

The last days of Sam Doe

I was on my way to the Mideast with the foreign minister of an Arab country. During a short layover in Zurich, we were taken to the VIP lounge reserved for senior diplomats and heads of state. There, my Arab friend met a very nervous and very unhappy black diplomat from Liberia whom he knew. The African looked like he had just seen the grim reaper.

In fact, as he whispered to my friend, he had—in the form of Master Sgt. Samuel K. Doe, the illiterate thug whose days as tyrant of the West African state of Liberia seem about to be over.

Doe, related the diplomat, called him and three other government ministers into his office. After shouting at them and accusing them of disobedience and theft, Doe pulled out a long-barreled .38 revolver and calmly shot the first three men.

He then pointed his pistol at the diplomat, thought for a moment, and said, "Okay, you can go." Such is political life in Africa, where most leaders are far closer to the murderous Sgt. Doe than the media-sainted Nelson Mandela.

Doe came to power in a bloody coup that overthrew the old Tolbert ruling dynasty made up of descendants of freed American slaves.

Liberia was created in 1822 as a home for liberated blacks from the American south. In a stirring tribute to human goodness, the freed slaves quickly enslaved the local tribes. Their descendants went on to misrule Liberia, once the world's largest producer of rubber, until 1980.

Enter Master Sgt. Doe. He and his thugs bayoneted the president and staged a carnival-style execution of 13 other senior government officials on the beach of the capital, Monrovia. While bands played and dancers cavorted, a firing squad tried to shoot the hapless condemned men. So bad was their aim that it took six volleys at point blank range to finish the job.

Doe then went on to impose a reign of terror on

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formerly easy-going Liberia. In 1985, a certain Commander Quiwonkpa tried unsuccessfully to seize power. Doe supervised while the rebellious commander was beaten, castrated, cut up into little pieces and, reportedly, eaten.

All this happened in a little nation of 2.1 million that was virtually an American colony—an African version of the old Central American banana republics. Liberia was run for a century by the all-powerful Firestone rubber company and a handful of American "advisers." It remains to this day the largest recipient of U.S. aid in Africa. The aid, of course, was nearly all stolen by the ruling elite while wretched Liberia rusted, rotted and slid slowly back into the bush.

Champions of human rights in the U.S. almost never mention Liberia. One reason was that the National Security Agency has a major electronic intelligence station in Liberia that intercepts communications across Africa. Liberia also provides naval and air base rights to the Pentagon. A powerful Voice of America transmitter beams from Monrovia.

Doe also managed to escape censure by Congress because of his close links with Israel, which used Liberia as a staging base for covert operations in West Africa and arms sales. Doe may be an illiterate, but he was smart enough to have an excellent grasp of American domestic politics.

Last year a senior civil servant, one Charles Taylor, took to the bush and began a revolt against Doe. After Doe's drunken soldiers slaughtered large numbers of tribesmen, the revolt spread.

At the time of this writing, Taylor's rebels are at the outskirts of Monrovia. His revolt has sparked tribal battles between the Gios and Manos, on one hand, and Doe's Khrans on the other. Beheaded Gios and Manos have been dumped all over Monrovia.

This whole business would sound like a black satire written by Evelyn Waugh if it weren't so murderous.

Africa will be well rid of Master Sgt. Doe and his henchmen. If he's lucky, Doe will manage to fly off into a comfortable exile supported by funds secreted in Switzerland. Should Doe fail to get away, his fate will not be a happy one.

What's happening in Liberia reflects a wave of political change sweeping across West Africa. Just as nasty communist regimes have been overturned in East Europe, so some nasty, or even reasonably decent western-backed African regimes, are being buffeted by demands for change.

The Ivory Coast's "leader for life" is being forced to retire. President Omar Bongo of Gabon is under siege by growing numbers of opponents. Zaire's ruler, General Mobutu, is also in trouble and has recently agreed to some sort of elections.

Ivory Coast and Gabon are virtual French protectorates. Zaire is protected by the USA. Now it's Liberia's turn. Glasnost and perestroika come to the African bush.



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