

August 3, 2003

Blacks Counsel Caution on Liberia

By CHRISTOPHER MARQUIS

WASHINGTON — African-Americans have historically been skeptical of military intervention by their country in the affairs of others, at least when compared with other Americans. It is not surprising, then, that a New York Times survey being issued today, which asked whether the United States should try to change a dictatorship to democracy or stay out, found that 82 percent of African-American respondents wanted America to mind its own business, as opposed to 58 percent of all others.

Carroll Doherty, editor of the Pew Research Center, said there had been a consistent gap between whites and blacks in recent military undertakings.

The Iraq war has proved especially divisive, he said, with 72 percent of whites saying Washington was right to attack Iraq, compared with 41 percent of blacks, according to a June poll. But he noted that African-Americans were similarly skeptical during the first Persian Gulf War and the battle for Kosovo.

Even when it comes to Liberia there is disagreement within the black community over what the United States should do — despite the fact that the Congressional Black Caucus last week called on the Bush administration to act.

The president has so far balked at sending in troops, opting instead to offer cash and logistical assistance to West African peacekeeping forces, while positioning ships off the Liberian coast with 2,300 Marines on board.

A number of African-Americans support that stance — though not always for the same reasons as the administration. They include some with a radical, pro-Africa agenda, who are nonetheless urging the United States to keep out of Liberia, or limit its role to helping international peacekeepers.

"Our view is that the Liberian situation is part of a West African crisis and ultimately needs to be settled by West Africans," said Bill Fletcher, president of the TransAfrica Forum, an organization that fought apartheid in South Africa and fosters contacts between Africa and the United States.

A decade ago, when the Clinton administration agonized over whether to intervene in Haiti to restore its elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, TransAfrica's founder, Randall Robinson went on a hunger strike and black lawmakers raised a daily ruckus that compelled the administration to send in troops. But when it comes to Liberia, that unity is missing, Mr. Fletcher noted.

To be sure, some of the strongest advocates for American intervention are African-American. Secretary of State Colin L. Powell has voiced remorse at the administration's reticence and the Rev. Jesse Jackson has chided Washington for keeping "a killing field on the back burner."

But some black Americans say they would support deploying troops only if they were assured of a peaceful reception.

"If you told us we were going to fight a war, we'd oppose it," said one Congressional aide who is close to the Black Caucus.

Black intellectuals and activists cite several reasons for their reluctance to commit troops. African-Americans, they note, are a disproportionately large group within the armed forces. Nearly 20 percent of active service members are black, while blacks make up about 13 percent of the overall population.

"I don't like the fact that a segment of the population that is poorer and darker bears this particular burden," said Roger Wilkins, a professor of history at George Mason University who supports sending troops to Liberia with great reluctance.

Suspicion about the true intentions of the American government is another motivator. For some African-Americans, distrust of the Pentagon is palpable. Blacks, they say, end up fighting other men's wars. "We have a long history of serving as cannon fodder for interests that are not our own," said Mark Fancher, chairman of international affairs at the National Conference of Black Lawyers.

Mr. Fancher invoked the Buffalo soldiers, black troops sent to fight Indians and Mexicans in the conquest of the West, and African-Americans lost in Vietnam, a "liberation struggle" he said, falsely billed as a fight against Communism.

On Liberia, Mr. Fancher said, his group is unyielding. "There is no situation where it would be appropriate to send in troops," he said. "It is exclusively an African problem."

The perception that American concern toward Africa is based on its natural resources or geopolitical jockeying is widespread, and President Bush has not managed to allay such suspicions, despite his recent African tour. The president's five-day, five-nation trip was largely shrugged off as a photo opportunity. And black Americans remain deeply skeptical about the war in Iraq, with opposition ranging from 65 percent to 81 percent in the polls.

Liberians have made much of their historic ties to America. They flaunt their love of things American, their use of the dollar, their English, their taste for American television shows. They recall the role played by freed American slaves in founding their country in the 19th century.

Archbishop Michael Kpakala Francis of Liberia, who pleaded for American intervention in meetings last week with lawmakers and administration officials, spoke of his nation's steadfastness as an ally, noting that Liberia declared war on Germany during World War II. Some African-Americans, however, are ambivalent about the connections between the two

nations, recalling that Liberia was founded by the American Colonization Society, which acted in the belief that blacks would never achieve equality in America, and should, therefore, be returned to Africa.

Nor does the black-on-black violence in Liberia resonate with black Americans in the way that South Africa did, with its epic struggle against white minority rule. While the triumph over apartheid is a story familiar to most black American children, Liberia's tangled history with the United States is not.

In the end, however, whether in Liberia or elsewhere, blacks are less easily persuaded that peace is likely to be founded through arms. When asked whether they believe peace is best achieved through military strength or diplomacy, Mr. Doherty, of the Pew Research Center, notes that blacks tend to support diplomacy by more than 15 points over whites.

"There does seem to be a more deep-seated reluctance to support military action," he said.