



Liberia

# 1

## THE REBEL

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ON A SATURDAY MORNING in June 1992, the Liberian port of Buchanan sweltered in the dense tropical humidity of West Africa's rainy season. Four small boys ambled up a muddy and pothole-ridden sidewalk and entered a tea stall on the city's main street. They looked to be scarcely older than ten. Dressed in baggy jeans and grimy T-shirts, not much taller than the loaded Soviet-era Kalashnikov assault rifles they cradled in their arms, the boys shuffled heavily in big brown military boots that on them resembled the outsized paws on a puppy.

"How the day?" one of them muttered.

A shudder ran down my spine. The bullets were bigger than his fingers. The boy brushed by the stool where I was sitting and approached the woman who owned the stall. He lifted his fingers to his mouth. The owner dutifully fetched some bananas and buttered some rolls. The boys shuffled out into the street—no word of thanks, no suggestion of payment—savoring their breakfast as they walked.

It was six years since I had last visited Liberia, a country founded by freed American slaves and for a century and a half America's closest ally in Africa. In 1986 I had written some unkind words about the country's mercurial tyrant, Samuel K. Doe, and his confederates, and Doe had flattered me with a personal rebuke. "Lies, lies, lies, bias and misinformation," the president said of my work, and he banned its distribution in Liberia. The chief of Doe's personal militia, a notorious butcher named Charles Julu, whom I had singled out for his particularly egregious conduct, had let it be known that he could not guarantee my safety if I chose to return. A friend of mine, Gabriel Williams, one of Liberia's many fearless journalists, had apprised me

of these developments in a letter from Monrovia, signing off, "Keep fit and keep well, don't come to Liberia now."

So I had watched from afar as the country descended from repression into slaughter—from tyranny into lethal anarchy. On Christmas Eve, 1989, a band of insurgents invaded Liberia from neighboring Ivory Coast. Within months, in a spiraling conflagration that had long been feared, tens of thousands of Liberians were murdered, half the population was scattered into exile, and much of the country was bombed and looted into ruins. The much-loathed Doe was captured by a rebel gang and tortured to death. Charles Julu fled into exile.

Now, two years later, Liberia was in thrall to armed children and teenagers, to a mind-numbing array of con artists, embezzlers, and murderers, and to ghosts from its peculiar past.

The boys in Buchanan were soldiers in the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), the rebel force that had launched the war against Doe, and that at this moment of attenuated stalemate controlled 95 percent of the country outside Monrovia, the capital. They were among several hundred scruffy, edgy, blank-expressed members of the "Small Boys Unit" attached to the personal security force of Charles Taylor, the rebel leader. They were not paid, but neither were they hungry. They got what they wanted with their guns.

"Many of these boys are orphans of the war," Taylor told me when we met the following day. "Some of them saw their mothers wrapped in blankets, tied up, poured with kerosene, and burned alive." The rebel leader paused reflectively, then explained, "We keep them armed as a means of keeping them out of trouble. It's a means of control."

Charles McArthur Taylor is an Americo-Liberian, a descendent of the freed American slaves who founded Liberia in 1847. Buchanan, like Monrovia fifty miles up the coast, was named after an American president. For 133 years Americans acquiesced in and profited from the exclusionary rule of the Americo-Liberians. For decades Americans trained and equipped the armed forces that would violently seize power in 1980. In the last years of the Cold War, the Reagan administration contributed a half billion dollars in aid that helped soldiers of Samuel Doe's ethnic Krahn militias bludgeon their rivals into submission. With abuses mounting and alarm bells sounding, American officials were memorably obfuscatory. When Taylor's war finally came, in 1990, four U.S. Navy ships carrying two thousand marines floated off

the coast as the slaughter intensified, evacuating Americans, but declining to intervene.

Before Taylor's war few Americans could locate Liberia on a map of the seven continents. Once the fighting started, Liberia briefly captured our imagination as Hell on Earth, an especially lurid example of apparently senseless slaughter. Taylor against Doe, Gio against Krahn—the images that flickered across our TV screens were as inscrutable as they were chilling and bizarre. Sadistic teenage killers with names like “General Fuck Me Quick” and “Babykiller” raped, shot and beheaded at roadside checkpoints decorated with human heads and entrails. Fighters fortified by amphetamines, marijuana and palm wine sashayed irresistibly for photographers, decked out in looted wedding gowns and women's wigs and shower caps, or in novelty-store fright masks. Some sported fetishes they believed made them impervious to bullets. Accounts of cannibalism were commonplace, and apparently credible. Taylor's fighters, among others, were said to eat the hearts and genitals of their slain enemies to enhance their “power.”

The fact that so many of Taylor's fighters were children added an especially surreal element. One British newspaper carried a photograph of uniformed peacekeeping troops trying to lure Taylor's fighters out of the bush by offering them sweets and toys. Another featured a picture of a Taylor confederate looting a large teddy bear from a Monrovia shop.

Liberia's fifteen minutes of infamy seemed to spring full-blown out of the most sensational Western images of Darkest Africa. But Taylor's war, like Rwanda's genocide in 1994, was not as senseless as it seemed. In Liberia, no less than in Rwanda, there was method to the madness.

Charles Taylor comes as close as anyone in this volume to being outright evil—or “wicked,” as Liberians say. Race war was his method. By “race war” I mean not a war between whites and blacks but rather between groups distinguished by ethnicity, in which their ethnicity is a calculated instrument of mobilization. In this case it was a war between groups distinct not just from each other but from the man who set them against each other. It was Taylor's signature insight that someone else's will to mass slaughter, that of the aggrieved Gio people toward Samuel Doe's tiny minority Krahn, could be harnessed to his own will to power. “Kill the Krahn!” became his battle cry.

As many as 150,000 Liberians were murdered in the seven years between 1989 and 1997 out of Liberia's prewar population of 2.5 million, and 25,000 women and girls were raped, as Taylor made one disastrous miscalculation after another, survived to fight another day, and finally prevailed.

Like so many of the Big Men examined here, Taylor early on proved adept at turning a stalemated war into a lucrative business enterprise. He became the prototypical gangland impresario thriving in a lawless market. And like all of the others, Taylor is both a molder of his environment and a reflection of it. He is quintessentially a creature of Liberia's sinister history who became its master by exploiting and magnifying its most "wicked" features.

The story of Taylor's conquest of Liberia includes many of the threads in the larger pattern of evil that has consumed so much of the African continent in the decade since the end of the Cold War: the historical legacies of tyranny, the links between tyranny and anarchy, and those between ethnicity and organized crime. Not least, the swaggering, twisted orphans of Taylor's Small Boys Unit exemplified a time-honored method employed by racial tyrannies across Africa through the ages, from Monrovia to Khartoum to Johannesburg: let the natives do the dirty work, not least in war.

*"Peace is our answer"*

"There was no other way to get power from Samuel Doe than to resort to arms," Taylor was telling me now. "He killed people. He maimed people. He beheaded people. He raped students. He had wrecked the country. Nothing short of arms would have removed him from power."

The rebel leader and I were sitting in leather-upholstered chairs in the plush, carpeted, air-conditioned living room of his "official residence" in Buchanan. A satellite dish sprouted from the roof, and a big screen TV dominated a corner of the room. The scene was as cool and comfortable as any home in suburban America. By the standards of wartime Liberia, this trim, whitewashed villa was a veritable palace.

Buchanan, like Monrovia, is a quaintly seedy seaside port with salty air drifting in from the Atlantic Ocean and blending with the pungent emissions of teeming tin-roof slums on the city's periphery. Even before the war, loiterers and beggars patrolled the streets. The

beach was lined with mounds of garbage. Open sewers bred rats and mosquitoes.

I had spent the previous night in Buchanan's only functioning hotel, a dingy, roach-infested bungalow with candles for light and buckets for bathing. The night before that, Taylor's fighters, drunk and stoned, had set me up in what they presumed to be the choicest accommodation in town, the grimy, one-room hovel of a teenage prostitute named Irene. Her bedroom walls were decorated with extremely lewd pornographic magazine photos. Irene spoke no English. She stared at me uncomprehendingly when it became clear that I was in Buchanan to consort not with her but with "President Taylor," as the rebel leader had come to be known in the territories under his control.

Taylor was born in 1948 in a small Americo-Liberian settlement outside Monrovia called Arthington. He was the third of fifteen children born to a former servant girl and a rural Baptist schoolteacher and circuit judge. Like most children of the Americo-Liberian elite, he was sent to the United States to college after graduating from high school; he received a degree in economics from Bentley College in Boston, then did graduate work at New Hampshire College. Taylor spent nine years in the states, becoming an outspoken leader of the expatriate Liberian students movement and a vocal opponent of President William Tolbert's inept regime.

After Doe's coup in 1980, Taylor returned home, and, through his wife's family connections to one of Doe's co-conspirators, a charismatic soldier named Thomas Quiwonkpa, he succeeded in ingratiating himself with the new junta. The People's Redemption Council, made up as it was primarily of illiterate conscripts, was in dire need of capable managerial talent. Taylor shrewdly emerged as director of the obscure General Services Agency, the government's main procurement office. There he soon managed to amass a personal fortune by cleverly centralizing government procurement in his own hands and taking commissions on each contract he arranged. He also served, briefly, as deputy minister of commerce.

In 1983 Taylor was accused of embezzling \$900,000 from the purchasing agency he headed by negotiating bogus contracts with his own front company in New Jersey. Whether the charge was true or not is difficult to know. It may well have been politically motivated, for it was around that same time that Taylor's brother-in-law and military patron, Thomas Quiwonkpa, was falling out with Doe. In any

case Taylor fled to the United States, and the following year he was arrested by U.S. marshals in Somerville, Massachusetts. He spent sixteen months in jail while his lawyers fought his extradition. He finally escaped from the Plymouth House of Corrections by paying guards \$50,000 in bribes. He would pass through Mexico, Spain and France before returning to West Africa in late 1985 or 1986 and surviving two more stretches in jail for vaguely defined transgressions in Ghana and Sierra Leone, repairing to Libya for training in guerrilla warfare, and finally emerging in his present incarnation as rebel leader, racketeer and aspiring head-of-state.

Taylor comes across as an intelligent man, suave and urbane, articulate and smooth as butter. He has an oval face and a close-cropped beard and slits for eyes. His skin is several shades lighter than that of most indigenous Liberians—evidence of his Americo-Liberian roots. He has the disarming Americo-Liberian habit of calling friend and stranger alike “my dear,” as in, “The danger in this, my dear, is that we are involved in guerrilla warfare.”

Taylor speaks with a pretty close approximation of an American accent, as distinguished from the thick Liberian creole spoken by most Liberians. He speaks in a silken baritone, in measured, cadenced sentences that convey a thoughtful temperament. The words tumble out of him in a rolling, reassuring, sermonlike delivery. He says things like “I have always shown respect for other views and values, and I’ve always shown respect for the rule of law.”

For our encounter Taylor exchanged his battle fatigues for a pressed white cotton shirt, navy pinstripe slacks, and black Oxfords. He said he enjoys Handel and Bach—“not Beethoven”—and that his favorite singer is Mahalia Jackson. (I would later discover that these were personal touches he shared with nearly every foreign journalist he met). A bevy of obsequious aides were gathered around us, and a crew from Taylor’s fledgling TV station was deployed to record the great man’s interview with this presumably distinguished American correspondent.

“War is not our answer,” Taylor purred. “Peace is our answer.” On the other hand, he added, “I cannot be held responsible for the anger of my people. Here is my projection: I can see the people being very violent.”

From his rebel domain Taylor loomed over Liberia as a larger-than-life, infinitely potent political personality, an object of obsession for friend and foe alike. I heard him described as flamboyant, a woman-

izer, a con artist, a gangster, an “emasculator”—and also as shrewd, bold, magnetic. “He is a superb negotiator,” said one diplomat; “a deft political operator,” added another.

“He is much slicker than Doe,” I was told in Buchanan; “that’s what makes him dangerous.”

No one doubted that Taylor is a figure of immense cunning and ruthlessness, and monumental recklessness, who would stop at nothing—not mass murder, not gang rape, not even the wholesale ruination of his country—in pursuit of power and the loot that goes with it.

At the time of my visit with Taylor, Liberia’s war was in a lull. The country was split in two, with two governments, two economies, three currencies, at least four armed factions, and some twenty thousand armed “fighters” hustling for survival without pay—and with much blood on their hands for which they would rather not be held accountable. Rival militias were proliferating. Profiteers were milking the stalemate and stripping mines and forests. More than 700,000 refugees languished in limbo in neighboring countries. There were forces at play and interests at stake that suggested to many Liberians that renewed military conflict was likely. And they were right.

Three months after my visit, Taylor launched an assault on Monrovia code-named “Operation Octopus.” Attacking the capital from three sides, his drug-addled fighters bombarded residential neighborhoods, looted, raped and pillaged on an awesome scale, and murdered several thousand civilians. Taylor failed to take the city, however, and he was finally driven out by West African peacekeepers. He licked his wounds and bided his time.

### *“A mad, horrified people”*

“We have been angry a long time,” said Blamo Nelson, cochairman of SELF, the home-grown relief organization that was overseeing the distribution of food in besieged Monrovia at the time of my visit. Nelson’s mother had starved to death during Taylor’s war. “We all wear masks,” he told me. “Behind those masks is a mad, horrified people.”

Charles Taylor’s war was not a purely “tribal” affair. Taylor’s rebels sought to eliminate not just Doe’s ethnic Krahn but also people of means, people who wore fine clothes or lived in decent houses. The fighters assumed that people of means had collaborated with Doe. The Krahn suffered disproportionately not just because they were



Krahn but because their leaders had appropriated an inequitable and oppressive system and exaggerated its worst features.

It was the Americo-Liberians who built that system. Ultimately the Krahn, traditionally one of Liberia's poorest ethnic groups, took the fall for 133 years of simmering hatred born of envy. It is a sinister irony that Charles Taylor and many who bankrolled his war against that system are themselves Americo-Liberians.

Evidence of Liberia's American roots are pervasive all along the coast, from Robertsport to Maryland County. Quaint echoes of the antebellum South can be found amid the crumbling, mildewy streets. The freed slaves built tin-roof houses on the model of their former masters' dwellings, with pillared porches, gabled roofs and dormer windows, and they still stand, albeit unsteadily. Liberia's contemporary culture abounds with touches of inner-city Washington or Detroit. Taylor's radio station, KISS-FM, broadcasts up-tempo soul music, played by disk jockeys with names like Marcus Brown, "the guy with the glide who will put a smile in your slide." The cinemas show films like *Mean Mother*, featuring a protagonist who was "mean and wild, smashing the man and the mob for his woman."

Liberia's flag is a replica of the American Stars and Stripes, with a single star. The constitution—alas, for its neglect—was drafted by a Harvard law professor. The people have names like Sawyer, Cooper, Johnson and Richardson. They wear secondhand American jeans shipped in bales and sold wholesale to sidewalk hawkers. The police wear the discarded summer uniforms of the New York City police. The soldiers wear U.S. Army fatigues and helmets, with M-16's slung over their shoulders. Baptist churchgoers sing "Nearer Thy God to Thee." The protesters, when they can get away with it, sing "We Shall Overcome" and "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?"

Liberia was founded in 1821, the brainchild of the American Colonization Society, whose members were white Americans with a mix of motives, some philanthropic, others nakedly racist. Not a few of them feared the black "horror" likely to ensue with the coming of emancipation; they sought to establish a mechanism for ridding the United States of slavery's progeny. The small number of ex-slaves who took up the society's offer of free passage and returned to Africa likewise had a mix of motives: some were missionaries, some were entrepreneurs, some merely despaired of any hope for a better life in the United States. Their small settlement on the Atlantic coast of Africa was se-

cured by a blend of bribery, deception and coercion. The first deed of settlement was secured, at gunpoint, in return for three hundred dollars' worth of muskets, beads, tobacco, gunpowder, clothing, mirrors, food and rum, from a chief named "King Peter", who reportedly came only later to understand the full implications of the term "sale."

The first freed American slaves arrived in 1822, but white governors ruled the settlement on behalf of the Colonization Society until 1847, when Liberia was handed over to the settlers—the Americo-Liberians—and proclaimed Africa's first independent republic. The new country's motto, "The love of liberty brought us here," survives to this day. But the years of settler rule were characterized by severe exploitation of the indigenous inhabitants, who still constitute more than 97 percent of Liberia's 2.5 million population. Half the country's national income was enjoyed by less than five percent of the population. The ruling True Whig party, composed entirely of Americo-Liberians, maintained a kind of feudal oligarchy, monopolizing political power. While the settlers along the coast developed an elaborate lifestyle reminiscent of the antebellum South, complete with top hats and morning coats and a Society of Masons, the indigenous peasants eked out a meager, brutish existence on the thin edge of survival. Exploitation reached a nadir in the 1920s, when high government officials were implicated in a flourishing international slave trade and domestic forced labor.

Among those linked to forced labor was the Firestone rubber company, which operated the world's largest rubber plantation in Liberia. After World War I, which spurred the growth of the automobile industry in the United States, Firestone secured a ninety-nine-year lease for a million acres in Liberia. The Americo-Liberian elite was experiencing acute economic difficulties and hoped through the Firestone presence to solidify its position by strengthening its ties to American capital. Firestone in turn ensured its own stable source of rubber by becoming deeply enmeshed in the political and economic culture of the Americo-Liberians. The company provided spacious homes for government officials. It retained True Whig leaders on the company payroll. By 1950 Firestone alone was responsible for a quarter of Liberia's tax revenues.

Graft and repression peaked during the prolonged regime of President William V. S. Tubman, who ruled from 1944 to 1971. Tubman is said to have appropriated more money for ceremonial bands than for

public health; he devoted more than 1 percent of the national budget to the upkeep of his presidential yacht. Tubman created a personal cult based on an elaborate network of kinship and patronage, personal loyalty, the manipulation and co-optation of tribal chiefs—and force. He built an extensive secret police network and laid the groundwork for much of what was to come under Doe: a personal autocracy based on weak institutions and contempt for law.

But Tubman established himself as a reliable ally of the United States in the early stages of the Cold War, and this won him both financial and military support. It was during Tubman's rule that the United States built the Voice of America relay station for broadcasts throughout Africa and the Omega navigation tower for shipping up and down the Atlantic Coast. The American embassy in Monrovia became the main transfer point for intelligence gathered in Africa. U.S. military planes were granted landing and refueling rights on twenty-four hours' notice at Roberts Field, outside Monrovia, which had been built by Americans as a staging ground during World War II. Liberia cast a key vote in the United Nations in support of the creation of Israel.

Tubman's successor, William Tolbert, did try to liberalize the political machinery, but his reforms merely heightened expectations that could not be satisfied. One memorable confrontation in Monrovia, on April 14, 1979, almost exactly a year before Doe's coup, highlighted the wide gap between the ruling elite and the indigenous masses. At a time of intensifying hardship for most Liberians and increasingly ostentatious displays of wealth by the elite, Tolbert announced an increase in the price of rice, the Liberian staple. When it became apparent that Tolbert and members of his family stood to benefit personally from the price increases, residents of a seething Monrovia slum known as West Point rose up in a series of street demonstrations. Tolbert ordered the police to open fire on the unarmed demonstrators. More than forty were killed. The "rice riots," as they came to be remembered, created a groundswell of ill will from which Tolbert never recovered.

Unfortunately, the agent of change was the army. Originally called the Frontier Force, Liberia's army was created in 1907 as a means of securing the country's borders against French and British colonial encroachment. President William Howard Taft sent the first U.S. training officers to help out in 1912. The army assumed two essential

responsibilities: tax collection—one might say “taxation without representation”—and suppression of dissent. The army fought twenty-three brutal wars against indigenous uprisings, and the United States intervened directly in nine of them. By 1951 the United States had established a permanent mission in Liberia to train its army. Many top officers were sent to America for training. Samuel Doe was trained by the Green Berets.

The enlisted ranks were mainly illiterate peasants, school dropouts and street toughs. In the hinterland areas under their control, they were kings—unpaid but able to plunder what they needed, from cattle and rice to women and girls. It was a West African version of Haiti's *Tonton Macoutes*.

The Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL), as it came to be called, was a malignant organism in the body politic, inherently opportunistic, unlikely to be a source of progressive change. In retrospect it's clear that the institution of the army was a microcosm for what ailed Liberia. A gang culture flourished. Violence was rampant. Ties of blood and ethnicity were paramount. The construction of ethnic patronage systems by rival soldiers would become one of the most important causes of Liberia's subsequent collapse.

On April 12, 1980, Samuel Doe, then an unknown semiliterate master sergeant, and a band of sixteen collaborators—the youngest was sixteen years old—stormed the Executive Mansion in Monrovia, captured President Tolbert in his pajamas and disemboweled him. Two weeks later, in an unforgettable public spectacle that haunts Liberia to this day, thirteen members of Tolbert's cabinet were tied to telephone poles on the beach and mowed down by a drunken firing squad. There followed weeks of bloodletting in which hundreds were killed.

Nevertheless, Doe's coup was widely applauded at first. There was dancing in the streets of Monrovia. Casting himself as the liberator of the indigenous masses, Doe promised an end to the corrupt and oppressive domination of the Americo-Liberian elite and a more equitable distribution of the nation's wealth. He also pledged to return the country to civilian rule in five years. But he soon proved to be a lawless and brutal tyrant.

Master Sergeant Doe and his comrades styled themselves the “People's Redemption Council” (PRC), and they lost no time in consolidating their control. Within a matter of days after the coup, the PRC suspended the constitution and declared martial law. Political activity

was banned. Military rule evolved into a byzantine pattern of plotting and intrigue, alleged conspiracies, and executions by firing squad. In his first five years in power Doe executed more than fifty rivals, real and imagined, after secret trials. Scores of civilians were detained without trial for violating the ban on political activity. Informal charges ranged from plotting coups to "discussing Sgt. Doe's level of education." Doe, for his part, adapted to the perquisites of power in a manner familiar to leaders across the continent, expanding from the scrawny sergeant in battle fatigues to a blowfish-fat, self-proclaimed doctor in a three-piece suit.

"When the coup took place in 1980, it was an exact reflection of the kind of army that the system had produced," said Conmany Wesseh, a onetime student activist who spent a decade in exile during Doe's regime. "Arrest on mere suspicion, strip people naked, parade people naked through the streets, kill people on the beach after summary trials—the same acts that were carried out against my own father and others prior to 1980 were carried out against their creators. Doe was the embodiment of everything that had happened before. The difference with Doe was a difference in scale, not quality. If Tolbert did it twice, Doe did it a thousand times."

### *"Some rapes"*

Patrick Seyon, president of the University of Liberia, likewise emphasized the continuity from one regime to the next. "Those who found themselves in power after 1980 went along with the world that had been set in place by the freed American slaves," Seyon told me. "No one saw that there was something systemic in the level of inequality that existed. They followed right in line."

Dr. Seyon is a gentle, soft-spoken scholar with a wry wit and wispy white goatee. In 1981, when he was forty-three and vice president of the university, he was jailed for two weeks on suspicion of plotting to overthrow Doe's year-old government. He told me he received fifty lashes twice a day for eight consecutive days. Flogging has long been the most common form of summary punishment in Liberia. This, too, was a legacy of the old Americo-Liberian regime, under which common criminals were subjected to what was known as "breakfast and dinner," twenty-five lashes in the morning and twenty-five lashes in the evening.

“There were two of them, two soldiers,” Dr. Seyon recalled. “One of them used a fan belt from an army truck, doubled up. The other used a strip from a rubber tire. The rubber portion of the thing was removed, so that the fiber, the nylon, was exposed. First they put water on your back. Then they sprinkle sand on your back so that when the piece of rubber was used, you get traction. The sensation you got was as if your skin was being pulled off your back.”

The campus of the University of Liberia is a modest collection of tan and red cement-block buildings directly across the street from the Executive Mansion, on the edge of downtown Monrovia. It has been a focal point of conflict for years. In the 1970s it was the scene of protest against the regime of President Tolbert. In the 1980s the campus was roiled by protest and repression under Doe. In 1982 Doe issued an infamous edict, Decree 2A, banning all academic activities that “directly or indirectly impinge, interfere with or cast aspersion upon the activities, programs or policies of the People’s Redemption Council.” Faculty members and student leaders were repeatedly detained and harassed under martial law.

On August 22, 1984, in an event that left an indelible impression on a generation of Liberians, uniformed troops of Doe’s personal militia, the Executive Mansion Guard, opened fire on unarmed student demonstrators. They killed a still-unknown number of students. Doe’s justice minister at the time, Jenkins Scott, acknowledged there had also been “some rapes” on the campus of both students and staff, but the episode was never investigated, and no one was ever prosecuted.

In October 1985 Doe brazenly stole an election that was to have ushered in civilian rule. There were piles of burning ballots. The Special Election Commission appointed to verify the vote was abruptly replaced with a new panel stacked with Doe partisans. Opposition parties had been banned, criticism outlawed, newspapers closed, opposition leaders detained and beaten.

Doe by then was well on his way toward bankrupting the country. In a decade in power Doe and his cronies are estimated to have stolen about \$300 million—equal to half of the anemic gross domestic product for their final year at the till. Doe himself stashed \$5.7 million in a London branch of the notoriously corrupt, now liquidated Bank of Credit and Commerce International (BCCI). He had turned Liberia’s distinctive American panache—the U.S. dollar remains legal tender—into a lucrative money-laundering racket. At a time when Liberia’s le-

itimate economy was contracting almost by half, the number of banks in Monrovia rose from six to fourteen.

Liberia has always been a poor country. By the mid-eighties only one in four Liberians had access to safe running water—and only 6 percent in the rural areas, where most of the prewar population lived. Barely one in four adults could read or write, and only one in five school-age children finished elementary school. Infant mortality was ten times the American average. Life expectancy was fifty-two years.

Doe, for his part, had largely disappeared from public view by the time I arrived in 1986. Unpolished, inarticulate, consumed with the intrigue of barracks politics, Doe never went in for the kind of personality cult promoted by the likes of Mobutu in Zaire. His activities were usually not reported. His methods and motives were largely unknown to the general public. “This fellow,” as he was called in hushed conversations with a mixture of fear and derision, had had little success in dealing with his country’s mounting woes. The populist fervor that had greeted his sudden rise to power in 1980 was a distant memory.

My own first impression of Samuel Doe’s Liberia: On the day I arrived in Monrovia, in March 1986, I discovered I needed a new wallet. For more than a century the U.S. dollar had been the only currency in Liberia. After Doe seized power, corruption and mismanagement began outpacing the government’s ability to meet its payroll. So Doe started minting “Doe dollars,” heavy, octagonal coins that were officially valued on a par with the U.S. greenback. U.S. notes were soon trading at a premium on the black market, and Doe dollars fell to a third of the official rate. Inflation soared, one awkward result being that it was necessary to carry huge quantities of these coins around just to make petty purchases. The coins were too ungainly to carry in my pocket, or in my wallet. The solution was a heavily reinforced leather pouch, the kind of thing one associates with currency transactions in the Middle Ages. I duly obtained one of these pouches from a roadside vendor almost as soon as I emerged, pockets bulging, from changing traveler’s checks in the largest bank in Monrovia, the Chase Manhattan Bank.

I had been sent to Monrovia to investigate an event that would prove to be the catalyst for Charles Taylor’s war five years later. On November 12, 1985, barely a month after the stolen election, Taylor’s mentor, the erstwhile fellow putschist of Doe’s named Thomas Quiwonkpa, attempted a coup. The coup nearly succeeded, and Doe fi-

nally put it down with horrific violence, killing hundreds of presumed supporters of Quiwonkpa—mostly members of the Gio and Mano ethnic groups from the remote border region of Nimba County.

The “November 12 business,” as it came to be called, established an unprecedented new level of brutality and yielded a critical mass of enduring hatred for Doe—particularly among the Gio and Mano. This was the ethnic division that Charles Taylor would exploit for his own ends five years later. It was from Nimba County that Taylor launched his rebellion in 1990; he would call it “a continuation of November 12.”

### *“The November 12 business”*

All of Africa’s ethnic conflicts start at the top and spread downward. People hungry for power use violence as a means of achieving it. They use ethnicity to mobilize constituencies—above all, the militias they need to vanquish their foes and protect themselves.

Ultimately what happened in Liberia was that a personal rivalry developed between two of the putschists from 1980: Samuel Doe, the coup leader, and Thomas Quiwonkpa, perhaps his most popular co-conspirator. Their personal rivalry translated into tension in the ranks between their respective ethnic constituencies, Doe’s Krahn and Quiwonkpa’s Gio and Mano. After Quiwonkpa’s failed coup in 1985, the struggle ramified outward from the army into society at large, as Doe’s forces purged Gio and Mano from the armed forces and then punished Gio and Mano civilians, killing on a massive scale as a form of collective punishment. As late as 1997, all the nominal heads of the militias, including Charles Taylor, were former associates of Samuel Doe.

Liberia’s descent into all-out war was, among other things, a vivid refutation of the most widely accepted explanation for Africa’s ethnic wars: arbitrary borders. Africa’s borders were drawn up by the European colonial powers in Berlin in 1884, with no consideration for its multiple ethnic groupings. Some tribes were split apart, others were roped together, supposedly creating inevitable friction over state power and scarce resources. Many assume that Africa’s tribes are inherently hostile toward one another, incapable of peaceable coexistence or negotiated resolution of conflict. It isn’t true. Most African tribes live side by side without conflict.



The border between Liberia and Ivory Coast is a typically arbitrary border—the river that forms the border was nothing more than a dry creek when I was there. It slices directly through both the Krahn and the Gio territories. On the Liberian side of the border, the Krahn and the Gio descended in 1990 into a genocidal civil war. Yet on the Ivorian side, the Krahn and the Gio have lived peaceably side by side for as long as anyone can remember, and more than 100,000 refugees from Liberia's war settled peaceably among them after Taylor's invasion. I visited Danané on the Ivorian side in 1992, and I was able to interview Krahn and Gio refugees from Liberia, living in communities less than an hour from each other along a dirt road. From their competing versions of the war I was able to learn a great deal about the epic events of the previous decade that had led these two groups into a fight to the death on one side of the creek, even as their brethren on the other side continued living in harmony.

There were in fact no violent ethnic divisions among indigenous groups in Liberia before 1980, when the country was dominated by the Americo-Liberians. Liberia's sixteen distinct ethnic groups speak different dialects and practice different social and spiritual customs, but in their scattered domains across the overwhelmingly rural country, they frequently intermarried, traded with each other, and for the most part coexisted peaceably. After the 1980 coup, however, with indigenous Liberians exercising power for the first time, relations between Samuel Doe's Krahn group and almost all others became increasingly strained. This may have been inevitable to some extent, but Doe's erratic and increasingly violent method of personal rule inflamed the problem.

Before Doe took power Liberia's Krahn had been an obscure community comprising barely four percent of the population. For years it had been maligned by other larger groups, who considered the Krahn to be backward and uncivilized. After 1980, members of a tiny faction, or clan, within the Krahn community, most of them from Doe's own home village of Tuzon in Grand Gedeh County, began to emerge with what appeared to be a disproportionate share of the fruits of indigenous rule. The perception of special treatment may have exceeded reality, but there was no question that the Krahn were disproportionately represented where it counted: in the leadership of the armed forces. In addition to Doe, the commander in chief, Krahn soldiers

headed all the most important uniformed divisions within the army, including the vital Executive Mansion Guard, military intelligence, and all three mobile infantry battalions. The chief of staff of the army was Krahn. So, too, was the governor of the National Bank. In the manifold upheavals of Doe's decade-long rule, Krahn soldiers had responded to repeated protests, alleged assassination plots and failed coups by murdering, raping and pillaging on a huge scale.

Thomas Quiwonkpa was a Gio man from Nimba County. His coup attempt was widely popular. "The entire nation was jubilating," Isaac Bantu, the BBC stringer in Monrovia, told me, recalling the early-morning hours of November 12, when it appeared Quiwonkpa had succeeded in toppling Doe. "Hundreds of civilians were killed right in the streets when the tide turned."

After Quiwonkpa's coup failed, Gios and the linguistically related Manos were the main targets of reprisals. Krahn soldiers loyal to Doe herded hundreds of Gios and Manos onto the grounds of the Executive Mansion and the Barclay Training Center military barracks, stripped them naked, and killed them. Eye-witness accounts of what occurred in these two locations disclosed bloodcurdling brutality. Quiwonkpa himself was captured three days after the coup attempt, pummeled beyond recognition in front of many witnesses, and finally castrated and dismembered. His genitals were paraded before the public and then consumed by hysterical Krahn soldiers in accordance with a Krahn ritual that had long since been repudiated by most other groups in Liberia.

Evidence of ritual violence in Liberia, including widespread reports of cannibalism, would feature prominently in accounts of the war Taylor launched five years later. There was often a suggestion that ritual elements like cannibalism cast Liberia's violence in a fundamentally different light from that of more, shall we say, conventional violence. There was in fact a long history of ritual violence in Liberia. It was associated with the already brutally violent currency of power dating back to the Americo-Liberians. Political leaders of all stripes over the years sought to buttress their power by linking it with the occult traditions of rural "bush-spirits." Taylor himself was reported, probably accurately, to have drunk the blood of sacrificial victims.

The British scholar Stephen Ellis, who has probed into the role of ritual elements in Liberia's violence, noted the importance of man-

hood initiation rites in the Poro and Sende secret societies, still common in the rural areas of northern and western Liberia, in which "rituals of death" are enacted in a "theatre of terror." The acquisition of power is associated with ritual sacrifice and the eating of human flesh and blood, represented symbolically by animal sacrifice and the ritual scarifying of an initiate, symbolizing his spiritual death and resurrection. It is not surprising that in a society suffused with extreme violence, in which the competition for political power has degenerated into a life-and-death struggle prosecuted by very young men and boys who have been radically dehumanized, these symbolic representations have sometimes been enacted literally.

"The observation that there is a 'cultic' element to violence of this type does not imply that the militias fight primarily as a form of ritual behavior," Ellis has written. "Clearly the prime motive is to gain wealth and power through violence, with the cultic aspects being a means of spreading terror and also of psychologically strengthening fighters, using a lexicon of symbols which is widely understood."

My own view is that ritual elements in Liberia's carnage, troubling as they are, could scarcely be more troubling than the scale of the violence itself. Who is to say that cannibalism is any worse than mass murder, or gang rape, or fifty lashes a day for eight days with a fan belt?

In any case, President Doe never publicly responded to reports of this extreme behavior by his subordinates. No one was ever disciplined or prosecuted. On the contrary, it was reported that Doe personally congratulated the two young soldiers who murdered Quiwonkpa even as hundreds of civilians lingered nearby, viewing Quiwonkpa's dismembered body. There could have been no more fitting expression of Doe's absolute contempt for law save that of the jungle—that is to say, anarchy.

### *"I saw truckloads of bodies"*

In March 1986, four months after the failed coup, I boarded a jam-packed minivan taxi and made my way up to Nimba County, several hours northeast of Monrovia along the border with Ivory Coast. Nimba is home of the Gio, Thomas Quiwonkpa's people. It was rumored in the aftermath of Quiwonkpa's failed coup that thousands of Gios and the linguistically related Manos had been slaughtered there

and buried in mass graves. Not a word of this had made it into the Western press. I wanted to know what had happened.

The trip carried me directly into the ethnically charged environment that Charles Taylor would deftly exploit five years later. It yielded an indelible lesson in the dynamics of ethnic conflict, and in the link between tyranny and anarchy.

My guide in Nimba was Isaac Bantu, a journalist who was then the Liberia stringer for the BBC. Bantu was among the most prominent Liberian reporters who over the years had risked arrest, beatings and even murder, carrying on a tradition of fearless journalism with roots in America's own First Amendment. Many Liberian journalists have been educated in the United States and inspired by its constitutional freedoms. It is a paradox of Liberian history that while one dictatorial regime after another enjoyed the most cynical American backing during the Cold War, many Liberians were inspired by the most enlightened of American values.

Bantu, who was then thirty-three, is a stocky, bearded, gregarious man with a broad smile and ready laugh that masks a drive and intensity typical of so many Liberian journalists I came to know. He was a popular figure across much of the country because of his remarkably candid dispatches for the BBC's *Focus on Africa* news program, broadcast from London on a shortwave band each afternoon.

Bantu was not a dispassionate observer. He was a democrat living under a military dictatorship. He was also a Gio man from Nimba, and his own personal experience was emblematic of the wrenching ordeal of the Gios under Doe.

In the aftermath of the November 12 coup attempt, Bantu was one of the scores of prominent opposition figures, activists and journalists who were detained without charge in horrific conditions. Some two dozen armed, uniformed soldiers surrounded his house and beat him with rifle butts as they took him into custody. The soldiers threw rocks through his windows, then set the house on fire before leaving.

Bantu was taken to the headquarters of Military Intelligence, known as G-2. The building was a dilapidated wood-frame structure with peeling green clapboard sides and a rusting corrugated roof. Bantu was held in the G-2 headquarters for nine days.

"For the first seven days, I ate nothing, drank nothing," he told me. "I had malaria, a running stomach, a backache from the beatings."

As elsewhere in Africa, conditions in detention in Liberia have always been abysmal: gross overcrowding, poor ventilation, primitive sanitation facilities, including open sewers and stagnant water in which swarms of mosquitoes thrive in West Africa's tropical humidity. Malaria is endemic. Detainees are fortunate if their relatives can smuggle in money with which to bribe the guards to bring them mosquito repellent and malaria pills. Former detainees describe grim bouts with ringworm, typhoid and amebic dysentery, the latter transmitted by use of communal chamber pots. Blankets and mattresses are infested with lice. Access to medical care is extremely limited. "This is all part of the punishment," a former prison doctor told Bantu and me. "There is not a drop of medicine in these places," he said. Meals, served once a day, consist of the so-called "black diet"—half-cooked rice mixed in palm oil, occasionally supplemented by pigs-feet soup.

Bantu was held with several dozen others in a room too small for everyone to sit down simultaneously. A single screenless window was left wide open, permitting mosquitoes to feast on the detainees. There were no blankets with which to fight off the chills. Detainees were permitted to urinate in beer bottles. Bantu was finally transferred after nine days to the Central Prison. He walked free after fifty-five days. He was never charged, nor even interrogated.

During his first week in custody in the G-2 headquarters, Bantu at least was permitted to sit on a porch on the roof of the building during the day. From there he was able to watch Doe's troops mop up and consolidated their hold on the capital. "I saw truckloads of bodies," he told me.

### *"These people are bad"*

Bantu was an ideal guide to Nimba County—a popular Gio hero who shared their rage against Doe. We were greeted with open arms at every door we knocked on. Stories were candidly told—albeit in hushed tones, under conditions of anonymity.

The focus of reprisals in Nimba County was a remote mining town near the Guinean border called Yekepa. This was the domain of Charles Julu, Doe's close associate who would later issue the death threat against me that kept me out of the country for five years. According to the many witnesses and survivors Bantu and I spoke to,

Julu ordered more than a dozen summary executions in Yekepa, perhaps many more. Julu was a Krahnman and chief of "Joint Security" in Nimba, in charge of all the overlapping police and military security forces in the region. He was also director of security for a multinational mining concern, the Liberian-American Swedish Minerals Company (LAMCO), the largest employer in Yekepa. Yekepa is basically LAMCO's company town.<sup>1</sup>

As director of LAMCO's private security force, the Plant Protection Force (PPF), Julu exercised authority over a unit of about two hundred uniformed security officers and patrolmen, most of whom were armed with pistols and batons. The connection between Julu's private and military roles was deliberately blurred, residents of the area told us. "He's the boss man for this area as far as security," said one. "That's all we know."

Julu was an outsider in Nimba County, a Krahnman surrounded by Gios. He became a focal point for simmering rage against Doe. On the morning of November 12, Julu went into hiding. After the tide turned and Doe regained control of the capital, Julu mobilized his PPF officers and a detachment of army soldiers, and embarked on a spree of brutality and terror. He detained dozens of Gio civilians at the LAMCO headquarters in Yekepa and ordered PPF officers to flog them. He also engaged marked LAMCO trucks and vans to transport an undetermined number of Gio soldiers and civilians up to the Nimba mountain range above Yekepa, where they were executed.

Some of the victims were presumed supporters of the coup attempt; others apparently were Julu's own personal rivals. Some had been implicated in an earlier coup attempt, in 1983, in which Julu's son was killed. One of these was a man named Lewis Dokie, the brother of Sammy Dokie, who would become one of Charles Taylor's earliest co-conspirators. Lewis Dokie was flogged to death by Julu.

Bantu and I pieced together these details from interviews we furtively conducted in the backyard of a simple cinder-block house on the outskirts of the LAMCO company compound. A dozen sullen men were gathered around us, summoned by a friend of Bantu's to

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<sup>1</sup>The Bethlehem Steel Company had owned 25 percent of LAMCO until only the year before, when the giant American company sold its interest to Doe's government in an agreement whereby Bethlehem Steel pledged to buy 2 million tons of iron ore annually through 1987.

share their experience of those events. We spoke in hushed tones on the condition that no names be used. A lookout covered the front of the house.

"Remember," one of them recalled, "when people heard about the coup in Monrovia? Oh my God, the people bombarded this town just like a damn picnic. People were going from home to home, shouting, singing, dancing. Julu was in hiding. But then Doe came over the radio."

One by one they described being rounded up by Julu's men, being stripped, beaten, flogged, and left to nurse their wounds for days without benefit of clean water. A few had witnessed executions.

"I was trying to see what was going on down there," one of them told us. "Julu was there. D.K. [a popular Gio politician] stepped out of the truck and approached Julu with his arms out like this. Before he could even say 'Julu,' bang! bang! bang! bang! bang! bang! They killed him in cold blood. They shot him in the leg. They shot him in the heart. They shot him in the head."

The man began crying as he spoke. "Can you imagine that?" he asked. He was sobbing uncontrollably now. "He was my friend. They just killed him." He paused to collect himself. Then he shook his head and whispered, "He's a wicked guy, that Julu."

Years later, what sticks in my memory about these conversations is the boiling rage these men conveyed. There was no talk about "the standards of Africa." There was no sense of an exotic context in which a different set of expectations applied.

"You have no rights in Liberia," one of Bantu's friends muttered. "Whenever you are accused of being an enemy of the government, whether it is proven or not, you have no rights. Your rights as a human being are denied completely. The treatment you receive is worse even than the pet in your house can receive." When I asked this man if he had considered bringing legal action against the government, he laughed. "There is no legal remedy," he said. "Nobody will listen. Why even waste your time? The government is always right. The government can do no wrong."

I recall as well how clearly these embittered men foresaw the nightmare that awaited Liberia. The prospect of massive reprisals against the Krahn in the event that Doe was violently removed from power was anticipated by all sides. "The general feeling now," a diplomat had

told me, “is that if there is another coup, the Krahn will be totally wiped out.”

The observation was better made by Liberians themselves. A Gio scholar from Nimba County, Alfred Kulah, who was detained for two weeks and flogged by Krahn soldiers in Yekepa, told me, “I’m afraid that if they allow this man [Doe] to be killed, it will be recorded in history that there was once a tribe called Krahn in Liberia.”

A Gio businessman in Yekepa, who was detained for eleven days after November 12 and whose back, five months later, was still crisscrossed with the dark scars he sustained from flogging by Krahn soldiers, summed up a view I heard over and over again in Nimba: “Constitutional change—that is what we are trying to do. But the authorities don’t believe such change will be in their favor. They will try, for their own survival, to keep themselves in power, because they are afraid they will be made to pay for their wrongdoing. And they are right, I’m afraid. It’s going to be a cycle of violence. A cycle of recriminations. Because people all over want revenge.”

A farmer sought to explain to me the emotions he felt after being detained and flogged at a roadblock on the day after the coup attempt. “Just imagine,” he said. “They strip you. They put you down on the ground. They put a gun on your neck. And then they whip you. For nothing. Just because you are not Krahn.” The man shook his head and looked me in the eye. “Yes there will be revenge. These people are bad. The Krahn are too bad.”

*“We know that something will happen to us”*

A week after my trip to Nimba, I visited Grand Gedeh, President Doe’s home region. Grand Gedeh is a remote, densely forested region on the border with Ivory Coast. I made this trip without Bantu, needless to say. As a Gio man identified with radio reports critical of Doe, he would be as good as dead the moment he arrived.

It didn’t take me long to discover that the Krahn themselves were aware of their precarious position. The Krahn coexist throughout Grand Gedeh with several other ethnic groupings in a patchwork of scattered rural thatch-roof and mud-hut villages. After the failed November 12 coup, Krahn soldiers, many of them acting on their own authority, apprehended scores of Grebos, Gios and Manos, stripped



them naked, beat them with rattans and rifle butts, and detained them for days or weeks. In one especially brutal public spectacle, six secondary school students who were seen celebrating Quiwonkpa's coup were gathered up by Doe's Executive Mansion Guard, acting with a posse of the students' classmates and teachers. The students were paraded through town, hacked with machetes in front of their peers, and carried out of town and buried in a mass grave.

The tension was still palpable when I visited Grand Gedeh four months afterward. People looked over their shoulders as they spoke. A Krahn man declined to be interviewed in the presence of a Grebo driver, expressing his fear—"I cannot talk to you here"—in a written note he passed to me furtively underneath the table in his own kitchen. One afternoon while I was there, a rumor of unrest in Monrovia passed through Zle Town, the county seat, causing panic in the marketplace. Merchants abruptly shuttered their shops and the market-women fled into the bush. Schools were let out and the students ran home. "Everyone knows that anything can happen," I was told.

A Krahn farmer in Zle Town told me, "We are in fact living in fear. We know that when power changes hands, everyone will suffer. Whatever happens, the way Africans carry out politics, they will not make an exception for us. What I think is that, if there is an eventuality, if you know what I mean, there will have to be revenge. The situation in the country is very grave. We know that something will happen to us. We know that nothing lasts forever. We've got the feeling that something is in the making. When that thing explodes, then God have mercy on all of us."

When this man spoke of "the way Africans carry out politics," he was right. Africans carry out politics the way peoples the world over throughout history have carried out politics in the absence of legitimate law. With no chance of lawful accountability for criminal acts, people take the law into their own hands. Where justice is impossible, vigilantism follows. The ultimate legacy of Samuel Doe's tyranny was a litany of unsolved, unaccounted-for crimes begging for justice—in a word, anarchy. These were the jungle conditions that Charles Taylor would cynically exploit in his quest for power. Taylor understood that in the absence of individual accountability for political crimes, groups could be blamed—"Kill the Krahn!"

One of my earliest Liberian friends, Tiawan Gongloe, a Columbia-

educated lawyer, himself a Gio man who lost many relatives in Taylor's war, put it this way: "The Krahn are not inherently wicked. It was the quality of leadership they received that made them wicked. Doe made them wicked by putting them in a position where their very survival depended on his survival in power."

*"I am a strong believer in human rights"*

At the end of my visit in 1986, I called on Doe's justice minister, Jenkins Z. B. Scott. Scott had emerged as the de facto spokesman for the government in place of the inarticulate Doe. In the pantheon of Liberia's villains, Justice Minister Scott came to personify contempt for the law under Doe. It was Scott who, after the August 22, 1994, attack on student demonstrators at the University of Liberia, famously confirmed at a Washington press conference that there were "some rapes," but that, alas, none of the perpetrators could be identified—and no investigation was planned.

Liberia's Justice Ministry is a peeling, tilting, two-story edifice on a side street in downtown Monrovia. As elsewhere in the capital even then, telephone service was erratic and appointments needed to be arranged in person. When I presented myself at the front door of the Justice Ministry one weekday morning and asked for an interview with the minister, a uniformed policeman took my business card and told me to take a seat in the waiting room. Ten minutes later, I was guided upstairs and ushered into the office of the minister.

Jenkins Scott turned out to be a glib, vain, ingratiating man with a shiny bald pate and dramatic muttonchop sideburns. He wore a navy-blue short-sleeved safari suit and a matching blue and white polka-dot ascot. He apparently had nothing better to do that day than meet with an investigative reporter on assignment for an American human rights organization; indeed, he seemed to relish the challenge I represented. He eagerly gestured for me to take a seat on a plush, crimson velvet sofa. Then he held forth for three hours on the subject of human rights in Doe's Liberia.

I began by asking Scott about the November 12 business. What about all those reports of summary executions? Scott assured me that he too was concerned about these reports. Had he ordered an investigation? I asked. Indeed he had, Scott said, but none had been under-

taken. "There are limitations on manpower." I told him about the evidence I had compiled of mass killings, gang rape, detentions without trial and flogging. The justice minister sighed. "Really, I do not know," he finally said. "I hope it didn't happen, but who do you ask? No eyewitnesses have come to me."

Scott characterized the abuses after the coup attempt as unrepresentative, the consequence of an extraordinary upheaval over which the government had no control. "People talk about human rights and ignore the circumstances in which human rights abuses occur. For example, I was arrested during the coup. I was stripped, beaten. One of my eyes was badly beaten. I was handcuffed. It took three months for my hands to heal, and one of my hands still hurts."

Nevertheless, Scott assured me, he harbored no bitterness toward those who beat him. "It was the circumstances," he explained. "There were no orders to abuse human rights from Quiwonkpa. Likewise, there were no orders to abuse human rights from Doe. The man who beat me is still at large, but I'm not going to pursue him. He did that on that day because that was the thing to do. It was the circumstances. But under normal circumstances, he would not have done it."

The justice minister was warming to his subject now. "When you have an uprising, the law tends to break down," he said. "The problem is that complaints are made to people like you rather than to people like me. Since I have been the minister of justice, no one has come to me and said, 'Minister, this officer beat me.'"

I suggested that perhaps more people would come to him if they were confident that he respected their rights as much as I did. "I am a strong believer in human rights," the justice minister protested. "The idea is a good one. And I'm not excusing the abuses. I will not say there have not been human rights abuses. But it is not government policy. Under the circumstances, it looks like human nature. The human instinct, or the animal instinct, tends to come out."

The minister gave an illustration. "What would you do if a man raped your wife?" he asked. Before I had a chance to respond, he answered for me. "Chances are you would shoot him."

What about due process? I asked.

"Due process is foreign to Africa," the justice minister replied. "That is the Western type of culture. There must be an educational process. Human rights is not the sole responsibility of the government. It is the responsibility of the society at large."

The justice minister leaned forward and looked me in eye professorially. "The law of the frontier still rules to some extent," he explained.<sup>2</sup>

*"What was done to us must be done to them"*

Even those who predicted all-out civil war scarcely imagined the depths to which Liberia would descend in 1990. Charles Taylor's rebellion began in Nimba County with barely 150 insurgents. In less than a year it consumed not just Doe but many thousands of civilians in an orgy of killing and destruction. More than a million Liberians—half the population—abandoned their homes. Much of the country was bombed, burned and looted into ruins.

Taylor's war was widely popular when it began. Everyone wanted to get rid of Doe. But Taylor's method was to exploit the genocidal rage of the Gio and the Mano against Doe's Krahn, to inflame their lust for revenge through mass murder. In a word, his method was anarchy.

He began with mostly Gio exiles from Nimba, men like Sammy Dokie, who by 1992 had become chief of Taylor's fledgling leather-jacketed secret police. Dokie had been in exile for six years after twice failing to topple Doe. Two of his brothers had been murdered.

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<sup>2</sup>In 1990, Jenkins Scott fled Liberia when Monrovia came under siege by Taylor's rebels. But he made sure to sort out his financial affairs before taking flight. Together with Emmanuel Shaw, Doe's equally nefarious finance minister (more recently appointed "ambassador extraordinaire" by Taylor), Scott hatched a swan-song scam that underlined the depths of chicanery commonplace among Doe's top aides up until the bitter end. Scott and Shaw, while serving as ministers in Doe's cabinet, had set up a front company with a monopoly over the sale of petroleum products in Liberia. The arrangement netted millions in profits for the two of them. Scott and Shaw fled the country in May 1990—but not before preparing official documents purporting to bind the government to pay \$27 million in debts to their own company. In fact the debts, though they bore the official signatures of the justice and finance ministers, were fictitious.

Having set the plan in motion, Shaw and Scott packed their bags and flew to London, where they persuaded a British court to order a worldwide injunction freezing Liberian government assets up to \$27 million until their company obtained full payment. Scott then proceeded to federal court in New York and obtained a similar injunction that effectively deprived Liberia of all its assets in the United States. This was at a time when tens of thousands of Liberians were starving in the war-torn country that Shaw and Scott had left behind. Not until nearly a year later was Liberia's interim government able to get the injunction lifted by demonstrating "blatant, massive and enduring fraud."

"We all came back with that revengeful attitude," Sammy Dokie told me in Buchanan, "that what was done to us must be done to them to pay the Krahn back. So we fought a very bitter war."

With Dokie and his confederates on board, Taylor sought international backing for an armed rebellion. The Cold War was coming to an end, but the United States still appeared to be standing behind Doe. So Taylor turned to Libya.

The Libyan strongman, Muammar Qaddafi, had been seeking a foothold in sub-Saharan Africa for years, in Chad, Sudan, and Nigeria, among other countries. After Doe seized power in Liberia, Qaddafi briefly flirted with the new junta, offering a variety of bribes and blandishments that have since been cited by American policy-makers as a major justification for generous U.S. financial backing for Doe. For instance, toward the end of Doe's first year in power, around Christmas 1980, Doe's cash-strapped government threatened to seek a bailout directly from Qaddafi; the American assistant secretary of state at the time, Richard Moose, reportedly flew into Monrovia on a chartered plane and delivered \$10 million in cash. Doe soon blew off Qaddafi.

A decade later, Qaddafi, ever keen to stick it to the Americans, was cultivating all manner of "revolutionaries" across West Africa. Charles Taylor made his way to Tripoli, and soon he arranged for a small band of Liberians—Sammy Dokie among them—to receive military training in Libya. On Christmas Eve, 1989, they attacked across the Liberia border in Nimba County.

Taylor early on proved adept at using the radio as a means of bolstering his stature and mobilizing support, in this case the BBC. In radio interviews Taylor made what many Liberians recognized as a naked appeal to ethnic animosity. He declared his rebellion "a continuation" of the famous failed coup of November 12, 1985. His message was lost on no one—least of all on Doe.

Predictably, Doe responded with a ruthless counterinsurgency campaign—led by Charles Julu. Julu, on the strength of his performance in Nimba in 1985, had been promoted to head Doe's personal militia, the Executive Mansion Guard. Under Julu's command, Doe's troops, almost entirely Krahn, hastened to Nimba to confront Taylor's invasion, killing with abandon, raping, looting and burning villages, driving tens of thousands of Gios and Manos into the bush. Doe also dispatched Krahn death squads in Monrovia to round up prominent

opposition figures, who were beheaded, their remains left to rot on the street.

The result was exactly what Taylor might have hoped for. Gios and Manos by the thousands rushed to join up with Taylor's forces. And he welcomed them. "As the NPFL came in," Taylor told me, "We didn't even have to act. People came to us and said, 'Give me a gun. How can I kill the man who killed my mother?'"

Orphans bent on revenge, illiterate teenage peasants and school dropouts seizing the main chance, unemployed street toughs known as "grunah boys" (grown-up boys), and others merely driven by fear, hunger, peer pressure—Taylor armed them all. He sent them into battle with a minimum of training. He even opened up the jails as he passed through towns and armed the inmates. "Kill the Krahn!" they chanted. Within months, a force of 150 trained insurgents snowballed into a marauding gang of thousands, barely trained but heavily armed, seeking liberty, vengeance and booty. Taylor fought tyranny with anarchy, fire with fire.

No one really knows how many people died. The best guess is that between 150,000 and 200,000 were killed in six years. What a visitor gradually realizes is that virtually everyone lost a relative. In 1992 I took a poll of the staff at the El Meson Hotel in Monrovia. Harrison, the laundry man, had a brother killed in crossfire between the AFL and the NPFL; his father died of sickness and starvation. Saybah, the chambermaid, lost two brothers and her father to the AFL. Boakai, the maintenance man, who managed to produce hot running water in my room on my last weekend, lost a first cousin in an NPFL ambush—"They wanted his car and he refused to give it to him, so they shot him dead," he told me—and his brother-in-law died of cholera. Wleh Nyen, the security guard, lost his brother, a rebel fighter, in a clash with the West African peacekeepers; his mother died of cholera. Rebecca, the lovely receptionist, lost a cousin to starvation. Joseph, her weekend replacement, lost a brother and sister, her sister's husband who was Krahn, and their three children—all killed by Taylor's men; the grown-ups were shot, he said, and the children had their throats slit. "The people Taylor has are not educated," Joseph explained. "Taylor has brainwashed them."

Doe's home county, Grand Gedeh, was "cleansed"—to borrow a word not yet coined, as it was to be later in the Balkans. More than

100,000 Krahn refugees fled into neighboring Ivory Coast, telling stories of wanton slaughter. The first of three major battles for Monrovia, in the summer and fall of 1990, degenerated into chaos. Water stopped running. Electricity was cut off. Food ran out. Civilians scavenged for grass and weeds. NPFL rebels, high on marijuana and weirdly decked out in women's wigs and dresses looted from stores—"We fight to loot" was their motto—shot people who "smelled" Krahn. Krahn soldiers committed epic massacres, at one point killing 600 Gio refugees holed up in a Lutheran church. As civilians fled, soldiers and rebels alike looted with abandon: homes, stores, offices, government ministries, hospitals, embassies, churches—and banks. Nearly 50 million Liberian dollars in cash disappeared, one-fifth of all the money in circulation. After Doe was finally captured and killed, surviving Krahn soldiers set about burning the city down—"No Doe, no Monrovia" was *their* motto.

*"I'm sad about the lives"*

When I met Taylor in Buchanan, I asked him if it had not been a reckless war. "Quite the opposite," he replied, his deep silken voice a model of calm assurance. "Doe had sufficiently antagonized the country with a reign of terror. It must be recorded, it took me two active years of preparation. I knew that unless it was controlled, there would have been a bloodbath."

But there *was* a bloodbath, I noted.

Taylor scarcely blinked. "I must say with a high degree of sincerity, they did not go after the Krahn as they would have without the training that we provided."

Whatever "training" Taylor provided the original 150 insurgents, none was given to the thousands of vengeance-seeking, booty-hunting, pot-smoking boys and teenagers who made up the bulk of his marauding militia. Moreover, Taylor's "high degree of sincerity" notwithstanding, going after the Krahn was the very key to attracting support for his rebellion.

"It was an uprising," Taylor insisted. "The people took up arms and uprooted the system. Given the opportunity, the people will be able to put in a system that no military will ever be able to put out."

There was an Orwellian quality to this last pronouncement. For of course what Taylor was really trying to do was put a military force in

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power—his own ragtag gang of thieves and murderers—that no people will ever be able to put out. “I’m happy that we had this opportunity,” Taylor concluded. “I’m sad about the lives, but now we can use this opportunity to build a new country.”

As I sat in his air-conditioned living room, surrounded by Taylor’s fawning aides and sycophantic journalists, and by his heavily armed gang of twisted children, nothing was more clear to me than that this man was anything but “sad about the lives” it might cost to achieve his goal. Unbridled terror was the very essence of his game. Even as we spoke, it subsequently developed, Taylor was plotting “Operation Octopus,” the unsuccessful siege of Monrovia in October 1992 that left three thousand civilians dead and the capital in ruins.

I asked Taylor about accountability for war crimes. He had, after all, cited Doe’s crimes as justification for his war. Hadn’t Doe’s failure to hold anyone accountable for the escalating crimes of his regime contributed to the cycle of violence into which Taylor had so eagerly thrown himself?

“I cannot be held responsible for the anger of the people,” Taylor replied. “The whole problem is like the chicken and the egg. Which came first? We cannot go back and constitute blame. There are too many skeletons in the closet to begin to apportion blame. Forget blame.”

*“Where’s the money?”*

Doe, for his part, was killed not by Taylor but instead by members of a break-away rebel faction led by Brigadier General Prince Y. Johnson, a former Taylor ally who managed to beat him to the capital. Johnson by all accounts was an alcoholic psychopath, renowned for personally executing friends and foes alike in fits of pique. He had been Thomas Quiwonkpa’s aide-de-camp. In September 1990, Johnson’s gang ambushed Doe in Monrovia. They took him back to their base. There they conducted a frenzied, boozy interrogation that was recorded on videotape. The hour-long video is readily available in Monrovia. It is a lurid document. Doe sits on the ground, naked and flabby, with his legs stretched out before him, bloodied from a gunshot wound. His elbows are bound tightly together behind his back in what is known as the *tabey* position. A swarm of sweaty, glassy-eyed rebels circle the unfortunate despot, shouting and hooting in derision.



“What? What?” Doe says repeatedly, straining to hear the questions above the din.

“What did you do with the Liberian peoples’ money?” Johnson demands, cracking open yet another can of Budweiser.

“Prince, gentlemen, we are all one,” Doe pleads.

“Cut off his ears!” cries Johnson, and the troops set upon the howling prisoner with knives.

“Where’s the money?” Johnson persists.

“I’m in a lot of pain,” Doe replies, wincing, gasping, increasingly incoherent. “If you save my life I’ll do anything,” he moans.

He is said to have “died of his wounds.”

### *“The business of war”*

On that steamy weekend in Buchanan, the city’s port was alive with a bustling commerce that was difficult to square with the tribulations of a nation reeling from war. Huge cranes loaded ton after ton of timber onto a French-chartered freighter called *The Optimist*. Italian, German and Lebanese ships took on iron ore freshly mined and transported by rail from the rich mines in Nimba County. Dock workers sported T-shirts with slogans like “Charles in Charge” and “Chuckie Did It.” A billboard declared: “For Peace and Stability, Choose Taylor.”

Buchanan at the time was the commercial heart of “Greater Liberia,” the area controlled by Charles Taylor and his collaborators. It was a vivid example of a phenomenon central to all of Africa’s conflicts: the business of war.

Taylor’s NPFL evolved early on into a lucrative money-making enterprise. Foreign shareholders—mostly French, Italian, German, Lebanese, some Americans and, increasingly, Russians—paid Taylor millions in “taxes” for the right to exploit Liberia’s timber, rubber, iron ore, gold and diamond reserves. Access to foreign exchange played a vital role in the financing of Taylor’s NPFL and the arming of his fighters, allowing him to conquer areas with easily exploitable resources. Throughout the war Taylor maintained personal bank accounts worth millions of dollars in Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso and Switzerland, and he spent millions more on arms.

From the outset of the war Taylor exploited foreign business anxieties about access to their sites in Liberia. He turned to foreign min-

ing firms for cash and military aid. According to William Reno, an American scholar who has probed deeply into Taylor's business activities, a British firm, African Mining Consortium, Ltd., paid Taylor \$10 million a month for permission to ship stockpiled ore on an existing railroad that ran through Taylor-controlled territory. A French-owned company, Sollac, also purchased stockpiled ore from Taylor.

Indeed, Reno found, Taylor was especially adept at attracting French corporate attention and exploiting French government interest in his campaign after the West African peacekeeping force known as ECOMOG entered Liberia in August 1990. ECOMOG was dominated by English-speaking Nigeria and enjoyed the financial and diplomatic support of the United States. In a pattern that would become familiar in French-speaking Zaire and later Rwanda, France was ever on the alert for allies in Africa who were prepared to subvert what France viewed as the expansion of Anglophone interests in traditional French zones of influence.

Jean-Christophe Mitterrand, the former French president's son and the director of the official *cellule africaine* in the president's office, whose influence would appear later on in Zaire and Rwanda, was an early backer of Taylor's enterprise. France became Taylor's main customer for timber products; indeed, Taylor-held Liberia became France's third-largest supplier of tropical timber in 1991—in the depths of the war when half the population was displaced and most of the rest was depending on international famine relief to survive. Taylor used neighboring Ivory Coast, France's closest regional ally, as a base to attract logging firms to his areas. Another neighboring state with close ties to France, Burkina Faso, served as a conduit for arms shipments to Taylor.

The country was basically consumed by organized crime. The U.N. estimated in 1994 that there were some sixty thousand Liberians under arms, of whom no more than a handful had received any form of formal military training. As we have seen, most of the fighters were not soldiers but armed civilians, often teenagers and boys. Militia gangs based themselves wherever there were exploitable resources, especially in diamond-producing areas, or where villagers were still producing crops, or where humanitarian convoys could be looted. There emerged a mosaic of militia zones of control, in which civilians en-

joyed a degree of protection but had to pay tribute in kind to the local warlord. The militias defended these positions against all rivals while raiding the territory of rival militias, looting, pillaging, and commandeering slave labor, including women and girls as sex slaves.

The militias rarely confronted each other head-on; instead they preyed on civilians. Survivors described the pattern: a militia would surround a village and bribe someone to inform them of which villagers had possessions worth looting. The militia would then attack, instilling maximum fear with a few acts of exemplary violence—a beheading, say. Then they would assemble the villagers and read out the names of those whom they knew had goods worth looting.

Gang rape was commonplace. Women and girls were often kidnapped and “kept” as sex slaves; others were threatened with death until their husbands or fathers put up ransom. Men and boys, too, were sometimes abducted to serve as porters. Survivors of this regime told tales of gratuitous torture: relentless beatings and branding with heated axes.

Taylor’s fighters, including the children, operated checkpoints and roadblocks where they could extort a better living than they were ever likely to make without guns. At the same time, Taylor’s senior commanders preyed on their soldiers, taking a cut of the booty. A mode of production evolved in which the main aim was enrichment through looting, and wealth was sucked upward within the militias’ rudimentary hierarchies, from fighters to their officers.

In Taylor’s “Greater Liberia,” the people with guns were the law. Taylor allowed his top commanders to run sectors of the countryside as personal fiefdoms. Taylor’s brother, Nelson, netted \$10 million in three months from gold and diamond mining in his own corner of southwest Liberia. “It’s legitimate,” Nelson Taylor assured me when I met him in a waiting room teeming with courtiers and supplicants at “President” Taylor’s Executive Mansion in Gbarnga, the tin-roof town north of Monrovia that Taylor called his capital for much of the war.

By the end of the war Taylor was alienated from France but allied with the military regime of Sani Abacha in Nigeria. Commanders of ECOMOG, which was mostly Nigerian, went into business for themselves, stripping the country of railroad stock, mining equipment, public utilities—and selling them abroad. They made lucrative deals

with former Doe allies like Roosevelt Johnson, the leader of a Krahn-dominated militia known as Ulimo-Johnson, and George Boley, who led yet another Krahn-dominated militia reassuringly titled the Liberian Peace Council.

In January 1996 fighting broke out along Liberia's eastern border with Sierra Leone, between ECOMOG and "Ulimo-J"—Roosevelt Johnson's gang. A rotation of local ECOMOG commanders had removed an officer who was collaborating with Johnson in local mining operations. The new ECOMOG commander refused to go along with the old arrangement and tried to disarm Johnson's soldiers. Johnson found this unacceptable. His soldiers duly attacked ECOMOG, killing sixty troops. Thus began a high-stakes struggle for control of the region's diamonds, which several months later would extend to Monrovia and consume the lives of as many as three thousand in yet another spasm of seemingly senseless carnage.

"When Taylor came into Liberia, he had imbibed the mafia culture," Boima Fahnbullah, a former university professor in Monrovia, told me. "Killing without compunction, terror, reduce the mind to a slave, oppose it and you are dead—it became a way of life."

Fahnbullah had served briefly under Doe as education minister before resigning in disgust. "This was a war not for liberation and dignity," he told me, "but for Taylor to grab more of Liberia's millions than he was able to do before he fled the country in 1984. He [Taylor] had the pretext, the unpopularity of the Doe regime, and the cannon fodder—the Gio and the Mano who had been victimized by years of repression under the Doe regime. Here was an ideal marriage of convenience: an unscrupulous and venal rascal with an eye on wealth and an aggrieved people hungry for revenge. This was a recipe for disaster and the Liberian people have been the victims."

*"The man is a cornered rat"*

If it was mostly Gios and Manos who fought Taylor's war, it is mostly Americo-Liberians like Taylor—light-skinned men and women with familiar Americo-Liberian names like Cooper, DeShields, Eastman, Richardson, and Dennis—who would come to enjoy its fruits. They lived through much of the war in Gbarnga in a compound of villas built by USAID and abandoned during the war. Taylor and his friends

simply appropriated the compound, fixed it up and moved in. They gathered nightly on their screened-in porches, turned on their stereos and VCRs, and sipped chilled German wine while unpaid Gio fighters in jeans and flip-flops guarded the compound.

In mid-war Taylor abruptly obtained a new middle name: "Ghan-kay," which means "warrior" in the indigenous Gola language. He was seeking to highlight his servant mother's Gola ancestry and to downplay his Americo-Liberian roots. For Taylor had a problem. He used the Gio and was beholden to them for his power, not to mention his survival, but he is not of them. Throughout the war there were multiple attempts on his life. It was also widely noted that a half dozen prominent Gio politicians—men who might be seen as having a more legitimate claim to Gio leadership than Taylor—were murdered under mysterious circumstances. Among them was Jackson Doe, the man who had actually won the stolen election in 1985. Taylor of course denied any role in these murders, but few Liberians doubt that he was behind them. In the many rounds of peace negotiations, Taylor insisted on provisions that would allow him to maintain 150 of his own body guards even if the NPFL was disarmed. "The man is a cornered rat," I was told.

In our interview in Buchanan, I asked Taylor about the Krahn and the Gio. What was it that brought them into conflict? Taylor responded with a line that would become familiar to me as I moved from country to country in my travels.

"I do not think I can say accurately who is responsible," he began. "We do have evidence of two previous tribal wars between the Gios and the Krahn. The first was won in most part by the Krahn. The second was won by the Gio. This was seventy or eighty years ago. As a result slaves were taken for Nimba. In Nimba today you have people who are partly Krahn. They are descendants of Krahn slaves. It is believed that Doe, realizing this and being committed to his tribe, tried to avenge this earlier loss. This was the business, the insensitivity of Doe, the lack of understanding, that led to the slaughtering of the Gio."

This was rubbish. No amount of bloodshed "seventy or eighty years ago" could explain the current carnage. But Taylor was articulating a view of "age-old" tribal conflict that had the benefit of obscuring his own role in exploiting and magnifying more recent antagonisms.

Would that Taylor were as candid as his erstwhile ally, Sammy Dokie. It was Dokie, whose brother Lewis had been flogged to death by Charles Julu, who frankly acknowledged to me that he and other Gio confederates were motivated to join Taylor by "that revengeful attitude."

Dokie and I had spoken on that Saturday morning in Buchanan, the day before my interview with Taylor. He had taken over one of the large, airy wood-frame houses built by Americo-Liberians on the model of the antebellum South. At the time he was Taylor's "interior minister"—that is, chief of the secret police. Jeans-clad, gun-toting guards milled around us as we spoke. Dokie, like Jenkins Scott, seemed to have all the time in the world for me, and we talked for almost three hours. Dokie was short and stocky, potbellied, with thick-rimmed glasses and a day-old stubble. He wore a T-shirt and Adidas soccer shorts, and rubber flip-flops.

I had asked Dokie about posters I'd seen around Buchanan urging Liberians to "Forget the past." How could people be expected to forget about the past when so many crimes were unaccounted for, and so many criminals were still at large, running amok?

"Forget about the past," Dokie replied. "That's the solution because what has happened since 1980 and Samuel Doe took power up to the present has been people revenging for what has happened in the past."

Then what about prosecuting people for war crimes? I asked. Wouldn't that be a way of arresting this cycle of revenge?

"I'm very practical in my thinking," Dokie replied. "It would be impossible to talk about prosecuting those crimes of 1985 without prosecuting certain crimes during the civil war. And if the possibility exists to carry out prosecutions of the crimes of 1985 and crimes during the war, we will end up going from year to year just prosecuting because there have been numerous crimes against innocent Liberian citizens. And a lot of the doers are at large in other countries."

I asked Dokie if he and Taylor had intended to start a race war. "Definitely," he replied matter-of-factly. "I was a practical man in thinking. After reading about the atrocities committed by Krahn soldiers against Gios and Manos, I knew that one day there would be a racial war, if nothing was done to heal the wounds of those who were victimized. But I regret that it all ever happened."

So then Dokie had regrets?

"I cannot say there are no regrets," he replied. "There was no alternative. There is regret because I am a human. But I do not think that we who are the architects can be held responsible because every Liberian knew it was inevitable that one day such a war would exist."

*"A nation of laws and not of men"*

In July 1997 Charles Taylor was elected president of Liberia, in balloting that was judged to have been free and fair. Most Liberians, it seemed, preferred to give Taylor what he wanted rather than risk another round of bloodshed.

"I will not be a wicked president," he solemnly vowed.

Six months later, the charred remains of Sammy Dokie and his wife and daughter were discovered, decapitated with their eyes gouged out, in a ravine in rural Bong County. The chief of Taylor's presidential bodyguard quickly emerged as the primary suspect. For Dokie's murder adhered to an unmistakable logic. It was the logic of inexorable "wickedness," which Taylor had done so much to exploit and from which at this late date even he could not escape.

Dokie and two other top figures in the NPFL, Tom Woewiyu and Laveli Supuwood, had split with Taylor in July 1994. Woewiyu, a great big gregarious man who had been Taylor's defense minister when I met him in Buchanan in 1992, told reporters at the time of the split that "to help end the war Taylor must be arrested and killed like a snake." He said Taylor was a "deranged and confused person who does not know what he is doing." Sammy Dokie, for his part, denounced Taylor that same month as an "enemy" of the Liberian people and accused him of "atrocities."

Taylor charged his former confederates with mutiny. He asserted that Dokie was engaged in a "vicious plot" to "wage war on Liberia by attacking NPFL positions around the borders of Guinea and the Ivory Coast." He also accused his three former lieutenants of "embarking on a campaign of lies, deception, betrayal and connivance to discredit, impugn and in fact destroy the NPFL." The charge was not far from the truth. For the three former Taylor allies had duly joined a "coalition of forces" that included nearly all of myriad militias aligned against Taylor.

Some sense of the tone of the split between Taylor and Dokie—and the stakes—could be gleaned from an incident in August 1994, when Taylor's chief of staff, General Nixon Gaye, was fatally wounded in a shootout with members of his own battalion. Gaye, who was twenty-five years old, had been one of Taylor's most trusted associates. After Gaye's death Taylor told reporters that Gaye had been plotting a mutiny with Sammy Dokie and was trying to persuade his men to join him. The men refused, and an exchange of gunfire ensued. The wounded Gaye was brought to Taylor's headquarters, where, Taylor said, he "bled to death" during an interrogation. "We did not torture him," Taylor assured reporters. "I would have hoped he would still have been around to have told more than we got out of him. But it would have ended up in execution anyway. If he had not died during his interrogation, I would have ordered his execution by midday today."

Dokie and his two fellow defectors were among Taylor's earliest targets during the April 1996 conflagration in Monrovia. They were narrowly saved from assassination when a truck from ECOMOG's Guinean contingent spirited them off to the relative safety of the nearest Guinean command post. Minutes later, Dokie's official residence (at the time, he was deputy speaker of the Interim Legislative Assembly) was flattened by rockets from NPFL men led by Joe Tate, the police director.

On Saturday, November 29, 1997, Dokie was arrested in downtown Gbarnga, still the functioning capital of Taylor's government, along with his wife, his cousin and a body guard, while they were in route to a wedding in Nimba County. They subsequently disappeared. The local police who made the arrests told witnesses they were acting on orders of Taylor's personal body guard, Benjamin Yeaten, director of the Special Security Service (SSS), the presidential security unit.

For six days Taylor's government denied knowledge of Dokie's arrest and ordered a massive search. But after lawyers for the Dokie family secured a writ of *habeas corpus* from the high court, the government announced the discovery of the charred and mutilated bodies of Dokie and his family.

Liberians recalled Taylor's threats to "deal with" Dokie. At the time Taylor said his enemies would not be able to hide from him "even in the womb." Dokie had been one of Taylor's closest associates during



the early stages of the war. "He knew all the secrets," I was told. "He knew more about Taylor's history than anyone."

Moreover, it was not lost on Liberians that Dokie was but the latest in a long line of prominent Gio leaders to be murdered, going back as far as Jackson Doe. As a Gio man Dokie was a natural rival for leadership of the very group Taylor had exploited in his drive for power. He had to be eliminated. Thus, in the murder of an erstwhile rebel comrade by the plainclothes forces of Taylor's brand-new police state, did anarchy come full circle in a fledgling tyranny.

A day after Dokie's murder was announced, President Taylor, returning from a state visit to Nigeria, where he had met with "my friend and brother" General Sani Abacha, the Nigerian dictator, addressed the nation. Since learning the "sad news" of Dokie's demise, Taylor said, "I have been groaning in agony, lost for expression, and perplexed at how this tragedy could befall the Liberian nation, especially at this time when we had begun to enjoy the fruits of our successful transition to peace, stability and reconciliation."

Taylor ordered the police to leave "no stone unturned." He said "an enormous crime has been committed not only against the Dokie family and the families of the other victims, but against the entire Liberian nation, which if not appropriately addressed, could erode the very fiber of our national heritage. We invite all peace-loving Liberians to join us in categorically condemning this cold-blooded and barbaric act, and we assure you that the law will definitely take its course.

"This incident, my fellow citizens," Taylor concluded, "is viewed by this administration with the gravest of concerns in that it has the propensity to cast a dark shadow over our nation, and create fear and panic, and the erosion of confidence in our ability to protect the lives and properties of our citizens. It is in this light that we have called for swift justice to take its course, so that our country can continue to remain a nation of laws and not of men."

Benjamin Yeaten was granted a brief "leave of absence" from the SSS but was never charged; he returned to work a month later. Five SSS men were identified as suspects in Dokie's murder and two were charged, tried—and acquitted in two days. No one was ever convicted.

So "swift justice" had taken its course, and Liberia had come full circle. It was a country without law, dominated by a single survivor. Fittingly, President Taylor's new "legal adviser" was another survivor,

none other than Doe's old justice minister, Jenkins Scott. There was in fact no justice in Liberia, nor could there be. Its president would appear to be a war criminal. Taylor's skill in promoting lethal anarchy succeeded in toppling Samuel Doe's tyranny; now he presided over a tyranny of his own. The cost: as many as 150,000 lives, 25,000 rapes, a nation in ruins.