

@CHAPTER = LIBERIA

In 1847, Liberia declared itself an independent state. Founded by freed American slaves, Liberia was the brainchild of the American Colonization Society, some of whose members were looking for a solution to the "problem" of having large numbers of free black people in the United States. Since then, Liberia has had a "special relationship" with the United States, with many Liberians looking to the U.S. for their political and educational systems and for many of their cultural values. In 1980, a military coup overthrew the government of William Tolbert, ending the hegemony of power held for 133 years by descendants of the "settlers" and those who had adopted "settler" values and mores. The initially popular coup makers soon displayed many of the same qualities as the government they had overthrown. Violence, which attended the coup, became a prominent feature of Liberian political life.

During its eight years, the Reagan administration missed many opportunities to promote human rights in Liberia. In 1987, during a whirlwind visit to Africa, then Secretary of State George Shultz visited Liberia and credited the government with "progress in human rights," adding that the 1985 elections had been "quite open." The Secretary's comments shocked Liberians, as they appeared to reflect willful ignorance about past and ongoing abuses by the regime of President Samuel Kanyon Doe, the former sergeant and member of the People's Redemption Council, which shot its way to power in 1980. Then Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Chester Crocker echoed these sentiments in a 1987 letter to Human Rights Watch, in which he stated:

@QUOTENOIND = We believe there has been movement in a positive direction. If you take a moving picture, it shows a trend which we think is a good one. If you take a snapshot, then in that snapshot you can see problems. Problems are not absent, but the situation has improved.

@NOIND = Both statements reflected a close identification with the Doe regime, and a desire to obfuscate ongoing abuses as well as the fraud and strong-arm measures used by Doe to ensure his victory in elections staged in 1985.

Despite the Reagan administration's stance, Congressional pressure during the final Reagan years yielded a drastic decline in U.S. aid to Liberia. From 1980 to 1985, the U.S. poured \$500 million into Liberia, contrasted with the fiscal year 1989 figures of \$9.28 million in development assistance, \$11 million in Economic Support Funds and \$7.1 million in rice shipments under the P.L. 480 program. Another \$500,000 was spent in fiscal year 1989 under the International Military Education Training program. The decline in assistance was due to growing Congressional concern about human rights abuses as well as increasing awareness of rampant corruption under the Doe regime. Another important factor was the failure of the OPEX (operational expert) experiment: one year into a two-year contract, the 17-member economic management team, sent by the U.S. Agency for International Development to address concerns about the diversion of U.S. assistance, was withdrawn because of the Liberian government's refusal to extend adequate cooperation to the team in curbing extra-budgetary expenditures.

In our 1988 report, we urged the incoming Bush administration to reverse the discredited policy of quiet diplomacy by publicly speaking out against abuses and by using available U.S. leverage to press for a halt to abusive practices. One year later, the Bush administration has done little to break with Reagan policy toward Liberia. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Herman Cohen visited Liberia in October 1989 and reportedly said that he was looking forward to the next elections, which he hoped would be a model for the rest of Africa in its demonstration of true democracy on the African continent. The statement amounted to little more than wishful musing in light of Cohen's

failure to call for the release of political prisoners and freedom of the press and association -- all key elements of meaningful elections.

By contrast, both Houses of the U.S. Congress declared the 1985 elections fraudulent. And the harassment and intimidation of candidates and opposition members during the year-long campaign has been amply documented, including the jailing of opposition figures Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf and Amos Sawyer for extended periods without charge, the banning of the United People's Party and the Liberian People's Party, and the jailing and flogging of journalists.

Doe's continued suppression of independent political activities throughout 1988 and 1989 bode poorly for meaningful elections in 1991. The continuing imprisonment for treason of Gabriel Kpolleh and Caephar Mabande, both leaders of a banned political party, is an example of Doe's efforts to crush all opposition and to impose a de facto one-party state. In March 1988, thirteen persons were arrested in connection with another alleged coup plot. Shortly after his arrest, Joseph Kaipaye, one of the alleged co-conspirators, died under mysterious circumstances, reportedly by being thrown off the balcony of the Executive Mansion. And in October 1989, two arrested for yet another alleged coup attempt died in custody. The government attributed their deaths to natural causes, but held no inquest to substantiate this claim.<\$FDoe has frequently charged opponents with treason and often has had them executed after summary trials. In August 1981, Major General Thomas Weh Syen and four other members of the People's Redemption Council were executed after secret military trials for plotting to assassinate Doe. In November 1983, a general and four enlisted men were executed in connection with another alleged coup plot, purportedly led by Gen. Qwiwonkpa, then Commander of the Armed Forces. Qwiwonkpa fled the country, in fear for his life, but the charges were never substantiated. Alleged coup plots have continued to be uncovered by Doe and his security forces, but reliable sources suggest that Doe often concocts these plots as a pretext for eliminating or intimidating political opponents.>

The government also continued to crack down on the press, revoking in June the license of Radio ELCM, the Catholic station, for a story on several people who were crushed to death at a football stadium. The Ministry of Information revoked the license without an administrative hearing as required by the Ministry's guidelines.

Congress has continued to pay close attention to the human rights situation in Liberia. The foreign aid bill, which passed the House, requires the Liberian government to take "significant steps to increase respect for internationally recognized human rights, including the removal of all restrictions on the right of political parties to operate freely; the lifting of restrictions on freedom of the press; and the restoration of an independent judiciary."

In May 1989, Rep. Mervyn M. Dymally, chairman of the House Subcommittee on International Operations, paid a fact-finding visit to Liberia. While there, he spoke at a "Rule of Law" forum sponsored by the U.S. National Democratic Institute for International Affairs. In his remarks, which he repeated in meetings with Doe and high-level officials, Congressman Dymally stressed the link between respect for human rights and U.S. assistance. He spoke of Congressional interest in reforms to promote freedom of speech and press, multiple political parties and the rule of law. During his visit, the Congressman also visited Gabriel Kpolleh and Caephar Mabande in prison and expressed his concern about the conditions under which they were being held.

Such Congressional activism contrasted sharply with the Bush administration's quiet diplomacy. The U.S. ambassador to Liberia, James Bishop, issued several strongly worded public statements, but these have usually addressed fiscal issues, missing several opportunities to raise human rights concerns. There was

no public condemnation, for example, of the failure to investigate the October 1989 deaths in custody. The lack of direction on human rights issues was manifested in a conversation that Africa Watch had in November 1989 with the embassy's human rights officer, who declined to say whether the embassy would be calling on the Liberian government to conduct an investigation into the deaths in custody because he did not "know the ground rules."

@PAGE = The Bush administration's unwillingness to engage in forceful public advocacy is unfortunate because U.S. leverage in Liberia is considerable. Despite the decline in assistance since 1985, Liberia remains one of the largest recipients of U.S. aid per capita in sub-Saharan Africa. Moreover, most Liberians are strongly aware of the historical ties between the U.S. and Liberia and look to the United States to act as a moral arbiter -- a standing which makes U.S. silence all the more disappointing.

Like its predecessor, however, the Bush administration continues to permit other considerations to censor its public commentary on rights abuses. Liberia is the only nation in West Africa where the U.S. has landing and refueling rights for military planes on 24-hours' notice. The Voice of America broadcasts to West Africa through its transmitter outside Monrovia, the capital. And much of United States intelligence for West Africa passes through the Monrovia Embassy. We believe that such factors cannot justify funding and silently condoning abuses by the Liberian government.