

The Liberian dilemma

Liberia is the kind of country that white liberals would love to forget. Located on the steamy coast of West Africa, the republic of Liberia was created by American anti-slavery groups in 1847 as a new home for freed slaves. The former American slaves were to bring to the local tribes of Liberia the joys of liberty and commerce.

Alas, human nature is not always what liberals would like it to be. Once installed in Liberia, the former American slaves at once enslaved the local Mandingos and other tribes. They even recreated white pillared-southern mansions and plantations straight out of *Gone With the Wind*. The only difference was that the white-suited slave owners were black.

Slavery in Liberia has never fully died out. In the remote interior, latex, Liberia's main export, is still collected by plantation slaves. Until recently, latex went to Firestone which, along with descendants of the American slave elite, ran Liberia like a company town until April 1980.

Then a certain master sergeant by the name of Samuel K. Doe seized power in a bloody coup. Doe, an illiterate, was the first Liberian who was not of American origin to take power. At least 40 members of the former ruling elite, many from the Tolbert and Tubman families, were tied to telephone poles on Monrovia's beach. While bands played and crowds danced, the prisoners were executed by drunken soldiers. So bad was their aim that many of the prisoners had to be repeatedly shot at close range.

Doe proclaimed himself a general and quickly wrecked Liberia's never very robust economy. Corruption and larceny, which before had been obvious but genteel, became intolerable. Roads and buildings began to fall into ruin in the West African heat and rain. But Doe was careful to maintain good relations with his aid patrons in Washington. Liberia contained an important U.S. airbase and secret communications stations.

In 1985 there was an attempted army coup against Doe. He reacted by executing hundreds of

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officers and former supporters. Doe invited four ministers into his office, lined them up in front of his desk and then calmly shot three. To the fourth he said, 'I'm tired now, go back to work.' I heard this grisly little tale from the surviving minister.

Other suspected rebels were cut into pieces by Doe's troops. Some prisoners were forced to eat parts of dismembered bodies.

Doe's outrages became an embarrassment to his U.S. sponsors and the Organization of African States. Congress was on the verge of cutting off \$57 million in annual aid that held Liberia together when Doe took some good advice from his ally, Africa's other outcast, Zaire's President Mobutu.

The way to get congressional liberals like Teddy Kennedy and Stephen Solarz off your back, suggested Mobutu, was to recognize Israel.

For diplomatically isolated Israel, recognition by an African nation, even a Liberia or Zaire, was an important breakthrough. The Israelis held their noses and set up relations with Doe's Liberia. Israeli security advisers flew into Monrovia and took over protection of Doe, bringing with them arms and cash.

As Mobutu predicted, Liberia's recognition of Israel immediately shut off any move by Congress to cut aid to Liberia. Congressmen were not about to anger the pro-Israel lobby by attacking Israel's new friends in Zaire and Liberia. They returned to the safer routine of lambasting South Africa.

A much relieved Doe went back to chopping up and, reportedly, eating the hearts and livers of his enemies. U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz stopped in this year long enough to privately admonish Doe and tut-tut over the lack of human rights or democracy in Liberia. In public, Shultz listened while Doe denounced human rights abuses in South Africa. As usual, the sharp irony of the moment seemed lost on the stolid Shultz.

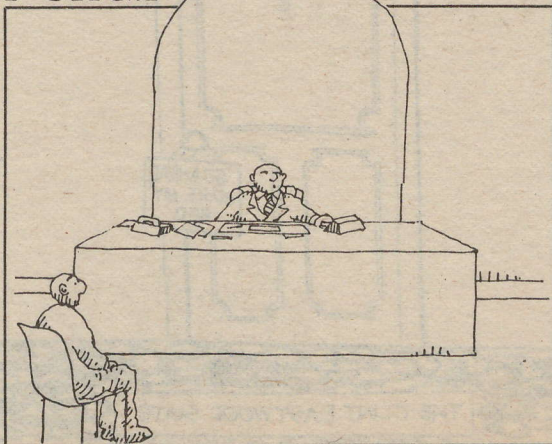
So what? Who cares at all about this stretch of West African coast?

The Americans certainly do. Liberia is an important strategic waypoint for them and, in war, air bases there would defend the passage between Brazil and Africa. Equally important, Liberia is an American creation and a reminder of the dark, shameful days of slavery.

The U.S. clearly has a responsibility to get rid of a horrid tyrant like Doe and to try to turn Liberia into a showcase of what black Africa, properly managed and ruled, could become.

This seemingly will not happen. Because of indifference, domestic politics and inertia, Washington appears content to let Liberia, which was to have been a beacon to all black people, sink back into the jungle. So the U.S. sends more aid to Liberia's chief while devising new ways of punishing South Africa.

Punch



"Bring my lunch in, Miss Belmont, and some scraps for Mr. Melbourne."