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LETTER FROM LIBERIA | JULY 27, 1998 ISSUE

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THE DEVIL THEY KNOW

BY JON LEE ANDERSON

In Balamah, a village surrounded by a patchwork of forest and small farms in central Liberia, I asked a boy if there had been much killing in the area during the recent civil war. “Too many people!” he exclaimed. “Much killing!” Who, I asked, had done the killing? I named some of the warring factions. The boy waved his hand and nodded, a gesture I understood to mean “All of them.” I asked, “Why?” and he replied, shrugging, “They killed because they had power.”

When I was a teen-ager, in the early seventies, I spent a year in Liberia living with a geologist uncle and his family, and I visited Balamah several times. I danced there for the first time in my life, with a circle of youngsters who chanted and banged sticks on cracker-tin lids. I even learned some words of the local Kpelle language, and was given a Kpelle name, Saki—which I was told meant “Tall Man”—that I was very proud of. I hiked into the jungle beyond Balamah looking for elephants, and met children who had never seen a white person. They shrieked in terror at the sight of me. I was also present once when a bush devil came through. He was on a mission to capture children for one of the mysterious bush schools that indigenous Liberians attend to acquire the knowledge and the ritual scars that will enable them to become full members of their tribe.

Graham Greene describes bush devils in “Journey Without Maps,” his account of a trek through Liberia in 1935. “The school and the devil who rules over it are at first a terror to the child,” he writes. “It lies as grimly as a

has seen the masked devil and has been told of his supernatural power; no human part of the devil is allowed to show . . . because it might be contaminated by the presence of the uninitiated, but it seems likely also because the unveiled power might do harm; for the same reason no one outside the school may see the devil unmasked for fear of blindness or death.”

The bush devil who came to Balamah when I was a boy arrived after dark with an assistant. They heralded their entry into the village with musical instruments, and the entire community scattered in terror, racing to their huts. I was told to lie face down and not look up until the devil had passed. If I disobeyed, my host told me, a curse would be placed on him.

In those days, Balamah was reached along a narrow footpath through dense jungle, and its roofs were thatch. Now a little red clay road links it with the outside world, and most of the roofs are tin, but not much else has changed. The walls of the houses are still made of mud, and there is still no electricity. I asked after the Paramount Chief, and was informed that he was still alive, but was away. Then a barefoot old woman wearing a head wrap pushed through the knot of villagers, extended her hand in greeting, and called me by my Kpelle name. A young man explained in English that she was the chief’s wife, and what she wanted to say was that she remembered me. When I asked if the bush devil was still there, too, the villagers exchanged uneasy glances but nodded positively and waved their hands vaguely in the direction of the forest. One of the young men told me that was why Balamah was so quiet that day. The villagers were staying close to home because the devil was thought to be out, and might pass by at any moment.

Graham Greene was in Liberia in 1935 speculating about bush devils because he wanted to take time off from writing fiction and to have an adventure in a place where the blank spaces on maps were still stamped, tantalizingly, with the words

another agenda. British government reports told of horrific massacres committed against civilians by the Liberian President, Edwin Barclay, and Greene apparently had been asked by the Anti-Slavery Society to find out what was going on. He unexpectedly ran into the President soon after he crossed the border between Sierra Leone and Liberia, and the two men sat down to chat. President Barclay was accompanied by a contingent of soldiers and hammock bearers and a gramophone on which he played Josephine Baker records. As the two men talked, Greene recalled, "Africa, lovely, vivid and composed, slipped away, and one was left with the West Indies, an affable manner, and rhetoric, lots of rhetoric. But there was a lot of energy, too: [Barclay] was a politician in the Tammany Hall manner." Liberia's constitution is modelled on that of the United States, and Greene asked him if he had powers similar to those of an American President. Barclay replied with enthusiasm that his authority was greater. "Once elected," he said, "and in charge of the machine . . . why then, I'm boss of the whole show."

The current President of Liberia, Charles Taylor, is also very much the boss of the whole show, and has similarly ambiguous qualities. Like Edwin Barclay, he has been accused of horrible acts of cruelty and depravity, yet—also like Barclay—he has great charm. Taylor, who was elected President a year ago, after fighting for seven years in a terrible civil war that virtually destroyed the country, is an urbane man with an economics degree from Bentley College, in Waltham, Massachusetts. He enjoys Handel and Bach—"not Beethoven"—and his favorite singer is Mahalia Jackson. His favorite movie character is Dirty Harry. He is athletic, and keeps in shape by regularly swimming and playing tennis and that very American game basketball.

The President is known formally as Dahkpannah Charles

Ghankay Taylor. Dahkpannah means "Supreme Ze," the title given to the ultimate chief of all sixteen of Liberia's indigenous tribes. Ghankay, Taylor's name from his mother's tribe, the Gola, means "Strong in the face of adversity." The English, Christian part of his name, Charles Taylor, is quintessentially Liberian; the country also abounds with Buchanans, Coopers, Johnsons, and Sawyers, and some years ago there was even a general named George Washington. Members of the ruling class in Liberia have traditionally been descendants of the African-Americans who began settling on the wild shores of West Africa's Grain Coast in the eighteen-twenties. They were sponsored by the American Colonization Society, which was implementing a "back to Africa" policy for freed slaves. Gradually, after years of hardship from disease and warfare with the indigenous population, the Americo-Liberians, as they were called, secured a coastal foothold and voted for self-rule. They formed the True Whig Party and chose "The Love of Liberty Brought Us Here" as their national motto. In 1847, Liberia (for "liberty") became Africa's first republic. Its capital, Monrovia, was named for James Monroe.

Despite the fact that during the civil war Charles Taylor commanded one of the most vicious armies of modern times, and is widely believed to have abused his power for personal enrichment on a grand scale, he has an impressive roster of liberal American friends and acquaintances that includes the Reverend Jesse Jackson and former United States Attorney General Ramsey Clark. Taylor enjoys an especially close relationship with former President Jimmy Carter, a fellow-Baptist, who travels frequently to Liberia to oversee "democracy building" and human-rights programs that the Carter Center foundation operates there. Taylor's lawyer and P.R. man in Washington, D.C., is Lester Hyman, a Kennedy protégé and the former chairman of the Democratic Party of Massachusetts. Hyman says that when President Clinton was in Africa this spring he telephoned Taylor from Air Force One and gave him

Presumably, the Presidential pep talk had to do with Taylor's efforts to keep peace in Liberia. Between December, 1989, and November, 1996, an estimated two hundred thousand people were killed in the war, and as much as eighty per cent of the population was displaced. The violence spilled over into Sierra Leone, which succumbed to its own version of the Liberian nightmare, and Guinea and the Ivory Coast were inundated with hundreds of thousands of refugees. A regional peacekeeping force, the Economic Community of West African States Ceasefire Monitoring Group, or ECOMOG, sent in troops, as did the U.N., and the United States conducted three separate Embassy evacuations. For a time, it seemed that the conflict was unresolvable.

Liberia has always been a harsh place, but for most of this century it was one of the most stable countries in Africa. It had not been colonized by Europeans, and thus avoided the violent independence struggles that began to disrupt the continent in the nineteen-fifties. It wasn't until 1980, when the government was overthrown in a military coup led by Master Sergeant Samuel K. Doe, that Liberia was inflicted with the kind of openly despotic misrule that is a feature of life in much of Africa. During the multi-sided civil war that started nine years later, sadistic teen-age killers sporting names like General Fuck Me Quick, Babykiller, and Dead Body Bones arbitrarily executed civilians and decorated checkpoints on the roads with human heads and entrails. Often on drugs, wearing fetishes they believed made them impervious to bullets, and garbed in costumes ranging from novelty-store fright masks to wigs and women's bathrobes, these murderous adolescents raped, pillaged, and slaughtered at will. Many engaged in cannibalism, eating the hearts and genitals of their slain enemies in order to enhance their "power."

Charles Taylor's fighters perpetrated some of the worst

Lester Hyman says that Taylor reminds him of Lyndon Johnson, and he believes that Taylor will become a great African leader. Ramsey Clark admires Taylor personally and points out that he went to war against the repressive Doe regime, which had received close to half a billion dollars in aid and military assistance from the Reagan Administration. African-American congressmen, like Donald Payne, of New Jersey, see Taylor as a link between two countries with unique historical ties. "I always felt Liberia was like a symbolic motherland to African-Americans," Payne says. He likes Taylor "because he's intelligent; he knows what sells here, and he's from over *there*. *He has the knowledge of both worlds.*" Lester Hyman says he knew from the first time he met Taylor, in 1991, that he was "a man we could work with."

The terminal at Roberts field airport, thirty-five miles outside Monrovia, is a torched husk, and the road into town snakes through a depopulated, marshy green landscape in which the dominant features are a long line of electrical pylons with no wires, and roofless, burned-out houses. Bumper slogans on buses say, "Rejoice, God's Word Is the Best" and "Every Disappointment Is a Blessing." In the city, which spreads untidily over a promontory on

reminder of the important role that American Protestant missionaries have always played in Liberia. There is the Eternal Love Winning Africa missionary radio station, the Fullness of Time Evangelistic Ministry, the Living Water Baptist Church, and God's End Time Ministries, Inc.

Policemen and ECOMOG troops still man roadblocks all over town. Refugees live in shanties built on the remains of destroyed homes; there is no electricity except for those few people who own private generators; and running water is scarce. The town's hardscrabble businesses, like the Survival of the Fittest Tailor Shop and a food kiosk called Neutral Ground, have assimilated Liberia's recent history. The placard for an artisans' workshop reads, "Creations Showroom: Center of Rehabilitation for the Tortured, War-Wounded, and Disabled."

Charles Taylor lives in a neighborhood called Congotown, which borders the ocean on the outskirts of the city. He has built himself a huge new house there, and several of his aides have homes nearby. Taylor's compound, which is surrounded by high concrete walls, has a private chapel, tennis and basketball courts, and a swimming pool. It is built into the incline of a steep hill and overlooks a verdant bushland that becomes a swamp in the rainy season.

President Taylor rarely makes public appearances, but most days, around midmorning, he leaves his residence under heavy guard and is driven downtown to the Executive Mansion in a high-speed convoy of two dozen new Mercedes-Benzes and Land Rovers and trucks full of bodyguards. The accompanying arsenal includes assault rifles, RPG-7 rocket launchers, and heavy machine guns. For everyone but the President, access to the mansion is through a nearby slum, where several roadblocks are manned by members of the President's own Special Security Service, former guerilla fighters. Armed with AK-47 assault rifles and frequently drunk, they often hassle visitors for "dash," or bribe money. Other security boys hang around the entrance to the mansion, many of them wearing three-

look for all the world like Haitian Tontons Macoutes from the Duvalier years. The ones inside invariably demand identification, and then ask, "Boss, what you got for me?"

The mansion is a curving, eight-story building constructed by Israeli contractors in the nineteen-sixties. It has an especially sinister history. Samuel Doe started his coup there in 1980 by ritually murdering President William Tolbert. Ten years later, Doe met his own grisly end when he ventured out of the mansion to meet with Prince Johnson, one of Charles Taylor's lieutenants, who had broken away from Taylor to lead his own faction. Johnson tortured Doe to death, and recorded it on videotape.

Just outside the walled grounds of the mansion there used to be a statue commemorating Liberia's Unknown Soldier. It was destroyed last May during a purification rite ordered by President Taylor to rid the mansion of evil spirits. There were "persistent reports," Bishop Alfred Reeves, one of the President's senior religious advisers, says, that a child had been buried alive under the monument as a sacrifice. "We had said this mansion needed to be cleansed ever since the assassination of President Tolbert," Reeves says. "We said it needed to be consecrated, but no one really listened to the church until Mr. Taylor came to power."

Taylor is a self-described "deeply religious" man, and an ardent numerologist; seven is his lucky number. Accordingly, seventy church elders from a variety of Christian denominations separated into groups of seven and spent a week going through the mansion from floor to floor, room to room, praying and fasting. The consecration may not have worked, however. There is a black cat prowling around, which has Reeves worried, because, as he explains, this is no ordinary cat: "This is a witch transformed into a cat." The cat is said to have leaped either from a small hole in a painting or from a statue of the Virgin Mary. It landed on a praying clergyman and tried to pluck out his eyes. In early June, the black cat reappeared, reportedly attacking a Presidential guard before escaping again.

Taylor's consecration ceremony fed a rampant rumor mill in Monrovia. The gossip includes a story about the President having an employee killed for some transgression, and then filling a bucket with his blood, which was kept under the Presidential bed until Taylor wanted to bathe in it. The diplomatic community is divided about how much of this sort of thing to believe, but most Western observers agree that Taylor is, as one of them put it, "incredibly superstitious and obsessed with his personal security."

Juju, as witchcraft and sorcery are called in Liberia, has long been associated with Liberia's political culture, and its most malevolent practices—ritual human sacrifice and cannibalism—are usually linked to people seeking power or to those who fear losing it. Samuel Kofi Woods, the director of the Justice and Peace Commission, a human-rights organization run by the Catholic Church, blames Taylor for what he says is an upsurge of politically motivated ritual murders. Woods says that the consecration ceremony sent the message that Taylor believes in juju. Indeed, in early June there were several local news stories about "heart men" at large. Human hearts were reportedly being removed and eaten by candidates for various offices to enhance their chances of winning election.

One afternoon, Charles Taylor formally received me in the carport of his residence, and I asked him about the juju aspects of his consecration. Taylor is a short, trim man, with copper-colored skin, a moon face, and a closely cropped beard and hair that are fading to gray. He sat in a small chair covered in beige velour and shiny brass, next to a black Mercedes sedan. He wore an ivory-colored lace caftan shirt and pantaloons, python-skin slippers with gold buckles, a diamond-encrusted gold watch, gold-rimmed sunglasses, and a black baseball cap with "President Taylor" spelled out in gold braid. There was a small side table next to him, and next to it a white plastic lawn chair. He smiled and motioned to the chair: "Sit down, my dear, sit down." A carved oxblood-colored swagger stick lay on the table, a kind of sceptre that he carries around with him. I asked him

tree," under which no grass grows, and which causes any animal that comes near it to die. He explained that he began carrying the stick during the war.

It was a Saturday, a Presidential day off, and Taylor let me know right away that in order to see me he had forfeited an opportunity to watch the World Cup match between Nigeria and Spain.

Nevertheless, he seemed to be in an expansive mood. He was eager to talk about money, about Liberia's limitless potential for becoming a wealthy country. This seems on the face of things to be an unrealistic position, since Liberia's foreign debt stands at more than two billion dollars and the national budget for 1998 is only forty-one million dollars. The war took a terrible toll on the country's infrastructure. Iron mines and rubber plantations were pillaged. Small farmers are unable to plant because they lack seed and basic tools. None of this seems to daunt Charles Taylor, however.

"There is gold everywhere in this country. Diamonds! You just have to dig and you find gold," Taylor said enthusiastically. The President waved toward a husky man who was standing uncomfortably out in the sun on the driveway about ten feet in front of us. Taylor introduced him as Jenkins Dunbar, the Minister for Lands, Mines, and Energy. "This is the man who is going to find us oil, which will be our salvation," Taylor said. "Aren't you, Dunbar? When are you going to find that oil? It better be pretty soon!" Dunbar froze, laughed nervously, and quipped, "Soon, very soon, Mr. President. If it's there, you can be sure we'll find it!" About twenty minutes later, Taylor noticed that Dunbar was still standing in the sun, fidgeting, and he told him to "find someone" to get him a chair. It was an extremely hot day.

I asked Taylor whether the consecration could accurately be described as an exorcism. He guffawed loudly. "Oh, my dear, I wouldn't say it was an exorcism! No . . . Over the years, the war years of Liberia, the bloodshed, we have often fasted and prayed. We are very, very, very religious people, we are praying people, just as in the United

happened here is that there were all kinds of stories about what went on in high places in Liberia. You know, in some parts of Africa there are still people who believe in human sacrifice. These things are all vanity. And so this Executive Mansion—after the war, and we finally get to be President, we thought it essential to consecrate this. And the kind of purification was to be coming in and praying and thanking God for having brought a President to this building.”

I asked Taylor whether he felt any moral responsibility for the atrocities committed by his troops during the war. “I have already apologized to the Liberian people, I have asked their forgiveness, and I have also forgiven them,” he replied. When I pushed for a fuller accounting, he said, “Wars are terrible wherever they are, and things happen you cannot account for. Sometimes things may happen in one place when you are in another place. What is important is that once it happens you make sure that justice is done.” There had been “excesses” committed by his troops, Taylor conceded, but whenever a serious crime like rape or murder had come to his attention he had executed those responsible. At any rate, he insisted, the estimates of Liberia’s war dead were “far too high—I don’t think we lost even twenty thousand people in the war.”

I picked up my camera to take Taylor’s picture, but as I did an adviser tapped me on the back and said, in a low voice, “Please don’t. If you take a photograph of him like this, you’ll make him look like a typical African dictator.”

“T*aylor is like an onion,” a United States State Department official said to me. “You peel and peel, and you think you’ve gotten to the core, and you have to keep going.”*

Taylor was born in the little town of Arthington, outside Monrovia, in 1948. He was the third of fifteen children born to a former servant girl and a rural Baptist schoolteacher who also worked as a sharecropper and a judge. Taylor says that he was in his early teens

They perceived the need for political change in Liberia, which was then led by William Vacanarat Shadrach Tubman, a cigar-chomping politician who had been in office since 1944. Tubman was one of the Americo-Liberians who had ruled Liberia since its birth as a nation. Their lighter skin tone was a badge of social distinction, and those who could trace their lineage back to the first settlers enjoyed a special status. Their culture was a quaint mimicry of the antebellum South: they were merchants and planters, Freemasons, spoke Pidgin English, attended Baptist churches, sang gospel music, used American dollars as legal tender, and saluted a red-white-and-blue flag.

To all intents and purposes, Liberia was the United States' bastard colony in Africa. Liberia declared war on Germany during the Second World War, and the Americans built the Robertsfield airport. Liberia's economy was always dominated by or linked to American interests. The Firestone Plantations Company has been the country's largest single employer for much of this century. Firestone ran two hospitals, twenty schools, and the Coca-Cola bottling plant. Bethlehem Steel was a partner in Liberia's biggest iron-ore mine. Liberia's ship registry, which sells "flags of convenience" to the world's maritime fleets and has long been a major source of the country's revenue, was and still is administered by Americans.

Charles Taylor was an outspoken student leader, and after Tubman died in office, in 1971, he became a vocal opponent of his inept successor, William Tolbert. In 1980, Tolbert invited Taylor to come home from school in Massachusetts for talks as the head of a student delegation. Taylor went, and was there several weeks later when Tolbert was killed by Samuel Doe. Doe was an ethnic Krahn. For the first time in Liberia's history, a descendant of the indigenous people ruled the land.

On the morning after Tolbert's murder, Taylor walked into Doe's military headquarters and, as he says, "immediately got to work." Nasty purges followed the coup, including a public execution, on a city beach, of several prominent members of Tolbert's cabinet, and

stop things," he "did a lot with a team of others to try to curb some excesses." He soon secured a post as director of the General Services Agency, which oversees government purchasing. But in October of 1983 Taylor fled the country, and shortly after his disappearance Doe accused him of embezzling nearly a million dollars in state funds. The following year, Taylor was arrested by U.S. marshals in Somerville, Massachusetts, and he spent sixteen months in jail while his lawyer, Ramsey Clark, fought his extradition. Back in Liberia, Doe was becoming increasingly despotic, but he continued to receive a steady flow of military and economic aid from the United States. Liberia was an important American Cold War ally, the host of C.I.A. communications facilities and one of the Navy's Omega navigation stations, and Doe was an avowed anti-Communist, so the human-rights abuses of his regime were overlooked.

In 1985, Taylor escaped from jail and disappeared for several years. He is loath to discuss this period, saying coyly that he plans to save the details for his autobiography, but for a time he was in Libya, receiving military training as Muammar Qaddafi's guest. Then, on Christmas Eve, 1989, he reappeared on Liberia's eastern border, transformed into a guerrilla chieftain with a small army. By August, 1990, rebel troops were on the verge of seizing Monrovia from Doe when an ECOMOG force intervened. After Doe was murdered, in September, 1990, an interim government was formed. It was backed by ECOMOG troops from Ghana, Sierra Leone, Gambia, Guinea, and Nigeria, with Nigeria by far the dominant presence. ECOMOG and Taylor became the principal adversaries in the widening war, which rapidly came to include other factions as well.

As the warlord of the country's largest rebel faction, the National Patriotic Front, Taylor became the most powerful, and possibly the wealthiest, man in Liberia. He is believed to have made millions from diamonds, gold, and timber looted from the mining areas and rich timber forests that his forces controlled. Taylor established what

town of Gbarnga, and it remained his base for most of the war. For a time, he also lived in the manager's residence at the Firestone rubber plantation, an hour's drive from Monrovia, in an antebellum-style mansion with a veranda and tall white pillars, the plinths of which are now painted an incongruous red. A businessman in Monrovia told me that the red "keeps out evil, jujus, or some shit." Mass graves were later found at the plantation and in the suburbs of Monrovia that had been occupied by Taylor's men.

More than a dozen peace agreements and nearly twice as many ceasefires were negotiated before an effective demobilization and disarmament process was begun, late in 1996, and preparations for an election soon followed. Predictably, Taylor's campaign was the best financed. Taylor was also the most visible candidate—the only one to have a helicopter at his disposal and privately owned radio and television stations on permanent standby to broadcast his messages. Among the more memorable slogans of Taylor's campaign was "He killed my ma, he killed my pa, but I'm going to vote for him anyway," and "Better the devil you know than the angel you don't." Liberians got the message, and seventy-five per cent of the voters brought in the devil they knew.

The one-year anniversary of Taylor's Presidency is not a cause for rejoicing for a large segment of the Liberian population. In Gbarnga, the capital of Taylor's wartime Republic of Greater Liberia, at an open-air roadside bar with blue plastic awnings stamped "UNHCR" (for United Nations High Commission on Refugees), I met Martin O'Reilly, an Irish lay brother, who was drinking beer with three young Liberian men who were his students at the Catholic mission. We walked back to the mission to talk, and while we were in the refectory, shouting erupted outside. An angry group of disabled former Taylor fighters, squatters who had taken up residence in the mission compound, had gone in wheelchairs and on crutches to where my car was parked. They had seen me holding a camera when I drove in, and they suspected me of

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photograph them and make promises, they said, only to go away again and never return. They were infuriated, and threatened to lie under the wheels of the car to prevent me from leaving. One, a legless young man in a wheelchair, acted as spokesman. He said that his nom de guerre had been Prince Johnson, after the man who had tortured President Doe to death. He had been a good fighter, he said, and his comrades had suffered in order to bring this government to power, but now they had been forgotten. There were more than a hundred ex-fighters just like them in Gbarnga, he said, and soon, if the government did not help them, they planned to go to Monrovia and mount a protest.

The road down to Monrovia from the central plateau on which Gbarnga sits winds through a lonely panorama of jungle and overgrown farms. Most of the land is untended, and many of the houses are roofless, gutted. There is little passing traffic apart from jeeps representing one international relief agency or another, and an occasional flatbed truck ferrying huge logs—reminders of persistent reports that since the war President Taylor has continued to profit from massive, uncontrolled logging of Liberia's virgin forests. One of Taylor's brothers now oversees the Forestry Development Authority, and the logging, according to credible reports, is supervised by a former Taylor rebel commander and a band of armed ex-rebel fighters who are using forced labor to fell the trees. The government has issued a report denying this.

The welter of police and military roadblocks, so much a feature of life in Monrovia, is replicated in the countryside. At one checkpoint just outside Gbarnga, the officer in charge was openly hostile. He didn't ask for a bribe, but he conducted a tense and insistent interrogation. This was the roadblock where Samuel Dokie—a former Taylor ally turned critic—his wife, and several other relatives were arrested last November and then vanished. After several days, amid a mounting public protest led by Kofi Woods, their gruesomely tortured and burned bodies were found dumped on the outskirts of Gbarnga.

the biggest scandal of Taylor's Presidency. In the police investigation that ensued, Benjamin Yeaten, the chief of the Special Security Service, apparently admitted having ordered Dokie's arrest, for motives that remain unclear, and several S.S.S. men were charged with the murders. All of them were released, however, and although Yeaten was temporarily removed from his duties, he remains in charge of the S.S.S. I met him in Charles Taylor's presence. A slender, unsmiling man with watchful, almond-shaped eyes, Yeaten was supervising security for the President during a condolence call on the Nigerian Ambassador following the death of General Sani Abacha, the extremely corrupt and cruel ruler of Nigeria. (A few weeks after Abacha's death, Olusegun Obasanjo, the former President of Nigeria, who had been a political prisoner for three years, remarked that Abacha was "more than evil, more than sadistic, he was actually mad.")

Although Taylor had been for all intents and purposes at war with Nigeria during the years that ECOMOG, which was dominated by Nigerian forces, supported the official Liberian government in Monrovia, General Abacha and Taylor had enjoyed a good rapport. It was Abacha who had persuaded Taylor to agree to a ceasefire and to participate in the 1997 elections. At a press conference after his visit to the Nigerian Ambassador, Taylor expressed his bereavement over the death of his "brother" and announced his intention of flying to Nigeria to console Abacha's widow.

As soon as the news of Abacha's death broke, Nigerian ECOMOG jets based at Robertsfield airport took off and buzzed the Executive Mansion and President Taylor's home in an intimidating fashion. I had heard the startling roar of the jets myself. Apparently, Taylor was not as popular with some of the other military leaders in Nigeria as he had been with Abacha, and he was clearly anxious to shore up good relations with Abacha's successor.

During the press conference, a young bodyguard held what looked like a camouflage flak jacket intended for the President's use if

The security men were well behaved in Taylor's presence, but their frequent drunkenness, cajoling for bribe money, and hostile behavior during the daily Presidential convoys have led to speculation that Taylor's downfall might one day come not from old enemies or hostile Nigerians but from his own people. Only a few weeks earlier, a group of disabled former rebels had invaded the headquarters of the National Patriotic Party in Monrovia and taken several officials hostage. In another incident that was much talked about among Westerners in Monrovia, foreign diplomats who had been invited to a fiftieth-birthday party for Taylor in the Executive Mansion were roughed up by S.S.S. men who barged in and began eating all the food.

O*ne of the few Liberians willing to speak openly about accusations of corruption against Taylor is Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, a former World Bank economist who ran against him in the Presidential election last year. She came in a distant second, with less than ten per cent of the vote. Johnson-Sirleaf admitted to me that she had supported Taylor when he first planned to oust Doe, but she says that she backed away from him after he began killing people he saw as potential rivals. "It was clear that Taylor's aim was to put himself in power," she says, "not to challenge the status quo." Johnson-Sirleaf says that she considers the principal features of Charles Taylor's leadership to be "corruption, misappropriation, ostentation, oversized security, and self-aggrandizement." She believes that Taylor "wants to rape the state and then give it out, to create a patronage state."*

Most Western diplomats, relief workers, and businessmen in Liberia say that the pattern of "pillage and plunder" instituted by Taylor during the war years has continued during his tenure in office. "He's very corrupt," said one diplomat, who charges Taylor with operating a "dual fiscal system": the official one and a private system based on profits from the illegal extraction of timber, gold, and diamonds. Taylor is also believed to be receiving a cut of the profits from the

the monopolies he allows on the importation of rice and other necessities. The diplomat calculates Taylor's private revenues to be "possibly equal" to the official budget.

The day I spoke to Taylor in his carport, he talked feelingly of his concern for his fellow-Liberians, about their "need for a leader who understands" them. He had to be like "a father, uncle, godfather, teacher, and priest" to his countrymen. I asked him whether it was more important for him to be loved or to be respected by his people. "I want to be respected," he said. "If I just think about love, love, love, I'll get nothing done. People must pay taxes. I must prosecute people who violate the law. . . . I'd like to be loved by my people, but I'm going for the long term; I want to go for the long-term benefit of this republic rather than short-term love." Then he rose from his chair and walked away. He wanted to catch the remaining minutes of the Nigeria-Spain game. He was, he told me, rooting for Nigeria.

On my last night in Liberia, I was visited in the restaurant of my hotel by Samuel Kofi Woods and a social worker who provides therapy to Liberia's ex-combatants. The social worker told me about a young man who confessed that it had been his "job" to slit open the bellies of pregnant women at a roadside checkpoint. He and his comrades would take bets on what sex the fetus was. In recurrent hallucinations, the man sees the faces of his victims walking toward him, and he shouts out at them, "It wasn't only me!" This particular case, the social worker acknowledged, is hopeless, as is that of another man—a victim—he is treating. The man's entire family of eight were slaughtered in front of him; one of his children was picked up in the air and literally hacked in two before his eyes. The man had been left alive "so that his suffering would be greater." And it was; the man was drinking and drugging himself to death. The social worker himself had to undergo counselling, he confessed, after he witnessed killers tear the heart out of a living man, then boil and eat it. It happened in broad daylight in Monrovia, just two years ago, at a gas station near the Eternal Love Winning Africa road junction.

The social worker expressed his fears about the mental health of the many ex-fighters who have received no psychological counselling, but he said he was especially concerned about those who have been rewarded with jobs, weapons, uniforms, and power, like the youths serving in President Taylor's Special Security Service. He sees them as time bombs, psychopaths who, he predicts, will one day resort to violence to get "a piece of the action" that Taylor is now enjoying. "I almost feel sorry for the man," he said.

We talked for several hours. Kofi Woods left, and night fell. The social worker got up to go and we said our goodbyes, and then I sat back down at my table. Within seconds, two of Taylor's S.S.S. boys were staring down at me. They had been waiting, they told me, "for hours." I was a hard man to find. I recognized them as a particularly persistent pair from the Executive Mansion. I had been accosted by them in downtown Monrovia earlier, and they had telephoned my room the day before. Tonight, they wanted their dash. One smiled, the other glared. The glaring one's eyes were so bloodshot I could see little white in his eyes.

I masked my fear with anger. I raised my voice. How dare they follow me, come into my hotel? Why should I pay them anything? The red-eyed man just kept glaring, but the smiling one began muttering excuses. They hadn't been following me, exactly. They worked for "Executive Mansion intelligence," and were keeping an eye on Kofi Woods. This was more chilling than any harassment of me. In a parody of politeness, I said goodbye and thanked them for their visit. We shook hands.

The next day, Robertsfield airport was crawling with S.S.S. men. President Taylor had flown out early to Nigeria, and was expected back at day's end. Groups of officials came and went. Several lethal-looking Nigerian jets equipped with rockets flew off with great roars, heading toward Sierra Leone's civil war. As I got in line in front of the baggage counter in the crowded little makeshift terminal building, an official in a dark suit came in. He was surrounded by security men, who opened up a space for him. As he pushed past me, I

controversial national police chief, who has been accused of having led gangs of looters and a political death squad during the war. I had interviewed him at police headquarters a few days before and now I greeted him. He recognized me and extended his hand. "So you're leaving?" he murmured. I said yes and he replied, "Good," and moved on.

"Good?" I called after him. "What do you mean?"

Tate's entourage halted, and he turned toward me. "I mean it's good that you're leaving in one piece." Then he turned and walked away.



Jon Lee Anderson, a staff writer, began contributing to The New Yorker in 1998.



