Liberia were valuable. Doe was new and inexperienced, and a stable Liberia seemed worth the price of trying to bolster him. This was the state of affairs the Reagan administration inherited.

Reagan would continue Carter’s policies toward Liberia and would quickly find, as had Carter, that Doe’s Liberia was a bottomless pit in which money was constantly needed and where one financial crisis led to another. On March 6, 1981, Chargé Julius Walker sent a memo to the White House Situation room explaining the dire state of Liberia’s finances. Liberia owed an immediate obligation to other nations of $48 million. This money could be “rolled over” to a deficit of $12.8 due by late March or April, the one-year anniversary of the coup. Walker stated this gave the new Reagan administration a great opportunity to demonstrate its support for Liberia. He suggested a representative from the US government should attend the anniversary festivities and present an emergency loan. This would keep the Liberians from seeking help from other places, such as Libya. If this were done during the anniversary, it would have “maximum political impact.”

The Reagan administration desired to show the world a strong America rising from the ashes of the Carter years. Bolstering Liberia would not only provide an important ally in rolling back communism in Africa, but also show that Reagan took care of his African friends. Reagan did care about Africa: he saw it as an important theater of the cold war. He, and the hardliners in his administration, strongly backed the “contra war” in Angola, where one guerrilla group (UNITA, led by Jonas Savimbi) was fighting to overthrow the left-leaning, pro-Cuban government. This is where Reagan’s real interest in Liberia originated.

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On March 17, 1981, another cable from Walker in the US embassy showed the effect of Reagan’s efforts on Doe and the men around him. Walker wrote “From my discussions with key leaders here, it is clear there is a confrontation between Doe, Quiwonkpa [a highly respected and powerful member of the PRC] and other military men on the one hand, and Foreign Minister Matthews on the other over the question of Libyan, Cuban and Soviet presence/intentions in Liberia.” Walker mentioned that Doe and Quiwonkpa had “stuck their necks out” for the United States. Doe had announced to Walker his intention to kick out Libyan and Cuban diplomats, and reduce the Soviet embassy staff, in return for US military aid and advisors. Walker was optimistic about the possibility of working with Doe, but stressed that Washington had to make some hard decisions about funding Liberia.\textsuperscript{201} Carter had increased aid after the coup in order to keep Liberia from defaulting and had convinced congress to approve $62 million for 1981.\textsuperscript{202} Reagan faced a choice. Doe could help the American cause against the Soviet presence in Africa. Giving him more aid might allow the United States greater access to this useful cold war staging ground. If Doe would play ball and avoid embarrassing the administration, US aid to Liberia could be a home run. The cost was low, and the potential reward was great.

Liberia, and Africa, would have been of little concern to the Reagan administration had it not been for Angola and Libya. In Libya, the administration sought to destabilize the Qadhafi regime by covert operations and other military operations. In Angola, it backed


\textsuperscript{202} Dunn and Tarr, \textit{Liberia: A National Polity in Transition}, p. 177.
Jonas Savimbi’s UNITA against the continuing Cuban presence. Liberia, with its deep-water port and modern airfield, was useful.

On April 5, 1981, the New York Times reported that the US government had persuaded Doe to disinvite Libyan military advisors he had previously asked to Liberia. The Reagan administration then did just as Chargé Walker had advised: in honor of “Redemption Day” the one-year anniversary of the coup, the United States sent the missile destroyer, USS Thorn, to Liberia. One hundred Green Berets were also sent to perform a parachute display and provide training for the 6000 man Liberian army for a month. Doe was delighted.

Doe Solidifies His Position and Power

Doe was becoming more confident in his role as the Liberian executive. He felt he had the close support and friendship of the Reagan administration, though it nudged him to make responsible choices and keep his nose clean. In April, he appointed a national commission to draft a new constitution. In May, he ordered the Libyans to close their embassy. He also closed the Liberian People’s Bureau, a left leaning organization that Foreign Minister Matthews had championed as a symbol of Liberia’s non-alignment.

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Matthews and Thomas Weh-Syen, Doe’s second in command protested that Doe was forcing Liberia to move away from its “avowed principle of non-alignment.”

Doe at the same time ordered the Soviets to reduce their number of embassy staffers, and in June, the Soviets closed their embassy for a time. Doe moved Liberia more firmly into the US sphere, making no attempts to hide his allegiance. At the same time, he became increasingly paranoid about those who would seek to usurp his authority. In May, thirteen low ranking members of the Liberian army were accused of plotting his overthrow. After a short trial, the soldiers were executed. In late August, he found evidence of an assassination and coup attempt against him. This coup was purportedly planned by Weh-Syen, who was promptly arrested.

On August 31, the new US ambassador, Bill Swing, sent a cable to the State Department describing the events in Liberia as he saw them. He had presented his credentials and found Doe extremely willing to follow the direction of the United States and eager to be invited to Washington to meet President Reagan. Swing recommended that Washington send advisors to Liberia, because US business interests were still very skeptical about Doe. The upcoming trials of the accused coup leaders would make a big difference in the way the public perceived the regime. Doe promised the trial would be public, the defendants would have defense lawyers, and the rule of law and human rights would be

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210 Johnson Sirleaf, This Child Will be Great: Memoir of a Remarkable Life by Africa’s First Woman President, pp. 111, 116.
upheld. Doe also noted that the BBC and other media were already in Monrovia. In conclusion, Swing reported that Doe’s “manner was relaxed and confident, appeared to take in and accept most of the points discussed above. He seemed particularly eager to provide reassurances on the trials. However, he offered nothing in the way of details either on the accusations, the evidence, or the current status of the inquiries by the supreme military tribunal.” On Liberia’s dire economic straits, Swing noted “Doe expressed himself more committed than ever to taking measures designed to shore up investor confidence and to attract new investment.”

Nevertheless, Weh-Syen and four other members of the PRC were executed at the end of August. Doe wanted American assistance, but he wanted total authority as well. At this time, it seemed he could have both. Reagan would continue to supply Doe with high amounts of aid, and Doe returned the favor by granting the United States unquestioned and rent-free rights to Roberts Airfield and Monrovia’s free seaport. While Doe’s coup had been condemned by the international community, interest in Liberia had ebbed, and the Reagan administration garnered almost no criticism for its support of Doe.

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Doe’s Adoration of America and Reagan

Within eight months of taking office, the Reagan administration had solidified Doe’s allegiance and removed any trace of leftist encroachment in Liberia. Reagan, like Carter, continued to save Liberia from economic ruin, but unlike Carter, he actively appeased Doe’s militaristic side. Doe, extremely pleased with Reagan’s policy toward his country, continually sought a meeting with the American president. Eventually a date was set for Doe to visit the United States in November 1981. He was thrilled. In September, however, Ambassador Swing had to inform him that the meeting with President Reagan had been canceled due to the president’s busy schedule; Doe would meet with the Vice President instead. He was crestfallen and said, “I will not go.” Swing reported that “Doe was clearly deeply disappointed and distressed at the news…In my three of four previous meetings with him I have never seen him in such a despondent mood.”

Secretary of State Alexander Haig met with Doe on October 10 1981, as both attended the funeral of Anwar Sadat, the assassinated Egyptian president. Doe took the opportunity to convey his increasing worries about possible attacks on Liberia. Haig noted, “Doe expressed great worry over efforts being engineered against him by Qadhafi and Soviets. He believes these efforts were generated by his pro-US policy and his expulsion of Soviets and Libyans. He expressed his fear that he could be removed within six months unless firm US help is provided.” Haig added, “Doe expressed willingness to contribute to

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any anti-Qadhafi efforts US may mount.” Haig assured Doe of the US commitment to Liberia.

The message was relayed to Reagan, who on November 11, 1981 sent a message to ease Doe’s disappointment in the canceled meeting as well as reconfirming the US commitment to Liberia. Reagan wrote, “I very much regret that I was unable to meet with you in Washington later this month as you requested. I do want you to know, however, how impressed I have been by the steps you have taken to create a more stable Liberia in which all Liberians can contribute their talents to the nation’s advancement… These actions will help achieve your worthy goal of a prosperous, peaceful Liberia in which all Liberians share fully.” He continued, “Finally, let me assure you of our friendship and intention to maintain the traditional close ties between our two nations. We are firmly committed to assist you in bringing about the improvements you seek for the people of Liberia.”

November also saw the forced resignation of Foreign Minister Matthews for making what Doe considered anti-government statements. Matthews had stood out in Doe’s administration. A very intelligent and able minister, he did not share Doe’s political ideology, and Doe had banned his political party, the Progressive Peoples Party. He disagreed with Doe about non-alignment, and he was replaced by Dr. Henry Boima Fahnbulleh Jr. Doe had originally filled his cabinet with people of differing ideologies and

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political parties, but by late 1981 the time had come for everyone to fall in line. Weh-Syen, Matthews, and four other members of the PRC became the example of the consequences of disagreeing with Doe.

As Doe consolidated his power, he became increasingly insistent on visiting President Reagan, whom he called a “father figure.” On March 5, 1982, Paul Bremer, the Executive Secretary of the Department of State, wrote a memo to William Clark, the National Security Advisor, stating Doe’s deep desire to visit the president. It mentioned his dismay at having his previous meeting with Reagan canceled and recommended that it was in the administration’s interest to grant him a short visit. The memo stated the benefits of American friendship with Liberia, the “oldest and closest friend in black Africa, and the only airport in West Africa to which we have unquestioned military access.” The memo also outlined the new “high profile” the United States adopted in Liberia committing $80 million for Liberia for fiscal year 1982. The memo recommended that “A meeting between the President and Doe would highlight our commitment to a close African friend and would allow us to emphasize at a high level our views on a number of pressing bilateral economic and political issues.”

Bremer wrote, “Doe requested a meeting with the President last fall. He was deeply disappointed at our inability to arrange one. This became a serious irritant in our relations and was finally alleviated only when he met with the Secretary of State in Cairo in November.” He continued, “A further rebuff to Doe would certainly do grave damage to our bilateral relations and play into the hands of leftist elements seeking to reduce Western

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influence in Liberia." The administration clearly cared about keeping Doe appeased, a seemingly simple task. Granting Doe a brief visit with the President would keep him satisfied.

Doe’s money woes did not lessen. He continually asked for more aid to meet Liberia’s IMF debts. On May 27, 1982, Reagan authorized $14.9 million of $20 million originally earmarked for Nicaragua reprogrammed to meet Liberia’s financial woes. Nicaragua was a hot spot for the Reagan administration. Funding the contra war was one of its highest priorities. Therefore, reprogramming aid originally designated for Nicaragua to Liberia indicates the importance the administration bestowed on Liberia. Receiving these funds and high-level attention from the United States, Doe began to conjure up grandiose plans for Liberia. Determined to create a new Liberia freed from its Americo-Liberian roots, he decided to build a new capital in the interior of the country. On June 24, 1982, he announced this as the most ambitious project yet undertaken by the PRC. Monrovia was an old city, crowded, vulnerable, and out of touch with Liberia’s heartland. The plan never materialized, but it provided a distraction from ills besetting the country.

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Reagan Meets Chairman “Moe”

To keep him in line at a very low cost, Doe was invited to Washington to meet President Reagan in August 1982. By then, US aid had increased tenfold from its pre-coup levels and, the US embassy in Monrovia reported, it had paid off. “Doe has – released political prisoners – declared a general amnesty – welcomed Liberian self-exiles home – returned confiscated properties of former government figures – brought several ancien regime officials into his government – and successfully met IMF fiscal stabilization targets for seven consecutive quarters, the best record in Africa. Doe has committed the PRC government to a return to civilian rule in 1985 under a new constitution being written at present. Doe has reaffirmed publicly on several occasions his intention to hand over power in 1985.”

This was a very rosy spin on a regime that had arrested and released political prisoners in a revolving door fashion and had made its IMF payments only because the United States had constantly bailed it out.

The National Security Advisor warned Reagan that Doe was likely to ask for more military aid, and he advised the president to respond, “We’ll look into it.” He also thought Reagan should stress “the importance of nation-building activities for the military rather than acquisition of expensive weaponry.”

To further prepare the president and other officials for the visit, a State Briefing Paper was circulated showcasing the benefits of the US-Liberian relationship. “Confidential

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agreements permit uninterrupted military access to Roberts International Airport and the free port of Monrovia. We have used it thrice: during the Angolan civil war in the mid-1970s, the first guerrilla incursion into Zaire’s Shaba Region…and the recent Chad crisis.” Liberian did more than house US installations and intelligence, it was place where the United States had unquestioned access and this meant that, from Liberia, Washington could launch activities (particularly covert activities) that would have been impossible from any other country.

Doe was set to visit the United States from August 14 to 29, 1982. His itinerary included trips to New York, Washington, Ft. Bragg (North Carolina), Los Angeles and Akron, Ohio where he would tour the Firestone headquarters. On August 17, 1982, President Reagan and Samuel Doe met for the first time. President Reagan introduced Doe to the press as “Chairman Moe,” a revealing gaffe. Doe considered Reagan a “father figure,” and Reagan did not even know his name. One reporter joked that Reagan shouldn’t go to the beach with Doe, a reference to the executions after the coup. Doe shook off the insults,

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In my research, I ran across very little about Firestone after the Tolbert administration finished negotiations with the company. That Doe would visit Firestone’s headquarters in Akron indicates that the company retained a large influence but it wouldn’t become part of Liberian headlines until the civil war when the Firestone compound existed almost as an autonomous sovereign nation.

saying, “Our country serves as a mirror through which African nations can assess America’s support and commitment to developing countries.”

Doe took the opportunity to ask Reagan for more funding, just as predicted. He brought three letters for the president, one asking for an agriculture task force; another inviting President Reagan to Liberia, and the last asking the United States to fund a new hydroelectric dam that would cost $650 million. (Another grandiose and distracting plan.) “While Liberia was never a colony of the United States, because of the close historical relationship, it has always looked to America for guidance and economic assistance,” Doe’s letter began. “In fact, because of this relationship, many countries have called Liberia an American colony while many others view her as promoter of the United States interest in international organizations.”

Doe asked the Reagan administration claim a greater stake in helping Liberia, mentioning the average $10 million that the previous government in Liberia had received had been barely enough to meet monthly needs and not enough to make a lasting impact. The current aid plan, which was almost ten times more than Tolbert had received, was still inadequate. Doe then asked the Reagan administration to provide the $632 million needed for his St. Paul Hydroelectric Project. Doe stated, “the United States [has] a moral

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227 Remarks of the President and Head of State Samuel K. Doe of Liberia and Their Meetings, August 17, 1982, the American Presidency Project.
responsibility to Liberia as it has to Israel and other countries." The White House later agreed to establish the task force, declined the invitation, and used diplo-talk to pacify Doe while refusing to fund the hydroelectric project. The rest of the US trip went without a hitch, but Doe was kept from some of the usual stops made by foreign dignitaries, due to fear of backlash by those in the United States critical of the emerging dictator.

After his visit to the United States, Doe stayed true to one of his promises and the new constitution was presented to the PRC at the end of 1982. On March 30, 1983, it was released to the public. This was a big step toward bringing Liberia back to civilian rule, which was the Reagan administration’s major request of Doe. Members of the US congress, who had to approve the administration’s aid request, were required by law to certify that every country receiving US aid had an acceptable record on human rights, and they really cared about the election. It would bring international attention to Doe and his regime; if the Reagan administration wanted to continue to do business in Liberia, it would have to justify the record amounts of aid it was lavishing on the country by showing that there was progress toward civilian rule. The election would provide a showcase for improvement in human rights in Liberia.


However, even as Doe presented the new constitution, he indicated that the election would not be all the Americans hoped it would be. He announced that anyone who worked for the government had to resign by the end of the month (March 1983) if they planned on running for office, otherwise, they would be barred from running in 1985. The announcement frightened some who desired to be involved in the political process. Due to Doe’s increasing paranoia and consolidation of power, some worried an announcement that they intended to run would single them out as being disloyal to Doe. At this time though, Doe had not announced his own intention to run, and some reported Doe had no intention of succeeding himself.234

While Doe was becoming more sure of himself, the truth was that Liberia was not improving. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the Finance Minister under Tolbert who worked in the Doe administration for a time, commented on this in her memoirs. In 1983 she was working for Citibank out of Nairobi, and she would often visit Liberia and see Doe when she did. He would ask random favors from her, including picking up things in the United States for him such as khaki pants and Alka-Seltzer, which Doe described as that medicine “you can pour in a glass that says ‘Voo.’” Johnson Sirleaf described one such meeting in which she said, “General Doe, [he had promoted himself to general by this time] you promised the people so many things, and you are not keeping your promises.” Doe looked at her and replied, “I didn’t promise them shit.”235

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235 Johnson Sirleaf, This Child Will be Great: Memoir of a Remarkable Life by Africa’s First Woman President, p. 117.
On April 30, 1983, the *Washington Post* published an article questioning whether Doe would follow through on his promise to return the government to civilian hands. The journalist, Leon Dash, remarked that the promise to return to the civilian government had been made at the behest of the United States. He was very critical of Doe and of US Ambassador Swing. Doe later complained that the *Post* had insinuated that Ambassador Swing was the “US viceroy who instructs” him. He was enraged and tried to call President Reagan personally to complain about the article. He was not put through to the president, which heightened his anger. He also summoned Swing and in front of the PRC “reprimanded him …for what he called his ‘aggressive’ political activity.” He then called California businessman Robert Moretti to complain about Swing for pushing him “too hard’ to return to civilian rule in 1985. Doe’s connection to Moretti is unsure, but Moretti had been speaker of the California assembly when Reagan had been governor. Doe also talked with Moretti about whether the United States would object if he ran president in 1985. Moretti couldn’t answer him.

On July 23, Doe announced an official date for elections and the return of the government to civilian rule. The election would be on January 20, 1985 and the new president would come into power on April 12, 1985, the fifth anniversary of his coup. He also tried to curry favor with the Reagan administration by offering to send Liberian troops in

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August 1983 to combat Libyan aggression against Chad. Reagan thanked him for his offer, but gently rejected it.240

In September, the Reagan administration issued a National Security Decision memorandum on “US Strategy Toward Liberia.” It stressed the “special relationship” between the United States and Liberia and asserted that the United States had special responsibility for Liberia. The country did not have a European power to fall back on like the other nations of Africa. Liberia could become a major embarrassment for the United States if it suffered “political or economic disintegration.” Therefore, the memorandum recommended that the United States continue to support Liberia to the sum of approximately $75 million a year.241 The White House was wary of Doe’s potential to embarrass the United States, but still hoping that everything would work out if the United States kept sending aid to Monrovia.

The end of 1983 brought about a significant event within the PRC that would have major repercussions years later. Thomas Quiwonkpa, a member of the PRC and major actor in the 1980 coup, fled Liberia for the United States. Quiwonkpa had long had differences with Doe and had dared to recommend that he not run for president in 1985.242 Doe, who feared a coup, had demoted Quiwonkpa.243 Quiwonkpa, well aware of Doe’s paranoia and its possible consequences, fled with several of his supporters. Doe then announced that he

243 Johnson Sirleaf, This Child Will be Great: Memoir of a Remarkable Life by Africa’s First Woman President, p. 119.
had evidence Quiwonkpa had been planning a coup against him with the help of foreigners. He expelled the Soviet ambassador and the Ghanaian chargé. Two years later, Quiwonkpa would return to Liberia and launch a coup attempt that was almost successful. Two of his supporters, Prince Johnson and Charles Taylor would play a role in the assassination of Doe and the civil war in 1990.

Doe took his anger at Quiwonkpa out on the people who least deserved it. He initiated what became known as the “Nimba Raid.” Special soldiers who belonged to Doe’s specific Krahn ethnic group stormed into Nimba County, Quiwonkpa’s home. The soldiers unleashed hell upon the people, looting and pillaging, and killing soon after. The Nimba Raid was not covered in major US news outlets, but Liberians became ever more aware of Doe’s brutality.

Doe continued to rule Liberia as he saw fit, and that meant using the Reagan administration’s aid for continued military growth. On December 9, 1983, he sent a letter to Reagan asking for more military aircraft, to be used in natural disasters such as a recent mining landslide as well as to quell potential terrorist treats. Doe wrote, “we are not unmindful that in a world of intrigues, confrontations and the desire by nations for spheres of influence, all states have become vulnerable to sophisticated and other forms of subversion, insurgency, sabotage and terrorism. The situation exists irrespective of the popularity or lack of popularity of the Government in power or the economic and social conditions of the particular country.” Doe continued, “We, therefore, believe that a certain minimum level of national defense, including air and rapid troop deployment capability, is required, regardless

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245 Pham, Liberia: Portrait of a Failed State, p. 84.
of our financial and economic conditions. For the desired economic development may never be forthcoming nor can it be guaranteed if the security and integrity of the state are not protected and preserved.” Doe threatened to postpone elections due to national defense problems, and used not-so-subtle hints to remind the Americans of the usefulness of Roberts Airfield “to accommodate U.S. military aircrafts.”

Doe expressed his frustration with Washington where aid hinged on congressional approval. He wrote, “It appears that our requests to the American Government have often encountered difficulties as a result of what is said to be Congressional constraints or because the United States is going through a period of retrenchment which makes qualifying criteria for such requests highly selective.” Liberia did not receive the aircraft, and the relationship between Doe and the Reagan administration began to change at this point. The administration had managed to get congressional approval for a great amount of funding for Doe, and for the most part, Doe had been willing to listen to advice. But as Doe gained confidence, he began to see the ways he could manipulate the administration, and the White House began to realize what a difficult and uncontrollable ally Doe could be.

Doe’s support in the United States outside of the Reagan administration began to wane. The State Department’s 1984 report to congress on human rights in Liberia showed that not much had improved in the three years Doe had been in power. Abuse by police and soldiers still were rampant, although reduced to some degree. Arbitrary arrest and

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imprisonments were ways of collecting fines, and often people in high authority used them as power plays. There were still many political prisoners in Liberian jails. Some members of Congress began to feel uneasy about the record amounts of aid being sent to Liberia. In this situation, the coming elections and the return to a civilian government became even more important. 1984 and 1985 would be pivotal years for Liberia and the United States. If Doe failed to hold the elections, it became increasingly evident that he could lose his greatest supporter.

In early 1984, the Reagan administration showed Doe just how serious it was about the coming elections. Just before sending a presidential representative to Liberia’s Redemption Day festivities (anniversary of coup), the NSC received news that Doe had postponed the elections for a year to January 1986. At the same time, Doe announced that thirteen men found to be coup conspirators would be executed. This caused consternation in the administration that worried that if these measures were implemented, “[It] will cause us real grief in Congress and jeopardize our rather extensive aid ($75 million in ’84, $91 million asked for in ’85) to Liberia,” an NSC staffer wrote. “They will also cast into real doubt Doe’s intentions of returning to constitutional rule in business and international eyes.”

In protest to Doe’s actions, the Reagan administration refused to send a representative to the Redemption Day celebration. A few days later, Doe pardoned ten of the thirteen slated for execution. The Reagan administration hoped to convince Doe to set the elections for late 1985 and contemplated changing ambassadors as Bill Swing “perhaps has lectured Doe once

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too often.” The NSC noted, “Our long-term problem is that Chairman Doe is a man of limited capabilities but not without pride and a growing imperiousness. Our ability to guide him has dwindled.”

All Eyes Look Toward the Elections

Doe became increasingly agitated with the Reagan administration’s heavier hand. On April 17, 1984, he accused the United States of interfering with Liberia’s elections. He said he was returning the $350,000 the United States had provided to help the transition to civilian rule. He never did. The State Department was also becoming agitated. “Doe has a history of taking ill-timed, emotional actions which he later regrets,” Senior Advisor to the Secretary of State Charles Hill noted. ”The recent series of surprise announcements raises serious questions about our future ability to work successfully with Doe and to encourage a transition to constitutional rule…We plan an internal reassessment of our facilities (for which we now pay no rent) to determine with as much precision as possible their actual value. We will also begin to consider, on a contingency basis only, basic questions on how to protect US interests should Doe make it clear that he will no longer work with US.”

As Doe continued to abuse his position, the weighing of costs and benefits began to become evident. How much trouble was Doe worth?


The Reagan administration decided that it had used too many carrots in the US-Liberian relationship. It was time for sticks. On April 21, 1984, $11 million dollars was withheld from Doe’s aid package. It was necessary to be “explicitly firm with Doe,” the NSC explained. “Doe would completely miss any verbal message delivered in subtleties of diplomatic niceties. Doe has done some outrageous things lately, and we have to put down some strong markers.”

The administration was growing increasingly uneasy about the elections. Many suspected Doe would not abdicate and would himself participate in the race. There were strange occurrences in Liberia. According to the newly drafted constitution, the president had to be 35 years old to assume office. Suddenly, Doe’s previously reported birthday of May 6, 1952 was “officially described as incorrect.” His birth date was “corrected” to be 1950. Doe also began to change his image. He changed his title from General Doe to Dr. Doe (due to his honorary doctorate awarded from the University of Seoul, South Korea). He also began wearing suits instead of his usual military garb.

The new constitution was ratified by national referendum on July 3, 1984. Soon afterwards, Doe announced that the PRC was dissolved, and he formed the Interim National Assembly (INA) that would serve until the new constitutionally elected government was elected. He declared himself president of the INA. He now became President Doe, a title

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he had refused earlier because he had not been elected. Doe also lifted the ban on political activity on July 18, months after it was to have been lifted.

With the signs of problems arising with Doe and Liberia, the Reagan administration sent General Vernon Walters to Liberia. Walters was a standout in the administration. A previous Deputy Director of Central Intelligence, he was a roving ambassador who knew how to deal with difficult issues. (Walters would later be tapped by Reagan as the US Ambassador to the UN.) The fact that the administration sent Walters shows that Liberia was important and a heavy hitter was needed to calm the waters.

Doe used the occasion of meeting Walters to explain why he had to run for president. He claimed his army officers worried about a new civilian president bringing in foreign troops, much like Tolbert had brought Guinean troops to Liberia after the Easter Riots of 1979. Furthermore, Doe alleged, “The officers also expressed apprehensions about the espousal of Socialism and Communism by certain political aspirants and groups in the country. They therefore warned in their request to me that if I fail to heed their entreaty and that of the Chiefs and Elders to stand for election, the people of Liberia will witness in Liberia another coup in broad daylight. Based on this request…I have accepted to stand for the election to the Presidency.”

Doe took the necessary steps to make his candidacy legitimate. He established his own party, the National Democratic Party of Liberia (NDPL), and placed himself its nominee.

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Other Liberians also began to announce their intentions to run. Among the contenders were Amos Sawyer, the mastermind behind the new constitution, and Baccus Matthews, the former Foreign Minister whose political party had been popular before the coup. Doe was becoming increasingly unpopular, and it was unlikely that he would beat either of these people in a free election. He proceeded to make the election process as difficult as possible for the candidates. First, registrations for new political parties became bogged down in fees and impossible tests. Doe also passed Decree 88A, which made spreading “rumors, lies and disinformation,” about the government a crime punishable by ten years in prison. This meant that it was almost impossible, and certainly dangerous, to campaign against him. He also established a Special Elections Commission and filled it with his own cronies.

Amos Sawyer’s prominence continued to threaten Doe. As a dean of the University of Liberia, Sawyer criticized Doe and called on him to resign. On August 13, 1984, he established the Liberia People’s Party (LPP). Six days later he was arrested and accused of having “spearheaded a coup.” Doe claimed: “After forcing my resignation, overthrowing the government…Dr. Sawyer and his supporters had planned to install a socialist republic in Liberia with the help of foreign countries.” He continued, “I feel personally disappointed

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260 Johnson Sirleaf, This Child Will be Great: Memoir of a Remarkable Life by Africa’s First Woman President, p. 120.
and surprised at the involvement of Dr. Amos Sawyer, a personal friend of mine who seems such an innocent professor.”

Sawyer’s imprisonment caused more problems for Doe. Students and faculty from the University of Liberia demanded his release. When students gathered to demonstrate against his arrest, soldiers responded with violence. The soldiers took the campus by storm, looted and ransacked offices and in a display of power and brutality, students were beaten, raped, some even shot and killed. Doe closed the University for three months, and downplayed the incident saying that the soldiers had merely shot warnings into the air and a few students had unfortunately been hit by stray bullets. He also stated that the Health Ministry had not received any reports of deaths. However, the New York Times reported that 50 students had been killed and more than 400 were wounded. A US national, Rev. Thomas Hayden, testified in congress a year later that the students were “violently beaten, flogged, raped, shot, and killed.” Students also began to question “whether the United States was interested in all of the people of Liberia or merely in maintaining a military leader in power so that the interest of the United States might be maintained.”

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262 Johnson Sirleaf, *This Child Will be Great: Memoir of a Remarkable Life by Africa’s First Woman President*, p. 126.
Doe tried to downplay the carnage, but the incident aroused international attention and many nations expressed displeasure. France, West Germany, Britain and the United States all had nationals who taught there.\textsuperscript{267} The Liberian Minister of Justice admitted that, “Individuals were disrobed. There were some rapes. There were some floggings with whips.” However, he explained, “The road to democracy is a rocky road.” Liberia could not have democracy, he added, “if the people are not prepared to be civil.”\textsuperscript{268} Doe was becoming the embarrassment the Reagan administration had feared he might become. The violence at the university showed the world his brutality. The cost of continuing to support him had just risen exponentially.

Sawyer spent ten months in prison and was barred from participating in the election. He would live to play a major role in the rebuilding of Liberia. In his book, \textit{The Emergence of Autocracy}, he expressed his opinion of the Doe regime:

No sector of Liberian society escaped military repression. Upon seizing power, the military banned student’s campus political organizations, closed newspapers, imprisoned editors, and looted business houses. People of the interior did not escape military terror as individual members of the military junta imposed their personal control over villages and districts, sometimes instigating communal conflicts among ethnic groups or lineage segments. The only consistency about military rule in Liberia was the repression rained upon the people and the looting of the society.\textsuperscript{269}

\textsuperscript{269} Amos Sawyer, \textit{The Emergence of Autocracy in Liberia}, (San Francisco: Institute for Contemporary Studies, 1992), p. 294; Schwab, \textit{Africa: A Continent Self-Destructs}, p. 43.
1985 was the year that many Liberians had been looking forward to for a lifetime. A free election was scheduled for the end of the year, and hope abounded as, for the first time, Liberians would be able to elect a person to represent them. Many still believed democracy could be achieved. Doe’s consolidation of power, however, had been none too subtle. Six of the original seventeen PRC members had been executed, one had died in a car accident, and one had fled the country. Doe had estranged many of the politicians who had originally supported him, most notably Baccus Matthews, his first Foreign Minister, Henry Fahnbulleh, Foreign Minister who replaced Matthews, and Togba Nah Tipoteh, former Minister of the Economy.\textsuperscript{270} By February 1985 only one party had been allowed to register as a legitimate political party: Doe’s NLDC. Eventually the Liberian Action Party (LAP) was allowed to register along with two other weaker parties.\textsuperscript{271}

**Abuse Precedes Elections**

Violence became endemic. On April 1, 1985 several coup leaders located Doe, and opened fire. Both Doe’s bodyguards were wounded, but the president himself escaped. Two days later, Lieutenant Colonel Moses Flanzamaton was arrested and charged with being the ringleader of the coup attempt. Flanzamation confessed but claimed he had been promised $1 million dollars by Doe’s opponents to finish him off. Flanzamation also implicated Baccus Matthews as one of the co-conspirators. Matthews was arrested, but later freed as

\textsuperscript{270} Pham, *Liberia: Portrait of a Failed State*, p. 83.
there was no firm evidence against him, yet his political party was not allowed to register to participate in the upcoming election.\footnote{Legum, “Liberia: Return to Civilian Rule Stained by Election Fraud Allegations,” \textit{Africa Contemporary Record, [Volume 18]}, 1985-1986, pp. B77-78.}

The Flanzamation incident becomes even more intriguing due to the possible CIA connections. Flanzamation reported to his captors that his promised $1 million was to be funneled through the US advisor to the Special Security Service at Doe’s Executive Mansion.\footnote{Legum, “Liberia: Return to Civilian Rule Stained by Election Fraud Allegations,” \textit{Africa Contemporary Record, [Volume 18]}, 1985-1986, p. B78.} According to investigative reporter Bob Woodward, Flanzamation was on the CIA payroll. After the failed coup, he confessed to his CIA ties and implicated the CIA in the plan to kill Doe. According to Woodward, in the week after the attempt it was “white knuckles” at Langley, fearing blowback.\footnote{Bob Woodward, \textit{Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA}, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), p. 311.} Moses Flanzamation was executed a week later and all his secrets died with him. His connection with the United States is not proven, as his confession may have been forced. Possibly no CIA connection existed. Nevertheless, it is interesting to speculate. Doe had become increasingly unpopular at home and abroad, and his human rights abuses had become more blatant. Perhaps the Reagan administration, or at least Bill Casey (Director of Central Intelligence), had decided that it would be easier to manage Liberia without Doe. The CIA might have found Roberts Airfield very handy, and it is logical to think that the Agency preferred a friendly face in the Executive Mansion, one that wouldn’t be a growing problem for the administration. Adding to the rumors and mystery, on April 4 an American man, William Woodhouse, was arrested for plotting to overthrow the government.\footnote{“Liberians Said to Jail American as Conspirator,” \textit{New York Times}, April 5, 1985.}
More problems about the upcoming election began to emerge. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf found great hope at the idea of elections. Many of her supporters encouraged her to be part of the political process. She decided to join the Liberian Action Party (LAP), the largest and strongest of the parties opposing Doe. Jackson Doe (no relation to Samuel) would run on the ticket as president, and she as vice president. Johnson Sirleaf was still employed by Citibank at the time and had developed an impressive reputation. She was invited to speak in Philadelphia on Liberian Independence Day, July 26, 1985, to the Union of Liberian Associations in the Americas. During this speech, she described the serious problems facing Liberia and Doe’s ineptitude to solve them. In the course of the speech, she called Doe and his associates “idiots.” Doe was furious. He summoned her to the Executive Manson the next time she stopped in Monrovia and yelled, “Oh! So you are saying we don’t know book!...We just know guns! That’s what you are saying?...Oh, you think we are idiots?” Doe placed her under house arrest and she soon found herself being moved between some of Liberia’s worst prisons. Johnson Sirleaf, though a civilian, was tried before a secret military tribunal and sentenced to ten years in prison for violation of Decree 88A.

This galvanized the US Congress, which held Johnson Sirleaf in high regard. It passed a nonbinding resolution that all US assistance to Liberia cease if she was not released. On September 18, 1985, the House Subcommittee on Africa held a hearing about the upcoming Liberian election. The committee members were very critical of Doe.

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276 Johnson Sirleaf, *This Child Will be Great: Memoir of a Remarkable Life by Africa’s First Woman President*, pp. 120-125.
Ranking minority member Mark D. Siljander (R-MI) opined that Doe was not going to allow free elections. “History will remember him [Doe] as just another African dictator that delayed the course of democracy in Liberia. I would have preferred Doe to have been seen as a great democrat, a lover of the principle of democratic rule on a totalitarian continent.” Howard Walker, the State Department’s Director of the Office of West African Affairs testified. He was bombarded with questions about the arrest of Johnson Sirleaf and the overwhelming evidence that the elections would be fixed and fraudulent. In response to the questions about Doe banning certain parties and candidates, Walker said, “As it stands, the facts are that three opposition parties are participating—rather a large number in counties like Liberia.” Walker tried to express some optimism about what elections would mean in Liberia. The committee was not amused or placated. Some members expressed their anger at the Reagan administration’s support of Doe. Howard Wolpe (D-MI) ended the hearing with a stern warning. “The congressional response to the elections that are in process right now is that if they take place without very, very substantial modification, it will be viewed as a total sham and that will cause continuing concern within the Congress.”

The arrest of Johnson Sirleaf had brought international pressure on Doe, and he bowed to it. Johnson Sirleaf was released. However, Doe insisted that she be removed from the ticket and not run for vice president. Nevertheless, she insisted on running for the senate.

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Doe once again called her into his office. He asked her to leave the country and said no more charges would be bought against her if she did. She declined.\textsuperscript{279}

For all of Doe’s anger and power, he had to kowtow. Johnson Sirleaf exposed his weakness: he needed to retain his American funding. Doe’s ability to get the Reagan administration to turn a blind eye had waned as the election loomed. The election mattered to the White House. (Johnson Sirleaf would later pay a high price for her defiance of Doe: she was arrested after the election and endured brutal treatment.) In her memoir, Johnson Sirleaf speculated: “It is probably fair to say that the Reagan administration was not pleased that I had stood in America and insulted Doe so publicly. Having dumped so much money and so much support into his reign, it wanted him to succeed, and his failure to justify that support had not, at this point, caused the administration to give up on him.” Perhaps she was right, or perhaps the Reagan administration had tried — and failed — to back covert moves to eliminate Doe.

\textbf{How to Get Elected to Public Office Without Having the Votes}

On October 12, 1985, the lines at the Liberian polling stations stretched “as far as the eye could see,” despite the hot dry day. The Liberian people longed for democracy, and hundreds of thousands showed up to vote. However, people soon began to report strange activities: some were barred from polling places, marked ballot boxes started disappearing, and children were seen voting at military bases. However, preliminary exit polls showed Jackson Doe’s LAP with a comfortable lead of over 70\% of the vote. The winds of change

\textsuperscript{279} Johnson Sirleaf, \textit{This Child Will be Great: Memoir of a Remarkable Life by Africa’s First Woman President}, pp. 126-134.
seemed to be blowing in Liberia. President Doe, however, had no plans to give up his position. The election results would not be official for several weeks as the president’s personally appointed Special Elections Commission tallied the results. Those weeks showed the futility of the election. People took pictures of ballots burning outside the city. President Doe cracked down on dissidents, promising lashings and prosecutions for anyone publicly criticizing him or challenging the committee’s review process. The results were hardly surprising. Samuel Doe declared victory with 50.9% of the vote. Johnson Sirleaf later wrote, “General Doe controlled the electoral commission and the army too. He claimed the election, named himself president, and declared the matter settled.” Liberia’s great promise and opportunity had gone up in flames like the burnt ballots.\(^{280}\)

**Election Aftermath**

On the morning of November 12, 1985, Thomas Quiwonkpa crossed into Liberia from Sierra Leone with a group of heavily armed men. Gunfire broke out in Monrovia. Quiwonkpa gained control of the national radio and called on Liberians to rise up and join “in the liberation of our people from fear, brutality and bloody tyranny.”\(^{281}\) Many rejoiced in the streets, but their celebrations were premature. Later in the afternoon Doe came on the radio saying, “I take this opportunity to inform the nation that the coup had failed. I am still the commander in chief of the armed forces of Liberia and head of state.”\(^ {282}\) Quiwonkpa was


\(^{282}\) Johnson Sirleaf, *This Child Will be Great: Memoir of a Remarkable Life by Africa’s First Woman President*, pp. 139-140.
executed (or perhaps committed suicide). His corpse was put on public display, and once again Doe took out his rage out on Quiwonkpa’s ethnic group; approximately 3000 Liberians from Nimba County were murdered. Johnson Sirleaf, though having no connection to the coup attempt, was imprisoned again.

The election would also have far reaching repercussions for Liberia’s relationship with the United States. Initially, the Reagan administration had encouraged Liberians to accept the election results, but US public opinion sharply objected to Doe’s continuing rule in Liberia. The administration’s enormous aid package came under fire. A New York Times editorial ran saying, “General Doe is neither Liberia’s first autocrat, nor Africa’s worst. But he holds one distinction that is becoming a distinct embarrassment to the United States…His regime receives more American aid than any other country in black Africa.” The editorial finished: “Congress has stipulated that this aid should be suspended if the State Department determines that the elections were not free and fair. They were not. General Doe rules by force and fraud. He should no longer be permitted to do so with the support of the American taxpayer.” Howard Wolpe of the House Subcommittee on Africa said, “For the U.S. to be closely identified with the Doe regime would be foolish.”

Members of the Senate Subcommittee on Africa called for the suspension or reduction of US aid. They held hearings on December 10 to grill the administration about

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284 Johnson Sirleaf, This Child Will be Great: Memoir of a Remarkable Life by Africa’s First Woman President, pp. 151-152.
285 Johnson Sirleaf, This Child Will be Great: Memoir of a Remarkable Life by Africa’s First Woman President, p. 137.
the $500 million it had sent Liberia from 1981-1985. Chester Crocker, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, pointed out some positive aspects of the election: Doe had allowed four political parties to participate, and numerous newspapers, that were not state owned, covered the election; this was a great feat for an African nation. The election, he said “established a beginning, however imperfect, that Liberia and its friends would use as a benchmark for the future.” Crocker mentioned that the opposition had disputed the results, but Doe “called on all citizens for national reconciliation…[and] the prospects for national reconciliation were brightened by Doe’s claim that he won only a narrow 51 percent election victory,” which, Crocker pointed out, was once again unheard of in Africa.

Crocker downplayed the violence after the coup and told the senators “We must try to help Liberia get back on the track of political stability that is so essential for economic growth, the path of national reconciliation, or democratic practices and respect for human rights.” The sad fact of this comment is it could have been made five years and half a billion dollars earlier.

Crocker was more than willing to admit the election was not completely fair: “The outcome obviously fell short of expectations, but we feel that there is something of a double standard being applied if we single out Liberia for a sort of special review and a special standard at a time when, looking across Africa, there are not too many other democratic experiments being tried.” Senator John Kerry (D-MA) lashed out “I think, tragically, once again we are seeing democracy trampled underfoot in yet another part of the world in which we are paying exorbitant amounts of money for what we are getting…I think it is time that the United Sates stop playing Uncle Sucker to this dictator, and I think it is time for the
Africa Bureau to start getting serious about supporting the democratic forces.” Kerry uprooted Crocker’s defense of the election saying, “You can have an election in which everybody votes, they walk in and they cast their ballot, but if you don’t know that people who counted were actually counting what was put on the ballot, it is not an election, is it?” Kerry and Crocker continued to go the rounds. He also questioned the second arrest of Johnson Sirleaf and Doe’s restrictions on international journalists.

Crocker insisted the United States needed to support Liberia. In closing, he gave some indication he understood Kerry’s frustrations. “I do not think that just the inauguration of Samuel Doe as head of state assures us of the beginning of either short-term or long-term change that I think is essential, and I think it is very important for us to be able to use as leverage that assistance which is very important to Liberia and to us as well.” The Senate voted to cut the aid to Liberia, and in January 1986, the House followed suit.

To try to convince the American public of the necessity of supporting Liberia, Crocker wrote a letter to the New York Times on February 3, 1986. He stated that Liberia should be judged on a different spectrum: “Are we comparing Liberia with New England or the bulk of the rest of the world?” Doe had fulfilled his promise to return the government to civilian rule. While problems remained, the administration was working with Doe. “To withdraw support for Liberia’s economic development, as you [the editors of the New York Times] urge, would sacrifice the tentative steps taken toward representative government in Liberia, penalize the Liberian people economically, undercut our significant national interest

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there and reduce our own influence. It could also provoke much more of the brutality you decry.”

Doe remained valuable to the Reagan administration. The US Rapid Deployment Force used its free rights to Liberian air and sea space to harass Qadhafi in Libya. The CIA used Roberts Airfield to ship arms to Savimbi’s UNITA forces in Angola. It was all a question of priorities.

Doe’s fall from grace came due to his own actions as a man hungry for power. He wanted to run Liberia as he saw fit. Carter began funding him, but Reagan kicked the funding into overdrive with no real oversight. Doe’s rule would lead to total destruction and civil war for Liberia. He was able to become as powerful as he did because of the funding of his regime by the United States government. In terms of costs and benefits, it made sense for the United States to fund Doe. It was relatively inexpensive, and it paid handsome rewards. Unrestricted, and free, access to Liberian ports and airfields was a boon for the Reagan administration’s covert activities, as were the communications facilities based in Liberia. Doe was a cheap date. Until the elections drew international attention to the small country, most Americans were unaware of it. The US congress, however, began to raise questions. It could not see why the United States should appropriate funds for him. With the fraudulent elections, Doe became an embarrassment, and Congress curbed aid to Liberia. However, the United States had gotten what it wanted and it had expended little capital. The sad truth is that the same cannot be said for Liberia. The country was destroyed, and Doe’s close relationship to the United States must bear some responsibility.

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290 Pham, Liberia: Portrait of a Failed State, p. 88.
An overview of this period shows the workings of the “special relationship” in regards to Cold War politics. As Reagan came into power, the administration saw a use for Doe’s Liberia. The key was to keep him happy. In a relatively short time, and with relatively little aid and military assistance Reagan convinced Doe to remove all leftist influence in Liberia and he gained the favor of Doe. Doe may have truly believed he had a connection or “special relationship” with Reagan. This is evident in his disappointment when his invitation to see Reagan was revoked, and in his feeling he could have a direct connection to the White House. He grew bolder as he began to realize that the United States needed to back him to keep their interests in Liberia, which helped Washington fight the cold war. As Doe became more doctorial, the Reagan administration sent more aid. Liberia received its largest aid package ever in 1985. It was Congress that ended the joyride.
Conclusion:
Foreign Policy in the Eyes of the Beholder

Liberia fell into civil war in December 1989 as opposition forces invaded from neighboring Ivory Coast. The violence was horrendous; both sides targeted civilians. Eventually Charles Taylor’s National Patriotic Front of Liberia advanced upon Monrovia, destroying the city and surrounding areas without mercy. Doe, abandoned by the United States, was captured and taken to one of the leaders of the rebellion, Prince Johnson (who was a follower and close companion of Thomas Quiwonkpa). Then began hours of bloodlust. As soldiers danced and celebrated, Prince Johnson looked calmly from behind a desk, casually drinking a Budweiser. Doe screamed and struggled as his ears were cut from his head. Soldiers rejoiced at his pain and posed for pictures with the blood-drenched dictator. Finally, after twenty-four hours of torture, Johnson took a knife, stabbed him, and ended Samuel Doe’s life on September 9, 1990.

Civil war continued to rage until 2003. Charles Taylor consolidated power and wrought terror as Liberia sank into total anarchy. Taylor next spread the war into neighboring Sierra Leone. He is currently on trial at the International Criminal Court. He is accused of war crimes for his involvement in the Sierra Leone civil war, and for selling weapons in exchange for blood diamonds. Liberia is still trying to rebuild. This is the sad state of what was widely considered the closest and most pro-western nation in Africa.

291 Dunn, Liberia and the United States During the Cold War: Limits of Reciprocity, p. 174.
292 Multiple videos of Doe’s torture can be found on youtube.com.
293 Hyman, United States Policy Toward Liberia 1822 to 2003, p. 34; Schwab, Africa: A Continent Self-Destructs, p. 44.
After I completed my volunteer service and returned to Idaho, this was the Liberia I knew. Having spent so much time researching the subject, I now feel I know a different Liberia. I still have several questions and, given the sources, I cannot definitively say I have answered my original questions: How did Liberia, America’s friend in Africa, descend into such chaos? Why did the Carter administration support Samuel Doe, and why did the Reagan administration lavish so much aid on this incompetent dictator who led his country into a horrific civil war? I understand that the Carter administration increased aid to keep Doe stable and keep Liberia from defaulting. However, the great jump of aid from the Tolbert years, averaging $10 million annually, to the almost half billion sent from 1980-1985 raises many questions. The Reagan administration would not have sent the aid unless it was receiving something in return. The available sources and logic indicate that it must have been a center for covert operations, but the details are still classified, and probably will remain hidden.

My thesis has helped me understand the “special relationship” Liberia had with the Untied States. It was indeed special, but it was also politics as usual: the governments of both countries tried to use it to their advantage. Moreover, it did not have substance until the Cold War because it was only then that Liberia could offer the US government something it wanted: unfettered access to well situated facilities. America’s interest in Liberia began with the wave of decolonization and accelerated with the fall of Haile Selassie in Ethiopia in 1974.

Tolbert understood this and frequently referred to the special relationship when trying to maintain the pipeline to US aid, while simultaneously trying to establish a more independent regime. This was a difficult task. Tolbert succeeded in maintaining US aid; he
succeeded in raising his – and Liberia’s – profile in Africa; but he lost the support of his people. Doe likewise tried to take advantage of his “special” position. He pushed the limits of US forbearance, and yet he still received record amounts of aid.

One could use the analogy of a poker game to describe the relationship. The “special relationship” allowed Tolbert and Doe to play the game. Tolbert and Doe eventually saw the United States’ and played against it. However, this is not to say the United States held the weaker hand.

US aid to Liberia made sense. A case can be made that US policy toward Liberia was a great success -- for the United States. The United States received what it wanted from Liberia and spent very little capital. Liberia was cheap compared to the billions sent to countries like Israel and Egypt. The United States paid no rent for its numerous facilities, and in the case of the Nixon, Ford, and Carter administrations, it gained a friendly advocate in Africa; that alone was valuable. In an increasingly unfriendly Cold War Africa, Tolbert’s support was useful. Doe’s friendship was more costly, but supporting him was cost effective during Reagan’s first term. He became an embarrassment after the 1985 elections, but a very minor one since Liberia was rarely covered in the media. Thus, from the standpoint of US self-interest, its relations with Liberia during the period covered by this thesis were a success.

However, the period covered by this thesis also covers the narrative of how Liberia began to slip into civil war. How can one consider a foreign policy successful if the outcome is the destruction of the country? The cornerstone of Liberia’s foreign policy was its relationship with the United States. Even Liberia’s domestic policy revolved around the money given by the United States. The United States lost nothing and Liberia lost
everything. The case then can be made, from the Liberian point of view, that the relationship with the United States was a great failure. The support given by the United States allowed Doe to stay in power, and Doe’s reign led to the civil war.

It would be irresponsible to suggest that Liberia was just acted on and Liberians bear no blame for the destruction of the country. Tolbert neglected the needs of his people to the point where Doe was championed a hero after he killed him. The United States did not place Doe in power; he enacted the coup on his own. Liberians cheered as Doe lined up and killed thirteen men on the beach. Doe could have returned his country to civilian rule; the United States did not push him to remain in power. Liberia was a client state, but clients have a funny way of pursuing their own agendas. However, American money did sweeten the pot.

It is possible that Doe would not have stayed in power as long as he did had the United States not supported him, but was it the responsibility of the United States to topple him? What would have happened to Liberia if the Carter administration had refused to support Doe after the coup? Did US policy just postpone civil war? Ultimately, Liberians bear the responsibility for the destruction of the country, but are the hands of the United States clean?

Carter’s Secretary of State, Cyrus Vance, titled his memoirs _Hard Choices_. This thesis indicates that the makers of foreign policy do indeed face hard choices, but so, too, do historians, who try to assess these choices. Not one of the Americans making choices about US policy toward Liberia knew that thousands of lives would be lost in that tragic country. It is sobering to think how long lasting can be the consequences of simple policy decisions. This study describes an example of how reasonable choices can render unwanted results. In
evaluating these choices, should the historian focus on the reasonable choices or on the unwanted results?

The United States should have supported Tolbert in developing and growing Liberia’s infrastructure; perhaps doing so would have prevented the coup. After the coup, the Carter administration made the right choice in supporting Doe, restoring some sense of order and preventing complete chaos. The Reagan administration’s choice to increase aid to Liberia greatly hurt the country, but the full story of funding is unknown. With the increased aid, the United States should have had greater oversight and held Doe accountable for his actions. However, all this can only be written with hindsight.

Writing this thesis has helped me understand the choices that the Ford, Carter, and Reagan administrations made in developing US policy toward Liberia. This thesis has not provided definitive answers to what happened in Liberia under Reagan because many of the sources remain classified, but it has shown that Liberia deserves more attention in Cold War history. Liberia was more than just a client state dependent on the United States. After the fall of Ethiopia, it became the only country in Africa that offered Washington unquestioned access. Liberia was an anomaly, but policy toward Liberia was not. Cold War politics trumped the “special relationship.” US policy was based on what the United States received from Liberia, not on a sentimental historical connection to the country. However, seeing that US policy was not reckless but in fact “successful” in narrow US terms has made the story of Liberia seem even more sad and tragic.

It has been almost ten years since I left Philadelphia. In that time, I have lost contact with my Liberian friends. Liberia has also greatly changed. Progress is slow for the country,
but steps toward rebuilding are being taken. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf just won re-election in the country with 90% of the final runoff election vote. She also was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Liberians want peace, and they are taking steps to bring hope to their country again. I wonder what my Liberian friends would think about my work. I remember my friends taking immense pride in their country and showing great appreciation to anyone who took an interest in it. I hope my work would make them proud as I, a US citizen, have tried to show how their great tragedy is part of America’s history as well.
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