

Beyond the Troops-No-Troops Debate

By Emira Woods and Carl Patrick Burrowes | August 2003

Fueled by media images of carnage and desperation, a debate has been begun regarding a possible U.S. role in Liberia, but so far it has been all troops or no troops, without adequate attention to the big picture. The initial response of the Bush administration has been to send a military assessment team, which received a warm reception from war-weary civilians.

With two rebel movements closing in on the government of warlord-turned-president Charles Taylor, humanitarian conditions throughout the country are dire: half the population is malnourished and are facing outbreaks of cholera. In the capital, Monrovia, the war is affecting one and a half million people who have sought refuge. Once a vibrant and bustling seaport, the city lies in ruin, with no running water or electricity. Unemployment stands at 80% and the average income is U.S. \$83 per year.

The nation's eagerness for U.S. involvement is rooted in the deep and complicated ties that have bound the two countries for over 180 years. As is often noted, Liberia is an outgrowth of the United States, founded in 1822 as a haven for free African Americans. During World War II, the country provided bases for U.S. military campaigns in North Africa. After the War, Liberian iron ore and timber flowed to U.S. ports, while streams of American television shows, popular music, and well-known consumer brands went the other way. Liberia was a major supplier of natural rubber to the United States until the 1970s, when prices plummeted due to competition from synthetics. After the U.S.-trained army seized power in the 1980s, American military aid increased from \$1.4 million to \$14 million annually, effectively militarizing the society and allowing the expanded army to become increasingly repressive in its bid to retain power. Despite these long-standing relations, a devaluation of Africa's strategic value at the end of the cold war led the United States to

abruptly withdraw from Liberia, which contributed to the implosion of the state.

Given this history, the U.S. has an obligation to help with Liberia's recovery, but assistance ought to extend beyond the dramatic and militaristic. If Liberia is to break its cycle of violence and decline, six major peace-building tasks will need to be undertaken—all of which would benefit from American financial and technical assistance: establishing a governing structure; enforcing peace; stemming the flow of weapons to the region; kick-starting the economy; and recovering looted assets.

Establishing a Governing Structure

The most urgent task facing Liberia—and probably the most important—is the creation of a government capable of undertaking the difficult tasks of rebuilding and rehabilitation. Toward that end, Liberian politicians, including representatives of Taylor's government and two rebel factions, have been meeting for several weeks in Ghana to form an interim government. But these talks are following the same flawed script that between 1990 and 1998 produced four transitional governments, each of which collapsed. First, they are being conducted behind closed doors by many of the same self-selected warlords and political elites who have failed to produce a lasting peace in the past. Second, they have focused on distributing government ministries to rival military and political factions. In the past, this formula has produced an executive branch that is representative and inclusive, but also inefficient and prone to collapse



given the rivalries and antagonism it contained. It yields a structure without legitimacy or coherency, both sorely needed for the tasks of national reconstruction.

The Bush administration could help break this cycle by providing diplomatic support and security for the talks to be held in Monrovia, ensuring input from civil society, and scrutiny by the Liberian media. To reduce paralyzing antagonisms, nominees should be appointed only if they win support from three-fourths of the delegates participating in the talks. This would minimize participation in government by odious human rights violators and encourage the selection of fresh candidates, producing a more coherent and deliberative interim government. More importantly, Liberians should be encouraged to address their legacy of severe human rights abuses through a Truth and Reconciliation Commission or a War Crimes Tribunal—or both.

Supporting Peace Enforcement

While well-trained and -equipped American Marines may have a role in peace enforcement, they are likely to be more effective and less politically polarizing if employed in a multilateral force with African troops. Many members of such a force could be drawn from those who served in Liberia as peacekeepers in the 1990s and, in the process, gained valuable knowledge of the terrain, along with technical and managerial experience. One negative consequence of previous West African peacekeeping efforts, however, was the deleterious impact of unplanned military expenses on the coffers and economies of the region. Ghana, for example, suffered record fiscal deficits in 1992, due to peacekeeping costs, and Nigeria spent in excess of \$500 million. This time around, the United States should help shoulder a larger share of the financial cost of peace enforcement.

Stemming the Flow of Weapons

The United States can also help with tracking and stemming the flow into West Africa of small and light arms, almost all of which originate in Western countries. In 1997, West Africa harbored 7 million firearms, with AK-47 rifles available in some markets for as little as \$20. Despite a UN-imposed embargo, arms shipments continued to arrive in Liberia every two to three weeks through sophisticated international smuggling networks. And the situation has been exacerbated by U.S. arm sales to Guinea, a major supplier of one Liberian rebel faction. The eruption of war in neighboring Cote d'Ivoire means the region is even more awash in rapid-fire assault rifles, shoulder-fired rockets, and mortars. These types of weapons require sophisticated tracking because they are not only cheap and highly portable, but also easy to conceal and smuggle. The United States could help curb illicit trafficking by supporting efforts in the United Nations to develop common standards for weapon exports and by closer monitoring of international arms brokers.

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Demilitarizing the Economy

If the goal of engagement in Liberia is to win international goodwill, the Bush administration would do well to place less emphasis on the landing of Marine amphibian units in place of assistance from an engineering brigade. Previous peace-building efforts in Liberia have failed, in part, because they paid inadequate attention to reviving the economy. Demilitarization was treated as an event, in which guns were exchanged for rice, rather than as a process. This time around, the United States, through the UN, could help anchor peace efforts by providing financial and technical help for restoring electricity and running water. Small-scale public works jobs could help to wean fighters away from pillaging and looting, while clipping the wings of warlords, whose

influence is often rooted in patronage. And ex-combatants employed in these projects are less likely to destroy what they have helped to build.

Canceling the National Debt

Given the desperate needs of Liberians, especially in the areas of education and health services, the Bush administration should take immediate action to cancel Liberia's odious debt, 30% of which is owed to the United States. During the decade-long war, debt servicing was all but abandoned, resulting in ballooning arrears. According to World Bank figures, Liberia's debt grew from \$813 million in 1981 to \$1.9 billion in 2001. At this rate, over 40% of all export earnings would be required to service the debt, in a country where the average annual income is \$83.

As noted by John Snow, U.S. Treasury Secretary, in reference to Iraq, the people "shouldn't be saddled with those debts incurred through the regime of the dictator who is now gone." But, where Saddam Hussein left palaces, electric grids, and oil refineries, Liberians stand to inherit nothing but debt—and ruin.

Recovering Looted Assets

The Bush administration could also aid in recovering wealth that was looted from Liberia over the past ten years. With help from a vast network of arms dealers, shippers, diamond syndicates, and timber buyers outside Africa, local warlords have pillaged forests and mines, often moving natural resources to Western and Asian markets via the same sealed shipping containers that brought arms. As a result, Liberian funds in Swiss banks total \$3.8 billion, higher than accounts of South Africa and Nigeria, both of which are more industrialized and populous.

Add to this figure funds held by non-Liberian members of this international syndicate—and those held by their Liberian collaborators in non-Swiss banks—and the wealth extracted during this decade of turmoil is staggering, much of it obtained under forced-labor conditions through terror. Using the same tools employed in identifying the financial assets of terrorists and drug smugglers, the United States could help Liberia regain all ill-gotten assets held by Taylor and his collaborators—both local and foreign, as well as by rebel leaders and those recycled politicians offering themselves for positions in a new transitional government. A thorough and wide-ranging asset recovery program would help deter corruption in the long-term and ensure that the cost of rebuilding Liberia does not fall disproportionately on American taxpayers.

For humanitarian and historical reasons, the Bush administration should respond to the Liberian crisis, but a lasting peace will require more than boots on the ground.

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Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF), a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC, online at www.irc-online.org) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at www.ips-dc.org). ©2003. All rights reserved.

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Recommended citation:

Emira Woods and Carl Patrick Burrowes, “Liberia: Beyond the Troops-No-Troops Debate,” (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, August 2003).

Web location:

<http://www.fpiif.org/papers/liberia2003.html>

Production Information:

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Editor: Erik Leaver, IPS

Layout: Tonya Cannariato, IRC

