

US Covert and Overt Operations in Liberia, 1970s to 2003

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Introduction and Background

With support from the US Navy, the American Colonization Society founded Liberia as an American colony in 1822 with the intention of sending rebellious blacks who were formerly slaves “back to Africa.”¹ To reduce the administration cost of the colony and limit the responsibility of the US government (USG), Liberia was granted independence in 1847.² The constitution was written at Harvard University, and the flag adopted was similar to that of the United States but with only one star.³ Although Liberia had all of the outward features of an independent state, the American Colonization Society and the USG de facto governed it indirectly. As former research director and president of the US Foreign Policy Association Raymond Leslie Buell puts it, Liberia survived “through visits of United States warships to Liberian ports and through more urbane gestures, the United States has posted a keep-off-the-grass sign on Liberian soil.”⁴

Liberia became a foothold of the USG in Africa during European colonialism, a place from where it could project its interests into other parts of the continent. In 1926 the Firestone Company established one of the world’s largest rubber plantations in Liberia as a response to the British rubber monopoly.⁵ In the following decades, the USG put in place a number of military facilities such as a deep-sea port, an airport, and numerous military bases and training camps. By the 1970s, Liberia hosted the largest US Embassy in Africa, with more than 250

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American employees; the Voice of America's relay system for Africa; the US diplomatic and intelligence communication relay station; and one of the eight antennas for the OMEGA navigation systems, later replaced by the Global Positioning System.⁶

The Liberian elite, often referred to as Americo-Liberians, have acted with a combination of compliance and resistance to US influence. The most significant era of compliance and alliance with the USG was that of William Tubman's administration from 1944 to 1971. As a result of the Open Door Policy, this period is often referred to as an era of economic growth and prosperity.⁷ However, the policy created wide income gaps between rich and poor, and repressive measures were used to counter any opposition to the Government of Liberia (GoL) through a comprehensive intelligence network connected to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).⁸

When President Tubman died in 1971, his successor, William Tolbert, resumed resistance to US influence in Liberia. Under his leadership, the GoL began to reorient the economic system from liberal capitalism towards state-led, planned economic systems, focusing on food self-sufficiency and industrialization. To gain support for this policy, Tolbert established relations with socialist-oriented countries such as the USSR and the People's Republic of China. More than 30 state-owned enterprises were established, and the GoL began to set restrictions on the use of US military facilities in Liberia.⁹ Concession agreements with foreign companies were renegotiated, creating serious tensions—particularly with Firestone.¹⁰

Furthermore, the GoL advocated for pan-African unity against neocolonialism and promoted the Declaration on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order, adopted by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in 1974.¹¹ Tolbert was directly involved in the formulation of the Monrovia Declaration, adopted by the Organization of African Unity meeting held in Liberia in 1979.¹² This declaration led to the influential Lagos Plan of Action for the Economic Development of Africa, 1980–2000, which states that the exploitation of Africa continued to be “carried out through neo-colonialist external forces which seek to influence the economic policies and directions of the African States.”¹³ This report stands in sharp contrast to the World Bank's Berg Report, published in 1981, which partly marks the beginning of structural adjustments programs in Africa.¹⁴

The CIA reacted to Tolbert's policies by supporting Liberian civil society groups in opposition to the GoL, in particular the Progressive Alliance of Liberians (PAL), headed by Backus Matthews, who was in close contact with the CIA.¹⁵ The PAL often used Marxist rhetoric to denounce the GoL.¹⁶ The most signifi-

cant event took place after the GoL accelerated the national plan for food self-sufficiency by stimulating local rice production through an increased import tax on foreign-produced rice.¹⁷ The PAL claimed that this was a way to boost the profit of rice importers and promote Tolbert's own private rice production. It organized a major demonstration in Monrovia on 14 April 1979, which became violent, with security forces opening fire on the crowds.¹⁸ The GoL saw the incident, which became known as the "Rice Riot," as the work of foreign powers.¹⁹

A confidential White House memorandum issued about six months later noted that the riot in Monrovia had severely damaged the GoL and that it was unlikely Tolbert would "survive until the end of his term in 1983."²⁰ On 12 April 1980, a group of 17 armed men, noncommissioned soldiers in the Armed Forces of Liberia, entered the Executive Mansion shortly before midnight and shot President Tolbert.²¹ One of the soldiers, Albert Toe, recalls that after having killed Tolbert, the coup makers contacted the US Embassy, which endorsed the coup and promised to provide all necessary support.²² That same morning, the leader of the coup, Samuel Doe, announced on national radio that a military coup had taken place and that a military junta under the name of the People's Redemption Council (PRC) had taken power under his leadership.²³

Doe and the US Government: From Friends to Foes

The US Embassy was instrumental in forming the PRC as a military junta immediately after the coup. All civilian communication was shut down in Liberia, and American advisers were assigned to Liberian key ministries.²⁴ US chargé d'affaires Julius Walker states that US Soldiers were deployed in Monrovia and "got looters and shooters off the street." Doe "had not really expected to be where he was." He feared that "forces were coming from all corners to attack him and he wanted America to send him strong support."²⁵

The PRC established a special military tribunal that charged 13 key government officials from the Tolbert administration with high treason, corruption, and misuse of public office and sentenced them to death.²⁶ Their execution by firing squad on the beach was broadcast by international media.²⁷ US ambassador Robert P. Smith notes that everyone knew "that only Frank Tolbert [senator and brother to former president Tolbert], Richard Henries [deposed Speaker of the House of Representatives], James Pierre [deposed chief justice of the Supreme Court] and Reginald Townsend [deposed chairman of the True Whig Party] were to be executed." The PRC "added the nine" other people and "then destroyed the records of the Tribunal."²⁸

According to Smith, the Soviets were “very interested in all this, although they were completely nonplused by the coup.” Doe, however, “knew little and cared less about communism and the Soviet Union.”²⁹ Walker notes that Doe was “exceedingly pro-American . . . because of the training he received earlier [from] the U.S. Army and the people he had known such as Colonel Gosney and his officers.”³⁰ Smith recalls that Doe “adored Colonel Gosney, and . . . referred to him always in the third person as ‘the Chief.’” According to Smith, the presence of the “US military mission that had been there for decades” saved the United States in Liberia. He notes that “he can’t emphasize strongly enough how helpful it was to have this small group of American Army officers, consisting of a group of lieutenant colonels and majors” who were closely related to their counterparts in the Armed Forces of Liberia. Doe could quickly pass the word that “whatever the chief [Gosney] says, goes.”³¹

Furthermore the USG sent three Army mobile training teams to Liberia to train the newly formed 1st Infantry Battalion, the Army Staff, and the Ranger Company.³² For the first anniversary of the PRC, Walker arranged for the arrival of a new Navy ship and “got the Green Berets from Fort Bragg,” who landed in Monrovia by parachute—an act that “made quite an impression.”³³

James Keough Bishop, US ambassador to Liberia (1987–90), indicates that after the coup, the USG regained access to the seaport and airport, allowing the government to “send cargo to other parts of Africa with no questions asked.”³⁴ US aid to Liberia increased significantly from below US \$20 million in 1979 to above US \$120 million in 1982. By the end of 1985, the PRC had received around US \$500 million in foreign aid from America, exceeding aid given to other sub-Saharan countries.³⁵

Herman Cohen, who served as US assistant secretary of state for African affairs from 1989 to 1993, states that the aid was not aimed at benefiting the general population in Liberia but at protecting the interests of the United States because “the Cold War tilted us [the United States] in favour of supporting [Doe], because we got reciprocal treatment. We were supporting certain governments that were clearly not going to use their assistance for development but use it for other reasons, and we supported people like Mobutu in Zaire and a few others.”³⁶ For example, in 1986 America was “sending military equipment to the anticommunist UNITA [National Union for the Total Independence of Angola] rebels in Angola, using Robertsfield in Liberia and Kinshasa Airport in Zaire. . . . This project alone justified good relations with both the Doe and Mobutu regimes.”³⁷

Toe, who became a central member of Doe’s administration, mentions that according to the plan, the PRC should rule the country until 1985, which would provide the time to shift many of the policies of the Tolbert administration, such

as cutting off relations with the USSR and Libya, closing the state-owned enterprises, preparing a new constitution for the Second Republic, and planning for elections in 1985. After the election, members of the military junta, including Doe, were expected to hand over power to a civilian government and return to their barracks. However, Doe ran for election in 1985 and won, which was not part of the plan.³⁸

The USG recognized the election, and in a statement to the US Subcommittee on African Affairs of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Chester A. Crocker, US assistant secretary for African affairs, confirmed that the USG had been “active in each step along the way, encouraging the Liberian authorities to live up to their promise to issue . . . a second Republic of Liberia.”³⁹ However, the relationship between Doe and the USG gradually deteriorated in the latter half of the 1980s. Emmanuel Bowier, former minister of information in the Doe administration, recalls that Doe had gradually changed from being a “country boy” and “puppet of the US” to a resister of US domination.⁴⁰

Tensions between Doe and the USG became evident in early 1987. About two years before Cohen became US assistant secretary of state for African affairs, he went on a trip to Liberia with George Shultz, US secretary of state; Crocker; Peter McPherson, administrator of the US Agency for International Development; and James L. Woods, deputy assistant secretary of defense. During the trip, Cohen was informed that relations between the GoL and USG had become complicated. The USG had great concerns about the GoL’s ability to repay Liberia’s debt, and McPherson had proposed “assigning a team of retired financial experts to work with the Liberians for two years to get their books and procedures in order.” According to Cohen, Doe “did not have a clue about Washington realities.”⁴¹

About three months later, Bishop, the new US ambassador to Liberia, arrived in Monrovia. His directive was to pay special attention to management of the relationship with the GoL so that the USG “could continue to have access to . . . strategic facilities.” Additionally, he was to protect US commercial interests, such as Firestone, American-owned banks, and the Liberian Maritime Registry, and to continue the original strategy of “civilizing” Doe by “providing him financial assistance which would enable his government to organize and manage itself, while instructing Doe in political governance—essentially through ambassadorial tutorial.” It was imperative, however, that Bishop ensure that the USG not become “anathema to a successor government by being perceived as too closely attached to the Doe regime.”⁴²

Shultz and McPherson persuaded Doe to accept a team of 17 American financial experts who were deployed at the control points of the GoL’s financial

system, such as the Ministry of Finance at the Customs and the Budget Office. Among other responsibilities, “they would be required to co-sign all government documents relating to fiscal expenditures.”⁴³ However, many people in the Doe administration saw the deployment of these advisers as blatant neocolonialism.⁴⁴ Some of the experts were threatened, and the US Embassy was concerned about their security.⁴⁵ As tensions between the advisers and the GoL increased, Cohen visited Monrovia again in September 1987, at the request of Ambassador Bishop, to inform Doe about the importance of cooperating with the financial-management team.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, tensions intensified, and Doe made the US financial experts *persona non grata* in Liberia.⁴⁷ According to Bishop, the financial experts were withdrawn, stating “for public consumption” that the program was “terminated by mutual agreement” in 1988.⁴⁸

Around the same time, the GoL had reestablished relations with the USSR and Libya, but those bonds were not strong because Doe had appeared very hostile to both countries in the first half of the 1980s.⁴⁹ Since the GoL had financial constraints, a representative from the Republic of China (RoC/Taiwan) contacted Doe and offered him financial assistance in return for recognition of the RoC. A number of GoL officials saw Taiwan’s move as a US-coordinated effort to isolate Liberia in the UN Security Council (UNSC), where the People’s Republic of China held veto power, and advised Doe not to recognize Taiwan. However, because Doe accepted the offer of the RoC, the People’s Republic of China broke diplomatic relations with the GoL.⁵⁰

When George H. W. Bush came into office in January 1989, Liberia was a cause of concern and the subject of the first interagency Africa Policy Coordinating Committee on 19 May 1989, with Cohen as the new assistant secretary of state for African affairs. The committee meeting was particularly concerned with Doe’s threat to undermine US access to its strategic facilities in Liberia—in particular, Roberts International Airport, which the United States “used for twelve flights per month in support of activities throughout Africa.” It was concluded that “all the facilities were important and virtually irreplaceable.” The United States, therefore, greeted the “arrival of anti-Doe insurgents in Nimba County on 24 December 1989 almost as a relief.”⁵¹ This group of insurgents was the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), led by Charles Taylor.⁵²

Removal of Doe’s Administration

Taylor had been allocated the position as director of the General Services Agency under the PRC but fled to the United States in 1983 after he was accused of embezzling \$900,000.⁵³ There he was arrested at the request of the GoL but

escaped from Plymouth County Correctional Facility in Massachusetts in November 1985. According to Taylor, during the night a prison guard escorted him to a minimum-security area from which he escaped through a window and was taken to New York in what he assumes was a USG vehicle.⁵⁴

Taylor subsequently arrived in Ghana where, according to Arnold Kwenu, a former general in the Armed Forces of Ghana, he was arrested because the Ghanaian authorities suspected him of working for the CIA.⁵⁵ At that time, tensions existed between President Jerry Rawlings of Ghana and the USG, partly because of Rawlings's strong rhetoric about Western neocolonialism in Africa. After diplomatic talks with the Government of Burkina Faso, headed by Thomas Sankara, Taylor was released and travelled to Ivory Coast where he joined the relatively newly formed NPFL.⁵⁶ According to Prince Johnson, a leading member of the NPFL and later head of the Independent NPFL (INPFL), Taylor ascended rapidly through the hierarchy of the NPFL and was introduced to Blaise Compaoré, the deputy head of state of Burkina Faso, and through him to President Sankara.⁵⁷

Sankara introduced Taylor to Col Mu'ammarr Gadhafi, and Libya became the main center for coordination of the NPFL. Recruits for the latter were trained at Wheelus Air Base, a former US military base in Libya.⁵⁸ According to Cyril Allen, who became among the most influential politicians in Taylor's administration from 1997 to 2003, and Daniel Chea, who served as Liberian minister of national defense from 1997 to 2006, the NPFL was in contact with all parties who wished to remove Doe from office. It sought support from multiple sources, including private business people and governments such as those of France and the United Kingdom—but in particular the USG.

The NPFL insurgency took place in December 1989 in close communication with USG advisers, but a split occurred within the NPFL, resulting in formation of the INPFL under the leadership of Johnson.⁵⁹ He maintains that this happened because Taylor had no confidence in many of the NPFL members and began to make covert divisions within that organization. The INPFL rapidly grew to more than 500 soldiers, and on their way to Monrovia, they captured strategic places and towns.⁶⁰

John Richardson, who was considered Taylor's right hand and later served as national security adviser in the GoL, says that the NPFL leadership believed that Johnson's INPFL could be so well equipped militarily and advance so fast only with support from the USG.⁶¹ Until 2006 Johnson denied that the INPFL was supported by the USG, but in private conversations with key members of the dissolved NPFL, he has gradually indicated that he did receive substantial support from the USG.⁶² According to the Liberian newspaper the *Informant*, Johnson

stated for the first time publicly in 2009 that the INPFL received around US \$10 million from a number of powerful states, including America, to finance the war.⁶³

By June 1990, Johnson's well-equipped INPFL controlled a large part of Monrovia, including the Freeport of Monrovia and the US Embassy area. Taylor's NPFL had also advanced and controlled the other side of Monrovia. In between the two forces were those of Doe, which controlled a relatively small area around the Executive Mansion in the center of Monrovia.⁶⁴

The split between the NPFL and INPFL appears to reflect internal disagreements within the USG. Cohen observes that "Doe's departure and Taylor's coming to power were the heart of . . . [the US] policy."⁶⁵ Taylor recalls that there "was full cooperation between me [the NPFL] and Washington and every move we took, we consulted Washington first."⁶⁶

Cohen indicates that the US State Department had proposed that Doe should "resign in favour of Vice-President Harry Moniba, who would appoint Charles Taylor as the new Vice-President and then himself resign. Taylor would become president of Liberia but would have to organize an election in October 1991 pursuant to the Constitution."⁶⁷ The State Department had arranged with the President of Togo that President Doe be granted asylum in Togo. The United States "had an aircraft available in Freetown ready to pick him [Doe] up." Cohen was supposed to go to Monrovia and say to Doe, "Okay, now is the time. Get your family and everyone, and get on the plane; let's go."⁶⁸ The plan changed, though, because the US Department of Defense had overruled the Department of State. According to Cohen, Robert Gates, the deputy national security adviser, shot down elements of Cohen's plans and ordered deployment of the US Marine Amphibious Readiness Group, which arrived offshore of Monrovia in 3–4 June 1990 prepared for deployment in a war zone.⁶⁹

Bishop states that the "the Bush administration pulled us back and told us that they didn't want us to [interfere] . . . because they didn't want to accept any degree of moral responsibility of Charles Taylor becoming the next head of state of Liberia" [*sic*], which Bishop thinks was a mistake. Bishop's mission in Liberia was terminated, and he was appointed US ambassador to Somalia.⁷⁰

Because the GoL was under massive military pressure from the NPFL and the INPFL, the USG played a central role in directing the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to set up an Interim Government of National Unity (IGNU) for Liberia in Sierra Leone, headed by Amos Sawyer. Furthermore, a regional intervention force, known as the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), was established to support installation of the interim government.⁷¹

Cohen believes that the US State Department saw ECOMOG as the “only hope for ending Liberia’s downward slide into anarchy.” ECOMOG’s plan was “well conceived and had the extra merit of involving Africans working to solve an African problem.”⁷² Kwenu, the appointed force commander of ECOMOG, recalls that behind closed doors, the USG ensured full support of ECOMOG but emphasized that it had to appear as an African initiative and that the USG preferred to fund ECOMOG indirectly.⁷³ Cohen notes that the US Policy Coordinating Committee for Africa was concerned that a major US contribution to a West African military force could lead to “follow-on requests for direct military support.” Therefore the United States initially contributed a “symbolic \$3.3 million” to show “solidarity with an important African initiative.” The US State Department “happily greeted the ECOWAS initiative,” but the USG had taken the “back seat” while keeping a “MARG [Marine Amphibious Readiness Group] contingent . . . stationed offshore, just in case.”⁷⁴

The USG worked “behind the scenes” through frequent high-powered visits to the region by US top officials and by providing economic and military support to countries that supported ECOMOG.⁷⁵ Kwenu notes that indirect support of ECOMOG became popular among many West African leaders because the organization appeared as an African initiative rather than neocolonial interference.⁷⁶ It became “socially prestigious” to serve under ECOMOG and “fight for mother Africa.”⁷⁷

In contrast, Prince Johnson maintains that it was “written all over that ECOMOG was made in America.”⁷⁸ ECOMOG had made an agreement with Johnson that the INPFL should secure the Freeport area in Monrovia to ensure a bridgehead for ECOMOG.⁷⁹ The GoL also saw the ECOMOG’s intervention force as a US proxy that would guarantee the installation and protection of the interim government.⁸⁰ The NPFL perceived ECOMOG in the same way, expecting it to become the main enemy, and therefore tried to stop deployment of the force.⁸¹

With support from Johnson’s forces, ECOMOG landed in the Freeport of Monrovia on 24 August 1990 under the command of General Kwenu. On 9 September, Doe went to the ECOMOG-controlled part of the Freeport with a convoy of soldiers and baggage. According to Kwenu, Doe’s visit was unexpected. Doe complained to Kwenu that he had not officially visited the president after the deployment of ECOMOG and explained that what was happening in Liberia was in many ways similar to the events in Ghana in 1966, when the CIA overthrew President Kwame Nkrumah.⁸² During this conversation, Johnson entered the Freeport with around 1,500 soldiers.⁸³ Fighting broke out between the INPFL

and Doe's bodyguards. ECOMOG sought protection in the trenches and remained passive while INPFL forces killed all of Doe's bodyguards.⁸⁴

Johnson took Doe to the INPFL base where he questioned and tortured him. The interrogation was filmed because Johnson wanted to show the world what happened to Doe, as when the Tolbert administration was executed in 1980. The US Embassy had supplied all of the fighting parties with communication equipment, and Johnson called Mr. Porter, the political officer at the US Embassy, and the ambassador over the VHF radio to ask what to do with President Doe.⁸⁵ Johnson calls their failure to answer "an indication that they . . . had written him off."⁸⁶

Doe died in the custody of the INPFL, but Johnson notes that the removal of Doe was a decision reached with major international players involved.⁸⁷ He further states that "ECOMOG had the weaponries, men and sophistication to protect the President against the attacks of the INPFL. If these were not utilized, then the world should hold ECOMOG responsible for not protecting the President." The "Interim Government could not function . . . while the constitutional president was alive and in the Executive Mansion. He therefore had to be removed. This decision was a collective one."⁸⁸

War, the Election of Taylor, and Oil

By the end of September 1990, General Kwenu was replaced by Maj Gen Joshua Nimyel Dogonyaro of Nigeria.⁸⁹ Dogonyaro united the Armed Forces of Liberia with the INPFL and ECOMOG, launching Operation Liberty in October 1990 against the NPFL.⁹⁰ As the NPFL was pushed back from Monrovia, ECOMOG flew in the IGNU and announced itself as the official GoL on 22 November.⁹¹

The NPFL established another Liberian government—the National Patriotic Reconstruction Assembly Government (NPRAG)—headed by Taylor, with its seat in Gbarnga, about a three-hour drive from Monrovia. The NPFL was referred to as the army of the NPRAG. In contrast to the IGNU, which controlled only the Monrovia area, the NPRAG controlled about 90 percent of Liberia, which became known as Greater Liberia.⁹² Taylor received new military supplies that improved his military capacity.⁹³ A number of "Francophone states in ECOWAS, notably Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire, supported . . . Taylor."⁹⁴ Libya had scaled up its support of the NPFL because Gadhafi saw ECOMOG as a dangerous development in Africa.⁹⁵

Cohen remarks that towards the end of the 1990s, the war in Liberia had become "a surrogate fight between Côte d'Ivoire/Burkina [*sic*] and Nigeria/

Ghana.” The US State Department sent Ambassador Donald Petterson to West Africa with a letter to President Houphouët-Boigny to make him understand that “his protégé Charles Taylor could not gain power without ECOMOG cooperation.” Taylor was informed that it was “unrealistic to expect ECOMOG to fade away and he should therefore accept negotiations.”⁹⁶

The first peace talks started in Bamako on 28 November 1990 but failed. The USG encouraged the US-based law firms H. P. Goldfield and Lester Hyman, as well as former US president Jimmy Carter, to get involved. Hyman was hired by Taylor to represent the NPRAG, and Carter’s International Negotiation Network became instrumental in setting up a number of conferences for peace negotiations.⁹⁷

In May 1991, the United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy (ULIMO) was established with the main objectives of fighting the Revolutionary United Front in Sierra Leone and the NPFL in Liberia. ULIMO later split into ULIMO-J and ULIMO-K in 1994, headed by Roosevelt Johnson and Alhaji Kromah, respectively. ECOMOG’s modern military equipment and air force were not appropriate for bush fighting, which called for a force like ULIMO. The latter became the largest army in Liberia, next to the NPFL, with around 15,000 soldiers, and ECOMOG and ULIMO cooperated closely throughout most of the conflict.⁹⁸ ECOMOG “distributed arms to the IGNU, ULIMO, and AFL [Armed Forces of Liberia].”⁹⁹

As conflicts in the region grew more complicated, a number of peace negotiations took place in different West African cities. For example, Mervyn Dymally, US congressman and chairman of the House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa, set up a series of meetings known as the Yamoussoukro Talks I, II, III, and IV, in which Jimmy Carter participated.¹⁰⁰ Concerned with the instability of the West African region, the meetings resulted in a number of peace accords whose key features included a cease-fire followed by the deployment of a monitoring group and formation of an interim government that should implement a disarmament program and plan for a national general election (e.g., Yamoussoukro Accord III).¹⁰¹

Cohen notes that Taylor would sign the final documents and then act differently. His fundamental demand was that he “must be the interim president,” and he insisted that ECOMOG should leave Liberia so negotiations could take place without “outside interference.”¹⁰² Nevertheless, the Abuja Accord of August 1995 led to a general election, which Taylor’s National Patriotic Party (NPP) won in July 1997 with 75.3 percent of the votes. More than 500 members of an international observation team led by Jimmy Carter oversaw the election, declaring it free and fair.¹⁰³

In relation to the NPP's victory, Cohen writes that the

winner was none other than Charles Taylor, the man we wanted to install as President in 1990. . . . If we had been allowed to pursue the plan adopted in the interagency process to persuade Doe to go into exile, thus opening the door for Taylor to take power, years of devastating civil war might have been prevented. And without the collateral need for ECOWAS peacekeeping, a francophone-anglophone surrogate war could also have been prevented. . . . Had Taylor been allowed to take power in 1990 . . . the destruction of Liberia would have been avoided, and Taylor might have been more open to constructive external influence.¹⁰⁴

Taylor's inaugural speech in August 1997 was attended by more than 10 heads of state from the West African region and a number of international politicians, including Jimmy Carter. In his remarks, Taylor emphasized that "the Liberian Peace Process has evolved a new measure of fraternity within the West African context" from where it is "anticipated that a definitive African Agenda will emerge out of this new prevailing spirit of Pan-Africanism." He further declared that "the time has come for Africa . . . to speak with one united voice" and not, as in the past, "be commandeered by others." According to Taylor, the "baton has been bequeathed to a new breed of West African leaders . . . that is no longer willing or prepared to accept being dictated to by outside forces."¹⁰⁵

The overall policy direction of Taylor's administration was nationalism, capitalism, and a reconciliatory policy towards the USG, based on business interests. The power was centralized around 15 to 20 key people loyal to Taylor. Although strong disagreements often occurred, Taylor usually had the final word.¹⁰⁶

His first significant decision was to reestablish diplomatic relations with the RoC, and he made a visit to Taipei upon the invitation of President Lee Teng-hui.¹⁰⁷ Sawyer's interim administration had reestablished relations with the People's Republic of China, partly as an attempt to counterbalance the influence of the USG.¹⁰⁸ At that time, the NPRAG "vehemently opposed and rejected" recognition of the PRC.¹⁰⁹ During the early 1990s, the USG had introduced Taiwanese representatives to Taylor, who had visited the NPRAG in Greater Liberia where oral agreements of mutual cooperation were made.¹¹⁰ Taylor recalls that the USG was very concerned about the GoL's China policy and had encouraged the relationship with Taiwan, recognizing that Taiwan would send a reconciliatory signal to the USG.¹¹¹

However, Taylor's administration did not succeed in establishing good relations with the USG. According to Allen and Chea, the main problem was that the USG could not accept the fact that many key members of Taylor's administration were radical nationalists who could encourage a revolutionary storm in West Africa. In addition, the USG was concerned about the GoL's close relations with Libya and France.¹¹²

Petterson, the US ambassador to Liberia (1998–99), explains that US strategic facilities in Liberia were no longer a central factor because the OMEGA system had been closed down and the infrastructure in Liberia had been destroyed, including the Voice of America facilities and CIA communication center. The USG had therefore “made alternative arrangements in other places in Africa.”¹¹³

US strategic military facilities were a cause of concern in the 1980s, but there is much to indicate that natural resources—oil in particular—became a central factor towards the end of the 1990s. In 2001 the US National Energy Policy Development Group noted that “West Africa is expected to be one of the fastest-growing sources of oil and gas for the American market.”¹¹⁴ Jenkins Dunbar, former minister of land, mines, and energy in the Taylor administration, recalls that USG officials and private corporations had a strong interest in iron ore, diamonds, uranium, and gold. The main issue, however, was oil.¹¹⁵ Liberia’s oil resources were officially mapped out in the early 1980s, but exploitation had not commenced, partly because of the extraction cost relative to market price.¹¹⁶

Taylor’s former wife, Agnes Reeves-Taylor, appointed chairperson of the Liberia Petroleum Refining Company at the end of 1997, says that French government diplomats showed her a new seismic survey indicating significant prospects for extraction of light crude oil in Liberia. Concessions given to French companies would result in a significant increase of French bilateral foreign aid to Liberia.¹¹⁷ The GoL published results of the seismic data showing “possible existence of both on-shore and off-shore oil with lucrative prospects.” The GoL welcomed the prospect of a “strong and Trusting Relationship” between Liberia and France and encouraged promotion of “French private enterprises in the revitalization of the . . . economy.”¹¹⁸ In September 1998, President Jacques Chirac invited Taylor and a government delegation to Paris where a number of negotiations were conducted behind closed doors, followed up during another visit to Paris in November 1998. The main issues discussed at these meetings were oil concessions and the entrance of French oil companies—Total, in particular—into Liberia.¹¹⁹

On 6 April 2000, the Liberian legislature approved “An Act to Amend the Executive Law of 1972 to Provide for the Establishment of the National Oil Company of Liberia,” with the purpose of facilitating development of the oil and gas industry in Liberia.¹²⁰ As the GoL negotiated with France, a USG official set up a lunch meeting with Agnes Taylor in London during April 2001, with representatives from two major US-based oil companies. They asked her to persuade Charles Taylor to stop negotiations with other foreign oil companies and grant oil concessions to US oil companies in return for US support of the GoL in the in-

ternational arena, including a large bribe through a secret account in Switzerland.¹²¹

Dunbar indicates that US-based Halliburton made a proposal to the GoL on offshore oil exploration in 2001. This proposal was sent to a Canadian law firm by the lawyer of the National Oil Company of Liberia, Frank Musa Dean. The firm returned the proposal with a statement saying that the agreement did not favor Liberia.¹²² The GoL rejected the American offer, which, according to Allen; Othello Brandy, Liberian ambassador to the Benelux Countries; Dunbar; and Taylor, was an unreasonable deal with a proposed production-sharing agreement of 20/80 in favor of the foreign exploration companies.¹²³

Removal of Taylor's Administration

After Taylor's administration had come into office, a number of key opposition leaders, most notably, Joe Wylie, Maxwell Khobe, and Roosevelt Johnson, began to reorganize ULIMO-J into a new rebel group called Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD). Johnson had received significant support from the US Embassy in Monrovia, and Khobe and Wylie had been trained militarily in the United States. Furthermore, Khobe was related to the government of Sierra Leone through his position as chief of defense staff of the Sierra Leonean Army.¹²⁴

Formed in Sierra Leone but structured in Guinea, LURD was first chaired by Mohammed Jumandy and subsequently headed by Sekou Demate Conneh from the end of 2001 and his wife, Aisha Conneh, an adopted daughter of President Lansana Conteh of Guinea.¹²⁵ According to LURD's manifesto, the primary aim involved stopping Taylor's "cancerous influence on the stability of the entire sub-region."¹²⁶ Joe Gballah, the secretary-general of LURD, states that the objective was to "get Taylor out of power . . . [and] put in place a power base that . . . [would] be in the interests of America." The US "brought in people from the CIA . . . under cover, to study the case [of] what strategy to use to overthrow Taylor." The USG already had "military arrangements with the Government of Guinea" and supported LURD "through Guinea." LURD "had agreed to work with Guinea . . . as a way to combat in Liberia [*sic*]." The top political decisions were at the level of "the president of Guinea and the president of America." Gballah himself rarely had direct contact with the Americans, and he met only once with Maj Gen Thomas Turner of the United States.¹²⁷

The first LURD insurgency started at the beginning of 1999, but the reports from the GoL were not taken seriously by either the UNSC or the international media.¹²⁸ The BBC reported that "observers thought the claims were fictitious"

and that President Taylor invented the attacks “in order to get a United Nations arms ban lifted.”¹²⁹

As UN sanctions further weakened the GoL, Taylor realized that relations with Taiwan had serious consequences for the Liberian case in the UNSC. In 2002 he requested that Liberia’s representative to the UN in New York, Winston Tubman, start the process of establishing relations with the People’s Republic of China.¹³⁰ Taylor also instructed Brandy to organize a Liberian delegation to go to Beijing. However, Brandy recalls that Taylor stopped this process because Taiwan offered him US \$5 to 10 million for maintaining relations with Taiwan, money that the GoL desperately needed for its defense budget.¹³¹

Brandy and Tubman agree that this was Taylor’s most serious mistake and the major precipitating factor in his downfall. The People’s Republic of China was interested in relations with Liberia and could have provided evidence in the UNSC that Guinea and Sierra Leone supported LURD, thereby blocking extensions of UN sanctions on Liberia.¹³² Monie Captan, Liberia’s minister of foreign affairs, raised the issue at the UN General Assembly in 2002, pointing to a “conspiracy of silence surrounding the prevailing war in Liberia waged by externally supported armed non-State actors.” He further argued that the “arms embargo imposed on Liberia . . . [was] a flagrant violation of Liberia’s inherent right under Article 51 of the Charter to defend itself against armed attacks.”¹³³ His remarks, however, had little effect.

In July 2002, Ambassador Bismarck Myrick was replaced by John William Blaney, who promised to “implement an aggressive, practical and pragmatic policy” in Liberia, observing that the “most immediate objective” would be “to curb Liberia’s role as a source of regional instability.”¹³⁴ Within a year, a break-away faction from LURD established the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL). Kaibeneh Janneh, former legal adviser to LURD, notes that many commentators argued that this split was based on ethnic and religious lines where France and Ivory Coast supported MODEL.¹³⁵ However, the USG was closely involved, and MODEL was established to ensure that LURD and MODEL together would have more votes and key positions in a future power-sharing interim GoL against Taylor’s NPP.¹³⁶ During MODEL’s establishment, Pamela Bridgewater, US deputy assistant secretary for African affairs, stated in March 2003 that “U.S. relations with Liberia are at a crossroad.” She spoke of a “need for a comprehensive stabilization strategy for Liberia” and noted that “the United States will not wait much longer. . . . We will move forward . . . [and] take action.”¹³⁷

As the war intensified and the humanitarian situation deteriorated, ECOWAS made several attempts to find a solution, resulting in a peace negotiation meeting on 4 June 2003 in Ghana.¹³⁸ Prior to the meeting, the UNSC had

expanded and extended the sanctions on Liberia.¹³⁹ LURD and MODEL increased their military pressure, and the US Embassy urged foreign nationals to leave Liberia. The French representative to Liberia, Francois Prkic, informed the few remaining humanitarian organizations that France expected a serious intensification of the conflict and that the French navy had prepared for an evacuation of the remaining foreign nationals in Monrovia.¹⁴⁰

Just as the peace negotiations were about to begin in Accra on 4 June, David Crane, American chief prosecutor of the UN-backed special court in Sierra Leone, unsealed an indictment against President Taylor that the court had judicially approved but sealed on 7 March 2003.¹⁴¹ The indictment accused Taylor on 17 counts, including being at the heart of a “joint criminal enterprise” that committed war crimes, crimes against humanity, and serious violations of international humanitarian law within the territory of Sierra Leone.¹⁴²

The indictment came through Interpol, asking Ghanaian authorities to arrest President Taylor.¹⁴³ However, according to Joe Mulbah, former Liberian minister of information, and Sylvester Vaanii Paasewe, Taylor’s press secretary, the African heads of state decided to discuss the indictment behind closed doors before doing anything. Present at this meeting were Lansana Conteh of Guinea, Laurent Gbagbo of Ivory Coast, Ahmad Tejan Kabbah of Sierra Leone, John Kufuor of Ghana, Thabo Mbeki of South Africa, Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria, Taylor of Liberia, Toumani Touré of Mali, and former president Abdulsalami Abubakar of Nigeria.¹⁴⁴ Paasewe notes that some of the African leaders remarked that it was an “unprecedented indictment of a sitting African head-of-state” and “debunked the Court as a neocolonial design” to restore the old imperial jurisdiction in Africa. Indicting a key player during peace negotiations would affect future peace processes across the continent and obstruct solutions to peace if key players would fear being arrested during peace negotiations. Therefore they decided to ignore the indictment and commence peace negotiations.¹⁴⁵

After the meeting, Taylor announced at the conference that “if I am the problem and seem to stand in the way of peace, I will remove myself from the process, and I will step down to allow peace to come to our country.”¹⁴⁶ Subsequently, Taylor was taken back to Monrovia in the Ghanaian presidential aircraft. As the indictment was unsealed, the US Embassy had encouraged Vice President Moses Blah to take power. According to Taylor, the loyalty of key members in the army prevented this, and Blah was arrested the same day.¹⁴⁷ Because of Blah’s ethnic background as a Gio from Nimba County, his arrest caused disturbances among the Gios within the Armed Forces of Liberia.¹⁴⁸ Blah was released and reinstalled as vice president after 11 days.¹⁴⁹

Two days after the indictment of Taylor, LURD launched the first of three major military offensives on Monrovia while MODEL advanced towards the strategic port city of Buchanan.¹⁵⁰ As the fighting intensified, the French navy ship appeared as planned and evacuated most of the remaining foreign nationals by helicopter from the European Commission's compound.¹⁵¹ At the same time, the US Department of Defense deployed approximately 1,800 Soldiers off the shores of Monrovia.¹⁵² The GoL succeeded in cutting off LURD's supply lines from Guinea, and the attack on Monrovia was repelled.¹⁵³

After deployment of the US Navy, Ambassador Blaney met with Taylor and presented a draft agreement for a cease-fire.¹⁵⁴ On 17 June, GoL, LURD, and MODEL signed the Agreement on Ceasefire and Cessation of Hostilities. The parties agreed to deployment of a joint verification team led by ECOWAS to monitor the cease-fire; deployment of an international stabilization force; commencement of a disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration process; security-sector reforms; and formation of a National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTGL), which would not include President Taylor, in accordance with his declaration in Accra on 4 June. The NTGL assigned a chairman and vice-chairman of that body and allocated 12 Legislative Assembly seats to the GoL, 12 to LURD, 12 to MODEL, 18 to established political parties, 7 to civil society and special interest groups, and 15 to counties.¹⁵⁵

About a week after the agreement was signed, LURD launched its second major attack on Monrovia.¹⁵⁶ During a press conference at the White House on 3 July, Bush announced that "Mr. Taylor must go. A condition for any progress in Liberia is his removal." He further stated that the USG was working with Nigeria and had "trained five battalions of Nigerian troops, preparing them for issues such as Liberia" and that US military advisers were cooperating with ECOWAS "to look at different options."¹⁵⁷

On 8 July, the US Congress adopted a resolution that supported the cease-fire agreement signed on 17 June and called upon the US government "to assume a leadership role in the international community . . . to help guide the Ceasefire Agreement and subsequent peace agreement, political transition and establishment of a sustainable democracy with good governance, and economic reconstruction processes."¹⁵⁸ This included, among a number of other commitments, the provision of "military experts, personnel, logistical support, equipment and funds as necessary" and an agreement that the United States would "play a lead role in creating and deploying an international stabilization force to Liberia."¹⁵⁹

After a meeting with Kofi Annan in the Oval Office on 14 July, Bush confirmed that the USG wanted "to enable ECOWAS to get in and help create the conditions necessary for the cease-fire to hold, that Mr. Taylor must leave, that

we'll participate with the troops." Bush further stated that he had "told the Secretary General that . . . there must be U.N. presence, quickly into Liberia" in the form of a military intervention.¹⁶⁰

Annan called Taylor, informing him that the USG wanted him to leave within 72 hours to avoid further military action. Taylor responded that he would not leave Liberia before external peacekeepers arrived on the ground.¹⁶¹ Less than three days later, LURD launched its third, biggest, and final attack on Monrovia, lasting about two weeks.¹⁶² The USG deployed "an 18-person Humanitarian Assistance Survey Team (HAST) from Stuttgart, Germany, to assess the humanitarian situation in Monrovia and to look at the condition of the airport, seaport, and road and bridge systems."¹⁶³

The USG had started to mobilize a large UN multinational force to intervene in Liberia. American diplomat Jacques Klein was appointed the UN secretary-general's special representative for Liberia.¹⁶⁴ Annan informed the UNSC on 29 July that ECOWAS was ready "to deploy 1,500 troops to Liberia by mid-August" in a three-phase deployment of an international force.¹⁶⁵ The first deployment would be a "vanguard force" comprised of two battalions from Nigeria" and a third battalion "made up of troops contributed by Ghana (250 troops), Mali (250 troops) and Senegal (250 troops)." The priority task of the vanguard force was to "stabilize the situation in Monrovia as President Taylor departs." Immediately after, phase-two deployment should take place "in order to facilitate the installation of a successor Government." Phase three would be a UN "peacekeeping operation within the shortest possible time." In relation to deployment of the soldiers, Annan stated that the United States "will position appropriate military capabilities off the coast of Liberia to support the deployment of the ECOWAS forces."¹⁶⁶

The UNSC authorized the multinational force on 1 August by adopting Resolution 1497, which, under chapter 7 of the UN Charter, directed the establishment of a "Multinational Force in Liberia to support the implementation of the 17 June 2003 ceasefire agreement" and support of the "departure of the current President and the installation of a successor authority."¹⁶⁷ The first batch of 30 Nigerian peacekeepers arrived in Monrovia on 4 August from the UN Mission in Sierra Leone, which marked the beginning of the implementation of phase one.¹⁶⁸

Taylor had been offered asylum in Nigeria, and on 7 August he presented his letter of resignation to the Liberian Legislature, through which he turned over his authority to Vice President Blah on 11 August. To the Legislature he stated that "persistent double standards" had been "applied against Liberia by the international community" and that an "international conspiracy against the Government

has been orchestrated through the support of two major rebel incursions from Guinea and La Cote d'Ivoire with the support of armed insurgents from Sierra Leone."¹⁶⁹

On the day of Taylor's departure, 11 August 2003, President Mbeki arrived at Roberts International Airport outside Monrovia with a team of South African troops. Significant politicians who participated in the departure ceremony included President Kufuor of Ghana; Joaquim Chissano, chairman of the African Union and president of Mozambique; Nigeria's minister of foreign affairs; and US ambassador Blaney, together with 30 US Marines.¹⁷⁰ In his farewell speech, Taylor declared that the USG, in cooperation with Britain, prevented the GoL from defending itself by imposing sanctions and that this "is an American war. LURD is a surrogate force. . . . [The United States] caused this war. . . . They can call off their dogs now."¹⁷¹

A few hours after Taylor left Liberia, Colin Powell, US secretary of state, said at a press conference in Washington that the USG was pleased with the "constitutional transfer of power from Charles Taylor to now President Blah" and that the USS *Iwo Jima* task group and the Marine expeditionary unit would come ashore to coordinate and assist with opening up the Freeport and allow the other forces to arrive.¹⁷² Subsequently, the US-led military intervention took place with the deployment of more than 15,000 military personnel.

Conclusion

The different forms of USG intervention in Liberia from the 1970s to 2003 can be useful for the study of other USG covert and overt operations in Africa. The USG's role in the removal of the Tolbert administration in 1980 was discreet and left a very light footprint. However, research suggests that most Liberian intellectuals and politicians nevertheless perceive the coup as a covert operation conducted by the USG in response to the policies of the Tolbert administration.

The removal of President Doe in 1990 can be seen as a semicovert operation of the USG. Although the organization and funding of ECOMOG was fairly discreet in order to make it appear as an "African solution to an African problem," the USG left a strong footprint. This becomes even clearer when the analysis is linked to the subsequent removal of the Taylor administration, which involved direct US political and military intervention.

Despite the strong US footprint, most Western academic studies of the recent Liberian conflict have either ignored or marginalized the role of the USG. Instead, Liberia has been used or referred to as a case of African anarchy and barbarism, whereby the international community had a responsibility to intervene

to protect civilians and promote good governance, human rights, democracy, and a free-market economy. This perspective is perhaps best reflected in the work of Stephen Ellis, among the most cited authors on the recent Liberian conflict. In his book *The Mask of Anarchy*, Ellis marginalizes the role of the USG, writing that “Liberians are often inclined to overestimate the extent of US responsibility for whatever transpires in their country” and emphasizing that Liberians have “indulged in an orgy of conspiracy-theorising” about the United States.¹⁷³

Localizing or internalizing the causes of conflict and marginalizing the role of international actors are a general feature of mainstream Western academic discourse that promotes military interventions and forms of recolonization, often referred to as neotrusteeships. This practice is well reflected in the works of James Fearon and David Laitin, who, among other cases, refer to Liberia as an example in which the United States has taken responsibility as the lead agent in peacekeeping and state building.¹⁷⁴ For Ellis, Liberia is among the most obvious candidates for trusteeship because it is “already deeply attached” to America, and although “intrusive outside meddling often smacks of colonialism and is thus a bitter pill for African nationalists to swallow . . . there is simply no alternative.”¹⁷⁵ Similarly, Niall Ferguson refers to Liberia as a state that “would benefit immeasurably from something like an American colonial administration.”¹⁷⁶

In fact, the US-led UN intervention starting in August 2003 did become a de facto external takeover of the Liberian state. External military forces secured a relatively safe environment within which external policy makers began reconstruction of Liberian state systems based on the neoliberal economic model. The security sector came under direct control of the USG, and external experts were deployed in a number of ministries at strategic control points.¹⁷⁷

Most Liberian informants who have contributed to this research believe that the conflict had deteriorated to such a critical point that the UN military intervention was necessary in order to stop further destruction of the country and its people. However, they are very conscious of and critical of the role played by the USG in the conflict and sceptical about the neoliberal reconstruction program, which many Liberian academics and politicians perceive as recolonization or neo-colonialism.¹⁷⁸ The huge gulf between the dominant Western perspectives of Liberia’s recent history and the dominant Liberian views is not only significant but also so hostile that it could potentially materialize into new armed conflicts.

A key point of dispute relates to the economic system. Most of the Liberian key informants interviewed in this study argue that Liberia has more than 100 years of experience with liberal capitalism, which brought about conditions for repeated armed conflicts. The Open Door Policy created an optimal business environment for foreign corporations to have easy access to cheap labor and natural

resources such as rubber, iron ore, diamonds, and so forth, but only a small percentage of Liberians benefited from the foreign investments, and little socioeconomic development took place. This situation created extreme inequalities and tensions between the small Liberian elite and the majority of the population—tensions used by external powers to destabilize the country. The policies of the Tolbert administration began to address these issues and were in many ways similar to the development policies used by the successful industrialized countries, which included state planning of the economy, subsidies, tariff barriers, and protection of infant industries and markets.

President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who served as minister of finance under the Tolbert administration, states that the Liberian government does not accept the free-market approach to development as promoted by “major financial institutions such as the World Bank.” A country “should not be bound by the free market concept to limit their own ability to . . . advance their development goals.” She maintains that Tolbert’s “policies were right, but the politics was wrong,” and that was what brought him down.¹⁷⁹

The experience of the military coup in 1980 stands as a clear lesson on the danger of challenging the liberal economic system. Most of the Liberian key informants who have contributed to this research, though, argue that they see no other alternative than trying to repeat the challenge because rebuilding Liberia according to the neoliberal economic model will inevitably reestablish the Open Door Policy and thereby reproduce the root causes of the armed conflict that devastated the country between 1989 and 2003.

To reduce the risk of future conflicts in Liberia, Western academics and practitioners should question more critically the imposition of neoliberal development policies and include in the debate the critical perspectives and notions of neocolonialism coming from African scholars and politicians. Ignoring or marginalizing the critique in general will not make it disappear but will create distorted understandings of the reality on which wrong decisions might be made, with the risk of increasing tensions between the North and the South.

Notes

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75. McCoy, *RAND Note*, 15.

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