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When Liberians Looked to America in Vain

By HOWARD W. FRENCH

Twenty-five years ago, when Jimmy Carter touched down on African soil, Liberia was an obligatory stop on the itinerary for a United States president.

For most of its history, the country, which was founded in 1847 by offspring of American slaves, had been a virtual United States protectorate. What is less well remembered is that Liberia, with its Citibank offices, its Intercontinental Hotel, its PanAm flights to New York, had a civil society more in tune with America's democratizing values than any other in Africa.

But with the brutal murder of President William Tolbert on April 12, 1980, and the establishment of a government under Samuel K. Doe, an unschooled army sergeant, Liberia began a long and tragic slide, one that has paused briefly but never truly ceased.

A country that Liberians have traditionally considered America's stepchild has devolved into something more akin to a destitute orphan. Few African countries offer such tantalizing opportunities to second-guess history, but experts on West Africa say the United States has had frequent, clear opportunities to make a dramatic difference for the better at very little cost, and time and again has failed to do so.

Today, as President Bush considers sending American peacekeepers and demands that President Charles Taylor leave office, these experts say the country — and much of West Africa with it — stand at a similar crossroads. President Bush's decision on whether to help stabilize Liberia could determine the fate of many millions.

"In all of Africa, this is the country which we have been most deeply involved with and knowledgeable about," said Richard Joseph, director of African studies at Northwestern University and former head of the Carter Center's programs in Liberia. "Not just the U.S. government, but American civil society, churches and other groups have built schools and clinics in every village in the country. There is no reason for Liberia to have gone the course that it took, were it not for the callous neglect of the United States."

America's first opportunities to help Liberia came in the final years of the Tolbert presidency, when the ruling class, narrowly drawn from citizens of American descent, or Americo-Liberians, initiated reforms aimed at easing the stark and strictly enforced social divide between themselves and the indigenous masses, then known as aborigines.

The United States had never paid much attention to Liberia's caste segregation, but by the time of Mr. Carter's visit, it was clear that the country was entering a crisis. Still, during the cold war, as few American resources as possible were being spent on West Africa, even in Liberia, where the

United States had real assets. These ranged from the Firestone Rubber Plantation, the world's largest, to regional Voice of America transmitters and other sophisticated equipment used for intelligence communications and maritime navigation.

The regime of Samuel Doe came to power having disemboweled Mr. Tolbert in his bed in the presidential palace. Days later, 13 of Mr. Tolbert's ministers were strapped to telephone poles and executed with machine guns by drunken soldiers on a Monrovia beach. Despite these and many other atrocities, Washington's role in Liberia grew strongly under Mr. Doe, even while he established one of the continent's most brutal dictatorships. In the year that followed the Doe coup — a year in which the Carter administration maintained ties and a new president, Ronald Reagan, expanded them — the United States provided $60 million in military aid to the new government. By 1982, Liberia was the largest per capita recipient of American aid in tropical Africa.

Samuel Doe had no difficulty in reading the United States. In much of Africa during the Reagan era, this required little more than posing as an anti-Communist. Mr. Doe flirted briefly with Libya, then astutely aligned his country with Washington and was henceforth allowed to pocket American aid with few questions asked.

But the biggest payoff for Mr. Doe, and the most tragic for Liberia, did not involve money. Rather, when he organized elections in 1985 to legitimize his rule, and then blatantly rigged the results, the United States put its imprimatur on the exercise, even though it was condemned by Liberian and international human rights groups. The United States assistant secretary of state for African affairs, Chester A. Crocker, said at the time that Liberia had experienced "the beginning, however imperfect, of a democratic experience."

"Those elections were quite clearly a complete fraud, and the United States should not have recognized them," said Stephen Ellis, a professor at the University of Leiden, in the Netherlands, and author of "The Mask of Anarchy," a history of modern Liberia.

"It was a fatal decision," he added, "because it allowed Doe to expand his power base, and he immediately headed in a fascist direction — extremely brutal and very corrupt."

In Liberia, Mr. Ellis said, Washington's staunch support for Mr. Doe sent a message that there was no point in moderate opposition. Indeed, armed opposition by Charles Taylor and others soon commenced, and with it, a long series of civil wars.

Washington's last big moment in Liberia came in 1990, in the final days of the Doe presidency, when two rebel armies were besieging Monrovia, and the United States deployed 2,500 marines within sight of the capital. West African leaders urged the United States to arrange Mr. Doe's exile and secure Monrovia. But with Iraq's invasion of Kuwait that summer, Washington's attention was elsewhere. Instead, America evacuated its own nationals, and the civil war in Liberia became an increasingly vicious free-for-all that has since engulfed and devastated Sierra Leone, Guinea and the region's richest and long most stable country, Ivory Coast.

"It is an unspeakable tragedy for West Africa that the Americans didn't act differently," said William Reno, a political scientist at Northwestern University and author of "Warlord Politics and African States," which focuses on the Liberian war. "Imagine what different societies Sierra Leone and Ivory Coast would have been if there had been a stable Liberia next door. Instead, the United States acted with a short-term view, and now tropical Africa has the West Africa crisis to match the tragedy of the Congo."