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LIBERIA: THE DISSOLUTION
OF PRIVILEGE

Part I: Seeds of Discontent

by J. Gus Liebenow



The struggle for fundamental changes in the social, economic, and political order in Liberia which culminated in the coup on April 12, 1980, had been long in its gestation.

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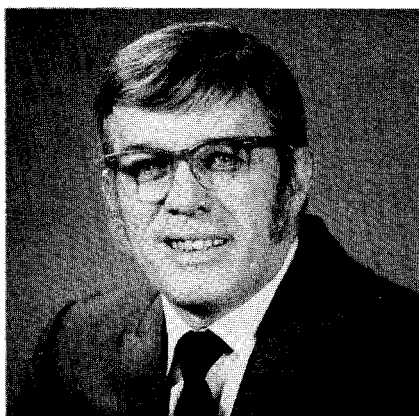
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Part I: Seeds of Discontent

On April 12, 1980—in the same week that Zimbabwe attained its independence from a form of settler-colonial domination—one of Africa's strangest cases of dependency rule also came crashing to an end in the western part of the continent. Following a litany now so familiar to contemporary African politics, a group of 17 noncommissioned officers and enlisted men broke into the Executive Mansion in Monrovia during the early hours of that April morning and assassinated President William R. Tolbert. The leader of the coup, 28-year-old Master Sergeant Samuel Kanyon Doe, was virtually unknown to the greater public. Before the gunfire had ceased, an additional 26 Liberian members of the security staff had also died, and a massive roundup of former officials began.

Ironically, both as leader of Africa's oldest state and as current Chairman of the Organization of African Unity, William Tolbert was to have gone to Zimbabwe to play the role of the godfather at the birth of Africa's newest state. Now, Africa's oldest republic had suddenly, like Zimbabwe, become one of its newest societies. For the coup by Master Sergeant Doe was not a mere palace revolution. Rather, the coup was bound to bring about fundamental changes in the social, economic, and political order in Liberia. In the view of most observers, the colonial-like relationship that had been established over the 16 or more indigenous tribal groups by the descendants of those who had launched the settlement at Monrovia in 1821 had been irrevocably ended. The externally oriented national motto—"The Love of Liberty Brought Us Here"—had

been replaced by the signature of the Doe revolution—"In the cause of the People, the struggle continues." Underscoring its symbolic significance, not only the tribal origins but also the very youth of the coup leaders as a group contrasted sharply with that of most deceased or arrested Americo-Liberian officials. The latter were chronologically twice or three times the age of Doe himself, and also represented an ideological posture which had been much earlier repudiated in most African states.

The struggle which culminated in the April 12 coup had been long in its gestation. Indeed, the depth of hostility that lay beneath the surface had been masked to the outside world by the very urbaneness and sophistication of those young diplomats and other officials who represented Liberia abroad during the past two or three decades. They radiated confidence and had provided the image of a stable, developing society. Thus, it was the coup itself and not only the incidents associated with it that surprised many of the leaders of other African states—particularly Liberia's immediate neighbors.

The discontent, however, had always been there, and there have been many anomic breakthroughs during Liberia's 160 years of existence as a political community. Few of the protests were sustained, whether they came from the tribal sector, such as the Kru and Gola who had resisted incorporation into the Liberian state until well into this century; or whether they were the challenges from political dissidents, students, and others within the Americo-Liberian group itself. Indeed, it was only during the 12 months preceding the April 12 coup

that the fever of discontent attained a sustained and organized character.

As a form of nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonialism in Africa, the Liberian case differed from most examples in which the essential imperial governing force was external. In this respect Liberia shared a parallel experience with Ethiopia and with the Afrikaaner republics in South Africa. In each of these instances, a group which was basically internal to the continent had extended its political, economic, and social control over its less powerful indigenous neighbors. In doing so, each manifested the same techniques of expansion as the European colonialists. Thus, the Liberian settler group asserted its claims to sovereignty over an expanded area in West Africa based upon direct "purchase," conquest, journeys of exploration, and treaties of "friendship and commerce," which were curiously transformed into deeds of ownership on the part of the settlers.

The settler community—or Americo-Liberians as they came to be called—was of diverse origins. Pivotal to the group, in terms of setting the dominant norms, were the freed persons of color from the United States. These had purchased their freedom and sailed to West Africa under the general protection of the American Colonization Society (ACS) and related groups of prominent white American sponsors. The motivations of the members of the ACS were varied, ranging from unquestioned humanitarianism to the crass desire to rid the American cities of a group which had not been successfully integrated into America's "melting pot," and whose presence set an unwanted example

of freedom to those blacks still in slavery. Associated with the settlers of United States origin were the various accretions from the West Indies, including many who departed from Barbados after the West Indian Uprising of the 1860s. Finally, there was a group of Africans who had never seen the New World but had been rescued from slaving vessels by the British and American navies and deposited on the "Grain Coast" to start a new life. Whether their origins were present-day Nigeria, Ghana, or elsewhere, this lowest status group within the Americo-Liberian fold came to be called "Congoes."

Grossly outnumbered by the tribal people who were gradually incorporated into the Liberian political community, the Americo-Liberians today constitute probably no more than 5 percent of the estimated 1.7 million inhabitants of the country. In the earliest years the settlers survived under the protective eye of the American navy. Indeed, one Lieutenant (later Commodore) Matthew Perry played a key role in the initial settlement and subsequent survival of the group. As the American shield was gradually withdrawn, however, the Americo-Liberians themselves developed the firepower and the military skills needed to bring under political control the members of the Vai, Bassa, Grebo, and other groups who had earlier threatened to throw them back into the sea. The Americo-Liberians imposed a set of dominant cultural norms for the new state which were roughly modeled after those of the society across the seas that had rejected them. These norms included the Christian faith; monogamy; a commitment to private ownership and free enterprise; an increasingly Liberianized version of the English language; a preference for American styles in clothing, food, architecture, and literature; and the creation of a political system which superficially resembled that of the United States.

We cannot discount the support given the settlers in their struggles with the indigenous population by the British, French, and Germans—particularly when American interest waned in the period following the Liberian declaration of independence in 1907. Nevertheless, the techniques developed for domination of the tribal people were largely of

settler inspiration. Central to the control strategy was the maintenance of solidarity within the settler group itself. In the social realm, it meant that endogamy, or marriage within the group, was preferred over both formal and informal liaisons across the "tribal-civilized" divide. In actuality, many liaisons did take place, and the offspring were incorporated into the Americo-Liberian group. In economic terms, solidarity meant the monopolization of commercial activity by the settler group and the restriction of the concept of private ownership in land to that group as well. In political terms, it meant not only the exclusion of tribal participation in national politics, but it also led to the emergence of Africa's first one-party state. Once it consolidated its power in 1877, the True Whig Party leadership viewed formal opposition as repugnant, since it allowed for creation of a "subversive" coalition between tribal leaders and dissident minorities within the settler fold itself. Finally, there was the solidarity of the Christian churches and the unity provided by that social-political-religious institution known as the Masonic Order. In many ways, the Masonic Order was the spiritual guardian of the settler ascendancy within the new Liberian society. Political leadership in the national society and leadership within the Masonic Order bore a close approximation to each other. Indeed, the Masonic Order served to a degree as the counterpart of the Poro and other secret societies of the Gola, the Mende, and other tribal groups. The Masonic Order kept the potentially dissident settler "in line."

Complementary to its strategy for in-group settler solidarity were the policies developed with respect to the tribal majority. Although international pressure compelled the settlers to grant citizenship status to the tribal people, the individual Kpelle, Loma, or Mende related to the national community in a different way than did his settler counterpart. First of all, in an effort to fend off competing European claims to the hinterland, the Americo-Liberians during much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had attempted to insulate the hinterland from European commercial, missionary, and other influences. Foreign commerce was limited to the coastal ports and missionaries were seldom

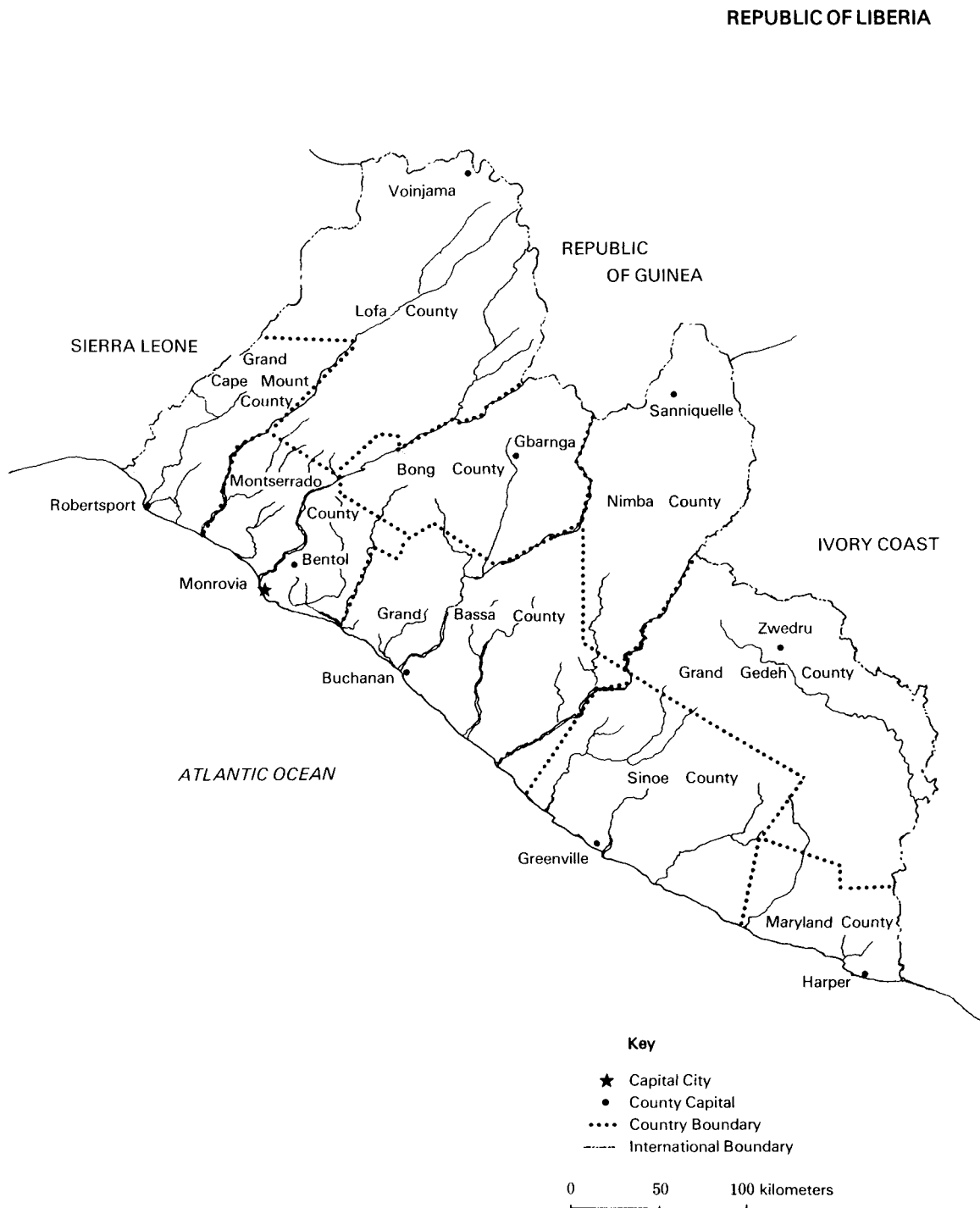
permitted to go more than 50 miles inland. The only external contacts the tribal people were to have were the Liberian commissioners, soldiers, and the occasional settler who had opted to "make farm" in the interior and to adjust his social relationships to fit the tribal circumstances.

Equally important to the control strategy, a tribal person lacked rights as an individual citizen; rather he was a member of a legally defined corporate group. His social and other relationships were covered by a legal code distinct from that which applied to the settler citizen. He owned land only in the sense that he shared in its use as a member of a tribal community. When representation and suffrage were extended, the paramount chiefs cast the votes for the entire group. As a member of a corporate group, the individual was responsible for the actions of his fellows and could sustain a group fine for some alleged violation of Americo-Liberian law.

Emulating the British efforts at indirect rule, the Americo-Liberians at the turn of the century co-opted the traditional political leaders into the evolving political system. In return for the maintenance of peace in their areas and the payment of taxes collected from their tribal constituents, the traditional authorities were given regular salaries, assured prestige, and license to use or abuse the person and services of their own subjects without the customary tribal restraints on their actions. In cases where chieftainship did not exist, the Liberians simply appointed paramount, clan, and town chiefs. In addition to representing the corporate political interests of the tribal constituents, the chiefs were the main contact point between the tribal person and the new society in terms of labor recruitment for government, private settler, or foreign economic concerns. Indirect rule preserved the diversity of tribal customs and institutions regarding marriage, land tenure, and other matters. Thus, in addition to the great divide between settler and tribal persons, at least 16 other major cleavages based upon ethnicity were preserved within the new political community.

The Tubman Era: Experiments in Orchestrated Change

The inauguration of William V. S. (for Shadrach) Tubman as President



Adapted from Transportation Map,
courtesy of the Embassy of the Republic of Liberia.

in January 1944 signaled a marked change in the Liberian political, economic, and social environment. In a way, however, the stage had already been set for change by two developments of the preceding decades. The first was the assumption by the Firestone Corporation of some abandoned rubber plantations and the privilege of exploiting other acreage as well. This started the tribal people on the road to a monetized economy, as well as providing the government with revenues which it could employ for developmental purposes. The second event was the reaction of American and European leaders to the League of Nations charges in the early 1930s regarding labor recruitment practices that bordered on involuntary servitude. As a consequence a president, vice-president, and other officials were forced to resign, and the country was virtually ostracized until the promised reforms took place.

The programs as well as both the accomplishments and shortcomings of Tubman's efforts at orchestrated change have been described in greater detail in my book *Liberia: The Evolution of Privilege* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1969). Suffice it here to state that Tubman recognized that the tribal interior could not be kept in "cold storage," insulated from the waves of change that were already sweeping the rest of Africa even prior to World War II. Accordingly, he opted for an "Open Door" policy with respect to encouraging foreign investors to exploit the natural resources and trade opportunities of Liberia. One resource had only recently been discovered, namely the high-grade iron ore which existed in large quantities in Bomi Hills, Nimba Mountain, and other locations (some of which were smuggled in from Sierra Leone) and the prospects of exploiting the fine timber as well as cultivating cocoa, coffee, and other agricultural commodities for export. The "Open Door" policy would give the government the revenue to build the roads, the hospitals, and the schools needed to placate the growing nationalist agitation by the tribal inhabitants. The revenues would also provide the means for maintaining more effective control over the tribal people and thus continued Americo-Liberian supremacy.

Elements of the new control strategy had actually emerged during the nineteenth century. I refer to the predominance of politicians and lawyers over merchants within the Liberian settler group. Many of the "merchant princes" of the early decades of Liberian history had been eliminated as a result of the worldwide economic depressions in the more industrial states and a consequence of the steamship, making Liberian sailing ships obsolete. From that point onward at the end of the nineteenth century politics became king. Such economic benefits that did accrue to the settler class came as the consequence of involvement in politics, and only seldom was the situation the reverse. Liberians who operate primarily as economic entrepreneurs posed a threat to the political system. Not only might they establish linkages with tribal economic entrepreneurs but they might make demands upon the governmental and legal system which would threaten settler supremacy. Thus, under both the Firestone development and the Tubman "Open Door" policy, the real economic entrepreneurs have been expatriate Americans, Europeans, Lebanese, and others. As foreigners, they have been constitutionally barred from direct participation in Liberian politics, and indirect involvement could lead to their summary expulsion. The foreigners provided a safety valve against the change which might have occurred if lower status Americo-Liberians or even tribal persons had developed economic careers independent of the True Whig political system. The poorer settlers and tribal persons would participate in the new economy, but largely as unskilled or semiskilled laborers. In contrast the leading political families within the Americo-Liberian class reaped some of the major internal benefits of foreign development. They did so through acquisition of shares in the foreign companies; through membership on the boards of directors (including all the perquisites but few of the real responsibilities); through scholarships for their children to study abroad; and through outright extortion of the Lebanese merchants and other more vulnerable expatriates. Nominally, at least, the number of Liberian businessmen and rubber farmers seemed to grow significantly during the Tubman

period. Invariably, however, the legal owners were the absentee national political leaders. The management of these "private" concerns were, in many cases, West Indians or even alien Africans, who were more subject to manipulation than were Liberian citizens.

Along with the improved standard of living which wage employment and expanded governmental services were to bring to the tribal people, Tubman's "Unification Policy" brought about a dramatic transformation in the social and political relationship existing between the Americo-Liberian minority and the tribal majority. For the first time since the settlers had landed in Liberia, it had become respectable for a tribal person to retain, or revert to, his or her original name, wear *lapas* or the traditional homespun gowns, and to take pride in tribal art and music. Ending a political system which I had heard President Tubman himself in 1960 describe as "colonial," the system of county government at the coast was extended into the provincial areas of the interior. Suffrage, moreover, as well as representation in the legislature was granted to all individual adult property-owning citizens. And gradually, the legal distinctions were removed which had prevented tribal persons from owning property on a freehold basis or to sue and be sued in national courts as *individual* citizens. From time to time a tribal person was named to a cabinet position or diplomatic post, and the broadening of the scholarship program permitted more and more tribal youths to go abroad for education. On the emotive level, a conscious policy arose directed toward eliminating all public references to the dichotomy between Americo-Liberians and tribal persons, "civilized" and "native" and other invidious distinctions.

Without denigrating Tubman's efforts at national integration, it was clear that the overwhelming thrust of integration was in the direction of accepting settler rather than tribal norms of behavior. As suffrage was extended, moreover, elections within the single party system became mere ratifications of the status quo. As hinterland citizens were accorded representation in the national legislature, power had already

gravitated to the executive branch. And as posts in government were allocated to tribal persons in growing numbers, the control over the key positions in society remained ever more firmly in the hands of those families who would guarantee continued settler control over the changing political community. As I had demonstrated in a sociogram in *Liberia: The Evolution of Privilege*, a number of leading settler patrons—through marriage, divorce, remarriage, and informal sexual liaisons—had created elaborate family dynasties. Cabinet posts, seats on the Supreme Court, ambassadorships, and other political positions were monopolized by the families of this relatively small cluster of leading patrons. The circulation of posts in government reflected not so much an advancement of talent as it did the rise and fall in political standing of a key patron. Individuals, moreover, frequently made decisions about marriage and divorce with an eye to improving political and social standing. Any enterprising young tribal person who wished to enter this privileged circle normally did so by being adopted as a "ward" of an Americo-Liberian patron or by acquiring an Americo-Liberian spouse.

It was the leading settler patrons who controlled not only significant social institutions, such as the Masonic Order and the ministry and lay offices in the prominent Protestant churches, but they also dominated the only legitimate vehicle for political expression, the True Whig Party. Opposition parties under Tubman were ephemeral, seldom lasting from one election to the next. They could never be assured that their candidates could actually campaign or that their votes would be counted. Indirect vehicles for political expression, such as cooperatives and trade unions, were either outlawed or their activities tightly circumscribed with regard to tactics (such as the strike or boycott) and leadership. The President's son, Shad Tubman, Jr., for example, was once the head of the association of trade unions. Student organizations at the University of Liberia, Cuttington College, and elsewhere occasionally engaged in protest activity, only to find the reaction of the Tubman government to be swift and harsh.

Despite the appearance of a dictatorial regime, Tubman had managed in his 27-year presidency to forge strong empathetic bonds with both tribal people and with various strata of the Americo-Liberian community. While supporting settler norms, he was not averse to publicly criticizing the old guard for their acquisition of landholdings in the tribal areas and their continued abuse of the tribal people. To those younger Liberians seeking a change in the political environment, the opportunities to study abroad, the availability of the foreign press in Monrovia (despite an occasional banning), and other mechanisms contributed to making Liberia under Tubman an "open society" of sorts.

The Tolbert Era — "Après nous, le déluge..."

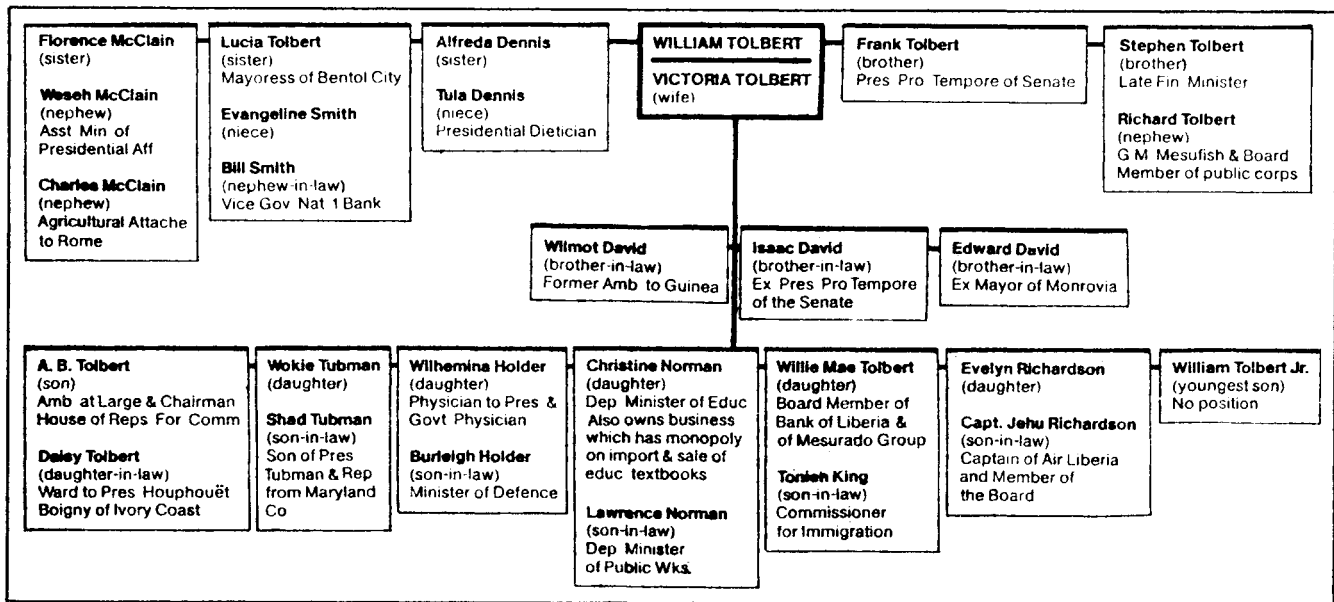
At the death of William Tubman in London in 1971, it fell to William R. Tolbert, Jr., President Tubman's Vice-President for 19 of his 27 years in office, to reap the wild winds of change. The Tolbert record is curiously mixed. In sheer physical terms, for example, the transformation of Liberia's roads and highways, the construction of new schools and hospitals, the completion of a new railroad to Buchanan from Nimba, and the building of many new office structures and homes in all of Liberia's cities had taken place at a more impressive pace than had been true under Tubman. Liberia's new national image under Tolbert had been a key factor in attracting at an accelerating rate the foreign capital needed for development. While it is true that the growing middle class in Monrovia and other cities was suffering from the spiral of inflation, it is also true that their burden was a far cry from what citizens of Ghana, Nigeria, and other West African states were experiencing. The very scope of the expansion of governmental and private enterprises meant that tribal youth and lower income Americo-Liberians acquired new skills, new employment opportunities, and other benefits. In the field of education, progress was evident everywhere. The University of Liberia, for example, had become a respected institution of higher learning. Another index: I could find only one bookshop in Monrovia in 1960; whereas in 1980 I counted over 20 bookshops, many well stocked with paperback books on literature,

science, practical arts (language, bookkeeping, beekeeping), and other fields—including a large display of very explicit "adult" books.

There was another side to the Tolbert coin, however. The new roads which provided enhanced education and employment opportunities to tribal persons, for example, also provided better access to the collectors of that odious regressive hut tax. The new roads also made it possible for the "honorable" to accelerate their "purchases" of tribal lands—which constituted one of the greatest land grabs in modern African history. The roads, moreover, facilitated the recruitment of labor for the mining and plantation enterprises of both foreigners and the Americo-Liberian politicians. The net effect of the preceding was that the roads and their aftermath broke up the traditional family as a social security unit. Since farmers no longer had an assured claim to the land they cultivated, they dropped both subsistence and cash crop agriculture in favor of wage employment in the enclave sector of the economy. This in turn meant that Liberia had to import rice and other basic foodstuffs, which not only aggravated its balance of payments problem, but also forced urban Liberians to pay more for the less nutritious imported foods.

It is true that jobs were created during the Tolbert era. It is equally true that the ranks of the urban unemployed in Monrovia and elsewhere had swelled dramatically as did urban crime, slum dwellings, and a general demoralization. The jobs that went to the educated portion of the tribal sector and to the lower rung Americo-Liberians inevitably fell far below their expectations and usually lacked the salary, fringe benefits, and job security accorded an identically trained offspring of an "honorable." A few more persons of tribal background did appear in the legislature, the courts, and the Cabinet as well as in the second echelon in many departments. Lacking patrons, however, they might be removed for a trivial infraction of a rule while a scion of an honorable would suffer no more than a slap on the wrist for corrupt practices on a grand scale.

Frequently Tolbert appeared to be on the verge of recognizing the



The Tolbert family tree and office-holders: an example of deep-rooted nepotism. Courtesy of *New African* magazine, May 1980 issue.

deep-seated inequities in Liberian society and especially the plight of the tribal poor. In the final analysis he substituted rhetoric for action or retreated in the face of the greed and pressure from the old guard. With great fanfare, for example, Tolbert launched a program to increase public housing in Liberia. Indeed, from 1973 to 1980, five new housing projects were completed. Only one of these, however, actually catered to low income families; the remainder were allocated to middle class occupants, with the "honorable" reaping the profits from rentals.

Difficulties arose for Tolbert even in the one area in which he prided himself for fulfilling Liberia's proper leadership role as Africa's oldest republic. In Tolbert's advocacy of a militant stance against white regimes in southern Africa, in his assertiveness within the councils of the Organization of African Unity, and in his pursuit of more meaningful regional cooperation, Tolbert was projecting a modern, progressive image for Liberia. Frequently, however, his efforts as an all-African leader were bumbling, such as his secret midnight flight to Biafra during the height of the Nigerian civil war, or his mysterious bilateral talks with then-Prime Minister John Vorster of South Africa, which gave

the latter a kind of legitimacy denied him by African leaders to that point. With respect to Tolbert's positive contributions, it must be asked: "who benefited?" Perhaps Tolbert's southern African stance helped the liberation cause, if only because it broke the ranks of conservative states that had remained muted on the subject. Perhaps the new international image of Liberia made it easier for World Bank and International Monetary Fund representatives to "sell" Liberian requests to their bosses because Liberia had become a force of international significance. The final bill for Tolbert's massaging of his own ego through international adventurism will ultimately be paid by future generations of Liberians. Included in this reckoning will be the repayment of the loans for the construction in 1979 of the OAU center beyond the free port in Monrovia. One estimate is that it took over \$200 million to build the white elephant resort hotel and the 53 very posh head of state chalets adjacent to it.¹ Add to this the construction of the new airport, the lighting of the 60 kilometer road from Roberts Field to Monrovia, and the providing to each of the 53 delegations 7 cars, color television sets, and other "amenities."

Perhaps the most critical indictment of Tolbert, however, came with respect to the issue of corruption. Not only did he tolerate it in others

(which Tubman did as well in a less outrageous fashion), but the President and the members of his family engaged in corruption in a most blatant way. The President's brother Stephen, who served intermittently as Secretary of Commerce under both Tubman and Tolbert until his death in a plane crash four years ago, was a prime example. He used his official position, with all the instruments of persuasion and obstruction, to gain substantial control of many foreign and domestic businesses. Indeed, any private Liberian entrepreneur who seemed to be succeeding in a business that Stephen Tolbert coveted could be sure that export licenses would be delayed, government auditors would pay surprise harassing visits, and that he might even be the victim of outright sabotage. The Tolbert family had almost monopolistic interests in the fishing industry, housing, food distribution, transport, catering, and even the sale of charcoal to the urban poor. The Tolberts had acquired tribal land in the hinterland with a vengeance. The control of the political system by a few key patrons had been perpetuated under the Tolbert regime. The rules of the game were the same as under Tubman; all that had changed were the names of the central figures, many of whom were the offspring, siblings, and cousins of the President and his wife.²

1. "Machet" in *West Africa* (July 23, 1979), p. 1299.

2. For an update, see *The New African* (May 1980), p. 26.

The cold statistics produced by Tolbert's own Ministry of Planning and Economic Affairs revealed the growing distance between the elite and the masses in Liberia: 4 percent of the population owned more than 60 percent of the wealth! In more visible terms the distance was epitomized in the blatant arrogance of the ancestral home of the Tolbert clan, a few miles from Monrovia. When I visited Bensonville 20 years ago it was a humble village with a dirt road serving as the main street. The houses were up on stilts and constructed of wood and corrugated iron, with shutters instead of glass windows. It had probably changed little since the 1860s when Tolbert's grandfather and other immigrants from South Carolina and the West Indies had settled there. During the nine years of Tolbert's presidency, however, Bensonville—renamed Bentol—had taken on all the negative imagery of a Palace of Versailles in the days of the Bourbons. Bentol was now a city with more than a score of opulent villas lining the well-lighted, carefully manicured boulevards. Each member of the Tolbert clan had his private estate with a high steel picket fence and an elaborate security system designed to keep out the poor. It became complete with a private zoo and an artificial lake for motorboat racing and waterskiing. The scale of the new post office and other public buildings of what had become the new county seat of Montserrado County was out of all proportion to the small elite population to be served. The stark contrast between the splendor of Bentol, on the one hand, and the squalor of Monrovia's slums and the general poverty of any upcountry village, on the other, could—in the words of one of my Liberian friends—"be described in a single phrase: *utterly obscene!*"

What finally undermined both Tolbert and the Whig aristocracy was the inability of the system to cope with the need for substantial political change. Initially, the successor to the consummate politician, William Tubman, appeared to be a remarkable political craftsman in his own right. Indeed, most analysts—including myself—had regarded Tolbert as at best an interim successor who would hold office until a stronger, more astute political



leader came along. That was still the educated guess when Tubman died in London in 1971.³ Tolbert's close identification with the settler community seemed far too apparent to placate the recently involved tribal leadership. When interviewing him in 1960, I found him to be reserved, humorless, and a bit of a "stuffed shirt" who was ill at ease on social

3. Robert A. Smith, "A Wholesome Functioning Society": President William R. Tolbert, *A Political Portrait* (Monrovia, 1971, p. 1ff.

The late President Dr. William R. Tolbert, Jr. Photo courtesy of the Embassy of the Republic of Liberia.

occasions. Tolbert, moreover, was viewed with contempt by other Whig politicians—such as Speaker Richard Henries—who regarded him as little more than Tubman's errand boy. There was, of course, already the liability of his family's rapacious greed. In addition to Stephen Tolbert, brother Frank Tolbert (later President pro tempore

of the Senate) had "purchased" large tracts of land in Bong County.

As one elder Liberian commented to me about William Tolbert: "There was one leopard that did change his spots." Laying aside the tuxedos and Fifth Avenue business suits which had been his trademark, President Tolbert adopted the open-necked safari jacket worn by many other African leaders. He strained to appear folksy with tribal and other leaders and to spice his public pronouncements with the Biblical references so dear to the hearts of the Whig aristocracy. Even more than Tubman, Tolbert became a frequent visitor to every county in the republic. In addition to acceleration of Liberia's development programs, he attempted to carry forward Tubman's Unification Program by downplaying some of the more offensive symbols of settler rule, such as the holiday celebrating Matilda Newport (the settler equivalent of Molly Pitcher) and the symbol "The Love of Liberty Brought Us Here." Some of the offensive language of the Constitution was being considered for elimination at the time of his death.

Despite a promising start in adjusting to the new political realities, Tolbert seemed incapable of sustaining his momentum. His democratic posturing gradually gave way to all the trappings of royalty: the processions of limousines, the long lines of schoolchildren along his route of return from the airport, and the erection of statues and other monuments in his honor. Increasingly he became more guarded in his public appearances, and the huge fences surrounding his properties and the Executive Mansion were signs of a growing suspicion he had developed in his relationship

with the people. He mingled less and less with the crowds. Increasingly, too, his rhetoric regarding the need for reform of the system seemed patently insincere, particularly when the observable realities differed so drastically from the sycophantic praise heaped upon Tolbert by the government-controlled news media, by the never-ending tribal delegations, and by the pulpit announcements of the Whig politicians-cum-pastors. Evidently irritated, he lashed out quickly at public criticism of himself and his family. In response to pamphleteer Albert Porte's cataloguing of Stephen Tolbert's efforts to "buy the country," the President permitted his brother to bring a crippling civil damages suit against Porte. In typical fashion, the presiding judge for the trial was Chief Justice James Pierre—who just happened to be Stephen Tolbert's father-in-law. Equally repugnant was Tolbert's failure to muzzle the arrogance of his son, A. B. Tolbert. Indeed on the CBS "60 Minutes" show taped in Liberia in December 1979, A. B. Tolbert not only claimed that he would be the next President of Liberia, but that he hoped to become the President of *all* of Africa someday!

Tolbert's greatest weakness with respect to reform was his constant

vacillation. What he graciously conceded on one day, he ruthlessly took away the next. In the process, he not only alienated the old guard of the Whig aristocracy, who regarded concessions as a sign of weakness; but he outraged the young dissidents who felt that he was not a man whose word could be trusted. It was an economic issue, however, rather than a strictly political problem that brought his vacillation clearly into the open and began the ultimate unravelling of his power. I refer to the demonstrations and riots which occurred on April 14, 1979, in response to the announced 50 percent increase in the price of a bag of rice. Thus the groundwork for the popular acceptance of the coup of April 12, 1980, had actually been laid 364 days prior to that event. The rice riots clearly had raised the level of dissent to a transcendent level.

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