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# **Conflict Radio and Ethnic Warfare in Liberia: 1980-1997**

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in  
the Department  
of History**

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# ABSTRACT

Conflict Radio and Ethnic Warfare in Liberia: 1980-1997

Michael Alexander Innes

This study provides an historical account of the development of radio broadcasting in Liberia between 1980 and 1997, focusing on two periods, the regime of Samuel K. Doe (1980-1989) and the ascension of Charles Taylor during the Liberian Civil War (1990-1997). The emphasis is on their differing approaches to the accumulation of broadcast resources and the extent to which they used them to incite extra-national groups to commit acts of violence against their ethnic opponents. Under Doe, foreign assistance funded a national network of radio stations that was instrumental in connecting hinterland populations to the capital, Monrovia. As such they were prized assets, but atrophied due to the ineptitude of the regime. During the civil war they became valuable property, and Taylor's radio propaganda campaign provided a second front against enemies both domestic and foreign. Using archived transcripts of major radio broadcasts, print news, and published memoirs of survivors of the latter period, I suggest that both leaders incited ethnic hatreds to varying degrees. I speculate that Doe's brand of incitement may have been an inadvertent side-effect of conflated national and ethnic politics. Taylor's propaganda, on the other hand, was much more explicit. The evidence clearly indicates that Taylor used a long-term campaign of media domination specifically to terrorize ethnic groups, elicit compliance from subject populations within territory under his control, program his forces to kill, discredit his enemies, and more generally to facilitate his personal pursuit of power.

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Among the staff and faculty at Concordia University, thanks go to Donna Whittaker and Darleen Robertson in the department of history for their administrative assistance and good humour, the staff at Interlibrary Loans, without whose diligence in ferreting out some very obscure materials I could never have finished my work, and to the University itself for its particular approach to higher education and allowing a formerly bad student the opportunity to prove himself. Interaction with various faculty members and graduate students in the departments of history and political science has always been enriching and stimulating – even when, in my reserved manner, I neglected to express it – and so my thanks to all whose lectures, seminars, debates and criticism helped shape and inspire my thinking on the world around me.

Finally, my greatest debt of gratitude goes to my advisor, Frank Chalk. His commitment to teaching and his vast expertise in the fields of genocide studies, U.S.

foreign policy, and African history have been an invaluable resource. His encouragement while I was an undergraduate taking one of his introductory courses on the history and sociology of genocide, and later as I explored similar subjects under his guidance, gave me the inspiration to pursue more advanced study in the field. His patience while I was his graduate student allowed me the space to satisfy my own curiosity and begin writing and publishing on subjects that I thought were of importance, but had little to do with the requirements of my program. Quiet office space at the Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies allowed me to concentrate on research and writing with a minimum of distractions, while regular workshops held under the auspices of the Institute provided a useful forum for presenting some of the ideas contained in this study. When I was initially interested in researching ethnic propaganda in the Balkans and Africa, it was Prof. Chalk who recommended that I look into an obscure little West African country called Liberia and investigate the uses of radio during its brutal but largely neglected civil war. The suggestion paid off, and the results contained herein are owed to his inspiration and guidance.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION:</b>	
<b>Fear and Loathing on the Ethereal Channel</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1:</b>	
<b>Radio Broadcasting in the Pre-Civil War Era: 1980-1989</b>	<b>9</b>
Radio in the First Republic: 1936-1980	11
Radio as a Strategic Asset, Part I: "This is Coup Time"	18
Freedom of the Press and "Responsible Journalism"	32
Radio as a Strategic Asset, Part II: The Liberian Rural Communications Network	36
Major Themes in Doe's Propaganda	39
Conclusion	45
<b>CHAPTER 2:</b>	
<b>Radio Broadcasting in the Civil War: 1990-1997</b>	<b>47</b>
Overview: Factions and Context	49
Early Days: Charles Taylor, the NPFL, and the BBC	56
Scorched Ether: Consolidating NPFL Radio	61
"Thieves, Rapists, and Murderers": The Attack on ECOMOG and "Foreign Intervention"	68
The ECOMOG Response: Monrovia Radio, The Fight for Gbarnga, and the Peace Process	79
Assessing the Impact of NPFL Radio	83
Broadcasting Victory: Toward the 1997 Election	89
Conclusion	96
<b>CONCLUSION:</b>	
<b>Policy Recommendations</b>	<b>99</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>103</b>
<b>APPENDIX: Sources and Method</b>	<b>112</b>



## INTRODUCTION:

### Fear and Loathing on the Ethereal Channel<sup>1</sup>

*When you read a work of history, always listen out for the buzzing. If you can detect none, either you are tone deaf, or your historian is a dull dog.*

E.H. Carr, *What is History?*<sup>2</sup>

At his first public press conference, Master-Sergeant Samuel Kanyon Doe, fresh from toppling the government of Liberia in 1980 and pressed into service as the leader of the People's Redemption Council, read haltingly from a prepared script, barely able to make out the words. Foreign reporters queried him on the direction the new government would be taking as he sat, placidly, sharing the spotlight with his mother. It quickly became apparent that Doe had nothing to say, that he in fact appeared somewhat vacant, capable of little more than "I can't tell you that now" and "no problems". Seventeen years later, Charles Taylor – formerly a government functionary in the 1980s before joining the ranks of those hounded out of the country by Doe – addressed a crowd after winning Liberia's presidential election in 1997. Well groomed and speaking in precise, measured tones, Taylor was a portrait of political sophistication as he informed his audience "that I will not be a wicked president, but I say to you also that I have no intentions of being a weak president during this particular period."<sup>3</sup>

The contrast between the two men says much about Liberia's troubled modern history. Nearly a quarter century has passed since Doe and a handful of henchmen overturned Liberia's entrenched political system and set the country on a course of ethnic conflict and fratricidal

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<sup>1</sup> The reference is to an observation made by journalist Mark Thompson in one of the best studies extant of post-Cold War conflict media. Thompson notes how both message and medium influenced audiences in the Balkan wars of the 1990s, playing "a good deal upon fear, including the thrill and pang of public fears funneled ethereally into private homes." Thompson, *Forging War: The Media in Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Hercegovina* Rev. Ed. (Bedfordshire, UK: Article XIX/University of Luton Press, 1999), 297.

<sup>2</sup> E.H. Carr, *What is History?* 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (London, New York, Toronto: Penguin Books, 1990), 25.

<sup>3</sup> *Liberia: America's Stepchild*, Directed and Narrated by Nancy Oku Bright (Boston: WGBH/Grain Coast Productions, 2002). Transcript available at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/liberia/pdfs/liberiatranscript.pdf>, Accessed 17 March 2003.

bloodshed. Doe ruled for a decade, turning Liberia into his personal fiefdom, until Taylor and the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) launched an invasion to depose him on Christmas Eve, 1989. A seven year civil war ensued in which Doe met the same sort of gruesome fate that he had arranged for many of his own enemies: captured by a Taylor splinter faction in September 1990, he was tortured, mutilated and killed, the process recorded for posterity on videotape – a more animated performance, no doubt, than he was used to giving.

Taylor, unlike Doe, was well known for his refined sense of media awareness and conspicuous manipulation of information, and reserved his best performances for the international press while funneling carefully crafted radio propaganda to captive audiences within his own territory. For many Liberia watchers, this amounted to a lot of bluster, especially when one considers the gaping chasm between Taylor's rhetoric, the actions of his forces, and realities on the ground. Taylor's credibility suffered accordingly, and as a result, studies of the civil war have largely neglected this crucial aspect of the rebel leader's methods.

Only a very few scholars have considered the issue with any degree of sophistication. Stephen Ellis, a scholar at Leiden University's African Studies Center and an authority on the Liberian civil war, has acknowledged Taylor's early reliance on the BBC to craft a public image for himself that would play a key role in his claim to NPFL leadership. "Revealing a fine talent for public relations," Ellis writes, "Taylor used the media to build a national and international profile which gave him a vital advantage over other leaders of the NPFL in the early months of the war."<sup>4</sup> Terrence Lyons, a conflict management specialist at George Mason University, suggests that Taylor's superior media resources helped win him the presidency in an internationally supervised democratic election in July 1997. "Taylor controlled the formerly state-

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<sup>4</sup> Stephen Ellis, "Liberia's Warlord Insurgency," in *African Guerrillas*, Christopher Clapham, ed. (Oxford: James Currey; Kampala, Uganda: Fountain Publishers; Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), 159.

owned shortwave radio station,” he notes, “and thereby dominated the airwaves through which most Liberians outside of Monrovia received their news.”<sup>5</sup>

David Harris, a graduate of the University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies, puts a finer point on Lyons’ argument:

Considering that illiteracy was estimated at 61 per cent even at the start of the war... that newspapers barely circulated beyond the capital, and that television stations were not operable, Taylor’s Kiss-FM radio station was singled out as a major advantage. Kiss-FM and its sister station, Radio Liberia International, were the only Liberian short-wave stations, until a few days before the election, to reach far beyond Monrovia or to play throughout the night.<sup>6</sup>

Harris goes awry, however, by underestimating the significance of mass media resources and propaganda wielded by Taylor and the NPP (the NPFL’s political incarnation). “Despite the fact that NPP resources could take their message much further afield, with greater inducements and a certain amount of intimidation,” he argues, “this cannot indubitably be presented as a decisive factor” in explaining Taylor’s election victory. Harris claims, rather unconvincingly, that similar imbalances have been overcome in other African elections and such an argument would, in any case, involve a rather condescending view of Liberians’ ability to critically respond to them.<sup>7</sup>

The most prominent scholarly analyses of the Liberian civil war have dealt with the advent of “warlordism” or “spoils politics” and the predatory resource accumulation of the main parties to the fighting,<sup>8</sup> the putatively ethnic nature of the conflict,<sup>9</sup> internationalization of the

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<sup>5</sup> Terrence Lyons, *Voting For Peace: Post-Conflict Elections in Liberia* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1999), 58.

<sup>6</sup> David Harris, “From ‘Warlord’ to ‘Democratic’ President: How Charles Taylor Won the 1997 Liberian Elections,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 37, no. 3 (1999), 438.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 440-441.

<sup>8</sup> William Reno, “Reinvention of an African Patrimonial State: Charles Taylor’s Liberia,” *Third World Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (1995), 111-120; and Reno, “The Organization of Warlord Politics in Liberia,” chapter in *Warlord Politics and African States* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), 79-111; Quentin Outram, “‘It’s Terminal Either Way’: An Analysis of Armed Conflict in Liberia, 1989-1996,” *Review of African Political Economy* 24, no. 73 (September 1997): 355-371. See also Outram, “Liberia: Roots and Fruits of the Emergency,” *Third World Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (1999): 163-173.

<sup>9</sup> Stephen Ellis, “Liberia, 1989-1994: A Study of Ethnic and Spiritual Violence,” *African Affairs*, 94, no. 375 (1995): 165-197; and Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy: The Destruction of Liberia and the Religious Dimensions of an African Civil War* (Washington Square, NY: New York University Press, 1999).

civil war,<sup>10</sup> regional peacekeeping,<sup>11</sup> human rights violations,<sup>12</sup> the peace process,<sup>13</sup> and the 1997 elections.<sup>14</sup> In reading through this partial listing of relevant works, a number of problems arise. First, Taylor is widely acknowledged to have been an aggressive propagandist, but the subject is left generally unexplored so that neither the accumulation of broadcast resources nor long-term patterns of broadcasting by the NPFL are factored into the dynamics of the conflict. Second, some scholars have expended much effort in determining whether the events of 1990-1997 can be described as single episode, three distinct wars, or one major fracas followed by a succession of smaller violent hiccups. Third, and most seriously, is the question of genocide. Kenneth L. Cain, a former UN human rights officer in Liberia, for example, documents a long list of atrocities and defines the personal culpability of Charles Taylor for their commission. He makes the claim, citing UN documents, that “[d]espite the ineffably violent character of the war that took place there between 1990 and 1997, no single ethnicity was targeted to a sufficient extent to warrant the special opprobrium of ‘genocide’.”<sup>15</sup> The statement is problematic for two reasons. First, ethnicity is but one of four victim categories covered in Article 2 of the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (UNGC) and Article 6 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, along with religious, racial, and national affiliations – group

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<sup>10</sup> Yekutiel Gershoni, “Military and Diplomatic Strategies in the Liberian Civil War,” *Liberian Studies Journal*, 22, no. 2 (1997): 199-239, and Gershoni, “War Without End and an End to a War: The Prolonged Wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone,” *African Studies Review*, 40, no. 3 (1997): 55-76; Abiodun Alao, *The Burden of Collective Goodwill: The International Involvement in the Liberian Civil War* (Aldershot, England; Brookfield, USA: Ashgate Publishing, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> Ademola Adeleke, “The Politics of Diplomacy and Peacekeeping in West Africa: The Ecomog Operation in Liberia,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 33, no. 4 (1995): 569-593; Clement E. Adibe, “The Liberian Conflict and the ECOWAS-NU Partnership,” *Third World Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (1997): 471-488; Herbert Howe, “Lessons of Liberia: ECOMOG and Regional Peacekeeping,” *International Security* 12, no. 3 (Winter 1996/97): 145-176; Jinmi Adisa, “Nigeria in ECOMOG: Political Undercurrents and the Burden of Community Spirit,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 5, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 83-110; M.A. Vogt and E.A. Ekoko, eds., *Nigeria in International Peace-Keeping: 1960-1992* (Lagos, Nigeria: Malthouse Press Limited, 1993).

<sup>12</sup> Kenneth L. Cain, “The Rape of Dinah: Human Rights, Civil War in Liberia, and Evil Triumphant,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (1999): 265-307.

<sup>13</sup> Abiodun Alao, John Mackinlay, and ‘Funmi Olonisakin, *Peacekeepers, Politicians, and Warlords : The Liberian Peace Process* (Tokyo, New York, and Paris: United Nations University Press, 1999).

<sup>14</sup> See Lyons, *Voting for Peace*; Harris, “From ‘Warlord’ to ‘Democratic’ President”; and Victor Tanner, “Liberia: Railroading Peace,” *Review of African Political Economy*, 25, no.75 (March 1998): 133-147.

identities that Cain himself demonstrates were the basis upon which Taylor and his forces identified potential victims of their attacks. Second, credible definitions of genocide do not turn on strictly statistical interpretations of the crime. Neither the UNGC nor the Rome Statute require a minimum threshold of casualties for a finding of genocide. As such, body counts are relevant only to the extent that they may indicate or clarify material evidence of genocidal intent.<sup>16</sup>

My goal is to address all three issues to the extent that this can be done in a study of such limited length and depth, but with several caveats, some of which are related to the nature of available sources. I have relied on reports provided by the U.S. National Technical Information Service's Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) and BBC Worldwide Monitoring Summary of World Broadcasts (SWB), print media such as *Africa Confidential* and *West Africa*, various human rights reports, and published memoirs of individuals who were witness to the carnage. In the course of my research, the project has revealed itself to be enormous. Establishing the contours of a rebel campaign in which control of broadcast facilities was a central feature and in which foreign intervention exacerbated already troubling circumstances, was a simple enough task. A thorough study of Taylor's propaganda message and its long-term impact on the international, regional, commercial, social, political, and military dynamics of the conflict, however, will have to wait for a dedicated rethinking of the civil war. For now, this thesis outlines the general patterns of resource accumulation and considers, in broad strokes, the nature and implications of warlord propaganda. Memoirs provided invaluable insights into the impact of Taylor's propaganda machinery on ordinary Liberian and non-Liberian civilians and fighters, but the experiences that they document are almost exclusively limited to a single year, 1990. For that reason, the second half of this thesis is weighted heavily towards radio during that period alone.

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<sup>15</sup> Cain, "The Rape of Dinah," 265-266.

<sup>16</sup> For a penetrating discussion of the "quantitative threshold" in international genocide legislation, see William Schabas, *Genocide in International Law: The Crime of Crimes* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 245-255.

The second issue, how to define the general contours of the conflict, is less problematic. For simplicity's sake, I have refrained from breaking the events of 1990-1997 down into lesser periods or wars. Instead, I treat as a single historical event the seven years during which Charles Taylor pursued the Presidency of Liberia, ending with the elections of 19 July 1997. In terms of rebel radio broadcasting, the framework I have chosen is sufficiently accurate; further work on the Liberian civil war may require more precise labeling.

The problems raised by Cain's analysis are particularly salient in a study of conflict radio. According to Article 25 of the Rome Statute, dealing with issues of individual criminal responsibility, "a person shall be criminally responsible for a crime within the jurisdiction of the court if that person... [i]n respect to the crime of genocide, directly and publicly incites others to commit genocide."<sup>17</sup> By highlighting Taylor's specific exhortations to eliminate particular groups, more general exemplars of his propaganda, and the impact of such messages on those with access to foreign media sources or within range of NPFL radio transmitters, I hope to establish a firmer understanding of Taylor's intentionality.

The task is not without its challenges: Ellis notes, for example, "the cultivation of secrecy and the hiding of intention... are notable features of Liberian religious culture and politics."<sup>18</sup> Pointing to the political and cultural importance of oral traditions in Liberia, he has observed how "the spoken word, subject to a thousand different interpretations and meanings, is not regarded as the deepest level of truth, but must be sifted for clues as to the real causes of visible events."<sup>19</sup> He has further suggested to this author that this "clearly applies to the broadcast word as well as the spoken one."<sup>20</sup> It is unlikely that Taylor set out to deliberately commit or incite genocide in any

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<sup>17</sup> *Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court*, UN Doc.A/CONF.183/9 (1 July 2002), 15-16. [www.un.org/law/icc/statute/english/rome\\_statute\(e\).pdf](http://www.un.org/law/icc/statute/english/rome_statute(e).pdf), Accessed 17 March 2003.

<sup>18</sup> Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy*, 13, 265.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 13. See also Ellis, "Tuning in to Pavement Radio," *African Affairs* 88, no. 352 (July 1989): 321-330, for an interesting description of politicized oral culture and its significance in West Africa.

<sup>20</sup> Personal correspondence with Stephen Ellis, 16 July 2002.

ideological sense of the term, but his words had a definite impact, and the consequences beg further consideration of his responsibility for atrocities committed by his troops.

Liberia's almost immediate collapse into anarchy following the NPFL invasion and the degree of ethnicization of the civil war presupposes a minimum threshold of psychological preparation on the part of perpetrators and victims, and so, as Cain argues,

A more proximate line of responsibility... begins in 1980 with Samuel Doe, a twenty-eight year old, semi-literate Sergeant-Major [sic]. Doe's violent coup against the Americo-Liberian elite, and subsequent use of his ethnic Krahn brethren as a palace guard and brutal state security apparatus, begot more violence, coup attempts, ethnically-based reprisals, and vengeful counterattacks, ultimately rendering sufficient chaos to induce Taylor to attack.<sup>21</sup>

In explaining the resource pool that was available for guerrilla exploitation, too, the Doe era is a logical point of departure. In Chapter 1, "Radio Broadcasting in the Pre-Civil War Era: 1980-1989," I discuss the long-term development of radio broadcasting in Liberia, from Doe's first broadcast to Liberians in April 1980, to late 1989, when foreign aid planners, exasperated with the corruption and ineptitude of the Doe regime, finally abandoned their efforts at implementing rural-based, development-oriented media institutions. Doe, for his part, lacked the capacity to fully exploit the media in any real sense, although radio stations were prized for their symbolic value as representations of power and legitimacy. I also speculate that although Doe's propaganda was not concerned with overt calls to specifically *ethnic* violence, it may have been, in some oblique fashion, filtered by discrete, sub-national ethnic sensibilities into a more subtle form of incitement than was originally intended. In Chapter 2, "Radio Broadcasting in the Civil War: 1990-1997," I demonstrate how radio facilities, developed over the previous five decades and enhanced by foreign aid programs in spite of overwhelming evidence of government cupidity, corruption, and tyranny, represented an attractive target for warlords such as Taylor. It was Taylor and his guerrillas who exploited the country's natural resource wealth more effectively than any other party to the civil war. They applied the same principles of predatory resource

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<sup>21</sup> Cain, "The Rape of Dinah," 268.

acquisition to Liberian media. They embarked on a sustained campaign of media dominance, using radio propaganda to incite ethnic violence, elicit compliance, inspire fear and terror, discredit enemies, and promote the leadership of Charles Taylor. Finally, I conclude with a number of policy recommendations, drawing on the evidence presented in this study, intended for those with an interest in countering the pernicious effects of conflict radio.



## CHAPTER 1:

### Radio Broadcasting in the Pre-Civil War Era: 1980-1989

*[I] will make no empty promises that I cannot keep.*

Samuel K. Doe to Liberian voters, 1985<sup>22</sup>

In 1980, long-simmering tensions between Liberia's ruling class and its ethnically-heterogeneous African majority came to a head. The political elite, led by President William R. Tolbert, was deposed in a bloody coup staged by 17 enlisted soldiers of the Armed Forces of Liberia. The new military government appropriated the populist rhetoric of Tolbert's political opposition and co-opted its intellectual leadership, offering a promise of democracy that expressed long-standing rural frustrations over the exclusion of Liberia's hinterland population from the political life of the state by "Americo-Liberians", descendants of Liberia's ethnic settler class. Tolbert's fall marked the end of that monopoly.

For the next decade, Liberians endured the autocratic rule of Master-Sergeant Samuel Kanyon Doe, one of the 1980 putschists and a member of the Krahn ethnic minority. Under Doe, revolutionary populism gave way to ethnic patronage, and by decade's end, the promise of Liberian nationhood was splintered by episodes of inter-communal violence and persistent fears of revenge. In an ethnic landscape composed of over a dozen distinct groups, none of which constituted more than a small percentage of the total Liberian population,<sup>23</sup> a deadly fault line developed between the Krahn and the Mandingo on one side, and the Gio and Mano on the other.

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<sup>22</sup> "Doe Woos the Voters," *West Africa* 3555 (14 October 1985), 2182.

<sup>23</sup> According to 1974 Government of Liberia census statistics, they are: Bassa (14.3 %), Belle (0.5 %), Dei (0.4 %), Gbandi (2.6 %), Gio (8.7 %), Gola (4.5 %), Grebo (8 %), Kissi (3.4 %), Kpelle (19.9 %), Krahn (4.7 %), Kru (8.1 %), Loma (5.9 %), Mandingo (3.9 %), Mano (7.4 %), Mende (0.6 %), Vai (3.3 %), Americo-Liberians (3-5 %), as well as an indeterminate number of others including Europeans, Americans, and Lebanese. See J. Gus Liebenow, *Liebenow: The Quest for Democracy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 35.

Radio broadcasting played a central role in political contests between Doe and his opponents. Illiteracy rates exceeded 70 per cent in some areas,<sup>24</sup> and the bulk of Liberians were rural dwellers who lived beyond the reach of print media that was expensive to produce, transport and purchase. Radio was cheaper than television and more accessible than print, capable of transmitting program content across broad swaths of Liberia's difficult hinterland terrain. As the government sought to monopolize the airwaves and quash dissent, broadcast stations were widely publicized as strategic assets. Radio facilities in Monrovia were prominent targets during coups and attempted coups in 1980, 1983, and 1985; Doe trumpeted the construction of a rural radio network partially funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID); and news broadcasts were used to promote projects of national significance and the legitimacy of Doe's government.

This chapter will demonstrate six things. First, a brief survey of the pre-1980 history of Liberian radio broadcasting will illustrate what facilities were available to the Doe regime at its point of entry into national politics. Second, the strategic importance of radio stations as symbols of official power will be shown via some of the key events of the era. Third, I will explore the repressive state of press freedoms during the 1980s in order to demonstrate the futility of foreign development efforts aimed at promoting the mass media as a venue for broad-based educational campaigns and free and open political discourse. Fourth, I will discuss the development of a statewide network of broadcast facilities that became less a medium for the voice of authority than an outright representation of it – especially in the hands of Doe's corrupt, self-serving government. Fifth, the nature of official propaganda will be explored, in an attempt to determine whether, given the polarized nature of ethnic relations during the 1980s, Doe used radio messages to incite ethnic hatreds or direct his suppression of perceived ethnic enemies. Finally, I conclude that by decade's end, Doe's political isolation, managerial ineptitude, and overall lack of

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<sup>24</sup> The 1974 Government of Liberia census cites literacy levels as low as 21 per cent among Liberians aged ten years or older. See *Africa South of the Sahara*, 11<sup>th</sup> Ed.(London: Europa Publications, 1981), 592.

intellectual sophistication combined to prevent his effective consolidation and manipulation of radio broadcasting for such political ends. Doe did not, in short, use radio to target and demonize ethnic opponents in an overt fashion. The pool of physical broadcast resources, however, was significantly increased on his watch.

## Radio in the First Republic: 1936-1980

From its inception decades prior to the founding of Liberia's First Republic in 1848, the printed press functioned as a laboratory in which traditions of political discourse and freedom of the press were developed and institutionalized.<sup>25</sup> Liberian radio broadcasting, on the other hand, had neither print journalism's historic toehold nor its particular relationship with domestic politics. A relatively recent technological development, it made its first appearance in South Africa in 1920 and in Kenya in 1927. Foreign interests initially established radio broadcast facilities in Africa as a means of maintaining a communications link between expatriates and the metropolises.<sup>26</sup> Between the late 1940s, when the first private radio programs were aired, and the end of the regime of William R. Tolbert in 1980, the change in Liberian mass media would be significant. Radio, with capabilities far better suited to the Liberian context than other media formats, was heavily promoted by foreign interests adhering to economic and religious development agendas. This was particularly salient given that in the latter half of the twentieth century, the person of the Liberian President came to symbolize the authority of the state, political rule became increasingly autocratic, and official strategies of national unification relied on ethnic rapprochement between a minority settler elite resident in Monrovia and an indigenous

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<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Carl Patrick Burrowes, *Modernization and the Decline of Press Freedom: Liberia, 1847 to 1970*, Journalism and Mass Communications Monographs No. 160 (Columbia, SC : Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, 1996); Momo K. Rogers, «The Liberian Press: An Analysis,» *Journalism Quarterly* 63, no. 2 (1986) 275-81, and Rogers, "The Liberian Press Under Military Rule," *Liberian Studies Journal* 21, No. 1 (1996): 7-32.

<sup>26</sup> Louise M. Bourgault, *Mass Media in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 69.

hinterland majority of extremely heterogeneous composition.<sup>27</sup> It was in this context that media-oriented broadcasting efforts were welcomed and encouraged by Liberian governments clearly committed to monopolizing broadcast resources and manipulating the flow of public information.

In April 1936, the Liberia Government Radio Service (LGRS) was created to introduce radio telegraphy to Liberia and three years later the first telegraphy stations were started in Cape Palmas, Maryland County, and Kolahun, Western Province, respectively. In 1947, Dr. John B. West, an American medical doctor who had arrived in Liberia three years earlier to head up the United States Public Health Mission in Liberia, resigned his post and started Liberia's first radio station under the call letters ELBC, transmitting intermittently over the next decade. In April 1950, he established the Liberia Broadcasting Company (LBC), operating the service full time. It was a modest endeavor, its range limited to a mere twenty-mile radius. In 1952, West received Liberian government funding to sustain his home-based broadcasting station and construct a facility in which to house the LBC.<sup>28</sup>

Meanwhile, government, vocational, religious, and corporate radio broadcasting took root. In 1956, the LGRS began offering a limited radio broadcast service, operated by Liberians, under the call sign ELRS. Radio ELNR was a rural facility designed to address the needs of the communities serving the Liberian-American-Swedish Mining Consortium (LAMCO) at both ends of the rail line connecting its mining operation in Nimba County and the seaport of Buchanan. Radio ELBWI (also known as Radio Booker T. Washington) was the internal service of a vocational education school. Radio ELHC, the service of the Holy Cross Mission, broadcast religious programming to mission students.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> See Liebenow, *The Quest for Democracy*, and Amos Sawyer, *The Emergence of Autocracy in Liberia: Tragedy and Challenge* (San Francisco, CA: Institute for Contemporary Studies, 1992).

<sup>28</sup> Jerome Zack Boikai, "National Development in Liberia and the Role of the Broadcast Media, 1950-1980: A Descriptive Study," (Ph.D. Diss., Wayne State University, 1983), 34-35; Rogers, "The Press in Liberia," 103-108.

<sup>29</sup> Boikai, "National Development in Liberia," 34-42; Sydney W. Head, ed., *Broadcasting in Africa: A Continental Survey of Radio and Television* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1974), 103-104; Rogers, "The Press in Liberia," 106-107.

Liberia's strategic location on the West Coast of Africa made it an ideal location for relaying broadcast signals. The Voice of America (VOA), in an effort to improve upon its decrepit Tangier-based relay sites and create more direct broadcast links between the continental United States and African listeners, established its African Program and Relay Center at Monrovia in January 1963.<sup>30</sup> The center's function was to create and transmit material specifically designed for an African audience, broadcasting in a handful of languages, including (in addition to English and French) Arabic, Swahili, Hausa, and Amharic.<sup>31</sup>

By far the most significant early developments in Liberian radio broadcasting were the creation of two separate and distinct services, Radio ELWA and the government sponsored ELBC station. The latter became Liberia's first commercial radio broadcast service, but ELWA was the first service of any substance to be established in Liberia. Originally the brainchild of a group of American students at Wheaton College, the project was quickly paired off with the Sudan Interior Mission, a Christian evangelical organization. Planning and construction took place over several years, with the facility finally located on one hundred acres of land in Monrovia donated by President William Tubman to the effort. The service began broadcasting in January 1954, operating under the call letters ELWA ("Eternal Love Winning Africa"). It transmitted within Liberia in English and a number of indigenous languages, as well as offering an external service, proselytizing across Africa and the Middle East.<sup>32</sup> Despite Tubman's initially lukewarm response to the idea of hosting such an ambitious project,<sup>33</sup> he soon caught on. At a dedication ceremony for one of ELWA's newly completed studio buildings, he was reported to have proclaimed "I find the broadcasts of ELWA convincing, convicting, and converting!"<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> This date is from William A. Hachten, *Muffled Drums: The News Media in Africa* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1971), 113. Boikai (p. 38) and Head (p. 103), citing an early graduate study of radio in Liberia, indicate 1964 as the year VOA began broadcasting.

<sup>31</sup> Hachten, *Muffled Drums*, 113.

<sup>32</sup> Head, *Broadcasting in Africa*, 208-209. Jane Reed and Jim Grant, *Voice Under Every Palm: The Story of Radio Station ELWA* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1968).

<sup>33</sup> Reed and Grant, *Voice Under Every Palm*, 25.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

The 1950s was thus an experimental stage during which radio was introduced to the peoples of Liberia. By the time UNESCO-sponsored development efforts began to take root throughout Africa in the 1960s, a number of radio facilities had already been established in Liberia. In 1959, the Liberian government contracted with the British firm Rediffusion to provide the necessary equipment, training, and programming infrastructure for an expanded ELRS facility. A year later, the Rediffusion station came on air under the revived ELBC call sign,<sup>35</sup> and was Liberia's first commercial radio broadcast service. Ownership of the station reverted to the Liberian government by 1964. Rediffusion was awarded a twenty-five year management contract by the Liberian government, but by 1968 the Liberian Broadcasting Corporation, created to manage the country's burgeoning media resources,<sup>36</sup> assumed control of such duties under the leadership of Liberian G. Henry Andrews. Three years later, ELBC was broadcasting on both medium and short wave, primarily in English but also offering minimal news programming in indigenous languages, for 17.5 hours per day from transmitters in Monrovia and Harper.<sup>37</sup> Its programming, covering a wide array of subjects, reflected the official drive to develop a common sense of national identity.<sup>38</sup>

Radio was integral to the social engineering efforts of both foreign and domestic broadcast services. In addition to the government's programming emphasis on national development, private radio played a significant role in cultivating indigenous cultural, social, and political awareness. Early radio relied on foreign sources, notably Voice of America (VOA) and British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) broadcasts, for information about the outside world and program content in general. The sophistication of domestic services was steadily improved. Liberian broadcasters continued the practice of outsourcing their newsgathering, thus tying rural populations to a broader skein of people, places, and events, but they also began to introduce

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<sup>35</sup> Boikai, "National Development in Liberia," 35.

<sup>36</sup> Including new television capabilities, introduced under the call letters ELTV (or "ELBC/TV") in 1964. Head, *Broadcasting in Africa*, 102-103.

<sup>37</sup> Head, *Broadcasting in Africa*, 102-103; Boikai, *National Development in Liberia*, 34-35.

subject matter that was much more relevant to rural listening audiences. LAMCO and ELWA both transmitted in indigenous languages, for example, and to a much greater degree than did ELBC.

ELWA in particular, in its efforts to spread its religious message among Liberians, placed a great deal of importance on shaping the attitudes and living conditions of its listeners.<sup>39</sup> Within months of its first broadcasts in 1954, ELWA planners recognized that the bulk of Liberian radio consumers resided in the interior, beyond the urban population centers. They employed Language Broadcast Directors, local subject matter experts, to research and design ethnically targeted program content. In addition to broadcasting religious programs and development messages through which modern agricultural knowledge could be disseminated, ELWA transmitted traditional folk tales and music, and eventually provided service in a dozen native languages. Indigenous Liberians actively sought out such employment as ethnic liaisons with ELWA. A measure of social competition and mobility was implied here, as individuals filling these positions were required to have or to complete a minimum high school level education. "The many feet of radio" gave proselytizing Liberians greater access to previously difficult to reach communities: according to one pastor, "It takes me a long time to cross rivers and mountains to get to a village to talk about Jesus... but now when I finally get there, the radio is already in the place talking. I have only two feet, but radio has many feet."<sup>40</sup> Tribal chiefs began to see beyond the initial thrill of a new technology, recognizing that their authority was increasingly contingent on radio links to outside sources of information.<sup>41</sup>

William R. Tolbert, Jr., Tubman's long-time vice-president, assumed the presidential mantle in 1971. Tolbert continued and built upon Tubman's programs for ethnic and national

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<sup>38</sup> Boikai, "National Development in Liberia," 43.

<sup>39</sup> On the one hand, ELWA contributed to the welfare of Liberians by building hospitals, child care facilities, and schools; on the other, it introduced a divisive social element by concentrating on the conversion of Muslims. Boikai, "National Development in Liberia," 43-44.

<sup>40</sup> Reed and Grant, *Voice Under Every Palm*, 105.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 96, 99, 102.

reform in Liberia, and in the realm of mass communications, vigorously pursued the construction of new broadcast facilities and programs. The message of national unification remained high on the Tolbert agenda, particularly through the activation of ethnic culture and identity. Soon after taking office, he initiated plans to extend the fingers of government information ministries into the interior, establishing a national news agency in the mid-1970s and expanding the Liberian Broadcasting Corporation with a multi-million dollar infusion of cash. It was part of Tolbert's modernizing vision that broadcast facilities (both radio and television) would be enhanced and used to gain government access to every part of the country. This involved finding the means to boost signal strength, and installing an FM radio and television complex designed to supplement the government's existing AM capability. Tolbert also conceived of a network of studios and transmitters throughout the country, in Lofa, Bong, Grand Bassa, Sinoe, Grand Gedeh, and Maryland Counties. Local news would be broadcast, but the project's purpose was to enable effective dissemination of official policies and statements to rural media consumers.<sup>42</sup>

If Tolbert's vision seemed ambitious, it nonetheless found a willing sponsor in the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Negotiations between the Liberian government and USAID in 1977 resulted in the creation of the Rural Information Systems project, initiating a decade-long development enterprise. A preliminary workshop was held in Liberia that same year, jointly sponsored by the Ministry of Information and Cultural Affairs and USAID. Representatives of numerous Liberian ministries were in attendance, learning of case studies in the uses of mass communications for national development. Further negotiations in 1977 and 1979 solidified the relationship between USAID and the Liberian government. In May, 1979, Liberian government representatives were given further exposure to the mechanics of development communication, attending a "Basic Education Village" workshop in Jamaica and touring the site of a project in Guatemala. That same month, an FM radio/television complex, part of Tolbert's expansion project, was built by an American company, Harris Electronics. The site

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<sup>42</sup> Boikai, "National Development in Liberia," 47-51.



included comprehensive production facilities capable of extended broadcast range and offering a wide variety of programming.<sup>43</sup>

Project development was put on hold due to the April, 1980 coup that toppled the Tolbert Presidency, but a Project Paper outlining the funding and physical characteristics of the Rural Information Systems project was approved by the summer. Grants and loans in the amount of approximately \$12,000,000 (U.S.) were secured for a seven year funding period, with a total projected cost of \$18,000,000 (U.S.).<sup>44</sup> The project, which would be known as the Liberian Rural Communications Network (LRCN), was to feature a central headquarters facility and a series of rural satellite stations. The criteria for their geographic disposition were drawn up by a government project design committee, and included "national coverage, homogeneity of listening audience, availability of electricity, location of political centers and availability of local infrastructure." Seven local stations would be sited in the towns of Voinjama, Gbarnga, Buchanan, Sanniquellie, Greenville, Robertsport, and Zwedru, with the headquarters located in Monrovia.<sup>45</sup>

ELWA acquired more land and expanded its production facilities, and claimed to have conducted the first audience survey of broadcast content. It came into conflict with the government's Ministries of Information and of Finance, the Criminal Investigative Division of the National Police, and the National Bureau of Investigation in 1978 and 1979 for its coverage of government repression and reporting public speeches on the state of Liberian public debt. Ministry representatives protested the negative publicity in the first case, demanding that a retraction be issued, and threatened to revoke ELWA's license in the second. In the latter case,

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<sup>43</sup> Institute for International Research, *Final Report of the Rural Information Systems Project: A Report to the United States Agency for International Development*, Project No. 669-0134 (Arlington, Virginia: Institute for International Research, March 1989), 3-4; Boikai, "National Development in Liberia," 51; see also Louise M. Bourgault, "The Liberian Rural Communications Network: A Study of in the Contradictions of Development Communication," *Journal of Development Communication*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (June): 57-71; and Bourgault, *Mass Media in Sub-Saharan Africa*, 92-93.

<sup>44</sup> Just under half of this amount was to be provided by the Government of Liberia.

<sup>45</sup> Institute for International Research, *Rural Information Systems Project*, 3-4.

ELWA was accused of broadcasting content that was contrary to official information provided by the government. It had thus exceeded its original charter “to be non-political”: by transmitting so-called “political” news, it was acting maliciously and spreading gossip.<sup>46</sup>

By the time of the 1980 coup, government interference with and control of the mass media were significant issues in Liberian public life. Tolbert’s plan for extensive development of the country’s broadcast facilities was a commendable attempt to modernize the state and blur the line separating rural and urban populations. Both Tubman’s and Tolbert’s treatment of the printed press, though, had made it clear enough that free and open public discourse was a rare luxury. Increasing government intolerance of anything but politically neutral broadcast content reinforced the notion that it considered radio to be a proprietary resource. This did not bode well for USAID’s development program.

### Radio as a Strategic Asset, Part I: “This is Coup Time”

In the 1970s, the Movement for Justice in Africa (MOJA) and the Progressive Alliance of Liberians (PAL)<sup>47</sup> led public agitation against Tolbert and the century-long political dominance of the old True Whig Party. In 1979 rioters protesting arbitrary government increases in the price of rice, a staple of the Liberian diet, were cut down in the streets of Monrovia by police acting on government orders.<sup>48</sup> MOJA and PAL leaders exhorted Liberians with appeals to African identity, revolutionary sentiment, and national cohesion, arguing for social, political, and fiscal reform in the face of government corruption.<sup>49</sup> On 12 April 1980, scarcely one year after the rice riots, 17 non-commissioned members of the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) staged a coup d’état. They

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<sup>46</sup> Ronald Joseph Shope, “The Patron’s Press: An Examination of Broadcast Press Freedom’s in the Republic of Liberia Between 1976 and 1986,” (Ph.D. Diss., Pennsylvania State University, 1995), 75-77, 81-84; Boikai, “National Development in Liberia,” 116.

<sup>47</sup> Later to become the People’s Progressive Party (PPP).

<sup>48</sup> See Bill Berkeley, *Liberia: A Promise Betrayed* (New York: Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, 1986), 14.

<sup>49</sup> For example, see “Liberia, the Changing Society,” *West africa* 3255 (3 December 1979), 2221-2223; and “Death of a Liberian Regime,” *West africa* 3274 (21 April 1980), 687.

seized the Executive Mansion in Monrovia at approximately one o'clock in the morning and killed Tolbert, along with 26 members of his staff.<sup>50</sup> Under the leadership of Master-Sergeant Samuel Kanyon Doe, an ethnic Krahn, Liberia entered a new stage in its political life.

The putschists immediately reconstituted themselves as the People's Redemption Council (PRC), headed by their four most senior members: Doe as Head of State and Chairman of the PRC, Thomas Weh Syen as Co-Chairman, Nicholas Podier as Speaker of the Council, and Thomas Quiwonkpa, a member of the Gio ethnic group, as head of the armed forces. MOJA and PPP leaders such as H. Boima Fahnbulleh, Gabriel Baccus Matthews, Chea Cheepoo, George Boley, Togba-Nah Tipoteh, and others, became members of Doe's cabinet.<sup>51</sup> The majority of the PRC's members were either Krahn or hailed from Grand Gedeh County.<sup>52</sup> Ethnic markers resurfaced in the wake of the coup, but according to one Liberian entertainer, "[N]ow that the 'native Liberians' in the persons of Sergeant Doe and the PRC have toppled a government identified as Americo-Liberians, there is a new agitation. All of a sudden our tribes have been discovered. All the years I have been hearing about Chea Cheapoo or George Boley, they were never referred to as Kranh [sic]."<sup>53</sup>

In the ethnic hierarchy of the old Americo-Liberian elite, the Krahn enjoyed little prestige, had no strength of numbers, and their territory in Grand Gedeh was among the least developed in the country.<sup>54</sup> The bonds of familiarity of the coup plotters were entirely comprehensible as a function of a conspiratorial process wherein one's kin, by

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<sup>50</sup> Liebenow, *The Quest for Democracy*, 185.

<sup>51</sup> "Master Sergeant Doe's Cabinet," *West africa* 3274 (21 April 1980), 689-690.

<sup>52</sup> Liebenow, *The Quest for Democracy*, 192.

<sup>53</sup> "Master-Sergeant Doe's Coup is Defended," *West africa* 3282 (16 June 1980), 1057-1060.

Stephen K. Ellis has based his analysis of ethnic conflict in post-coup Liberia on a similar observation, arguing that "The notion of Krahn-ness only gains much meaning in matters of national politics, where politicians compete with each other to build constituencies and to demonstrate that, while living in Monrovia, they have not lost touch with their rural roots." See Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy*, 36, and more generally, 31-43.

<sup>54</sup> Liebenow, *The Quest For Democracy*, 204.

default, were the only people to be trusted.<sup>55</sup> Maintaining control over the armed forces was still problematic: although Liberia's military was top-heavy with Krahn, it was the Loma who dominated among the enlisted troops. Initially, at least, the coup plotters put some effort into achieving a degree of ethnic parity among the PRC leadership. Such pragmatic concessions would be little more than transient, however, as rapid recruitment of Krahns into the officer corps of the armed forces and into positions of political prominence made for an unsteady rearrangement of Liberia's social mosaic.<sup>56</sup>

Rampant violence and lawlessness followed the coup. Reprisals against Americo-Liberian holdouts of the ancien régime were common occurrences. At least two hundred people were estimated killed within the first few days after April 12.<sup>57</sup> On April 18, the trial for treason and corruption of members of the Tolbert government got underway at the Barclay Training Centre (BTC), a military barracks in Monrovia. Speaking to a group of senior army personnel at the Centre, Doe declared April 12 to be henceforth known as National Redemption Day.<sup>58</sup> On April 19, the execution of four looters was televised, on Doe's orders, in order to dissuade others from "activities not in line with the objectives of the revolution."<sup>59</sup> Three days later, thirteen former officials of the Tolbert government were executed on a public beach behind the BTC, the firing squad cheered on by thousands of Liberian onlookers and reported by obliging Liberian and foreign journalists - a spectacle that received worldwide attention and international opprobrium.<sup>60</sup>

The PRC initially enjoyed broad support from Liberians. The military's refusal to fire on civilians during the rice riots in 1979 had given it a veneer of public legitimacy, which in itself could be attributed to a heavy recruitment base among the urban unemployed. Soldiers and

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>56</sup> Liebenow, *The Quest For Democracy*, 192; Amos Sawyer, *Effective Immediately: Dictatorship in Liberia, 1980-1986: A Personal Perspective* (Bremen: Liberia Working Group, 1986), 4-6.

<sup>57</sup> Berkeley, *A Promise Betrayed*, 45.

<sup>58</sup> "Liberia Developments," *BBC Worldwide Monitoring Summary of World Broadcasts* [Hereafter *SWB*] ME/6398/B/7 (April 18, 1980).

<sup>59</sup> "Developments in Liberia," *SWB*, ME/6399/B/4 (April 19, 1980).

<sup>60</sup> Berkeley, *A Promise Betrayed*, 14-15.

civilians shared a common bond of poverty. The extreme subservience to which troops were subjected as they were increasingly tasked with demeaning domestic duties at the behest of government officials further exacerbated matters.<sup>61</sup> The PRC quickly adopted a rhetorical platform of radical social change that quite neatly matched the public's expectations of political transformation. Borrowing from the PPP's Gabriel Baccus Matthews, it affected an appropriately populist catchphrase, "In the cause of the People, the struggle continues," that would preface and conclude public statements.<sup>62</sup> In fact, this would appear somewhat pallid when compared to the military government's later propaganda. Meanwhile, Doe and the PRC appropriated MOJA and PAL ideology and co-opted their leaders, if only for their value as political window-dressing: externally, Doe's survival was dependent on U.S. aid money and political support; internally, his ultimate power base derived from an ethnic patronage network of Krahn kinsmen, as well as a few select Mandingo.<sup>63</sup> The PAL under Gabriel Baccus Matthews, for its part, espoused a "revolutionary but not Marxist" platform, and MOJA, founded by Tipoteh, sought to avoid class politics altogether, vigorously promoting the reforms of the Tolbert era.<sup>64</sup>

One of the PRC's first actions following the 1980 coup was to assert control over the airwaves. Liberians in Monrovia were accustomed to radio programs coming on the air by five a.m., but on the morning of the coup the city's two main stations, Radio ELBC and Radio ELWA, were silent. Apprehensive Monroviens, especially those in close proximity to the Executive Mansion, instead rose to the sounds of shooting and increased military traffic. ELBC and ELWA eventually came alive. Announcers proclaimed, in English and in a number of indigenous dialects, the end of the Tolbert regime. Government employees were recalled to their posts at the Executive Mansion.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Sawyer, *Effective Immediately*, 4-6.

<sup>62</sup> Liebenow, *The Quest for Democracy*, 200-202.

<sup>63</sup> Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy*, 60.

<sup>64</sup> Liebenow, *The Quest for Democracy*, 174-176.

<sup>65</sup> Willie A. Givens, ed., *The Road to Democracy Under the Leadership of Samuel K. Doe*, Kensal House, Abbotsbrook, Bourne End, Bucks, England: Kensal Press, 1986), 7.

Later that day, Doe broadcast a statement appealing for calm and directing soldiers not to take orders from military officers or government representatives. It was an amateurish first stab at control of the media. According to Liberian writer Similih Henry Cordor, "The announcement said nobody should go in the street. But this sounded like people should go in the street." Jubilant Liberians, not surprisingly, inferred just that and responded to Doe's comments accordingly.<sup>66</sup> Meanwhile, international coverage of the events –foreign news had always been a credible source of news for Liberians – was cut. Ronald Joseph Shope, an ELWA staffer at the time, recalled how ELBC's relay of BBC news was suddenly interrupted by "technical difficulties" when a report on the Monrovia situation began. Following ELBC's lead, neither the Liberian Broadcasting System (LBS) nor ELWA carried their usual fare of BBC material that day.<sup>67</sup>

Doe and the PRC never looked back, regularly using existing radio facilities to broadcast their message to Liberians. ELBC's transmitters lacked the power to broadcast the station's signal beyond Monrovia. ELWA was the *de facto* national network, its five relay stations giving it the coverage to transmit throughout Liberia and neighboring countries as well. The uses of radio included daily "commercials" on ELBC in which the military government attempted to minimize ethnic differences,<sup>68</sup> rebroadcasting Doe's major public addresses on ELWA, and disseminating his propaganda across the country. In the case of constitutional reform, for example, Liberians were kept informed of and involved in the process through a regular program of broadcasts.

In April 1981 Doe announced the creation of a National Constitutional Commission that would scrap the old True Whig Constitution and craft a new version.<sup>69</sup> The Commission was given uncharacteristically wide latitude by the government to accomplish its task, although the latter's initial ambivalence towards democratic reforms eventually turned to outright subversion of the process. Headed by Amos Sawyer, it officially stood to in July 1981. It immediately went

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<sup>66</sup> S. Henry Cordor, *Liberia Under Military Rule: A Review and Analysis of Liberia Before and After the Military Coup* (Monrovia, Liberia: West Africa 22 July 1980), 41-42.

<sup>67</sup> Shope, "The Patron's Press," 81.

<sup>68</sup> Liebenow, *The Quest For Democracy*, 239.

to work on a massive campaign of civic education and popular participation that featured an extensive schedule of consultations with every stratum of Liberian society. For MOJA leader Sawyer, the work of the Commission was the fulfillment of the populist agitation of the Tolbert era.<sup>70</sup> The PRC, for its part, announced that it would hand over the reins of power by 1985.

The government, quixotic as always, commissioned ELWA to broadcast the text of the suspended 1847 Constitution in English as well as in various indigenous languages. The times and locations of public meetings on the issue of what should be included in a new constitution were broadcast over the airwaves. In March 1983, Sawyer presented Doe with the first draft of the new document at the Executive Mansion. After a period of government review, during which Doe's reluctance to hand over power began to show through the thin façade of revolutionary populism, the new draft was read over the air, this time courtesy of ELBC. The highly simplified vernacular in which it was aired so reduced the content of the new document that indigenous Liberians would most certainly have come away from the experience with an idiosyncratic comprehension of its original meaning.<sup>71</sup>

Following a referendum on the fate of the new constitution, Doe announced its acceptance in a nationwide radio broadcast on July 20 relayed from the Smithsonian Memorial Pavilion in Monrovia.<sup>72</sup> Liberian print outlets carried news of the events as well, but this use of radio was an especially relevant tactic in forging bonds with indigenous and rural populations whose literacy levels were appallingly low.<sup>73</sup> Overall, radio was used successfully to draw Liberians into a project of national significance, although Doe's chronic subversion of the process limited its impact. Soon after accepting the National Constitutional Commission's new document and the same day that he would issue a repressive decree regulating press freedoms, Doe interrupted normal radio and television service on the LBS to announce that he was disbanding

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<sup>69</sup> Liebenow, *The Quest for Democracy*, 217-218.

<sup>70</sup> Sawyer, *Effective Immediately*, 20.

<sup>71</sup> Liebenow, *The Quest for Democracy*, 218, 220-221.

<sup>72</sup> "Liberia's Constitutional Affairs," *SWB*, ME/7703/B/1 (24 July 1984).

the PRC and forming an Interim National Assembly of fifty-seven members –with himself as its President.<sup>74</sup> On October 15, Doe’s National Democratic Party of Liberia (NDPL) took the Presidency with 50.9 per cent of the vote, but there was little doubt that the voting procedures had been rigged.

For Doe, legitimacy was evidently less an ascribed quality than it was a function of ownership and control. A better informed public did not mean that it would be afforded the political space to be more openly critical. Liberia’s universities, for example, were traditionally hotbeds of political agitation, and following the 1980 coup, the PRC closed campuses, banned student political parties, and arrested and threatened students with execution.<sup>75</sup> In 1982, the PRC banned all academic activities that interfered with the programs, policies, or good name of the government.<sup>76</sup> “[W]hen we suspended student activities on campus,” Doe states, “we in no way attempted to relinquish our concern for our brothers and sisters who are searching for a decent education.” Rather, “the energies and resources of our young people could be directed more to development than to political activities.”<sup>77</sup>

Nor were Doe’s own officials exempt from criticism. Foreign Minister H. Boima Fahnbulleh publicly criticized government expenditures on such frivolous items as luxury cars and houses, claiming they demonstrated “corrupt values which continue to breed in our society.”<sup>78</sup> In an ELWA broadcast the same day, Doe responded “If [Fahnbulleh] wants the government to sell the car assigned to him and use the proceeds for the masses, we will be too happy to approve that.”<sup>79</sup> Rather than privately calling his Minister to the mat for breaking ranks, Doe evidently felt compelled to chastise him publicly. In a demonstration of pique Doe displayed the sort of bizarre sentiment that perpetually undercut his putative allegiance to MOJA and PAL

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<sup>73</sup> Liebenow, *The Quest for Democracy*, 218, 220-221; Shope, “The Patron’s Press,” 88-90.

<sup>74</sup> “Liberia’s Constitutional Affairs,” *SWB*, ME/7703/B/1 (24 July 1984).

<sup>75</sup> Liebenow, *The Quest for Democracy*, 259; Berkeley, *A Promise Betrayed*, 16.

<sup>76</sup> Berkeley, *A Promise Betrayed*, 16.

<sup>77</sup> “Samuel Doe’s Redemption Day Anniversary Address,” *SWB*, ME/7002/B/1 (15 April 1982).

<sup>78</sup> Eddie Momoh, “Make-ups and Shake-ups,” *West Africa* 3413 (10 January 1983), 66.



ideology: "If minister Fahnbulleh feels that he should remain a poor man in society," stated the PRC Chairman, "there is nothing wrong with that but he should not condemn those who want to live a better life"—government officials, in particular.<sup>80</sup>

Doe proved himself to be quite ruthless, eliminating enemies and allies alike in his efforts to stay in power. In 1981, Doe had Weh Syen and a handful of other PRC members executed for treason, making room for a resurgence of True Whig loyalists such as Gray Allison, John Rancy, and others. In 1983, Quiwonkpa almost suffered Weh Syen's fate. In October, Doe announced that the Commanding General of the Armed Forces would move to Monrovia from his military base outside the city to take up a new post as Secretary-General of the PRC. His duties, Doe stated, would involve maintaining internal Council discipline.<sup>81</sup> A rift between the two ensued. Quiwonkpa, a stalwart of the revolution who had consistently kept himself at arms-length from the political machinations of the PRC, refused to take up the position until an ill-defined set of concerns – possibly Doe's autocratic handling of political opposition and appointments, or perhaps he was seeking a stricter definition of the Secretary-General's duties – were addressed.<sup>82</sup> In a letter to Doe, the PRC announced that it was sacking the General for his troubles, and dismissed him from the military.<sup>83</sup>

Tribal chiefs and elders at the Unity Conference Center outside Monrovia pleaded with Doe to reinstate Quiwonkpa, but the Chairman of the PRC remained adamant, stating that only a written apology would suffice.<sup>84</sup> Quiwonkpa refused. Doe banned all official contact with the former soldier, instructing government, military, and paramilitary officials to refrain from

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<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> "Government and Military Changes and Appointments," *SWB*, ME/7467/B/1 (18 October 1983).

<sup>82</sup> Eddie Momoh, "The Party is Over," *West africa* 3456 (7 November 1983), 2549.

<sup>83</sup> "Liberian Government Council's Dismissal of Secretary General," *SWB*, ME/7472/B/1 (24 October 1983).

<sup>84</sup> "Liberian Leader's Response to Calls for Quiwonkpa's Reinstatement," *SWB*, ME/7472/B/1 (31 October 1983).

contacting him at his residence on pain of a three-year jail sentence. In his attempt to isolate Quiwonkpa, however, Doe stopped short of restricting his freedom of movement in any way.<sup>85</sup>

Not surprisingly, allegations of another coup plot emerged within a few weeks. In a radio broadcast on November 21, Doe announced that fourteen government officials and Liberian citizens were implicated in a plot for “activities designed to subvert and overthrow” the PRC.<sup>86</sup> Quiwonkpa’s military supporters fled to Cote d’Ivoire, and from there staged a raid into Nimba County, attacking government facilities and a mining complex in Yekepa.<sup>87</sup> They had planned on ultimately seizing the PRC’s radio facilities, after which a victory speech prepared by Quiwonkpa would be broadcast.

For a time, both Quiwonkpa and county superintendent Brigadier General Joseph Fambalo went missing.<sup>88</sup> On November 27, the government broadcast an ultimatum that Quiwonkpa and ten other conspirators had forty-eight hours to surrender themselves.<sup>89</sup> Two days later, the Ministry of Defence issued a statement announcing that a massive search had begun. It promised a fair trial for those involved in the coup, and asked for the help of all Liberians in bringing the episode to a peaceful conclusion.<sup>90</sup>

Those implicated by the PRC as conspirators began to trickle in. A great proportion of them heralded from Nimba, Quiwonkpa’s home county – some claiming their actions were in response to the large number of officials and citizens from Nimba who had been dismissed from the government or otherwise treated unfairly.<sup>91</sup> One suspect, Major Kalonko Luo, told journalists at the National Security Agency that the goal of the coup had been to bring about an immediate

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<sup>85</sup> “Liberian Leader’s Ban on Visits to Quiwonkpa,” *SWB*, ME/7484/B/1 (7 November 1983).

<sup>86</sup> “Alleged Plot to Overthrow Liberian Government,” *SWB*, ME/7498/ii (23 November 1983).

<sup>87</sup> Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy*, 58.

<sup>88</sup> “Arrest of Officer in Liberia and Unknown Whereabouts on Quiwonkpa,” *SWB*, ME/7504/B/1 (30 November 1983).

<sup>89</sup> “Liberian Government’s Ultimatum to Thomas Quiwonkpa,” *SWB*, ME/7502/ii (November 28, 1983).

<sup>90</sup> “Report Order to Suspected Coup Plotters in Liberia,” *SWB*, ME/7505B/1 (1 December 1983).

<sup>91</sup> “Developments Following Recent Attempted Coup in Liberia,” *SWB*, ME/7508/B/1 (5 December 1983).

return to civilian rule. More interestingly, he labelled a core group of PRC members for their instrumental roles in hindering clear lines of communication between Doe and Quiwonkpa: John G. Rancy, Minister of State for Presidential Affairs, Gray Allison, now Minister of Defence, and Lieutenant General Henry Dubar, Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces.<sup>92</sup>

While radio remained the locus of officially mediated information efforts, it was also prime real estate for those seeking to depose the Monrovia leadership. The alleged “coup” of 1983 was never brought to fruition, but it nonetheless highlighted Doe’s increasingly precarious position and underscored the importance of radio facilities as symbolic representations of power. Doe’s gradual elimination of his foes and his claim-staking of prominent physical assets such as radio stations suggest that he was at least as shrewd as those in his entourage and recognized the trappings of authority for what they were.

Quiwonkpa, who fled to the U.S. following the events of 1983 and had been in exile ever since, re-emerged in the summer of 1985. In an interview in *West Africa*, he told reporter James Butty “I thought I staged the 1980 coup to free the people of Liberia from 133 years of oppression, but now Doe has declared war on our people again.” He continued, making his intentions clear: “I have no other choice but to join my people in their struggle for another freedom.”<sup>93</sup> Doe’s star had fallen since the 1980 coup, and his grip on power had been a constant struggle against the slings and arrows of fleeting fortune: his hypocrisy, his seeming inability to simply relinquish power, and his consistent abuse of political opponents stripped away any measure of legitimacy that existed in the early days of the regime.

Less than a month after the October 1985 election, in the wee hours before daybreak on November 12, Quiwonkpa and roughly two dozen guerrillas entered Liberia through neighbouring Sierra Leone, gained access to Monrovia, and seized the Barclay Training Center

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<sup>92</sup> “Testimony of Suspected Coup Plotter in Liberia,” *SWB*, ME/7515/B/1 (13 December 1983).

<sup>93</sup> James Butty, “Quiwonkpa Breaks His Silence,” *West Africa* 3538 (17 June 1985), 1202-1204.

and ELBC.<sup>94</sup> Quiwonkpa wasted no time in issuing his first communiqué. Just after six a.m., ELBC interrupted its regular programming. The National Anthem was broadcast over the airwaves, followed by a message from Quiwonkpa claiming that there had been a coup by “patriotic forces” under his command.<sup>95</sup> Less than an hour later, ELWA interrupted its regular broadcast and started playing martial music. A taped message from Quiwonkpa ensued, calling “on the men and women of the armed forces, the police force and the security agencies to join with us in the liberation of our people from fear, brutality and blood tyranny.”<sup>96</sup> Quiwonkpa’s message included, among its exhortations against Doe, a long list of his military appointees. Further broadcasts around nine a.m. claimed that Doe had been overthrown, issuing arrest orders for military officers and political representatives of the Doe government, and warning against rioting and looting. ELWA broadcast special announcements just after 12 p.m. and again an hour later, appealing for calm and instructing enlisted men not to take orders from officers other than those selected by Quiwonkpa himself.<sup>97</sup>

The coup failed. Jean Thomas, the French Ambassador in Monrovia, claimed in a phone call to *Agence-France Press* that afternoon that forces loyal to Doe were marching on the city, with fierce resistance to the coup coming from an important military unit, the First Infantry Battalion of the Executive Mansion Guard, encamped between Monrovia and the airport.<sup>98</sup> At 1423 GMT, the unit’s commanding officer, Colonel Moses Wright, broadcast a message on ELWA claiming that his troops had seized the station, and were moving on to the Executive Mansion and ELBC. ELWA continued to run the statement, interspersed with martial music,

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<sup>94</sup> BBC Monitoring reports indicate that ELWA also broadcast a taped message provided by Quiwonkpa’s rebels. According to Shope, this was done “under duress”, but the station was not under Quiwonkpa’s control. Shope, “The Patron’s Press,” 113-123.

<sup>95</sup> Sawyer, *Effective Immediately*, 31; “Doe’s Counter-Statement,” *West Africa* 3560 (18 November 1985), 2439.

<sup>96</sup> “Military Coup Claimed in Liberia,” *SWB*, ME/8107/B/1 (13 November 1985) and ME/8107/ii (13 November 1985).

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> “Doe Says 12th November Coup Attempt Failed,” *SWB*, ME/8108/B/1 (14 November 1985); Berkeley, *A Promise Betrayed*, 20.

throughout the day.<sup>99</sup> At seven p.m., Doe issued a statement of his own, claiming on ELWA that the coup had been foiled: "I am still the commander-in-chief of the armed forces of Liberia and head of state. I call on all Liberians, men and women of the armed forces, the police, and the security forces, to stand firm and continue to remain loyal to the government."<sup>100</sup> Upon hearing Doe's voice over the airwaves, according to one journalist, "it was as if the nation had been thrown into mourning."<sup>101</sup>

Despite the level of popular support that Quiwonkpa enjoyed, the coup was a tactical blunder.<sup>102</sup> Capturing or killing Doe and seizing the Executive Mansion should have been the rebels' first priority, but Quiwonkpa's forces instead focused on the radio stations – secondary targets. By prematurely announcing victory and listing, by name, military personnel loyal to Quiwonkpa, those individuals would be doomed in the event of a rout. Quiwonkpa may have been expecting external military support in his bid for power: he was reputed to have told his troops on the day of the coup "in a few hours time, Pa will send the helicopters."<sup>103</sup> He was perhaps complacent, confident that he would receive much-needed external support in his bid to eliminate Doe.<sup>104</sup> The assistance never arrived.

Doe allegedly had advance warning of the attack from sources inside the U.S. embassy, and was able to muster the troops needed to defeat Quiwonkpa's meagre forces.<sup>105</sup> Radio broadcasts were disrupted following Quiwonkpa's seizure of the stations, as well. There have been unconfirmed allegations of Israeli assistance in jamming Quiwonkpa's military

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<sup>99</sup> Sawyer, *Effective Immediately*, 31.

<sup>100</sup> "Doe Says Coup Attempt Failed," *SWB*, ME/8108/ii (14 November 1985); "Doe's Counter-Statement," *West Africa* 3560 (18 November 1985), 2439.

<sup>101</sup> Tunde Agbabiake, "An Eyewitness Account," *West Africa* 3564 (16 December 1985), 2625.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> According to another report, on the other hand, Quiwonkpa and his men stood awestruck at the threshold of the Executive Mansion, unable to overcome their own mystified sense of its power long enough to actually seize it for themselves. See "Problematic Peacekeeping," *Africa Confidential* 35, no. 5 (4 March 1994), 3.

<sup>105</sup> Mark Huband, *The Liberian Civil War* (London: Frank Cass, 1998), 39.

communications on the day of the coup,<sup>106</sup> and BBC Worldwide Monitoring noted that the LBS “was unmonitorable and remained so as of 1238 GMT” on November 13.<sup>107</sup>

Worse, Quiwonkpa’s premature triumphalism condemned ecstatic Liberians who immediately believed the coup a success. An ELWA announcer urged caution, amid all the broadcasts, smoothly suggesting that “this is coup time and we want to appeal to all our listeners that everything is cool and calm.”<sup>108</sup> According to an eyewitness account of events written by *West Africa*’s Tunde Agbabiake, Liberians filled the streets, singing and dancing in celebration of their “miraculous deliverance.” Elsewhere, according to Agbabiake, “screaming crowds tore down all Gen. Samuel Doe’s billboards along highways and street junctions.”<sup>109</sup> Doe and his supporters, meanwhile, were taking careful note of the popular betrayal.<sup>110</sup> The results were predictable. Agbabiake wrote “Many of those who had openly rejoiced prematurely now resigned themselves to certain death.”<sup>111</sup> Quiwonkpa was butchered in the streets of Monrovia.<sup>112</sup> The Armed Forces of Liberia was purged of coup supporters, real or imagined. In the capital, hundreds of Liberians were herded into the BTC and slaughtered, and Doe’s political opponents were held in “protective custody.” In Nimba County, the Gio and Mano were targeted for reprisals, and in Grand Gedeh County, where the Krahn were in the majority, they tracked, abused, and killed non-Krahn residents, including a number of Grebo, Gio, and Mano. Those named in Quiwonkpa’s radio broadcast were instant candidates for reprisals, his ethnic kin were guilty by association, and sometimes abuses were committed for purely personal motives. Overall, the violence was vicious, resulting in approximately 400-500 deaths and an atmosphere

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<sup>106</sup> Conversation with Frank Chalk, Concordia University, Montreal, 14 November 2002.

<sup>107</sup> “Doe Says Coup Attempt Failed,” *SWB*, ME/8108/ii (14 November 1985).

<sup>108</sup> “Military Coup Claimed in Liberia,” *SWB*, ME/8107/B/1 (13 November 1985).

<sup>109</sup> Agbabiake, “An Eyewitness Account,” 2625.

<sup>110</sup> Sawyer, *Effective Immediately*, 32.

<sup>111</sup> Agbabiake, “An Eyewitness Account,” 2625.

<sup>112</sup> According to Agbabiake’s report in *West Africa* Quiwonkpa committed suicide after being cornered by Doe’s troops, the location of his hideout betrayed. Most other accounts, however, attribute the killing to Doe’s personal buttonmen, Edward Slinger and Harrison Pennue. Tunde Agbabiake, “How Quiwonkpa and Gbenyon Died,” *West Africa* 3565 (December 23/30, 1985), 2679-2681; see also Berkeley, *A Promise Betrayed*, 57-60.

of intense fear. Interviews conducted in Liberia after the coup by the Lawyer's Committee for Human Rights revealed heightened animosity towards the Krahn. They had committed most of the killings and were widely associated with the abuses of the past five years. Many of those who were interviewed suggested future episodes of violence would be retributive efforts focused on eliminating the Krahn.<sup>113</sup>

Charles Gbenyon, the Editor-in-Chief of the LBS, was killed three days after the coup attempt. Early on November 12, an LBS television crew filmed the unfolding events, interviewed Quiwonkpa as he made successive trips between the BTC and the radio stations, taped rebel arrests and humiliation of Doe officials, and recorded scenes of popular celebration as Liberians feted what they thought was the end of Doe. Gbenyon authorized the tape's broadcast on LBS that evening. This time Doe did not resort to specious justifications regarding "development communications" or the "non-political" responsibilities of a free press. Enraged by the perceived treachery of the electronic media, he zeroed in on Gbenyon. The journalist, with film crew in tow, approached Doe outside the LBS facility, but before Gbenyon had a chance to put his questions to him, the Liberian leader shouted obscenities and accused him of supporting Quiwonkpa. On Doe's orders, security personnel beat the hapless journalist on the spot and then carted him off to the Executive Mansion. He was bayoneted to death while still in handcuffs.<sup>114</sup>

Liberian democracy faced a grim future. Quiwonkpa's coup provided Doe with an excuse to round up and detain his political enemies in the Liberian Action Party, the Unity Party, and Liberia Unification Party. He banned organizations such as the Press Union of Liberia, the National Students Union, and the National Union of Liberian Teachers. He sundered whatever element of ethnic solidarity existed between the Krahn/Mandingo and the Gio/Mano, and effectively stifled any source of future dissent.<sup>115</sup> Doe became increasingly reclusive, his regime's

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<sup>113</sup> Berkeley, *A Promise Betrayed*, 7-9, 19-21, 45-99.

<sup>114</sup> Berkeley, *A Promise Betrayed*, 59-60; Agbabiake, "How Quiwonkpa and Gbenyon Died," 2679-2680.

<sup>115</sup> J. Gus Liebenow, "Liberian Political Opposition in the Post-Election Period," *Liberian Studies Journal*, 13, No. 2 (1988), 241-242.

pell-mell approach to governance lacking any semblance of a guiding vision save its own survival.<sup>116</sup>

## Freedom of the Press and “Responsible Journalism”

After seizing power the PRC suspended the constitution, established martial law, imposed a strict curfew, and placed a ban on all political activities. Doe’s ability to control his own troops was not always certain, and Quiwonkpa had to work diligently to limit the “unrevolutionary behaviour” of his forces.<sup>117</sup> Within weeks of the coup it became evident to Liberians that the new military government was not living up to its own promises, its brutality did not bode well and economic pressures on the country remained. As the PRC continued to rule by decree and repeatedly deferred its promises to “return to the barracks”, little seemed to differentiate the new government from its True Whig predecessors. Expectations were quickly deflated – Liberians could be heard muttering the words “Same taxi, different driver” – but not defeated.<sup>118</sup>

Its suspension of the constitution notwithstanding, Doe’s military government initially paid lip service to the importance of preserving press freedoms, but its sensitivity to broadcast content became increasingly evident as it sought to retain its grip on power in the face of mounting opposition. For the government, “press freedom” meant the freedom to report “responsible” news, news that promoted a positive image of the Liberian nation and placed the government in the best possible light.<sup>119</sup> Anything else was considered “gossip”. News that reported negatively on official Liberia, however factual its content was considered to be counter to the revolutionary aims of the government, disloyal, even seditious. Such was the logic of

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<sup>116</sup> Berkeley, *A Promise Betrayed*, 27-29.

<sup>117</sup> Berkeley, *A Promise Betrayed*, 15-17; Liebenow, *The Quest for Democracy*, 190-192.

<sup>118</sup> “Liberian Revolution Founders,” *West Africa* 3281 (9 June 1980), 1005. (1005-1009)

<sup>119</sup> Sawyer, *Effective Immediately*, 8; Shope, “The Patron’s Press,” 75-83, 93-112; Tom Kamara, “The Liberian Press Under Dictatorship, 1890-1990: A Comment,” *Liberia-Forum*, 5, no. 9 (1989): 62-67.



“development communication”: media outlets were considered by government to be auxiliaries in the drive to fashion a national ethos and build centralized institutions.<sup>120</sup>

Although press freedoms were enshrined in the Liberian constitution, those guarantees contained the peculiar caveat that “All persons may freely write and publish their sentiments, being responsible for the abuse of that liberty.”<sup>121</sup> As Liberian press historian Momo Rogers has argued, there was ample historical precedent for press freedoms so defined.<sup>122</sup> Official efforts to stifle political dissent among Liberian journalists had been going on since the 1920s, and peaked during the Administrations of William S. Tubman (1947-1971) and Tolbert (1971-1980). The Doe regime’s initial conciliatory stance on the subject was no less qualified than were earlier government-press relations. Dissent without repercussions was nearly impossible in this atmosphere, and journalists and editors who strayed too far from officially palatable media discourse found themselves suffering the consequences.

Under Doe restrictions on mass media reached new heights. For a short time, there was official tolerance of a critical press, but within a year of the coup, the screws began to tighten. Doe’s growing intolerance of media criticism was bolstered by a coterie of like-minded opportunists. Information Minister Gray D. Allison was Doe’s spokesman, broadcasting with impunity sensational accusations intended to discredit PRC opponents. Willie Givens was Doe’s speechwriter and for a time, Deputy Minister for Public Affairs, until he was rewarded with an ambassadorship to the United Kingdom. As “Presidential scriptwriter”<sup>123</sup> he was instrumental in shaping Doe’s public pronouncements, a significant factor considering Doe’s reputed illiteracy.<sup>124</sup> Emmanuel Bowier, a senior employee of the Ministry of Information who would eventually

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<sup>120</sup> See, for example, Wilbur Schramm, *Mass Media and National Development: The Role of Information in the Developing Countries* (California: Stanford University Press, 1964), and Rosalind Ainslie, *The Press in Africa: Communications Past and Present* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1966).

<sup>121</sup> Rogers, “The Liberian Press Under Military Rule,” 7-8.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> Eddie Momoh, “Make-ups and Shake-ups,” *West africa* 3413 (January 10, 1983), 66.

<sup>124</sup> Personal correspondence with Tom Kamara, 16 October 2002. See also Kamara, “The Liberian Press Under Dictatorship,” 62-67.

become its chief officer, was Allison's "idea man", generating pro-Doe material for publication. Allison, Givens, and Bowier, according to Tom Kamara, a Liberian journalist and editor of *The New Liberian* during Givens' tenure, were among those who helped to channel Doe's antipathy and instruct the poorly educated soldier in how to deal with a "disloyal" media.<sup>125</sup> The result of all this government attention among independent radio outlets was self-censorship, high turnover of staff, and a reduction in programming quality. ELBC's close ties to the government meant that other stations often took their lead from its coverage of events.<sup>126</sup> Overall, according to Kamara, who was imprisoned by the PRC regime for speaking out against its practices, "the criterion for employment was political conformity."<sup>127</sup>

In a speech made to foreign journalists in April, 1981, Allison told them, somewhat cryptically, "to be mindful of the freedom of the individual as well as the freedom of the government."<sup>128</sup> He made it clear that the Ministry of Information would be the central clearing house for all information disseminated by the government, and suggested to his audience that safeguarding those freedoms from media excesses could involve "non-political interference in the affairs of the press."<sup>129</sup> Doe took harsh measures against more general forms of "rumour-mongering" as early as January 14, 1982;<sup>130</sup> the issue of what constituted "non-political interference" was clearly defined by 1981 as numerous instances of physical harassment and detention of journalists came to shape government-press relations.

The PRC's sensitivity to media content included foreign as well as domestic news sources. Negative foreign coverage was a threat to the government's good image – especially given the degree to which Liberians relied on external services for their knowledge of

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<sup>125</sup> Kamara, "The Liberian Press Under Dictatorship," 62-67. All this, of course, raises some prickly questions as to whose interests were being represented in Doe's public statements.

<sup>126</sup> Shope, "The Patron's Press," 81.

<sup>127</sup> Kamara, "The Liberian Press Under Dictatorship," 64.

<sup>128</sup> Cited in Rogers, "The Liberian Press Under Military Rule," 20-21.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> "Liberia Coup Rumours and Doe's Response," *SWB*, ME/6929/ii (16 January 1982).

the outside world. The interruption of BBC reporting during the April 1980 coup suggests Doe's awareness of this fact. In another instance Peter D. Gurley, an official of the Ministry of Information, was prompted by negative BBC coverage of the PRC to extol its virtues in the prominent weekly news magazine *West Africa*.<sup>131</sup> Under other circumstances, this could be viewed as a normal response to potentially damaging media exposure. But for the Doe regime, such measures were clearly an extension of the PRC's interest in promoting "responsible", pro-government news coverage. Alternate voices would undermine Doe's efforts to enhance binding notions of "national unity".

On 21 July 1984, Decree 88A gave security forces the power to "arrest and detain any person found spreading rumours, lies, and misinformation against any government official or individual either by word of mouth, writing or by public broadcast."<sup>132</sup> Doe wielded 88A like a hammer of the Gods, bludgeoning his opponents into submission with it during the run-up to the 1985 election. Editors and other political enemies were harassed, jailed, or worse, and newspapers were shut down or their facilities burned to the ground.<sup>133</sup> After the election and Quiwonkpa's attempted coup, Doe's savage campaign of ethnic retribution against the former General's Nimba County kinsmen shattered political opposition and frightened Liberians into submission.

Despite a meek effort at repealing the Decree in 1986,<sup>134</sup> Doe's treatment of the media in the latter half of the decade was at once neglectful, capricious, and mean. Doe closed the Catholic Radio ELCM station,<sup>135</sup> turned on Gray Allison in much the same way he betrayed all those who

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<sup>131</sup> "Liberia's PRC Puts Its Case," *West Africa* 3291 (18 August 1980), 1543-1544.

<sup>132</sup> Rogers, "The Liberian Press Under Military Rule," 23; Berkeley, *A Promise Betrayed*, 110.

<sup>133</sup> See "Threats to Democracy," *West Africa* 3528 (April 8, 1985), 656-657.

<sup>134</sup> "Liberian Senate Enacts Law Repealing 'Controversial Decree'," *SWB*, ME/8294/B/1 (25 June 1986).

<sup>135</sup> "Seeking Solutions," *West Africa* 3768 (6-12 November 1989), 1848.

remained in his orbit for too long,<sup>136</sup> and promulgated a restrictive National Communications Policy and created a regulatory commission to implement and monitor it.<sup>137</sup>

## **Radio as a Strategic Asset, Part II: The Liberian Rural Communications Network**

The military junta consistently demonstrated its interest in controlling the shape of media output. The construction of its own proprietary broadcast facilities was thus a natural extension of its media policies. Under Tolbert, plans to develop a network of rural broadcast facilities were initiated with assistance from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). The activities of the Rural Information Systems Project, as it was then known, were suspended in the atmosphere of uncertainty that followed the 1980 coup. In early October of that year, however, Doe enacted Decrees 20 and 21, establishing of the Liberian Broadcasting Corporation (LBC) and the Liberian Broadcasting System (LBS). It also made clear the government's intention "to undertake an expansion program to provide needed facilities" for the LBS. The project, henceforth known as the Liberian Rural Communication Network (LRCN) would fall under the LBS's mandate, alongside a television service, an external broadcasting service, and a commercial am/fm service.<sup>138</sup> According to Decree 20,

The Liberian Rural Communications Network (Rural Radio Network) is a development oriented public service broadcasting system with authority to establish a central programming facility and regional broadcasting stations. Its goals are to support rural development by promoting:

- a) the increased utilization by the rural population of existing Government services;
- b) the expansion of these services to a greater portion of the rural population;

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<sup>136</sup> "Defence Minister Sacked," *West Africa* 3751 (10-16 July 1989), 1150; "Minister Quizzed," *West Africa* 3757 (21-27 August 1989), 1397; "Allison Sentenced to Death," *West Africa* 3758 (28 August – 3 September 1989), 1442; "Suspects Released," *West Africa* 3772 (4-10 December 1989), 2038.

<sup>137</sup> "Press Law Row," *West Africa* 3761 (18-24 September 1989), 1578; "Communications in Conflict," *West Africa* 3771 (27 November – 3 December 1989), 1970.

<sup>138</sup> "The Operation of LRCN: Governance and Administration," Section 2.2.1 in Institute for International Research, *Final Report of the Rural Information Systems Project: A Report to the United States Agency for International Development*, Project No. 669-0134 (Arlington, Virginia: Institute for International Research, March 1989), 17-18.

- c) increased communication between the villages and the local, regional and national Governments;
- d) increased self-help activities; and
- e) increased involvement and participation in local and national development efforts.<sup>139</sup>

The Doe regime took full credit for initiating the project, despite the fact that it had been in the works for several years prior to 1980.<sup>140</sup> The original plans provided for a Central Production Unit (CPU) in the vicinity of Monrovia, with regional stations in Voinjama, Gbarnga, Buchanan, Sanniquellie, Greenville, Robertsport, and Zwedru.<sup>141</sup> The LRCN ran into a host of administrative problems that slowed the project's implementation, not least of which was the Doe government's foot dragging in making its share of the project funds available. The plan for seven regional stations was ultimately whittled down to three, one each in Voinjama (ELRV) in Lofa County, Gbarnga (ELRG) in Bong County, and Zwedru (ELRZ) in Grand Gedeh. They were controlled from the system's headquarters located in Monrovia, centralizing project funds, assets, and staff training under the control of a self-interested bureaucracy that by the late 1980s was as corrupt as the government controlling it.<sup>142</sup> Programming covered a wide range of subjects in fourteen languages, placing a heavy emphasis on health education and agriculture that was highly effective in influencing indigenous behaviour, despite the project's problems. An intriguing aspect of the LRCN's mandate was its parallel effort to preserve local traditions: staff traveled the country recording traditional music and village histories, preserving such material for future broadcasts that would, so the theory went, provide a localized social tether between Liberians and their communities – the contradiction obviously lost on Doe and his people.<sup>143</sup>

USAID personnel sought to iron out with government officials the details of LRCN's relationship to the LBS, acknowledging in their final report on the project that their efforts were

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<sup>139</sup> For the full texts of Decrees 20 and 21, see Institute for International Research, *Final Report of the Rural Information Systems Project*, Appendix D.

<sup>140</sup> Givens, *The Road to Democracy*, 1-16.

<sup>141</sup> Institute for International Research, *Final Report of the Rural Information Systems Project*, 3.

<sup>142</sup> Bourgault, "The Liberian Rural Communications Network," 62-64; and Bourgault, *Mass Media in Sub-Saharan Africa*, 92-99.

being conducted under trying circumstances. The project, they stated, straddled a fine line between positively impacting Liberian development and having its status and recognition as a development project of international standing sidelined by the political agenda of overzealous journalists and mistrustful political leaders. "LRCN must steer a middle course," the writers of the final report argued, "which promotes its credibility as an information source without embroiling itself in controversy to the extent that its development mission is compromised and impeded."<sup>144</sup> Project planners, possibly with future contracts in mind, evidently gave little weight to how the availability of new broadcasting resources might inadvertently contribute to the media policies of a government with no real interest in anything but its own survival.

The system was up and running by 1986 and publicly trumpeted by Doe,<sup>145</sup> but it atrophied due to the inattention of Monrovia-based technocrats. They had little or no interest in traveling into the hinterland to conduct the audience research needed to design program content, or to provide the technical training necessary to maintain staffing levels. At the same time, Doe's blundering mismanagement of the country inspired the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the African Development Bank to suspend aid to Liberia in 1987. American support had helped prop up the Doe regime throughout the 1980s, when it might otherwise have been toppled by its opponents. But a team of Operational Experts dispatched by the U.S. to fix Liberia's economic woes gave up within months of its arrival, the task of putting Doe's economic house in order beyond its capabilities and willingness to invest more effort in the endeavour.<sup>146</sup> USAID's involvement in the LRCN tapered off after 1987, and its mandate expired in 1989. With foreign technical advisors no longer in place and domestic management of the network of dubious

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<sup>143</sup> Bourgault, "The Liberian Rural Communications Network," 61-62.

<sup>144</sup> Institute for International Research, *Final Report of the Rural Information Systems Project*, 57-59.

<sup>145</sup> "Inauguration of Rural Radio Service," *SWB*, ME/W1405/B/1 (2 September 1986).

<sup>146</sup> Bourgault, "The Liberian Rural Communications Network," 62-67.

competence, the LRCN's viability as a functioning broadcasting service was very much in question.<sup>147</sup>

## Major Themes in Doe's Propaganda

Radio stations, prized for their strategic and symbolic functions, also served as platforms for the dissemination of government media messages. On one level, the very fact that broadcast facilities were being used at all to transmit official information indicated a degree of ownership, and therefore legitimacy. The ideas being broadcast were significant in their own right, however, and while the Doe regime's general lack of *savoir faire* meant that its representatives, particularly Doe, often came across as unlettered bumpkins, a number of key themes can nonetheless be discerned in their major radio broadcasts and public addresses. Doe used radio in either ceremonial or policing roles to promote three main themes: populist nationalism, nativism/anti-foreignism, and Christian messianism.

Contextually, Doe's most prominent radio broadcasts were generally those made either on Liberia's annual National Redemption Day on April 12, the anniversary of the 1980 coup,<sup>148</sup> or in the event of major security threats to the regime such as the alleged 1983 coup or the Quiwonkpa affair in 1985.<sup>149</sup> This dual propaganda function of asserting the "voice of authority" on significant public occasions meant that Doe's legitimacy was intimately bound to timely broadcasts of radio messages. In terms of security threats, it meant that he could project his leadership onto the national stage, responding to premature rumours of his demise and demanding order and obedience. It also meant that Doe could put Liberians on notice at will, cajoling and

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<sup>147</sup> Institute for International Research, *Final Report of the Rural Information Systems Project*, 3-16, 58-59.

<sup>148</sup> "Samuel Doe's Redemption Day Anniversary Address," *SWB*, ME/7002/B/1 (15 April 1982); "Liberian Leader's Redemption Day Address to the Nation," *SWB*, ME/7306/B/7 (13 April 1983); "Liberian Leader's Redemption Day Address: Timetable for Civilian Rule," *SWB*, ME/7619/B/1 (16 April 1984); "Doe's Redemption Day Message," *SWB*, ME/8233/B/1 (15 April 1986).

<sup>149</sup> "Samuel Doe on Death of Quiwonkpa and LBS Editor," *SWB*, ME/8111/B/1 (18 November 1985).

threatening them in his messages with allegations of dangers both real and imagined, railing against coup and assassination plots and foreign conspiracies against his rule.

Thematically, Doe's propaganda messages were influenced as much by the aforementioned occasions as they were shaped by the overall trajectory of his rule. Early in the decade, for example, Doe's speeches were heavily laden with the populist and revolutionary rhetoric of the anti-Tolbert agitators. Once the PRC began its repression of ethnic enemies and drove political and military competition from the country, anti-foreign diatribes became much more prevalent. After Doe took the 1985 election and crippled the opposition, suggestions of Christian messianism marked his public addresses with increased frequency.

Populist nationalism took a number of forms in Doe's media broadcasts. The quasi-socialist ideology of MOJA and PAL reformers such as Amos Sawyer, Tipoteh, Matthews, and Fahnbulleh was appropriated by the PRC immediately after seizing power, and for the first three years of the 1980s, the military government generally represented the long-held hopes of the indigenous masses for more transparent government and more inclusive political participation. Official propaganda reflected great concern with cohering the masses along national lines: avoiding the tribalism of the past and cultivating an overarching sense of Liberian community and identity were ideas that were trotted out at regular intervals. Tropes of colonial mythology also appeared on occasion, pushing Liberians to resist the parochial concerns of ethnicity foisted on them in the name of outside exploitation.<sup>150</sup> This reformist, populist message was packaged in revolutionary terms, with the unfortunate correlate that activities or ideas running counter to the government position were anti-revolutionary, their proponents "enemies of the revolution" or "enemies of the state".<sup>151</sup> Eventually, as Doe consolidated power and eliminated his enemies, this

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<sup>150</sup> See, for example, "Master Sgt. Samuel Doe's 14th April Broadcast to the Liberian Nation," *SWB*, ME/6396/B/10 (16 April 1980).

<sup>151</sup> Givens, *The Road to Democracy*, 28-44.



faded somewhat, and opponents became merely “threats to national security.”<sup>152</sup> Notions of national unity and development persisted to a limited extent throughout the decade, but were most prominent in the early stages of Doe’s and the PRC’s quest for legitimacy.

Nativist and anti-foreign propaganda also came in a variety of forms. As a Krahn, Doe was a “man of the soil”, and notions of pastoral essentialism were sometimes placed in opposition to the image of urban-based Americo-Liberians in order to define the nascent “Liberianness” of populist myth.<sup>153</sup> Fear-mongering over foreign intrusions into Liberian life, however, were much more prominent, and underscored tendencies already at play in domestic politics. Ideologically, MOJA and PAL leaders subscribed to a “Liberia for Liberians” nativism that was both socialist and rejected non-native influences.<sup>154</sup> The PRC immediately began preaching the same philosophies once it seized power. More pragmatically, challenges from across Liberia’s borders gave some impetus to integral notions of a Liberian nation. On 29 January 1983, for example, the Finance Ministry announced that a program aimed at identifying Liberians and foreign residents alike would begin in February of that year. Doe publicly criticised Nigeria for its expulsion of illegal immigrants, and proceeded to have nationals of a number of West African states –Guinea, Mali, Côte d’Ivoire, and Sierra Leone – residing in Liberia illegally rounded up and charged. Some were allowed to remain after paying substantial fines.<sup>155</sup> Similarly, Quiwonkpa supporters were known to have fled to neighbouring Côte d’Ivoire, where a fledgling army of Liberian expatriates was gestating.<sup>156</sup> The PRC demonstrated itself to be thoroughly conspiracy-minded, constantly warding off coups and rumours of coups: foreign mercenaries were often said to be among the plotters, whether they were real or imagined, and the Soviet Union, Libya,

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<sup>152</sup> See, for example, “Liberian Leader’s Address: Closure of University and Action Against Students,” *SWB*, ME/7730/B/1 (24 August 1984).

<sup>153</sup> See Givens, *The Road to Democracy*, 28-44.

<sup>154</sup> “Liberian Leader’s Views on Socialism,” *West Africa* 3540 (1 July 1985).

<sup>155</sup> “Liberia’s Reported Round-up of Illegal Aliens,” *SWB*, ME/7253/B/2 (9 February 1983).

<sup>156</sup> Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy*, 65-74.

neighbouring African countries, and even the U.S. were generally fingered for alleged support of one anti-government conspiracy or another.

Anti-foreign agitation was a consistent theme in Doe's propaganda, and foreign "elements" remained his favorite bogeymen. Domestically, Doe turned revolutionary populism, the very ideology initially espoused by the PRC, on its head, using it to discredit his political enemies by linking their socialism to external, non-native sources of subversion. At a news conference at the Defence Ministry on 2 September 1984, for example, Gray Allison reminded his audience to be on guard against "socialist infiltration" of Liberian society, pointing to the foreign indoctrination of Doe's competitors in the coming election, particularly Matthews and Tipoteh, and alleging their intent to undermine Liberia's national integrity.<sup>157</sup> In a tour of the counties in 1985, Doe told a rural audience that he was "prepared to fight the introduction of any foreign ideology that would not serve the best interest of the Liberian nation and its people," warning them to be on guard against politicians — especially his opponents — who might try to introduce such ideas to their children.<sup>158</sup> By decade's end he had linked negative press coverage to journalists in the pay of "outside forces",<sup>159</sup> Bowier restricted contact between Liberians and foreign diplomats,<sup>160</sup> and Sierra Leonean, Senegalese, and Ghanaian residents — some of whom had been in Liberia for decades — were forced to leave the country.<sup>161</sup> Overall, Doe's allegations served to justify purges of the "enemy within", whether they were of foreign or domestic provenance, and left him better able to carry on with the business of autocracy. Opportunism redux.

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<sup>157</sup> "Minister on Socialist Infiltration," *SWB*, ME/7739/B/1 (4 September 1984).

<sup>158</sup> "Liberian Leader's Views on Socialism," *West Africa* (1 July 1985).

<sup>159</sup> "Dateline: Liberia," *West Africa* 3663 (16 October 1987), 2141.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>161</sup> "Repatriated, Not Deported," *West Africa* 3704 (8 August 1988), 1461; "Alien Repatriation," *West Africa* 3753 (17-23 July 1989), 1229; "Dateline: Liberia," *West Africa* 3663 (16 October 1987), 2141.

Christian references and exhortations to the Almighty were liberally sprinkled throughout Liberian speech and public culture,<sup>162</sup> especially by ELWA and other spiritually inspired broadcasters. This was a function, in large part, of the long-term dominance of Americo-Liberian Christianity over Liberian state and society. Such influences only appeared in Doe's radio propaganda to any significant degree after the 1985 election. Doe's messianism was, by virtue of its ties to the True Whig era, a throwback to pre-reformist ideology, and was thus inherently conservative and anti-revolutionary in its own right. Once Doe's peculiar sense of ownership-legitimacy was satisfied by the holding of an election and possession of state resources, his religious colloquialism demonstrated both a reversion to the Liberia of True Whig sensibilities and maintenance of an ecumenical status quo in relation Liberia's Christian Churches.<sup>163</sup> Divine legitimacy accrued to the regime in this way meant that enemies of Doe's status quo were thus also enemies of God, enormously simplifying the task of demonizing the former Master-Sergeant's opponents.

What such religious allusions might have meant to non-Christian Liberians is difficult to determine, but defining the contours of Doe's rhetoric is fairly straightforward. Official speeches typically concluded with the words "May God bless the work of our hands and save the state."<sup>164</sup> On 16 November 1985 Doe stated "Quiwonkpa and his troops were not patriotic forces, but rather devil forces."<sup>165</sup> In a live relay of an address given at the Executive Mansion on November 22, Doe relaxed the curfew that had been in effect since the coup attempt, announced a series of austerity measures, and reminded his audience of the "evil designs" harboured by Liberia's enemies: "[T]he Lord being on our side," he stated, "and knowing that I personally had done

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<sup>162</sup> For a fascinating description of street level philosophical graffiti in Monrovia, see Neill Alldred, "Street Philosophy," *West Africa* 3729 (6-12 February 1989), 184.

<sup>163</sup> See Paul Gifford, *Christianity and Politics in Doe's Liberia* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 140-145.

<sup>164</sup> "Liberia's Doe Announces Curfew Relaxation and Austerity Measures," *SWB*, ME/8117/B/1 (25 November 1985); "President Doe's Inauguration and Release of Political Opponents," *SWB*, ME/8151/B/1 (8 January 1986); "Doe's Redemption Day Message," *SWB*, ME/8233/B/1 (15 April 1986).

nothing to anybody except in the line with my duties as the head of this nation, the rebels were badly defeated.”<sup>166</sup> Despite all his hard work at unifying Liberians, Doe claimed, “the forces of evil mind took the hearts of some of our citizens with grand designs of ambition and selfishness.”<sup>167</sup> At his inauguration speech on 6 January 1986 at the Centennial Memorial Pavilion in Monrovia, he solemnly promised “to be a good shepherd,” bleating to his audience that “you can help to make me a good leader of my flock.”<sup>168</sup> At first blush, all of this might seem innocent enough speechifying, overstated and melodramatic but without malicious intent. But the sense of divine providence was a very real component of Doe’s later philosophy and propaganda, ultimately serving as further justification of his autocracy: God gave Doe the presidency, so the message went, and therefore only God could take it away.<sup>169</sup>

Without question, Doe’s rhetoric was overwhelmingly disingenuous. He and the PRC used what ideological inspirations they needed to shape their own public relations campaign, and changing circumstances meant that such image-making was of necessity fluid. Anti-foreign sentiments, while crafted – at least in part – to discredit domestic enemies and warn against external threats, were only useful as far as Doe’s opportunism would allow. Foreign sources of currency and trade, for example, justified commercial associations with anyone willing to deal: in one instance Doe justified talks with the late Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, intended to secure foreign weapon systems, by claiming “if a socialist can help, I will take it.”<sup>170</sup> Christianized propaganda may have been a sop to or even written by the True Whig loyalists who gained prominence as Doe eliminated his fellow 1980 putschists. It may also have been a

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<sup>165</sup> “Samuel Doe on Death of Quiwonkpa and LBS Editor,” *SWB*, ME/8111/B/1 (18 November 1985).

<sup>166</sup> “Liberia’s Doe Announces Curfew Relaxation and Austerity Measures,” *SWB*, ME/8117/B/1 (25 November 1985).

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>168</sup> “President Doe’s Inauguration and Release of Political Opponents,” *SWB*, ME/8151/B/1 (8 January 1986).

<sup>169</sup> “What the Lord Giveth,” *West Africa* 3642 (1 June 1987), 1047-1048.

<sup>170</sup> “More Heads to Roll,” *West Africa* 3687 (11 April 1988), 667.

symptom of Doe's own megalomania, and more obliquely, of the general rise, late in the decade, of the shadowy spiritual practices of indigenous *Poro* and *Sande* secret societies.<sup>171</sup>

## Conclusion

Despite the overt ethnicization of national politics during the 1980s, explicit exhortations to sub-national ethnic identities were absent from Doe's major public addresses. The anti-tribal populist rhetoric of the new regime was evidently less convincing than its actual conduct. Krahn hegemony aggravated social, political, class, and ethnic conflicts, and periodic outbursts of inter-group violence perpetrated by "die-hard ethnicists" hardened the previously ephemeral distinctions between various communities.<sup>172</sup> In this light, indigenous access to state resources such as radio, in an environment where over a dozen linguistic groups competed for airtime, complicated national development schemes in some possibly unforeseen ways.

ELWA pioneered multi-lingual programming, and demand for indigenous-language program content grew, placing pressures on other stations such as the government's own ELBC to accommodate the needs of their various ethnic listeners. Even English language programming was not without its tensions. There were three distinct versions of English that were used in Liberia: Standard American English, favoured by foreign-educated Liberian academics; "high Liberian", the flowery English of the First Republic's political and social elite; and the more common pidginized vernacular that was the *lingua franca* of the majority of Liberians.<sup>173</sup> There were direct class, ethnic, and national implications to the shape and content of political and

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<sup>171</sup> Stephen Ellis notes the degeneration of *Poro* and *Sande* traditions brought about by the long-term conflation of state and *ethnie* and the targeted violence of post-Tolbert era. In this context, the erosion of internal constraints on the abuse of power in both Americo-Liberian constitutionalism and the ethnic spirituality enforced by indigenous secret societies helps to explain the later prevalence of grotesque public displays of human atrocity; it also points to the connection between Doe's increasing obscurity as a public figure and "the cultivation of secrecy and the hiding of intention" that "are notable features of Liberian religious culture and politics." See Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy*, 13, 265.

<sup>172</sup> Amos Sawyer makes this reference in *Effective Immediately*, 18.

<sup>173</sup> Liebenow, *The Quest for Democracy*, 239.

cultural radio broadcasting, and the impact of this on sub-national group aspirations should therefore not be underestimated. Thus, despite mounting pressure from ethnic groups for broader linguistic coverage and often confused government efforts at broadcasting a single, unifying sense of Liberian identity, questions of national and linguistic “ownership” most certainly complicated issues. This suggests, perhaps, that Doe’s nationalist, anti-foreign, nativist, populist, and Christian propaganda tropes may have meant vastly different things to different Liberians, and that rhetorical appeals to any single, homogenizing sense of state-level community were never intended to offer anything more than a platform for enhancing the power of subordinate groups. Just as Liberians did following that first fateful broadcast in April 1980, Doe’s kinsmen may have inferred what they wished from broadcast warnings against tribal violence or blanket condemnations of otherwise intangible enemies of one sort or another. For a Krahn soldier, for example, “enemies of the revolution” and “threats to national security” might just as well have been tags indicating non-Krahn Liberians – especially when his President, leader of the “nation” and himself a Krahn, dispatches him to deal with such threats to national/Krahn security.

Such observations remain purely speculative given the dearth of evidence to support them. The paradox, however, of encouraging divergent indigenous traditions through a national medium while at the same time trying to cohere a deeply heterogeneous population into a single political constituency raises some intriguing questions regarding the root causes of ethnic conflict and the particular frictions that developed during the Doe era.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Richard Fardon and Graham Furniss, of the Centre of African Studies at the University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies, point to the complexity of multi-lingual allocations of air time. They write: “A key issue for radio stations has always been that of language. Whether at local level or for the international broadcasters... the choice of languages in which to broadcast has always been delicate. Nothing so readily places a voice on the national sound stage as its language of address. That language may already connote a particular group, or else an alliance of forces may coalesce to identify it as a proprietary badge. To broadcast in one language is to fail to broadcast in another, and that is always taken as a message. Because the message of language choice may be divisive, the particular array of languages used on air may function as a symbolic mark of inclusion into a state, region, or nation.” See Richard Fardon and Graham Furniss, “African Broadcast Cultures,” chapter in Fardon and Furniss, eds., *African Broadcast Cultures: Radio in Transition* (Oxford: James Currey Publishers, 2000), 4.

## CHAPTER 2:

### Radio Broadcasting in the Civil War: 1990-1997

*We will take guns, machetes, and knives, and we will kill them all.*

NPFL Leader Charles Taylor<sup>175</sup>

The National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) had been percolating in neighbouring Côte d'Ivoire since the survivors of the failed attempt to unseat Samuel Doe fled there in 1985. On Christmas Eve, 1989, they crossed the border into Nimba County in northeastern Liberia, initiating a barbarous seven-year spree of predatory resource acquisition, revenge killings, factional fighting, and regional unrest. The rebel group, trained in Libya, accompanied by foreign mercenaries, and backed by neighbouring Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire, was led by Charles Taylor, a former Doe government official and Quiwonkpa supporter. It quickly snowballed into a sizeable army bloated with Gio and Mano survivors of Doe's Nimba County repression. The NPFL rapidly made significant inroads against the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL), quickly seized control of over ninety per cent of Liberian territory and provoked resistance from ethnic foes and disenchanted supporters alike. The Liberian state ceased to exist as such. Reduced to a rump political core located in the capital city, Monrovia, it was administered by the impotent Interim Government of National Unity (IGNU) until 1993, when it was replaced under a series of power-sharing arrangements by the Liberian National Transitional Government (LNTG). A Nigerian-dominated Ceasefire Monitor Group authorized by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOMOG) prevented rebels from taking Monrovia in 1990. An experiment in regional peacekeeping, ECOMOG's poor performance precipitated further external intervention in 1993 in the form of the United Nations Observer Mission in Liberia (UNOMIL). NPFL forces remained in control of most of Liberia until 1992-94, establishing the National Patriotic Reconstruction Assembly Government (NPRAG), its answer to the IGNU, in Gbarnga, Bong

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<sup>175</sup> "Thousands of NPFL Supporters Demonstrate," *FBIS-AFR-90-152* (7 August 1990).

County. By 1994 the NPFL suffered severe military setbacks, and by the end of the year had been rolled back into pockets of territory including Nimba, Bong, Maryland and Grand Kru counties, and parts of Bassa, Sinoe, and Grand Gedeh counties.<sup>176</sup> Runaway factionalism left Monrovia surrounded amidst a territorial patchwork of armed belligerent groups.

Regional and international efforts at mediating the conflict were frustrated by the hidden agenda and wanton violence of a veritable rogue's gallery of ethnic warlords. Foremost among them was Charles Taylor, a ruthless, oleaginous leader who scuttled countless peace talks and fractured what little remained of the country's ethnic solidarity. The leaders of ECOWAS member states begrudgingly considered Taylor to be the conflict's single most important player. His ultimate goal was to rule Liberia, and today he sits as its democratically elected president. He showed a strategic and tactical sense unmatched by any of his rivals. He eliminated internal rivals for the leadership of the NPFL, stamping it with his imprimatur and establishing his personal authority over what may have originally been a collectively led movement. He manipulated popular sentiment, spread disinformation, fostered divisions among and between his enemies, and exploited every available opportunity to undermine his opponents.

Central to all this was his much acknowledged but little explored manipulation of news and radio broadcasting. It is the contention of this chapter that control of the media was an essential element of NPFL strategy throughout the conflict, requiring a substantial investment in broadcast resources and planning. The NPFL deliberately engaged in a long-term scorched-earth policy in which broadcast media facilities were denied to Taylor's opponents and consolidated under his banner. In the midst of the mad scramble for control of Liberian resources that characterised the civil war, radio facilities remained the prized assets they were under the Doe regime. Unlike Doe, however, Taylor was a charismatic and savvy political operator, a master of self-promotion and subterfuge who utilised such capabilities to good effect, from the time he first

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<sup>176</sup> "After Akosombo," *Africa Confidential* 35, no. 22 (4 November 1994), 2-4.



crossed the Ivorian frontier into Nimba until he was elected President in July 1997. In Liberia, generally considered the first of Africa's post-Cold War "failed states", radio was a highly valued commodity, providing an invaluable public relations tool where services and supplies of any kind were at a premium.

Certainly, Taylor's rivals had rudimentary broadcasting capabilities, and engaged in similarly brutal denial-of-resource policies.<sup>177</sup> His forces, however, displayed a singular interest and enjoyed a higher degree of success in maintaining and controlling radio facilities and resources, deliberately destroying those that they could not, thereby leaving the country exposed and vulnerable to rebel media saturation. As the narrative history of radio during the civil war is explored, I will make several key points. First, the rebel group's seizure and destruction of media facilities will yield a rough sketch of the disposition of the country's radio assets at various times, anchoring further exploration of radio during the conflict. Second, the nature of NPFL propaganda will be discussed, revealing a skilfully employed campaign of image enhancement, disinformation, and command guidance. Taylor used his media presence to exaggerate the extent of his authority and the success of his military campaign, terrorised ethnic groups into fleeing or complying with rebel demands, likely programmed his fighters to target specific communities for violence, promoted himself as "presidential", and discredited and destabilised his opponents. Finally, foreign actors and intervention forces contended with the NPFL media onslaught in a number of ways that were generally inadequate and poorly thought out – although overall, the consequences of their actions were mixed.

## Overview: Factions and Context

At the height of the conflict, nine distinct armed groups were actively involved in the

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<sup>177</sup> Mark Huband, *The Liberian Civil War* (London, UK and Portland, OR: Frank Cass Publishers, 1998), 87.

fighting, including the NPFL, ECOMOG and the government's Krahn-dominated Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL). The Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL), led by Prince Yormie Johnson, split off from Taylor's NPFL, challenged it for control of the capital city, and was ultimately responsible for Samuel Doe's gruesome killing in September 1990. In 1994, following much internal dissent over Taylor's leadership, several of his high-ranking officials broke away to form the NPFL – Central Revolutionary Council (NPFL-CRC). Early in the war refugee Krahn and Mandingo soldiers and political leaders, who fled to Guinea and Sierra Leone following the NPFL invasion, established the United Liberation Movement for Democracy in Liberia (ULIMO). In 1994 it split into two factions, the Krahn dominated ULIMO-J, led by Roosevelt Johnson, and ULIMO-K, a Mandingo group headed by Alhaji Kromah, Doe's former information minister. Also in 1994, disaffected members of ULIMO-J and the AFL formed the Liberian Peace Council (LPC), led by George Boley, himself a Krahn and former Doe minister. Abuses perpetrated by ULIMO-K helped spawn the Lofa Defence Force (LDF), led by Francois Massaquoi. Some groups, such as the LPC and LDF, were fairly insubstantial forces numbering only a few hundred fighters. The AFL, ULIMO-J, and the LPC constituted a rough Krahn axis that fought off the NPFL, but the chaotic nature of the civil war and the endemic opportunism that characterised factional leadership meant that alliances were fluid and subject to treachery. ECOMOG, for example, first manipulated the Krahn militias as proxies to counter the much stronger NPFL menace, then later used the same tactic against them, providing assistance to Taylor and his allies. Taylor, likewise, sought first to fracture ECOMOG's multinational cohesion, before attempting similar tactics against Liberian opposition groups when they were aligning themselves under the to NPFL-CRC to attack his stronghold in Gbargna. Other groups claimed allegiance with ECOMOG, the AFL, or one another as chances for political, military, territorial, and commercial advancement arose.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> For an overview of these groups and their origins, see Ellis, "Liberia's Warlord Insurgency," 155-171; and Alao *et al.*, *Peacekeepers, Politicians, and Warlords*, 99.

ECOMOG, for its part, would play a significant role in the civil war. A Standing Mediation Committee of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), consisting of Nigeria, Gambia, Ghana, Mali, and Togo, had been formed in Banjul, Gambia in May 1990 to find a diplomatic solution to the Liberian situation.<sup>179</sup> In August it established ECOMOG, ostensibly a neutral peacekeeping force, once it became clear that a peacefully negotiated resolution to the crisis lay was not possible. It deployed to Liberia that same month under the command of a Ghanaian, General Arnold Quainoo.<sup>180</sup>

The mission, which lasted the better part of a decade, from 1990 to 1999, was fraught with problems. West African states were apprehensive over Nigeria's hegemonic ambitions in the region as well as its role in the peacekeeping force. Guinean and Nigerian heads-of-state insisted on their right to intervene in the conflict despite the fact that they did not have the consent of its major faction, the NPFL, or of its leader, Charles Taylor, to do so. Guinean President General Lansana Conte stated that "We do not need the permission of any party involved in the conflict to implement the decisions reached in Banjul. So, with or without the agreement of any of the parties, ECOWAS troops will be in Liberia."<sup>181</sup> ECOWAS itself was divided by persistent rivalries between anglophone and francophone West African states fuelled by personal loyalties, regional alliances and the interests of the United States, Libya, and France. ECOMOG's role as a disinterested outside party, and hence its effectiveness as an impartial peacekeeping force, was thus in question before the first contingent landed, under rebel fire, on Liberian soil. Its officers and men became embroiled in the country's maelstrom of regional and tribal politics, corruption,

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<sup>179</sup> "ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government," Decision A/DEC. 9/5/90, Relating to the Establishment of the of the Standing Mediation Committee, Banjul, Republic of Gambia, 30 May 1990 ; and "ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government," Extract From the Final Communiqué, Establishment of a Standing Mediation Committee, Banjul, Republic of Gambia, 30 May 1990 ; documents in Mark Weller, Ed., *Regional Peace-Keeping and International Enforcement : The Liberian Crisis* Cambridge International Document Series Vol. 6 (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1994), 38-40.

<sup>180</sup> "ECOWAS Standing Mediation Committee," Decision A/DEC.1/8/90, on the Cease-Fire and Establishment of an ECOWAS Cease-Fire Monitoring Group for Liberia, Banjul, Republic of Gambia, 7 August 1990; document in Weller, *Regional Peace-Keeping and International Enforcement*, 67-69. See also pages 69-75.

criminality, and human rights abuses.<sup>182</sup> Eventually, Liberians gave ECOMOG the cynical tag “Every Car Or Moving Object Gone.” The intervention force’s problems did not end with this street label. Tactically, it lacked both a clear mandate and adequate funding and equipment to carry out an effective military operation. A partial list of the force’s inadequacies included poor logistics and administrative capabilities, an order of battle inappropriate to the conflict, a dearth of maps and intelligence, and little if any internal communications capability.<sup>183</sup> Plagued with both macro and micro level deficiencies, it is no wonder that ECOMOG has since been characterised as a failed experiment in regional peacekeeping.

In contrast, the NPFL consistently remained the largest, most powerful, best equipped, and most adaptable of Liberia’s warring groups. According to 1994 disarmament statistics compiled by the United Nations Observer Mission in Liberia (UNOMIL), all other domestic factions would have had to combine forces in order to match it in terms of manpower, weaponry, and resources – this despite the fact that it had suffered heavy battlefield and territorial losses between 1992 and 1994.<sup>184</sup> From its modest beginnings, the NPFL benefited from the fact that its immediate ethnic allies, Gio and Mano residents of Nimba, had been well prepared by government persecution: in essence, Doe was the NPFL’s greatest recruiter. When the rebels first attacked the towns of Butuo, Kamplay, and Longuatu, they killed a number of customs officials and security personnel. The Doe government responded, dispatching elements of the AFL, notably the Krahn-dominated Special Anti-Terrorist Unit (SATU), to quell what were initially perceived to be but mild regional disturbances.<sup>185</sup> They swept the area, killing Nimbans of Gio and Mano extraction in a replay of the brutal ethnic purges perpetrated in the same area by Doe’s

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<sup>181</sup> “ECOWAS Peacekeeping Force To Be Sent To Liberia; Foreigners Released By INPFL,” *SWB* ME/0838/ii (9 August 1990).

<sup>182</sup> Cain, “The Rape of Dinah,” 265-307.

<sup>183</sup> Howe, “Lessons of Liberia: ECOMOG and Regional Peacekeeping,” 167-173.

<sup>184</sup> Alao *et al.*, *Peacekeepers, Politicians, and Warlords*, 61, 99.

<sup>185</sup> Africa Watch, *Flight From Terror: Testimony of Abuses in Nimba County* (London, New York, Washington : Africa Watch, May 1990).

forces in 1983 and 1985. Survivors were quick to join the rebels. The ranks of the NPFL swelled from a handful to 6,000 in short order; by 1994, its troop strength was estimated at 35,000, compared to ULIMO's 10,500 and the AFL's 8,037.<sup>186</sup> Bent on vengeance, the NPFL engaged in ethnic slaughter of its own, targeting the Krahn and their Mandingo allies. Charges of genocide emerged from all quarters.<sup>187</sup>

Cyclical ethnic slaughter and repression of this kind continued through the civil war. According to a U.S. State Department human rights report, "The human costs of the war were immense," including 200,000 "war-related" deaths, 1.2 million internally displaced persons, and approximately 750,000 refugees outside the country.<sup>188</sup> Former UNOMIL human rights officer Kenneth L. Cain has demonstrated that these overall statistics, in addition to countless incidents of rape, torture, and other human rights abuses, indicate a victimisation rate of 85 per cent of Liberia's pre-war population of 2.5 million.<sup>189</sup> By the time of the July 1997 presidential elections, an overwhelming majority of the population had thus suffered abuses of one kind or another at the hands of government, rebel, and intervention forces, although "The warring factions committed the most egregious abuses" showing "flagrant disregard for human rights."<sup>190</sup> A sampling of their illicit activities includes looting and burning villages, arbitrarily detaining and impressing people (notably underage children) into their force structures, employing forced labor, and committing acts of "torture, individual and gang rape, summary executions, mutilations, and cannibalism."<sup>191</sup> Among the many factions and leaders that ran amok during the

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<sup>186</sup> Alao *et al.*, *Peacekeepers, Politicians, and Warlords*, 61, 99.

<sup>187</sup> See, for example, "Cabinet Cites 'Genocide' on Liberian Border," *Foreign Broadcast Information Service* [Hereafter *FBIS*]-*AFR-90-012* (18 January 1990), 13-14.

<sup>188</sup> U.S. Department of State, *Liberia Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1997* (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 1998). Hereafter USDS, *1997 Report on Human Rights in Liberia*. [http://www.state.gov/www/global/human\\_rights/1997\\_hrp\\_report/liberia.html](http://www.state.gov/www/global/human_rights/1997_hrp_report/liberia.html), Accessed January 17, 2003.

<sup>189</sup> See Cain, "The Rape of Dinah," 268.

<sup>190</sup> U.S. Department of State, *Liberia Human Rights Practices, 1995* (U.S. Department of State, March 1996). <http://dosfan.lib.uic.edu/>, Accessed 3 March 2003. Hereafter USDS, *1995 Report on Human Rights in Liberia*.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*

civil war, Taylor and the NPFL carry the burden of responsibility for the lion's share of abuses.<sup>192</sup> Yet when Liberians, exhausted by seven years of fratricidal bloodshed, were finally allowed to go to the polls in July 1997, they voted overwhelmingly for Taylor in an election deemed free and fair by international observers.<sup>193</sup>

Taylor's victory is best understood when one considers that the NPFL and its leader consistently dominated the military and political scene throughout the civil war, displaying a degree of sophistication unmatched by any of the other factions or their leaders. Taylor was able to deploy the requisite firepower to enforce his rule, establishing a parallel Liberian "state" with himself as its titular head. He capitalized on the country's natural resources and negotiated international commercial access to them, enabling him to sustain his military campaign, enjoy the material support of external states, and challenge the legitimacy of the Monrovia government.<sup>194</sup> Resource acquisition was a preoccupation at the grassroots level as well, and included such predatory activities as "confiscation, indiscriminate looting, pillaging, and destruction of property."<sup>195</sup> According to the State Department's human rights report on Liberia for 1995, the forces of the major factions "pilfered virtually any item of value and regularly demanded scarce food and personal valuables from already impoverished residents or displaced persons, often

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<sup>192</sup> In his searing indictment of the rebel leader, Cain rather convincingly argues that "Taylor warrants heightened scrutiny for the following reasons, *inter alia*: the NPFL initiated armed conflict; inaugurated the use of grade school-age children as scouts, spies, and cannon fodder; explicitly employed terror tactics, ethnic cleansing, and political assassinations; was numerically the largest faction by threefold; consistently controlled the most territory, including intermittent control of all areas of Liberia outside Monrovia; deployed sophisticated arms; and exhibited something approximating a chain-of-command. Taylor has latterly mutated into an elected president and currently enjoys status as the Head of State of a recognized government. Predictably, his new government immediately kidnaped [sic], tortured, assassinated, and mutilated a leading opposition figure and his family, appointed an infamously murderous former rebel commander as Police Chief, and closed independent radio stations and newspapers. Evil Triumphant." See Cain, "The Rape of Dinah," 269.

<sup>193</sup> See Terrence Lyons, *Voting For Peace: Post-Conflict Elections in Liberia* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1999); and Harris, "From 'Warlord' to 'Democratic' President."

<sup>194</sup> Reno, "The Organization of Warlord Politics in Liberia," 79-111.

<sup>195</sup> USDS, *1995 Report on Human Rights in Liberia*.

robbing them of their clothes and physically abusing them, particularly at checkpoints. Confiscation of private homes and vehicles was common practice."<sup>196</sup>

Within NPFL territory, living conditions were horrendous – freedom of movement was severely curtailed, internally displaced nationals of ECOMOG contributor states were held hostage in camps, and human rights violations were legion. A rudimentary state apparatus was nonetheless maintained that included schools, medical clinics, currency, transportation, communications, and trans-shipment hubs including an airport and a deepwater port. The NPFL's parallel state was co-ordinated by the secretive G-2, dubbed "the point of no return" by one author,<sup>197</sup> an entity that was linked to numerous executions and disappearances. It was also responsible for running Taylor's communications system, although – not surprisingly, given the extent of Liberian territory under NPFL control – communication between Taylor and his field commanders was alleged to have been poor.<sup>198</sup> The NPFL was particularly adept at intelligence gathering. Abroad, Taylor had agents operating within the U.S. State Department.<sup>199</sup> Domestically, NPFL cells infiltrated into Monrovia, and the group used small, mobile detachments of guerrilla fighters – usually children of elementary-school age – to keep track of ECOMOG and IGNU activities to a far greater extent than they, in turn, were able to monitor the NPFL.<sup>200</sup> In the hinterland Taylor's troops were familiar with the lay of the land and spoke the

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> Leonard Brehun, *Liberia: The War of Horror* (Accra, Ghana : Adwinsa Publications, 1991), 54, 56.

<sup>198</sup> "The Forces in Contention," *Africa Confidential* 33, no. 23 (20 November 1992), 6-7. Taylor often condemned the atrocities perpetrated by his own troops, claiming that he could not control the actions of every man under his command. Whether military authority was delegated to the local level because of poor communications or discipline is difficult to determine. What is certain is that the NPFL leader, while reaching for the Liberian presidency, was able to exercise his authority over troops and commanders who he claimed had otherwise acted independently of his orders.

<sup>199</sup> "Spy Under Arrest," *West Africa* 3960 (16-22 August 1993), 1438; "Intrigue in Washington," *West Africa* 3969 (18-24 October 1993), 1871; "In Prison Without Trial," *West Africa* 4001 (6-12 June 1994), 999-1000; "Espionage Journalist Pleads Guilty," *West Africa* 4005 (4-10 July 1994), 1187.

<sup>200</sup> "The Forces in Contention," *Africa Confidential* 33, no. 23 (20 November 1992), 6-7; "The Battle for Gbarnga," *Africa Confidential*, 34, no. 11 (28 May 1993), 1-2.

local languages, although NPFL atrocities limited the extent to which such advantages could be exploited among the civilian population.<sup>201</sup>

## Early Days: Charles Taylor, the NPFL, and the BBC

What Taylor claimed to lack in direct command and control capability he more than compensated for with access to and control of mass media and personal communications equipment. According to William Reno, a political scientist at Northwestern University, "he communicated with publicists, overseas associates and representatives through a facsimile and satellite telephone hook-ups."<sup>202</sup> At the beginning of the war, the satellite phone was the medium through which Taylor initiated a tenuous link to the outside world; it was, in fact, instrumental in shaping both external and internal perceptions of the NPFL and his relationship to it. He was notoriously jealous of his personal power, fearful of having his location pinned down and unwilling to either reveal the true disposition of his forces or clarify his own intentions. Communications technology of one kind or another thus allowed Taylor to micromanage and manipulate people and events sight unseen.<sup>203</sup>

Taylor was particularly aggressive in his pursuit of international media attention, regularly calling the BBC and demanding to be interviewed, maintaining personal contact with the service's *Focus on Africa* program. Taylor's Defence Minister, Tom Woewiyu, also emerged in early 1990 as the NPFL's chief spokesman, appearing on BBC programs and West African media to trumpet the rebels' cause.<sup>204</sup> Until the late summer months of 1990, NPFL broadcast resources were limited to such surviving foreign and independent outlets as would carry the

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<sup>201</sup> "The Battle for Gbarnga," *Africa Confidential*, 34, no. 11 (28 May 1993), 1-2.

<sup>202</sup> Reno, "Reinvention of an African Patrimonial State," 113-114.

<sup>203</sup> "Peace Looms in Liberia," *West Africa* 3957 (26 July – 1 August 1993), 1292-1293.

<sup>204</sup> "The Plot Thickens," *West Africa* 3812 (17-23 September 1990), 2478; "Rebels Establish Firm Foothold," *FBIS-AFR-90-005* (8 January 1990).



group's anti-Doe messages,<sup>205</sup> highlighting the importance of its sustained contact with the BBC during this period.

During the first few weeks of the NPFL offensive in early 1990, internal feuding over the group's leadership was played out in Liberian and international media. At first, Taylor was careful to explain the group's provenance to Robin White, host of *Focus on Africa*. On 1 January 1990 he stated "[T]he National Patriotic Front... was originally organized by the late Brigadier General Thomas Quiwonkpa... this is a continuation of the 1985 situation."<sup>206</sup> The issue of NPFL leadership would lead to much internal dissent, however. According to captured guerrillas speaking publicly at the Ministry of Justice in Monrovia on 11 January 1990, Taylor was the group's organizing force prior to the December 1989 invasion. He provided them with logistical and financial support, and acted as their point of contact between training bases and staging areas in Libya, Burkina Faso, and Côte d'Ivoire. One of the captured guerrillas revealed that according to the long-term rebel plan, "Charles Taylor was going to be president."<sup>207</sup> Moses Duopu, the NPFL Secretary-General, publicly contested this view of the group's leadership, claiming that the rebels were governed by an Executive Council. Taylor dealt with the problem the same way that he would deal with most acts of internal dissidence or political competition – through violence. With the NPFL's total military victory imminent in the summer of 1990, he had Duopu and other competitors murdered, clearing the way for his own uncontested control of the spoils.<sup>208</sup>

What remains unclear is whether or not Taylor began as NPFL supremo and was therefore simply defending his authority, or whether he carved a public image for himself out of the murky circumstances surrounding the early days of the civil war, and was thereafter forced to

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<sup>205</sup> For example, the "Voice of Mid-Liberia", a Christian station run by Baptist missionaries, hosted an NPFL conference in late May 1990. See "Taylor Talks," *West Africa* 3796 (28 May – 3 June 1990), 879-880.

<sup>206</sup> "Opposition Leader Predicts Uprising," *FBIS-AFR-90-001* (2 January 1990), 10-12.

<sup>207</sup> "Captured Rebels Explain Training, Recruitment," *FBIS-AFR-90-008* (11 January 1990); "Dissident 'Revelations' Reported," *FBIS-AFR-90-009* (12 January 1990).

<sup>208</sup> See Ellis, "Liberia's Warlord Insurgency," 159-160.

brutally consolidate his newly-defined leadership. Either way, once Taylor established personal control of the NPFL, the group's propaganda machinery went into overdrive characterising him in grandiose, effusive language. Many of the tropes in Taylor's propaganda messages reflected a self-referential quest for legitimacy. He referred to some of the familiar populist themes of the pre-Doe era, adopting an ethnic middle name, "Ghankay", and claiming to stand for the "people's popular revolution" in a bid to remove the autocratic, abusive Doe.<sup>209</sup> In 1990, at a demonstration at the University of Liberia's Fendell campus north of Monrovia, he told a crowd of supporters "This revolution is not Charles Taylor's revolution, it is the people's revolution."<sup>210</sup> And yet on his own radio station, *Voice of the NPFL*, he was referred to variously as "His Excellency", "Commander-in-Chief", and "President of Liberia",<sup>211</sup> making little attempt to hide his own ambition, especially after Doe's death. On occasion he injected a quasi-messianic tone into his rhetoric: Doe was a "Devil",<sup>212</sup> while Taylor likened himself to a religious saviour whose rule was essential for Liberia's salvation. "They did not have a good thing to say about Jesus Christ when he was on earth," he once told the BBC's Robin White, "And he was the best thing we had around."<sup>213</sup> Responding to criticism of his guerrilla campaign, he claimed that his enemies were "all communists that are trying to combat against me. That they said about Jesus Christ. And now everybody... [knows]... that he was lord and master."<sup>214</sup>

Taylor's media "relationship" with White became especially useful when his personal location was in question – giving the earliest indications of a predilection and capacity for projecting his authority and charisma beyond the confines of his physical self.<sup>215</sup> In one of

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<sup>209</sup> "Rebel Leader Taylor Outlines Political Program," *FBIS-AFR-90-186* (25 September 1990).

<sup>210</sup> "Thousands of NPFL Supporters Demonstrate," *FBIS-AFR-90-152* (7 August 1990).

<sup>211</sup> See, for example, "Radio Condemns Ecomog Presence, Behaviour," *FBIS-AFR-90-194* (5 October 1990).

<sup>212</sup> "Further on Mobilization," *FBIS-AFR-90-151* (6 August 1990).

<sup>213</sup> "BBC Interviews Rebel Leader Charles Taylor," *FBIS-AFR-90-021* (31 January 1990).

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>215</sup> "Opposition Leader predicts Uprising," *FBIS-AFR-90-001* (2 January 1990); "Taylor Views New Rebel Offensive," *FBIS-AFR-90-010* (16 January 1990); "BBC Interviews Rebel Leader Charles Taylor," *FBIS-AFR-90-021* (31 January 1990); "Taylor Interviewed on Current Situation in Gbarnga," *FBIS-AFR-94-188* (28 September 1994).

Taylor's first such communications at the onset of the rebel campaign, he sparred with the host of

*Focus on Africa:*

*White:* You have told me that you are calling from somewhere in Africa. Could you be more specific as to where you are calling from?

*Taylor:* Because of a possible diplomatic embarrassment, Robin, I would hesitate to do that at this particular time.

*White:* Where are you heading for? Are you heading for Liberia yourself?

*Taylor:* As a matter of fact, I have been in Liberia for the past 4 days. I was involved, I was personally on the ground. I inspected areas that were held by my forces, and I was present. I was there. I have not depended on field reports, I was there.<sup>216</sup>

In subsequent interviews, White continued to try to evoke from the rebel leader a clear statement of his whereabouts, but the latter remained vague. On January 15, when news from Nimba was otherwise sparse, Taylor claimed his forces were making advances against government forces:

*White:* ...[W]here is the fighting now going on?

*Taylor:* We have launched one of several offensives that we hope will be... that will serve as a deciding factor in our struggle.

*White:* And this is a new offensive?

*Taylor:* That is correct.

*White:* And where is this new offensive taking place?

*Taylor:* Well, our forces have been in action in action [near] Grand Gedeh County. We will also be involved in some subsequent actions in the middle part of the country, which we do not want to disclose at this particular time because we are trying to engage the enemy in such a way that he will not understand our movement.<sup>217</sup>

On January 30, White asked the rebel leader "What is your news from the frontline?" Taylor stated "I do not want to give you positions anymore, but we are progressing according to our plan"<sup>218</sup> – a convenient response, to be sure, considering that he had been spotted in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, only days previously.<sup>219</sup> In another interview at the end of January 1990, White asked Taylor: "Why are you not at the battlefield yourself?" Taylor's claimed "I have diplomatic,

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<sup>216</sup> "Opposition Leader predicts Uprising," *FBIS-AFR-90-001* (2 January 1990). The evidence suggests that Taylor's first call to the BBC was not at the end of December 1989, as indicated by anecdotal references, but was in fact made on 1 January 1990. There is no record of a phone call from Taylor to the BBC prior to that date in either FBIS or SWB transcripts. The gap bears further investigation, as this may simply point to a lapse in their monitoring of the situation.

<sup>217</sup> "Taylor Views New Rebel Offensive," *FBIS-AFR-90-010* (16 January 1990).

<sup>218</sup> "BBC Interviews Rebel Leader Charles Taylor," *FBIS-AFR-90-021* (31 January 1990).

<sup>219</sup> "Rebel Charles Taylor Said in Ivory Coast," *FBIS-AFR-90-017* (25 January 1990).

political, and other things. I have to visit capitals, to seek and solicit assistance, and explain what we are doing. My work now is not at the battlefield” – although he was loathe to admit he had not been there, suggesting that he had just recently been in the vicinity of Saniquellie. “I do not have to say exactly where I was,” he protested, “but I was there. I visit there.”<sup>220</sup>

Taylor was not the only Liberian with a heightened appreciation of self-serving media messages. The country’s domestic press came to resemble the broken state it purported to inform. Caught on either side of the Monrovia-Gbarnga divide, journalists were drawn into the propaganda war being fought over the airwaves by proponents of the Monrovia-based government and the NPFL.<sup>221</sup> According to Liberian journalist Suah S. Deddeh, “As the competing parties traded insults, journalists became the conduit through which their verbal attacks were publicised and amplified. It is no wonder that some people held the press responsible for helping to fan the flames of war during that period.”<sup>222</sup> Woewiyu’s counterpart in the government was Minister of Information Emmanuel Bowier, and the two quickly became the media “stars” of the early stages of the civil war.<sup>223</sup> While the former made certain that news of NPFL battlefield successes reached the outside world and were in turn picked up by local media, the latter used the government’s proprietary broadcast resources to paint quite a different picture of rebel defeat. Taylor publicly vilified Doe, while the former Master-Sergeant engaged in no small amount of muckraking, revealing his nemesis to be an embezzler of government funds and an escaped convict on the run from a U.S. jail. Both Doe and Taylor evidently had a vested interest in controlling the flow of information: Taylor’s bilious BBC badinage stirred official wrath against foreign media, and rebroadcasts of BBC news coverage were dropped from the government’s Radio ELBC programming. Eventually, they were banned as treasonous behind

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<sup>220</sup> “BBC Interviews Rebel Leader Charles Taylor,” *FBIS-AFR-90-021* (31 January 1990), 13-14.

<sup>221</sup> Suah S. Deddeh, “Pushing For Press Freedom in Liberia,” *Journal of Democracy* 11, no. 2 (April 2000), 161.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*, 161-162.

<sup>223</sup> “The Liberian Way,” *West Africa* 3801 (2-8 July 1990), 2020-2021.

NPFL lines as well.<sup>224</sup> Despite Taylor's seemingly privileged access to the BBC, his was not the only voice providing information to the service. Controlling the flow of information was essential for the warlords, and once the NPFL was running its own proprietary media facilities, it could afford to implement such constraints.

## Scorched Ether: Consolidating NPFL Radio

NPFL troops seized control of existing radio facilities as they moved south and outwards from Nimba to encompass most of the country. The evidence suggests that in the course of the rebels' military operations, they deliberately set out to eliminate enemy broadcasting capabilities while supplementing or expanding their own. William Ardill was an Irish American medical doctor and member of the evangelical Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) stationed at the Monrovia campus of Radio ELWA. In his memoir of the war he wrote:

The daily ELWA broadcasts about the war and reports about the safety of various people were a vital link to those caught behind the rebel lines. With the mail service stopped, there were no new radio programs being aired because programs produced in other studios never arrived.<sup>225</sup>

Doe had tolerated the generally self-censoring, survival-minded Christian missionary broadcasters throughout the 1980s, and ELWA often trod a fine line between actually reporting real news – which, despite its attempts at objectivity, would occasionally incur the wrath of official censors – and the “responsible journalism” that satisfied government authorities.<sup>226</sup>

During the NPFL assault on Monrovia in early July 1990, journalist G. Henry Andrews noted in a journal entry dated July 3 that “Both the FM and shortwave services of the state radio have ceased broadcasting. My trained ear detects that the transmitters are on, but there's nothing

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<sup>224</sup> Huband, *The Liberian Civil War*, 130; James Butty, “Doe Wants to Talk,” *West Africa* 3793 (7-13 May 1990), 781; James Butty, “A Year of Terror,” *West Africa* 3827 (7-13 January 1991), 3149-3150.

<sup>225</sup> William Ardill, *Where Elephants Fight* (Jos, Nigeria: Fab Anieh Ltd., 1997), 153.

<sup>226</sup> See Shope, “The Patron's Press,” 75-83, 93-112, 113-123.

coming over the airwaves”<sup>227</sup> Eventually, state radio, short on fuel for its generators, was reduced to intermittent broadcasts during the rebel siege of the city.<sup>228</sup> In the hinterland, where the NPFL’s totalitarian methods would leave Liberians with little other than rebel-mediated information, the Liberian Rural Communications Network represented a wealth of broadcast resources and was thus a natural target for the rebels.<sup>229</sup> BBC Worldwide Monitoring picked up a broadcast at 2100 GMT on July 17 from a station identifying itself as “Radio Number Two, the Voice of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia, broadcasting from Gbarnga, Liberia.”<sup>230</sup> On August 2 at 2110 GMT, another station, this time in Voinjama, was heard identifying itself as the “Voice of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia Radio Number Four”.<sup>231</sup> The Voinjama station broadcast intermittently into 1991,<sup>232</sup> but by 1992 it and the Zwedru station had been picked clean, all three of the hinterland LRCN facilities consolidated at Taylor’s headquarters in Gbarnga. They were supplemented by broadcasting sites at the Firestone rubber plantation<sup>233</sup> at Harbel and the Bong Mining Complex at Yekepa, Bong County.<sup>234</sup> Resources outside of core territory were systematically stripped of spare parts or destroyed as the NPFL sought to deny radio facilities to its enemies. Taylor’s troops overran, shut down, and eviscerated the Liberia

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<sup>227</sup> G. Henry Andrews, *Cry, Liberia, Cry!* (New York: Vantage Press, 1993), 24.

<sup>228</sup> “Doe’s Resignation,” *West Africa* 3802 (9-15 July 1990), 2066.

<sup>229</sup> See Institute for International Research. *Final Report of the Rural Information Systems Project: A Report to the United States Agency for International Development*, Project No. 669-0134 (Arlington, Virginia: Institute for International Research, March 1989).

<sup>230</sup> “Liberia Fighting in Monrovia; NPFL Takes Control of Local Radio Station,” *SWB*, ME/0825/ii (July 25, 1990).

<sup>231</sup> “Liberia NPFL Radio Warns of ‘Invasion’; Doe Seeks Medical Aid For Ministries,” *SWB*, ME/0834/ii (August 4, 1990).

<sup>232</sup> “Sierra Leone Troops Reportedly Halt NPFL ‘Advance’; Nigeria Pledges Help,” *SWB*, ME/1041/ii (April 9, 1991); “Liberian Cabinet Resigns; ‘Hundreds’ of NPFL Rebels Killed in Sierra Leone,” *SWB*, ME/1064/ii (May 6, 1991).

<sup>233</sup> And possibly provided by the Firestone company itself.

<sup>234</sup> According to some reports, the NPFL maintained a mobile broadcast van located at the Firestone plantation. Given the fluidity of guerrilla control over parts of Liberian territory and the intermittent operation of certain facilities, however, it is entirely possible that such reports merely noted the equivalent of gophers alternately popping their heads up in a carnival mallet game. Still, the possibility that the NPFL maintained mobile broadcast equipment should not be discounted. See “New Radio Station Commissioned,” *SWB*, ME/0924/ii (November 17, 1990); “ECOMOG Uncovers Grave,” *West Africa* no. 3940 (29 March – 4 April 1993), 521.

Relay Station of the Voice of America in Careysburg in September 1990; the site became a camp for internally-displaced persons thereafter.<sup>235</sup> Elimination of the LRCN satellite stations and consolidation of the NPFL's broadcast equipment and facilities at Gbarnga limited the capabilities of NPFL opponents in Grand Gedeh and Lofa counties. Other Liberian Broadcasting Service facilities, "from Bomi County to Careysburg", were similarly pillaged by 1992. In Paynesville, the NPFL dismantled the government's ELBC FM radio and television site, gutted it of equipment and goods, and set it ablaze.<sup>236</sup>

The fight for control of Monrovia in the summer of 1990 gives some of the clearest indications of an NPFL policy of media-domination and the problems inherent in maintaining independent and accurate media coverage of events during internal wars. Taylor's forces had taken most of Liberia and were engaged in heavy fighting in the capital with the AFL, INPFL, and eventually, ECOMOG. By June foreign journalists, ordinarily resident at the Ducor Palace Hotel, were seeking safer accommodations. They managed to secure rooms in abandoned staff housing maintained by the U.S. embassy in the city's Mamba Point district, and maintained contact with the outside world through a U.S. embassy-routed AT&T hook-up until July 2, when Monrovia's telecommunications links were severed. Correspondents from competing international media outlets then found themselves in the peculiar quandary of having to submit a single, shared daily news story to their respective employers via diplomatic communications channels. According to Mark Huband, a British journalist working for *The Guardian*, "the pool system meant that Reuters, Associated Press, the BBC, as well as *The Guardian*... and *The Independent* were in the frustrating position of all receiving exactly the same text for editors in London or New York to play around with."<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>235</sup> Patricia A. Holmes, "The Voice of America in Liberia: The End of the Road," *Liberian Studies Journal* 17, no. 1 (1992): 79-93.

<sup>236</sup> "Liberia Broadcasting System Comments on Equipment Destruction by NPFL," *SWB*, ME/1326/B/1 (March 11, 1992); see also "Radio 'Vandalism'," *West Africa* 3890 (6-12 April 1992), 600.

<sup>237</sup> Huband, *The Liberian Civil War*, 130-131. Huband states that only the *New York Times* correspondent in Monrovia was not so constrained, enjoying personal access to U.S. embassy communications.

For ordinary residents of Liberia, penetrating the propaganda of the warring factions was an even greater challenge. William Ardill noted how the confusion generated by contradictory government and rebel media messages could be overcome by access to foreign news sources:

On May 19 [1990] we heard Taylor's army had reached the city of Buchanan about 45 miles southeast of Monrovia. It was a major port city and was a key victory. On the BBC we heard from Taylor that he was now in control of the port. On the government news reports, the AFL said they had firm control of Buchanan and defeated the rebels. We had learned to question the government reports. We knew that Taylor was also a master propagandist, so we listened several times a day to the VOA and BBC reports and tried to sort out what was really happening only a few miles from where we lived.<sup>238</sup>

Similarly, G. Henry Andrews decried the "double-talk and twisted logic" of official information.<sup>239</sup> The Doe government actively engaged in counter-propaganda operations, dispatching television crews, for example, to sites of reputed rebel victories in order to gather evidence proving them false. Andrews wrote: "[A]s soon as news spreads that the NPFL is threatening a town or city, ELTV [and other] reporters rush to the town, take pictures, interview inhabitants, rush back to Monrovia, and publish statements of residents claiming that there are no rebels in the town, that all is well."<sup>240</sup> In a diary entry dated 1 July 1990, he questioned the veracity of government media reports as the NPFL seemed ever closer to its goal of capturing Monrovia:

The NPFL is now on the city's doorstep. Reports say the fighting is only five miles from the heart of the city. Is this true? Rumors abound. Our only sources are the BBC, VOA, and ELWA. People learned long ago not to believe anything on ELBC and ELTV. Since the start of this conflict, the government has never admitted the loss or capture of any town or city, except by implication or reference. As each city or county has fallen to the NPFL, the government has denied the news and told us that everything was under control, that there was nothing to worry about, and that there was no need to panic. The first mention that the government made of the NPFL being in Buchanan, for instance, was when it announced that the army had launched a counterattack to retake Buchanan. But the government had never admitted that Buchanan had fallen in the first place, instead, denying all the time NPFL claims to have taken the city.<sup>241</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> Ardill, *Where Elephants Fight*, 174, 196-197.

<sup>239</sup> Andrews, *Cry, Liberia, Cry!*, 4.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, 19. Leonard Brehun makes the same observation in *War of Horror*, 83.

<sup>241</sup> Andrews, *Cry, Liberia, Cry!*, 19.



In an environment increasingly inimical to human life, independent media coverage of events and open access to accurate news was thus a significant problem for foreign journalists and ordinary residents alike.

Shortwave HAM radio sets facilitated communication beyond Liberia. By the end of June William Ardill was the only HAM operator still at the ELWA site. He noted “I always kept the short wave radio out. It was my lifeline to the world.” Once telecommunications links went down, ELWA’s HAM set “was the only link we had with our loved ones and the SIM office in the States.”<sup>242</sup> Personal, hand-held radio receivers were ubiquitous – some even considered them essential personal items, even during times of extreme crisis – allowing residents, at least for a time, to side-step authoritarian control of information.<sup>243</sup> Rebel and government monitoring of such media was a constant concern, however, and just as self-censorship came to be a problem with more established independent news outlets, private listenership was often self-limited by the fear of the harsh punishment meted out to those who defied the decrees of the warlords. After Ardill evacuated his wife Dorothy to the U.S., for example, his radio contact with her was constrained by such concerns. “I told her in coded language and disguised terms,” he wrote, “about what was happening and what our prayer concerns were each day. Because I was not sure who was listening in Liberia I had to be careful I was not jeopardizing our situation by giving military or sensitive information.”<sup>244</sup>

At stake during the NPFL’s effort to capture Monrovia was control of the ELWA facilities. The government’s Radio ELBC network was effectively shut down by 20 July 1990.<sup>245</sup> A joint dispatch issued by Huband and his peers, citing diplomatic sources in Monrovia, claimed that “Taylor’s forces had surrounded and effectively neutralized Doe’s troops barricaded inside the radio and television station east of the city, but did not attack them, apparently in order to

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<sup>242</sup> Ardill, *Where Elephants Fight*, 163-164.

<sup>243</sup> Andrews, *Cry, Liberia, Cry!*, 38.

<sup>244</sup> Ardill, *Where Elephants Fight*, 164.

spare the facilities.”<sup>246</sup> Shortly after, they noted that ELWA, located in another part of the city, was the only radio station still functioning.<sup>247</sup> Continued broadcasting would have drawn fire from the fighting factions, and Taylor wanted the Christian missionary station intact. At his urging it ceased regular programming on July 6, its staff unwilling to risk the destruction of the facility that would surely result if they did not comply.<sup>248</sup>

Three weeks later Taylor’s forces briefly took the area around the ELWA campus.<sup>249</sup> They sought out and retrieved staff members, including Ardill, most of whom had fled to surrounding refugee camps, and brought them back to the station so that they could prepare it for a staged broadcast.<sup>250</sup> Although the site had survived the fighting up to that point unscathed, they were initially unable to summon the requisite electrical power needed to reactivate the transmitter. According to Ardill, rebels ordered one of the staffers “to turn on the generators but he couldn’t because the emergency tower lights had been left on and the batteries...were flat.”<sup>251</sup> The problem was eventually resolved when “One older generator [was] started manually with an air compressor and we all sighed in relief.”<sup>252</sup> The rebels then provided ELWA staff with a taped message from Taylor, who was not physically present for the announcement.<sup>253</sup> On July 27 they transmitted his “special message”, proclaiming “the Doe government is hereby dissolved,” and that it was “replaced by the government of the National Patriotic Reconstruction Assembly under my leadership.”<sup>254</sup>

ELWA staff were allowed to leave the studio, and returned safely to the Bong Mining Company facilities in Bong County where they rejoined their peers. Taylor’s troops were routed

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<sup>245</sup> “Clandestine, Unofficial, and Satellite Broadcasts,” *SWB*, ME/1748/E1 (23 July 1993).

<sup>246</sup> “Rebels Attack Airfield,” *FBIS-AFR-90-145* (27 July 1990).

<sup>247</sup> “Rebels Control Mamba Point District in Monrovia,” *FBIS-AFR-90-148* (1 August 1990).

<sup>248</sup> Ardill, *Where Elephants Fight*, 139.

<sup>249</sup> “Liberia,” *SWB*, ME/0940/E1/1 (December 6, 1990); Ardill, *Where Elephants Fight*, 210.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>251</sup> Ardill, *Where Elephants Fight*, 210.

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>254</sup> “Doe Government ‘Dissolved’; Charles Taylor Leads New Government,” *SWB*, ME/0829/ii (30 July 1990).

within days. Before leaving they looted what they could, and set fire to what they could not.<sup>255</sup> Forces loyal to Doe added to the destruction afterward, subjecting ELWA to heavy shelling on July 30.<sup>256</sup> In 1991 SIM dispatched an assessment team to evaluate conditions at the site.<sup>257</sup> It had been flattened; ELWA only resumed operations, limited to English language-only programming, between August 1993 and May 1996, when it went off the air again due to intense fighting in Monrovia.<sup>258</sup>

It is difficult to determine whether the staged broadcast was premature or not. NPFL forces may not have been able to hold the ELWA site, but the event itself would seem to have accomplished at least two things. The fact that the transmission was roughly timed to coincide with July 26, the date of Liberia's annual Independence Day – an occasion upon which Liberians were accustomed to hearing such government pronouncements – was surely calculated. More importantly, it contributed to Taylor's tactic of projecting himself far and wide, using public radio addresses to promote the image of his omnipresent leadership and to enhance perceptions of NPFL success. The day after Ardill and fellow ELWA staff members helped to arrange Taylor's special broadcast, they decided to leave the country. Driving from Bong through Nimba to their eventual destination, Côte d'Ivoire, they stopped at a border town on the riverine frontier dividing Liberia from its eastern neighbour. There, "much to our surprise, we saw about 100 people dancing and singing for joy. The soldiers were all waving their guns in the air and the women were dancing up a storm."<sup>259</sup> When they asked what the festivities were about, they were surprised to hear "the great news," that "Doe has been toppled. It is over. We won."<sup>260</sup>

For Ardill and his fellow refugees, the moment was not without significance: "Here we

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<sup>255</sup> Ardill, *Where Elephants Fight*, 227.

<sup>256</sup> "Liberia," *SWB*, ME/0940/E1/1 (6 December 1990).

<sup>257</sup> Ardill, *Where Elephants Fight*, 229-230.

<sup>258</sup> "Liberia," *SWB*, AL/2252/AS1 (March 16, 1995); "Clandestine and Other Selected Broadcasts," *SWB*, WBI/0032/WB (August 8, 1997).

<sup>259</sup> Ardill, *Where Elephants Fight*, 223-224.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*

were in the town and in the area where the whole war had begun on the day when it appeared to be over. We sat for a few minutes quietly amazed and awkward. We were happy it was over.”<sup>261</sup> They remained conscious of conditions under Liberia’s warlords, however, and were determined to leave. The news, alas, was anything but current: they were “stunned and heartbroken” to be told that the rebels had heard the news in an ELWA broadcast. “[W]e know if it is on ELWA,” the revellers stated, “it is the truth.”<sup>262</sup> Indeed, for at least one Liberian observer, “The educated people have Voice of America and BBC” but “Radio ELWA is our people’s BBC.”<sup>263</sup> According to Ardill, “They had heard the taped message we had been forced to play of Mr. Taylor and now they were being deceived by the radio station ELWA. A station whose credibility and trust SIM had spent years developing – now it was the voice of the NPFL and already lies were being told in our good name.”<sup>264</sup>

### **“Thieves, Rapists, and Murderers”: The Attack on ECOMOG and “Foreign Intervention”**

Once ELBC had fallen into NPFL control and ELWA was reduced to rubble less than a fortnight later, there were no other stations to counteract rebel broadcasts. Taylor enjoyed unparalleled control of the airwaves. In early August, NPFL propaganda reflected the rebel leader’s concern with the impact of “foreign intervention” on the conduct of his campaign. Nigerian navy frigates were docked in Freetown, Sierra Leone to facilitate the evacuation of refugees, ECOWAS was debating whether or not to intervene, and both government forces and the dissident INPFL were confined to sections of the capital. Samuel Doe and Prince Johnson welcomed the possibility that foreign military presence would stave off their own military

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<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*, 223-224.

defeat. Johnson, seeking to provoke U.S. intervention, ordered the arrest of U.S. and U.K. nationals in territory under his control.<sup>265</sup> Taylor and the NPFL, on the cusp of victory, condemned the move, but threatened hell and damnation should any foreign forces interfere in the conflict or venture onto Liberian soil except to rescue and evacuate the hostages taken by Johnson's group. Meanwhile, they, too, took hostages, focusing on the nationals of potential ECOMOG contributors – Nigerians and Ghanaians in particular – as insurance against intervention.<sup>266</sup>

For Taylor, the U.S. and Nigerian presence – not to mention the impending ECOWAS intervention – represented foreign meddling in Liberian affairs and international efforts to prop up the Doe regime more than it did concern for the welfare of non-Liberian residents of the country. The mobilizational potential of denouncing foreign intervention was too great to pass up. Broadcasting from its Voinjama site on August 2, the NPFL appealed to Liberians to join its ranks, "to protect your common heritage" against foreign intervention. It extended a hand to Mandingos, claiming that they would be welcomed and protected.<sup>267</sup> On August 5, as U.S. warships could be seen on the horizon and Marine helicopters were landing in relays at the Executive Mansion, Taylor broadcast identical messages from his Voinjama site and from Yekepa in the Nimba mountains.<sup>268</sup> Emphasizing statist concepts of legitimacy, he called on Liberians to defend and foreign governments to respect Liberia's territorial integrity and sovereignty. He called for a mass mobilization to create an army of 150,000 men, telling

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<sup>265</sup> "Johnson Orders Arrest of U.S., U.K. Nationals," *FBIS-AFR-90-151* (6 August 1990); "Doe Welcomes U.S. Marine Intervention," *FBIS-AFR-90-151* (6 August 1990).

<sup>266</sup> "Taylor Calls for 'General Mobilization'," *FBIS-AFR-90-151* (6 August 1990); "Further on Mobilization," *FBIS-AFR-90-151* (6 August 1990); "NPFL to Attend ECOWAS Meeting; Taylor Comments On Hostage-Taking," *SWB ME/0836/ii* (7 August 1990);

<sup>267</sup> "NPFL Radio Warns of 'Invasion'; Doe Seeks Medical Aid For Ministers," *SWB ME/0834/ii* (4 August 1990).

<sup>268</sup> "Further on Mobilization," *FBIS-AFR-90-151* (6 August 1990); "Taylor Warns 'Foreign Governments' on Neutrality," *FBIS-AFR-90-153* (8 August 1990).

listeners “We must be ready to build bridges, dig trenches, erect obstacles, and remain vigilant in order to fight our common enemy.”<sup>269</sup>

Taylor’s propaganda was also rife with images of colonial-era persecution and enslavement. “We are confronted with a new colonization like that during the days of slavery,” he proclaimed in his August 5 broadcasts. “We believe that Liberians can meet this challenge and that they must remain free and independent.”<sup>270</sup> Taylor began to organize mass protests, calling for rallies at Buchanan, Kakata, and Gbarnga. “A Liberian made slave by a Nigerian, never,” he told thousands of NPFL supporters gathered on August 6 at the Fendell campus 25 km north of Monrovia. “Nigeria has its own problems,” he stated, “but now they want to come to our house and tell us how to manage it?”<sup>271</sup> The crowd was drawn from the 184,000 refugees who had taken refuge at the campus. According to an *Agence France-Press* (AFP) report, participants showed their support for the NPFL leader, including chants of “Taylor or Nothing”, “We Want Taylor,” and “Doe Must Go”. The rebel group’s largesse, however – it provided the refugees with food aid in the form of rice – may have been as much of an inspiration to the protesters as any ideological support for NPFL war aims.<sup>272</sup>

Taylor issued chilling exhortations for Liberians to adopt extreme solutions to their problems. “We will take guns, machetes, and knives, and we will kill them all,” he told the Fendell crowd on August 5.<sup>273</sup> The approach was a common one among the warlords, and framing potential populist measures in such absolutist terms left little room for inter-group conciliation. In May, for example, Doe had called on sympathetic tribal leaders to “get their cutlasses, their single-barreled [sic] guns and get in the bush.”<sup>274</sup> The following week, 18 decapitated Gio and Mano victims turned up in Monrovia. Taylor’s response was “If you’re a

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<sup>269</sup> “Further on Mobilization,” *FBIS-AFR-90-151* (6 August 1990).

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>271</sup> “Thousands of NPFL Supporters Demonstrate,” *FBIS-AFR-90-152* (7 August 1990).

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>274</sup> William O’Neill, “Liberia: An Avoidable Tragedy,” *Current History* 92, no. 574 (May 1993), 215.

Mandingo, it doesn't matter who you are or what you've done. That's it. It's tit for tat." Following the capture of Buchanan, Mandingos were heavily represented among the two hundred or so people rounded up and executed by the NPFL.<sup>275</sup>

Indeed, of the various ethnic victims of warlord brutality, the Mandingo were recipients of a disproportionate amount of the NPFL's ethnic enmity. Traditionally mobile Muslim traders of Malinke extraction, they were only accorded official status as a Liberian ethnic group under the Doe regime, an affiliation that drew no small amount of ill-will from other Liberians and established their bona fides as Krahn allies. They were thus perceived by many Liberians to fall outside the normal web of obligations (as much as any such homogenizing network can be said to exist in Liberia), occupying a particularly vulnerable position as an ethnic group with both domestic and foreign roots and linked to the forces of a potentially hostile neighbouring country, Guinea.<sup>276</sup> Indeed, within the first week of the NPFL invasion, 13,000 refugees had fled to Guinea alone; by mid-February their numbers had swelled to 80,000, by August 280,000, and 409, 000 by the end of 1990.<sup>277</sup> Tom Woewiyu, speaking on the phone in an interview with the BBC's "Network Africa" program, addressed the issue of non-Liberians and civilians being caught up in the violence and shed some light on NPFL perceptions of the potential for an ethnic fifth column within Liberia. "[T]he... tribes in Guinea [and] Liberia [are the same]," he stated. "So that when you have a problem between the Mandingos and the Manos and the Gios[,] and the Mandingos are in Guinea *and* [emphasis added]... in Liberia, then that particular country cannot serve as a referee."<sup>278</sup> In 1992, Guinea's Interior Minister Alséni René Gomez admitted

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<sup>275</sup> O'Neill, "An Avoidable Tragedy," 216.

<sup>276</sup> Krahn refugees in Sierra Leone and Nigeria (and indeed, the Gio and Mano in Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso) militarized along similar lines. Israeli scholar Yekutiel Gershoni makes a parallel argument regarding Taylor's efforts to internationalize the conflict; overall, the militarization of ethnic Liberian diasporas during the war requires more detailed study. See Gershoni, "Military and Diplomatic Strategies in the Liberian Civil War," *Liberian Studies Journal*, 22, no. 2 (1997): 199-239, and Gershoni, "War Without End and an End to a War: The Prolonged Wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone," *African Studies Review*, 40, no. 3 (1997): 55-76.

<sup>277</sup> Hiram A. Ruiz, *Liberia: Destruction and Reconstruction* (U.S. Committee for Refugees, December 1990), 7.

<sup>278</sup> "Woewiyu Interviewed on ECOMOG, Banjul Talks," *FBIS-AFR-90-164* (23 August 1990).

publicly that ULIMO troops were being trained in military camps in his country. After much qualification, he recalled the massacre of “[o]ur Mandingo tribesmen, all of whom are Moslems.”<sup>279</sup> The Mandingos had already been victimized for their perceived loyalty to Doe and the Krahn, and this foreign connection provided the NPFL with further justifications for eliminating them. NPFL propaganda rejected *any* foreign presence, but in this case, Guinea’s participation in ECOMOG was attacked with particular malice.

As ECOWAS ended its deliberations and prepared to deploy its intervention force, Taylor took measures to strengthen his bargaining position, targeting nationals of ECOWAS contributor states who were resident in Liberia. The fight for Monrovia between the NPFL, INPFL and AFL thereafter became the context for widening Taylor’s agenda of ethnic violence. Elements of the NPFL gained footing in eastern Monrovia on August 8, and they immediately targeted the 1,500 Nigerians who had taken refuge in the Nigerian embassy, taking 300 of them prisoner.<sup>280</sup> When a convoy of West German diplomats and others sought to drive out of Monrovia in a bid to flee to Côte d’Ivoire, Taylor forbade approximately sixty Guineans from leaving with them and refused safe passage to West Africans in general.<sup>281</sup> Two Nigerian journalists were detained on charges of espionage and later killed.<sup>282</sup> Ghanaian men were taken hostage, while women and children were expelled from Liberia into Sierra Leone.<sup>283</sup>

ECOMOG forces were gathered and ready for deployment, but remained on standby, including Guinean troops who were massed along the Liberian and Ivorian borders.<sup>284</sup> Taylor dispatched a delegation, headed by Woewiyu, to Banjul for talks with ECOWAS foreign ministers. Taylor was reputed to have heard that the ECOMOG contingent had already set sail,

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<sup>279</sup> Barki Gbanabome, “The Guinea Connection,” *West Africa* 3919 (26 October – 1 November 1992), 1823.

<sup>280</sup> “Liberia Rebels Seize Nigerians From Embassy; ECOMOG Preparations,” *SWB*, ME0840/ii (11 August 1990).

<sup>281</sup> “Taylor Refuses West African Expatriates Leaving,” *FBIS-AFR-90-159* (16 August 1990).

<sup>282</sup> “Nigerians Reportedly Detained For ‘Spying,’” *FBIS-AFR-90-161* (20 August 1990).

<sup>283</sup> “Ghanaian Nationals Reportedly ‘Taken Hostage,’” *FBIS-AFR-90-161* (20 August 1990).

<sup>284</sup> “Taylor and ECOMOG Commander in Banjul; Evacuees,” *SWB* ME/0845/ii (17 August 1990).



despite the ongoing negotiations. At a press conference in Harbel on August 21, the enraged rebel leader railed against the “flagrant act of aggression” of the West African states. “I’m personally counting on directing the military operation,” he told his audience. “We’ll fight to the last man. We don’t consider this force to be a peace force. I’ve given orders to open fire on any strangers setting foot on our territory.”<sup>285</sup> Taylor warned the Nigerians and 60 Guineans, confined to the sanctuaries of their Monrovia embassies in the rebel-held quarter, “Nobody will leave Liberia until the conflict is over.”<sup>286</sup> The non-Liberians learned what night be in store for them: “Remember what the Americans did with the Japanese living in the United States in World War II,” he threatened. “They put them in concentration camps!”<sup>287</sup> Indeed, many were held in camps in NPFL territory under dreadful conditions. In 1991 the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) reported that it delivered provisions to 1,800 West Africans detained in this way by the NPFL, and estimated that many more non-Liberians could be found among the internally displaced. Of those being held in camps, the ICRC registered – among others – 995 Ghanaians, 781 Nigerians, and 28 Sierra Leoneans.<sup>288</sup>

Trapped by the intense factional fighting in the area over control of James Spriggs Payne Airfield, some of the embassy hostages were apprehensive about the prospect of ECOMOG’s military presence in the city. According to one Nigerian interviewed by AFP reporter Christian Spillmann, “ECOWAS should take our fate [sic] into account... Why come to Monrovia when you could evacuate us to Ivory Coast or through [the port of] Buchanan?”<sup>289</sup> Conditions for non-Liberians would get much, much worse, however.

ECOMOG forces arrived in Monrovia on 24 August 1990. Its presence was warmly greeted by Prince Johnson, but it had to fight to establish a toehold on Liberian soil in the face of

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<sup>285</sup> “Taylor Warns ECOWAS Against ‘Aggression’,” *FBIS-AFR-90-163* (22 August 1990).

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>287</sup> “Nigerians Discuss Situation at Monrovia Embassy,” *FBIS-AFR-90-165* (24 August 1990).

<sup>288</sup> “Refugees? Hostages?” *Africa Confidential* 32, no. 7 (5 April 1991), 8.

<sup>289</sup> “Nigerians Discuss Situation at Monrovia Embassy,” *FBIS-AFR-90-165* (24 August 1990).

NPFL resistance. Doe was dead by the second week of September, and with his public humiliation and murder evaporated the justification for Charles Taylor's "patriotic people's uprising" – or at least what remained of it after six months of vicious fighting between government forces and the NPFL. ECOMOG, rather than Doe, was now the main obstacle to total NPFL victory, defending the Monrovia enclave and frustrating Taylor's presidential ambitions. Following his victory in the 1997 election, he claimed that "If we had been allowed to win on the battlefield, we would have finished the war in six months in 1990."<sup>290</sup>

Accordingly, ECOMOG became the prime target of Taylor's propaganda machine. On September 2, within days of the ECOMOG landing, Taylor broadcast his declaration of war from the government's former Radio ELBC site in the eastern part of Monrovia.<sup>291</sup> He portrayed resistance to ECOMOG as an act of national self-defence against "hostile mercenary forces," describing them as "bandits, hooligans brought in by Samuel Doe to help him continue the killing of the Liberian people."<sup>292</sup> ECOMOG troops were the worst kind of rabble, bringing their weapons to bear on "babies, pregnant women, old disabled people trapped in their homes, [and] blind people." They were "looting homes and other properties in Monrovia... raping our women and minor children, and selling dangerous drugs, such as cocaine, LSD, and crack to our young children."<sup>293</sup> NPFL troops were engaging these "criminals" and "foreign terrorists" in battle, Taylor informed listeners, and would not forsake their duty to protect the population. He placed blame for the horrors of the war squarely on Doe's shoulders, claiming that "Already, thousands of our citizens, including babies, young children, the elderly, the disabled have been killed by Doe and his foreign mercenaries."<sup>294</sup> He granted an amnesty to "all those who have not yet

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<sup>290</sup> Baffour Ankomah, "Interview With Charles Taylor," *New African* (December 1997). <http://dSPACE.dial.pipex.com/icpubs/na/dec97/nasr1202.htm>, Accessed 6 March 2003.

<sup>291</sup> "NPFL's Charles Taylor Comments on Situation," *FBIS-AFR-90-171* (4 September 1990); "Taylor Restarts Radio; Plight of Refugees," *FBIS-AFR-90-171* (4 September 1990).

<sup>292</sup> "NPFL's Charles Taylor Comments on Situation," *FBIS-AFR-90-171* (4 September 1990).

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*

joined us,” and called for a mass mobilization of Liberians. “I call upon all our citizens,” he stated, “the aged as well as the young, to rise up in defense of our nation and join me in a solemn pledge to take all action to ensure that the sovereignty and the territorial integrity of Liberia are maintained.”<sup>295</sup> Taylor’s inflammatory and one-sided vision of the crisis called for an extreme solution; the absolutist frame of reference in his propaganda left little room for doubt as to what he intended. “Make no mistake about it,” he proclaimed, “There are only two sides to this war: Doe and his foreign mercenaries on the one side against the people of the Republic of Liberia under the command of the National Patriotic Reconstruction Assembly Government. We must stand up together now as Liberians and drive these thieves, murderers, and rapists from our shores.”<sup>296</sup>

The Voice of the NPFL let loose another stream of anti-ECOMOG vitriol on October 4. The foreign troops were still, blared the NPFL radio host, Lewis Lee, “nothing more than thieves, rapists, and murderers,” who “should not be surprised if our brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, mothers, and fathers take a retaliatory measure in getting them out.”<sup>297</sup> This time, however, NPFL radio took particular aim at the ethnic composition of ECOMOG’s national elements in a blatant attempt to subvert the intervention force’s political loyalties and sow discord among and between its ethnically diverse contingents. “The leaders of the invading ECOWAS countries, mainly Ghana, Nigeria, and Guinea,” claimed the NPFL commentator, “have sent troops that comprise of [sic] ethnic groups opposed to their regimes.”<sup>298</sup> Ghanaian President Jerry Rawlings feared his own General Arnold Quainoo, the ECOMOG commander, and had him demoted because he was not of Rawlings’ tribe, the Ewe. Nigeria’s Ibrahim Babangida had deployed only southern Nigerians to Liberia, thus easing pressures on his own government by getting rid of an internal enemy. Lansana Conte, President of Guinea, “attempted

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<sup>295</sup> Ibid.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid.

<sup>297</sup> “Radio Condemns ECOMOG Presence, Behavior,” *FBIS-AFR-90-194* (5 October 1990).

<sup>298</sup> Ibid.

to eliminate soldiers [of his country's former regime] by sending them on our soil to be killed."<sup>299</sup> Lee asked "Why die for a worthless cause? Why die because your leaders see you as a threat to their tyrannous regimes? ... Think about it – Why are you fighting your Liberian brothers?"<sup>300</sup> Taylor projected an image of himself as a reasonable leader who did "not believe in killing his neighboring brothers simply to satisfy the wicked whims of murderers like Conte, Babangida, and Rawlings."<sup>301</sup> The Voice of the NPFL may have been fairly close to the mark when it argued that the force's "evil intent" was to set "brother against brother," but it also skewered reality in one of the group's more egregious flights of fancy, suggesting that ECOMOG was responsible for liquidating Krahn forces at the very time when the Krahn, via the AFL and INPFL, were its only Liberian allies.

On October 28 NPFL radio broadcast another round of polemics targeting the U.S. for its alleged support of ECOMOG. The broadcast critiqued U.S. foreign policy regarding the intervention, claiming to have evidence showing that its putative neutrality was a façade and that America had betrayed its historic ties to Liberia. NPFL troops, the broadcast claimed, had intercepted radio communications between ECOMOG and the U.S. embassy in Monrovia and an American ship anchored offshore, demonstrating active, if discrete, co-operation between the two. "America, you have shown your true colors!" lamented the broadcast. "You have given us words while your deeds are different. The only thing we want to say is you cannot stop us. Please, do no harm us. Leave us alone America!"<sup>302</sup>

NPFL radio's early portrayal of the intervention force was a sham, of course, and horribly hypocritical. Leonard Brehun, a Ghanaian businessman who had lived in Liberia for over thirty years, observed that Taylor's attempted demonization of the intervention force "was a big joke, because the looting, the rapes and the genocide were all going on long before the

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<sup>299</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>302</sup> "Radio on U.S. 'Complicity'," *FBIS-AFR-90-210* (30 October 1990).

arrival of ECOMOG, and they were still going on in places where ECOMOG Forces had not even reached."<sup>303</sup> ECOMOG troops up that point had not yet established themselves as the corrupt, disruptive element that they would soon become. The NPFL, in contrast, had relied quite heavily on mercenaries from neighbouring countries in the initial stage of the war, and continued to depend on foreign support in the form of arms supplied by Libya,<sup>304</sup> cross-border access into Côte d'Ivoire through its porous border with NPFL-controlled Liberia,<sup>305</sup> and elite Burkinabe troops who were fighting alongside Taylor's rebels.<sup>306</sup> Taylor denied publicly what his troops admitted freely and to what was in any event, was clear for all to see: that such liaisons were at the heart of the Liberian civil war. Taylor was steadfastly against any regional intervention. An external force such as ECOMOG could, and did, interfere with his plans of conquest. In addition, it would be neither unrealistic nor unfair to consider that the NPFL might have feared the potential for external actors, responding to the distress calls of ethnic kin within and along Liberia's borders, to provide them with the kind of support needed to defeat the NPFL. Highlighting the transgressions of NPFL opponents would nonetheless serve the rebels well as ECOMOG's mission and the comportment of its troops degenerated.

The NPFL's October 4 call to brotherly ethnicity, of course, was not so much a true lament against unnecessary strife as it was a siren song played for the ultimate benefit of NPFL recruiters. Turning ECOMOG troops against their own governments and into NPFL allies could not have been a more distant and unlikely prospect at that point, but the content of the message may have satisfied dissident elements within ECOMOG contributor states who were opposed to the intervention. The shift in Quainoo's fortunes was possibly mischaracterized as well. Despite the fact that Nigeria was contributing the bulk of the force, its first commanding officer was a Ghanaian, Quainoo, who had expected to find a traditional peacekeeping situation and was

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<sup>303</sup> Brehun, *The War of Horror*, 106.

<sup>304</sup> "Report of NPFL Offensive Against Airport," *FBIS-AFR-90-159* (16 August 1990).

<sup>305</sup> "Rebel Charles Taylor Said in Ivory Coast," *FBIS-AFR-90-017* (25 January 1990);

<sup>306</sup> "Some 100' Burkinabe Troops Supporting Taylor," *FBIS-AFR-90-171* (4 September 1990).

instead confronted with armed opposition to ECOMOG's presence.<sup>307</sup> Within a few short weeks, Ghana and Nigeria agreed to alter ECOMOG's command structure to deal with the situation. Nigeria prematurely announced the appointment of one of its own, Major General Joshua Dogonyaro, to be field commander, while Quainoo remained the overall force commander.<sup>308</sup> For all intents and purposes, however, the more aggressive Dogonyaro was running the show, and Nigeria would remain at the helm of the ECOMOG deployment thereafter.

Without a doubt Taylor was playing on regional divisions within ECOWAS. If there was a colonial hangover at work in the Liberian civil war, however, it had as much to do with competition between francophone and anglophone West African states over a putative race for cultural dominance, as it did with the commercial interests of Great Powers such as France and the U.S.<sup>309</sup> The United States had propped up the Doe regime with hundreds of millions of dollars in development aid, and Doe had actively cultivated ties with Babangida and anglophone Nigeria. The NPFL's base of support was among the francophone ECOWAS countries, and it was they who would show the greatest concern with staving off anglophone encroachment in the region. Family ties were instrumental in shaping regional loyalties, as well. The victims claimed by the PRC's 1980 beachfront executions included Adolphus Tolbert, President Tolbert's nephew. Adolphus Tolbert was married to one Désirée Delafosse, god-daughter to Félix Houphouët-Boigny, the President of Côte d'Ivoire. Houphouët-Boigny had pleaded with Doe to spare the young Tolbert, but to no avail. Doe thereby incurred the enmity of Liberia's eastern neighbour.<sup>310</sup> Taylor, for his part, had been jailed by authorities in Ghana, Sierra Leone, and

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<sup>307</sup> Lindsay Barrett, "General Quainoo and Liberia's Crisis," *West Africa* no. 4014 (5-11 September 1994), 1545-1546.

<sup>308</sup> "ECOWAS Chairman Comments," *FBIS-AFR-90-186* (25 September 1990).

<sup>309</sup> For an interesting editorial commentary on the issue, see "Washington, Paris, and Liberia," *West Africa* 3924 (30 November – 6 December 1992), 2046-2047. For a more scholarly argument, see Adisa, "Nigeria in ECOMOG," 83-110.

<sup>310</sup> Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy*, 53-54.

Guinea during the 1980s<sup>311</sup> and was reportedly furious over Babangida's material support for Doe after the NPFL began its campaign to oust him. The animosity between Taylor and the leaders of anglophone West Africa was quite real, although he would eventually prove himself more than capable of overcoming such obstacles in his pursuit of power. In the first years of the civil war, at any rate, his guerrilla campaign was successful enough that he could afford to be intractable.<sup>312</sup>

### The ECOMOG Response: Monrovia Radio, the Fight for Gbarnga, and the Peace Process

The NPFL's media monopoly was a serious threat to ECOMOG. Since its arrival in August, the West African intervention had been faced with a steady barrage of hostile NPFL radio messages. According to C.Y. Iweze, ECOMOG Chief of Staff under Quainoo, "this propaganda was to disturb us for a long time because we had no means of countering [it]"<sup>313</sup>. The force's only psychological operations asset, some poorly designed leaflets intended for the population of Monrovia, were left behind in Sierra Leone and did not arrive in theatre for a number of months.<sup>314</sup> Quainoo's Nigerian Field Commander, Major General Joshua Dogonyaro, rightly saw the Taylor's proprietary broadcast resources and access to international media as a second front in the crisis.<sup>315</sup>

Dogonyaro – better known for his role in Nigeria's August 1985 coup d'état, during which his was the voice that proclaimed, on Radio Nigeria, Ibrahim Babangida's accession to

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<sup>311</sup> Kwesi Yankah and Lazarus d. Maayang, "Charles Taylor: Dark Days in Ghana," *Uhuru Magazine* 2, no. 5 (1990), 39-42 (Accra, Ghana).

<sup>312</sup> Defining shades of Fashoda in post-Cold War Africa, meanwhile, is an ambitious project far beyond the limited scope of this study.

<sup>313</sup> C.Y. Iweze, "Nigeria in Liberia: The Military Operations of Ecomog," chapter in *Nigeria in International Peace-Keeping*, 228.

<sup>314</sup> Iweze, "Nigeria in Liberia," 228.

<sup>315</sup> Nkem Agetua, *Operation Liberty: The Story of Major General Joshua Nimyel Dogonyaro* (Lagos, Nigeria: Hona Communications Limited, 1992), 59.

power – sought to redress this “information war” by re-establishing media capabilities in Monrovia under ECOMOG control.<sup>316</sup> Nigeria appointed a chief information officer for the mission,<sup>317</sup> and deployed a mobile broadcasting unit from its Federal Radio Corporation to Monrovia on October 23. Its mandate was to establish a new radio station operated by a multinational West Africa crew. It opened on November 13 and began broadcasting the following day under the government of Liberia’s defunct ELBC call sign. Radio Nigeria reported that Dogonyaro had initiated the project to “serve [Liberia’s] internal administration”; its correspondent stated that the move was a “significant step to counter the propaganda machinery of rebel leader Charles Taylor.”<sup>318</sup> Indeed, at the ELBC opening, Dogonyaro proclaimed “The organs of the mass media, especially radio, for its obvious advantage of immediacy, intimacy, and widespread reception has the responsibility of mobilising the people to identify and co-operate in the reconciliation and reconstruction efforts.”<sup>319</sup> Monrovia-based media were thus restored under ECOMOG protection, despite Taylor’s attempts to have the station destroyed that very month.

The NPFL’s radio facility in Gbarnga operated a number of frequencies intermittently until September 1994. Radio ELBC, Voice of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia, continued broadcasting until December 1993, when it was last heard.<sup>320</sup> On February 27, 1994, an English-language station identified itself as both “Radio Liberia, the Voice of Liberia” and “Radio ELRL, the radio service of the Liberia Communication Network.” BBC Worldwide Monitoring picked up the latter call sign operating on the same frequency previously used by Radio ELBC, Voice of the NPFL, beginning on March 2.<sup>321</sup> The following day, “station ELFM” announced

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<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*, 59, 72-77.

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>318</sup> “NPFL Agrees Cease-Fire; ECOWAS Summit Plan; Nigerian Radio For Monrovia,” *SWB*, ME/0904/ii (23 October 1990); “New Radio Station Commissioned,” *SWB*, ME/0924/ii (17 November 1990); “Liberia,” *SWB*, ME/0940/E1/1 (6 December 1990).

<sup>319</sup> Agetua, *Operation Liberty*, 119-120.

<sup>320</sup> “Liberia,” *SWB*, AL/2252/AS1 (16 March 1995).

<sup>321</sup> “Note on Liberian Radio,” *SWB*, AL/1942/A (March 10, 1994)



itself as “the FM service of the Liberia Communications Network with studios in central Liberia, broadcasting on 89.9 MHz.”<sup>322</sup>

It is difficult to determine why the NPFL broke from its original Radio ELBC “Voice of the NPFL” identity to the newer formats in February 1994. Radio ELFM and ELRL were still Taylor propaganda organs. ELBC may have simply run out of the necessary fuel, replacement parts, or technical expertise to operate the Gbarnga facility. The NPFL had suffered serious military setbacks in late 1992 and 1993, losing key facilities such as the port of Buchanan, the Robertsfield airport, and the Harbel Firestone plantation. “Taylorland” was reduced to half of the country’s territory and the NPFL leader’s external commercial support had evaporated.<sup>323</sup> ELRL and ELFM were online within a mere two months of ELBCs’ last monitored broadcast, however, suggesting alternate possibilities.

Throughout the conflict, lapses in Taylor’s radio broadcasts and media appearances were nothing unusual, so the gap may be insignificant. Or the NPFL may have been able to seize the necessary equipment from a rival faction.<sup>324</sup> The consolidation of Taylor’s resources under a more ambitious-sounding “Liberian Communications Network”, a title that closely approximated that of the Monrovia government’s former media bureau, certainly points to a possible shift in broadcast policy. In any event, the new call-signs did not last long. In 1994 the NPFL was riven with internal dissent and under siege from a coalition of forces formed and led by the NPFL-CRC. Thus weakened and vulnerable to attack, Taylor lost his Gbarnga headquarters in September, and with it his core broadcast capability. According to the reports of a Liberian print journalist, the fight for Gbarnga turned it into a ghost town, its streets littered with corpses,

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<sup>322</sup> “Note on Liberian Radio,” *SWB*, AL/1942/A (March 10, 1994); “After Akosombo,” *Africa Confidential* 35, no. 22 (4 November 1994), 2-4

<sup>323</sup> “The Battle for Gbarnga,” *Africa Confidential*, 34, no. 11 (28 May 1993), 1-2.

<sup>324</sup> The LPC’s George Boley, for example, was known to operate his own station “Radio Liberty”. See “Clandestine and Other Selected Broadcasts,” *SWB*, WBI/0032/WB (8 August 1997). This may in fact have been the Monrovia ELBC call sign, either appropriated by Boley or operating in collusion with him.

buildings reduced to rubble, stores looted, and the surviving inhabitants evacuated. Amidst the ruins, the radio transmitter remained standing.<sup>325</sup>

Between the resurrection of Monrovia-based radio and the fall of Gbarnga, NPFL propaganda showed many of the same preoccupations that had defined its radio output in the summer and fall of 1990.<sup>326</sup> Taylor tried to strip ECOMOG of its political legitimacy, calling public attention to its transgressions. ECOMOG was accused of breaking cease-fire agreements, maintaining ties with one or the other of the warring factions and fostering divisions among them, being party to the commercial exploitation of Liberia's natural resources, and even sowing its fare share of wild oats among Liberia's devastated population. Such charges undermined ECOMOG's already low credibility as an honest broker in the Liberian conflict.<sup>327</sup> Taylor, for his part, employed a more generalised policy of "constructive ambiguity" wherein he seized every opportunity to embarrass ECOMOG, explain away his own missteps, and generally leave himself enough wiggle room to back out of commitments as he saw fit.<sup>328</sup>

Taylor's attempts to project an image of omnipresent leadership became increasingly transparent during this period as well. Radio ELRL had gone silent on September 7.<sup>329</sup> A week later, Taylor and his military cabinet left Gbarnga for the Akosombo peace talks in Accra, Ghana. Kromah's group seized Taylor's headquarters immediately, then lost it the NPFL-CRC coalition.<sup>330</sup> On September 26, Taylor spoke to White:

*White:* Are you back in control of Gbarnga or not?

*Taylor:* We are not in total control of Gbarnga; we have re-established ourselves around Gbarnga; probably in the next couple of days we will be...

*White [interrupting]:* How far are you at this moment from your headquarters?

*Taylor:* Oh, not very far. We are talking about... [pauses]the fighting is... [pauses] Our forces are fighting yards apart, and we are just trying to put the rest of the pieces together.

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<sup>325</sup> "Gbarnga Destroyed," *West Africa* 4022 (31 October – 6 November 1994), 1877.

<sup>326</sup> Survey of BBC SWB and FBIS transcripts for 1991-1995.

<sup>327</sup> Alao, *The Burden of Collective Goodwill*, 69, 75-78.

<sup>328</sup> Adisa, "Nigeria In Ecomog," 106.

<sup>329</sup> "Liberia," *SWB*, AL/2252/AS1 (March 16, 1995).

<sup>330</sup> "After Akosombo," *Africa Confidential* 35, no. 22 (4 November 1994), 2-4.

*White:* So how far – half a mile, one mile, 10 miles, 15 miles – from your headquarters are you now?

*Taylor:* No, no, no, less than half a mile. Gbarnga is a divided city right now. We occupy some parts of Gbarnga, and other forces occupy some parts. But we must clear Gbarnga. We are not trying to gain any excess territory, but it is important that our headquarters be freed.<sup>331</sup>

This after Ivorian authorities had prevented Taylor from returning to the Gbarnga area following talks in Côte d'Ivoire and when the rebel leader was known to be spending most of his time at an NPFL military camp between Danane and Yekepa on the Ivorian side of the border, only venturing sporadically onto Liberian territory.<sup>332</sup>

## Assessing the Impact of NPFL Radio

Taylor's sly exploitation of foreign radio interviews soon became a focus critical attention overseas. A November 1994 editorial cartoon in *West Africa* depicted "Captain Charles Taylor" jetting through the cosmos aboard a sleek, needle-nosed spacecraft, the "Starship Superglue". Speaking over a phone from its cockpit, he claimed "Of course I'm talking to you from Gbarnga, Robin."<sup>333</sup> If this illustrates some measure of the cynicism that Taylor's methods engendered – particularly after the loss of the Gbarnga – for White, Taylor's tactics remained a subject of polite inquiry. Years after their first exchanges, in a face-to-face interview in Monrovia, the British journalist addressed the issue yet again:

*White:* Can I ask you a personal question?

*Taylor:* Sure.

*White:* When you were ringing up on the telephone to London and saying 'I'm in Gbarnga' or 'I'm here' or 'I've moved there', were you always where you said you were or were you lying?

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<sup>331</sup> "Taylor Interviewed on Current Situation in Gbarnga," *FBIS-AFR-94-188* (28 September 1994).

<sup>332</sup> "After Akosombo," *Africa Confidential* 35, no. 22 (4 November 1994), 2-4. Taylor was often alleged to be living outside the country. See, for example, "Is Taylor in Burkina Faso?" *West Africa* 3944 (26 April – 1 May 1993), 700.

<sup>333</sup> Editorial Cartoon, *West Africa* 4024 (14-20 November 1994), 1942. "Superglue" was a popular nickname for Taylor, and was a reference to the perception that whatever he got his hands on he kept.

*Taylor:* No, I was there. When I said to you ‘tomorrow I’ll be there’, I was there. And that’s why the Liberian people trust me. They know I told the truth and they know I tell the truth now.<sup>334</sup>

White acknowledges that at least during the opening salvos of the civil war, Taylor was constrained by legitimate operational security concerns from identifying his location too precisely. Still, the British journalist acknowledged that Taylor was well rehearsed before making contact: he “was very clever at picking his moments”, only calling “if something was happening.”<sup>335</sup>

NPFL propaganda had a significant impact on civilian Liberian and non-Liberian residents and on Taylor’s own fighters, and therein lies the key to illustrating his intentionality. The rebel leader’s direct control over his forces declined proportionately as the NPFL increased in numbers and strength in 1990, and suffered especially after the fall of Doe.<sup>336</sup> Repeated vilification of the NPFL’s enemies may have struck many as disingenuous, self-serving, and one-sided, and of course they would have been correct in thinking so. Taylor and his spokespeople often publicly denied that their military campaign was a tribal vendetta against the Krahn and the Mandingo, while their troops openly admitted it to be so. Taylor sometimes targeted the Mandingo when their ties to external forces were thought to be quite strong, but he also attempted to woo them when he was in desperate need of allies of any kind.

By making explicit threats and naming names, the Voice of the NPFL targeted specific national groups for violence, thereby establishing a measure of command responsibility for the outcomes of such exhortations. Taylor’s incitements to selective killing provoked a human stampede of non-Liberian West Africans keen to evacuate in 1990. The U.S. helicopter missions had managed to evacuate approximately 650 Lebanese, as well as a handful of Sierra Leoneans,

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<sup>334</sup> “Face to Face,” *Focus on Africa Magazine* (October-December 2000).

<sup>335</sup> Interview with Robin White, 3 February 2003.

<sup>336</sup> Outram, “‘It’s Terminal Either Way’,” 368.

Malaysians, Chinese, Columbians, Zairians, Ghanaians, Liberians, and Americans.<sup>337</sup> A Ghanaian ship, the *Tano River*, transported thousands of Ghanaians to safety in November.<sup>338</sup>

For those unable to escape, conditions were appallingly brutal. Henrique F. Topka, acting President of Cuttington University College in Bong County from March to May and August to December 1990, recalled how Taylor's threats against non-Liberians induced a great deal of anxiety among the foreign nationals on his staff.<sup>339</sup> In May, caught between government forces hunting for Gio and Mano residents of Bong County, and INPFL and NPFL fighters battling for territory around the campus, the school was closed and the majority of the students were evacuated. For Topka and his staff preservation of the facilities was paramount, entailing accommodation with whichever of the warring groups happened to be dominant at the time.<sup>340</sup> Eventually the Cuttington campus was within uncontested NPFL territory. Topka described the troubling familiarity that developed between university staff and the rebels:

Once the rebel leaders accepted us into their circle of trust and respect, there was a tendency for some of us administrators to be what George Orwell called "double thinkers". After closely associating with these commanders, trainers and fighters for more than five months, some of my colleagues tended to justify some of the brutal behaviors of these men. In some cases I could not understand whether their positions on some issues regarding actions taken by the rebels were the results of delusions, a consequence of their great understanding of the rebel cause, their lack of understanding, or merely an attempt to win favour in case the Charles Taylor forces succeeded.<sup>341</sup>

With the arrival of the ECOWAS intervention force and Taylor's threats against both ECOMOG troops and civilian nationals, it became clear to Topka that a more proactive approach was needed to insure survival. "At first we took the position of non-alliance," he wrote, "but it soon became clear that Cuttington had to take a position – one that was favourable to Taylor's."<sup>342</sup>

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<sup>337</sup> "800 Foreigners Evacuated From U.S. Embassy," *FBIS-AFR-90-161* (20 August 1990).

<sup>338</sup> Brehun, *War of Horror*, 100.

<sup>339</sup> Henrique F. Topka, "Cuttington University College During the Liberian Civil War: An Administrator's Perspective," *Liberian Studies Journal* 16, no. 1 (1991): 79-94.

<sup>340</sup> *Ibid.*, 83-87.

<sup>341</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>342</sup> *Ibid.*

Both the school and the nearby Phebe Hospital employed non-Liberians, and they feared for the safety of their foreign personnel. Cuttington staff drafted official letters of opposition to the intervention, intending them for submission to ECOWAS and to the UN. Topka notes that “On September 6, 1990 these letters were written and sent to Charles Taylor for onward transmission to the addresses since we had no means of posting them. Mr. Taylor was also served with a covering letter expressing our position on the issue.”<sup>343</sup> After the round-up of ECOMOG nationals began in other parts of the country, Cuttington staff wrote to Taylor on September 20 requesting “protection for our foreign staff.” They negotiated with two local rebel commanders, Oliver Council and Cooper Saye, and provided them with assurances regarding the behaviour of the staff members in question: “The commanders asked us to guarantee that these foreigners would not leave campus to travel in the countryside. They also asked us to promise that these individuals would not be involved in reconnaissance for ECOMOG.”<sup>344</sup> The decision to actively affiliate themselves with the Taylor faction was evidently successful, as “None of our foreign employees were ever arrested.”<sup>345</sup>

Outside NPFL territory, foreign nationals were less fortunate. Leonard Brehun described how “Apart from those at the concentration camp, Charles Taylor’s men were hunting for Ghanaians and Nigerians from house to house, wiping out their entire families.”<sup>346</sup> Naturalization and the intricacies of constitutional protections were of little concern to Taylor’s troops. Brehun, ordered to vacate his home, was accosted by two rebels who demanded to know his identity. He told them, elaborating on his long residency in Liberia, but they proceeded to abuse him regardless. Matrimonial connections offered little protection either: West Africans pleading for mercy based on marriage to a Liberian invariably doomed their spouses to the executioner’s bullet as well, although in one case, marriage to a supposed Ivorian gained a non-

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<sup>343</sup> Ibid., 88-89.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>345</sup> Ibid.

<sup>346</sup> Brehun, *War of Horror*, 50.

Liberian reprieve from almost certain death. Brehun described how at the moment of his own impending execution by the two NPFL fighters, his wife intervened. When Brehun's tormentors asked her if she was Ghanaian, she lied, apparently understanding the limited advantages of her own national status. She claimed instead to be Ivorian and began speaking French to the would-be executioners. Brehun was under the impression that they probably did not understand a word she was saying, but that they were still thoroughly impressed, as Ivorians "were their good, very good, friends and so [she] should not worry."<sup>347</sup> Brehun lived to record the tale.<sup>348</sup>

Rigid controls on the flow of information behind NPFL lines and the zealous enforcement of the anti-ECOMOG message suggest that Taylor's hate propaganda heavily influenced his own fighters. In his harrowing tale of personal survival, Brehun took note of how the two rebels who detained him began browbeating him with the details of ECOMOG and Ghanaian perfidy, acting it out in almost ritualistic fashion. "[T]hey started chanting," he wrote, "recounting how Ghana Government [sic] had sent troops to destroy Liberia, killing innocent, helpless and defenceless citizens, men, women, children both old and young alike and, above all, ravishing innocent and unsuspecting women... The ranting, the rhetoric went on for some time while, at the same time, the two men were circling around me."<sup>349</sup> According to a June 1992 report in *Africa Confidential*, "[w]hile Taylor has dropped formally the hard-line rhetoric about ECOMOG being Liberia's military enemy, many of his fighters still believe this to be the true position."<sup>350</sup> Liberian journalist Robert Sayon Morris, taken captive by the NPFL in late 1992, described the behaviour of Taylor's forces after they had captured a number of Monrovia suburbs in October. He heard "abusive and obscene language being used against ECOMOG, the Interim Government, the AFL... as well as against people of the Krahn and Mandingo ethnic

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<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.*, 55-58.

<sup>348</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>349</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>350</sup> "Another Bend in the Road," *Africa Confidential* 33, no. 11 (5 June 1992), 5.

groups.”<sup>351</sup> Surely, not the clearest evidence of ideological programming, but Morris went on to note that “The rebels did not like to hear people say positive things about ECOMOG.” Worse, “They had been brainwashed by Taylor against ECOMOG to the point where it could be seen as treason for civilians to talk about ‘peacemakers’ in Ghankayland.”<sup>352</sup> He described how in February 1993 one young man made the mistake of showing his enthusiasm for a potential ECOMOG rescue to a woman who happened to be an NPFL informant. He was detained and interrogated, “stripped naked, tied and beaten severely for spreading news about ECOMOG.” Once flogged, the hapless individual “was released with his mouth bleeding and his back looking like someone who had had leprosy for ten years.”<sup>353</sup>

The prevalence of grade-school age children among NPFL fighters also suggests a highly receptive audience for Taylor’s message. Rebels claimed that they did not need to proactively recruit children since many came willingly, seeking revenge or protection. The NPFL also claimed that it kept children close for their own safety, but they were known to be employed extensively as cannon fodder, scouts, spies, bodyguards, and most notoriously, they were organized into “Small Boys Units”. According to experts cited in a Human Rights Watch report on the use of child soldiers during the war, children were easy to recruit because they “are very obedient; it’s a strong cultural trait in Liberia,” and they “are easier to control and manipulate. If the commanding officer tells a child to do something, he does it. In this society, children are raised to follow instructions.”<sup>354</sup> According to one Liberian child care worker, “They are easily programmed to think of war and only war. So it’s easy for the factions to involve them. They are easy prey.”<sup>355</sup>

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<sup>351</sup> Robert Sayon Morris, “Horrors of War,” *West Africa* 3951 (14-20 June 1993), 989-992.

<sup>352</sup> Morris, “Horrors of War,” 991.

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>354</sup> Human Rights Watch/Africa, *Easy Prey: Child Soldiers in Liberia* (New York : Human Rights Watch, 1994), 23-24.

<sup>355</sup> *Ibid.*



Child soldiers were some of the most brutal and feared fighters in the NPFL's ranks. Aside from their normal combat duties and casual participation in looting, arson, and theft, child soldiers operating under the auspices of one or the other of the factions lived a nightmare existence separated from all forms of traditional parental authority and social restraint. They were forced to participate in public rapes and murders, subjected to sexual abuse and cruel mental and physical punishments, fed cocktails of cane juice and gunpowder, and supplied with alcohol, amphetamines, marijuana, and cocaine.<sup>356</sup> Rebel programming techniques included subjecting recruits to a steady diet of violent action movies such as "Rambo" and "Die Hard" – a peculiar form of video culture that inspired rebel fighters to take the names of their favourite Hollywood heroes.<sup>357</sup> It can thus be reasonably argued that the NPFL's aggressive program of radio propaganda in all likelihood contributed its fair share to shaping this surreal broth of mind-altering substances and soul-numbing quotidian experiences.

## Broadcasting Victory: Toward the 1997 Election

The NPFL retook Gbarnga by the early months of 1995, but it was militarily weakened, its territorial base had shrunk considerably, and Taylor was facing a panoply of armed opponents. All parties to the conflict were becoming visibly exhausted and peace talks beckoned. Bargaining from a position of weakness, Taylor changed tactics. With remarkable alacrity, he allied with ECOMOG and Nigeria, apologized for past misunderstandings, and revealed himself to be a consummate politician. Taylor's new course precipitated a corresponding shift in allegiances among the remaining factions, while externally, Babangida's successor Sani Abacha and Ghana's Jerry Rawlings saw Taylor as the key to a negotiated peace. A power sharing agreement was

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<sup>356</sup> Ibid.

<sup>357</sup> See Anthony Clayton, *Factions, Foreigners and Fantasies* (Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst: Conflict Studies Research Centre, 1996).

finally signed at Abuja in 1995, bringing Taylor, Boley, Kromah, and Johnson into the LNTG Council of State. Disputes over the distribution of government posts, disarmament, and control of natural resources heightened tensions. In late 1995 and early 1996 violent clashes erupted in Monrovia between the realigned factions.

One of the remarkable features of Liberian civil society during the civil war was that fragments of it actually survived the chaos and destruction. Liberia had traditionally enjoyed a vibrant independent press that had challenged the autocratic tendencies of previous regimes.<sup>358</sup> A restrictive Media Law enacted under Doe “remained in force and provided the Ministry of Information with wide discretion in regulating journalists,” but an independent press persisted within the confines of Monrovia.<sup>359</sup> With the warlords’ newfound access to the capital, however, independent media outlets were living on borrowed time. In late 1995, fully fifteen newspapers were in publication, and most were critical of Taylor and the NPFL. Following the violence between April and May 1996 only one independent newspaper survived - it had moved to a new location immediately prior to the outbreak but forgot to move take down its old trade sign. By the end of the year six independent newspapers were publishing intermittently, “but they were financially weak.” Other independents like the *Daily Observer* were still trying to reopen as of January 1997, but all the necessary printing equipment had been pilfered.<sup>360</sup> Broadcast facilities in the capital suffered the same fate. Television programming ceased with the April-May violence; of the six radio stations in operation prior to that period, only one, the NPFL station, survived. By the end of the year, only the government’s Radio ELBC, Taylor’s KISS-FM and the independent Radio Monrovia were functioning reliably.<sup>361</sup>

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<sup>358</sup> See, for example, Burrowes, *Modernization and the Decline of Press Freedom*; Rogers, “The Liberian Press”; and Rogers, “The Liberian Press Under Military Rule.”

<sup>359</sup> USDS, *1997 Report on Human Rights in Liberia*.

<sup>360</sup> U.S. Department of State, *Liberia Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1996* (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 1997). Hereafter USDS, *1996 Report on Human Rights in Liberia*. [http://www.state.gov/www/global/human\\_rights/1996\\_hrp\\_report/liberia.html](http://www.state.gov/www/global/human_rights/1996_hrp_report/liberia.html), last accessed 9 February 2003.

<sup>361</sup> USDS, *1996 Report on Human Rights in Liberia*.

Media facilities were not circumstantial victims of the fighting, but were deliberately targeted. One of the reasons for the fighting in Monrovia had been Taylor's publicly stated goal of arresting and prosecuting Roosevelt Johnson for war crimes. Johnson had been in hiding at the Barclay Training Centre, while the violence aimed at media facilities took part in another section of the city altogether.<sup>362</sup> NPFL troops were responsible and Taylor, not surprisingly, was the main beneficiary: his propaganda organs, which included a newspaper, *The Patriot*, as well as his radio outlets, were well guarded and survived the destruction.<sup>363</sup>

The NPFL destroyed the Catholic Radio ELCM station, seized the transmitter of another independent radio broadcaster, DC101 FM, and looted valuable resources from UNOMIL and other organizations. Taylor's group was flush with radio equipment, but as long as his media was restricted to the Monrovia area, he was vulnerable to the same sort of denial-of-resource tactics that his own forces had employed. In early July, shortwave listeners in Europe picked up test transmissions and between July 4-9, BBC Worldwide Monitoring heard the service identify itself as the Liberian Communications Network.<sup>364</sup> On July 24 at 2003 GMT, it reported monitoring an English language test broadcast of "Radio Liberia, the shortwave service of the Liberian Communications Network, coming to you from central Liberia."<sup>365</sup>

The rural service was based in Totota, Bong County.<sup>366</sup> The BBC was unable to determine its political affiliation, but on August 26 Isaac Musa, one of Taylor's closest aides, commended the NPFL leader publicly for setting up a multimillion-dollar shortwave station in the country, a service that would, according to Musa, contribute greatly to the peace process.<sup>367</sup> The following day, James Kassoyen, deputy manager of Radio Liberia International, told Liberian

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<sup>362</sup> "Out of Control," *Africa Confidential* 37, no. 10 (10 May 1996), 1-2.

<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>364</sup> "New Shortwave Radio Testing," *SWB*, EE/0028/WB (July 12, 1996).

<sup>365</sup> "Test Transmissions of New Shortwave Radio Monitored in July," *SWB*, AL/D2698/A (August 23, 1996).

<sup>366</sup> "Clandestine and Other Selected Broadcasts," *SWB*, WBI/0032/WB (8 August 1997).

<sup>367</sup> "Taylor Commended For Setting Up SW Radio Station," *SWB*, WBI/0035/WB (30 August 1996).

media that the service would begin full programming aimed at “the promotion of the peace initiative in Liberia.”<sup>368</sup>

At the same time, the NPFL continued to harass and intimidate all broadcasters not already under its direct control. A UN Department of Humanitarian Affairs situation report for August 1990 documented an incident in which *Action Contre la Faim* (ACF) – a French humanitarian aid group operating in Liberia – received an alarming letter from NPFL commanders. The notice, submitted on Taylor’s behalf, “directed all NGOs and companies with HF radios to register their equipment and to place NPFL radio operators on their payroll to operate each radio. This included all vehicle-mounted radios and ...NPFL operators would accompany all field missions in order to monitor their communications.”<sup>369</sup> Concerned UN officials raised the issue with Taylor, who denied responsibility for the affair. His response to the UN’s Humanitarian Coordinator in Abuja, according to the report, was to claim that it was “merely a case of local commanders acting on their own”. With an date of 19 July 1997 looming, Taylor was confronted with the possibility of exposure and potential damage to his credibility as a legitimate, law-abiding player. He ordered his commanders to stand down, and the issue of NPFL-monitoring of NGO and private broadcasts was dropped.<sup>370</sup>

Among the thirteen parties and their candidates running for the presidency, Taylor and his National Patriotic Party (NPP) were widely recognized as the odds-on favorites.<sup>371</sup> The former warlord was able to transform his faction into an effective political machine, mobilizing the necessary material resources and personal networks in a focused bid for the presidency. His media blitz was an important feature: according to Lyons, “Nearly every town in Liberia and every constituency in Monrovia had an NPP office, and the country was covered in Taylor signs,

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<sup>368</sup> “Radio Liberia Plans to Begin ‘Full Programming,’” *SWB*, WBI/0035/WB (30 August 1996).

<sup>369</sup> United Nations Department of Humanitarian Affairs, *Humanitarian Situation Report on Liberia*, no. 28 [DHA – 28: 21-Aug-96].

<sup>370</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>371</sup> For useful and brief overview of the election participants, see Harris, “From ‘Warlord’ to ‘Democratic’ President,” 437.

bumper stickers, and t-shirts.”<sup>372</sup> Taylor’s Kiss-FM and Radio Liberia International provided unparalleled exposure, raising awareness among Liberians through late night broadcasts that reached far beyond Monrovia.<sup>373</sup>

Taylor’s competitors complained about the radio campaign. They had earlier pleaded for a postponement of the election, claiming, not surprisingly, that they were unprepared and ill equipped for a political campaign. Both Taylor and ECOMOG’s commander John Inienger insisted that the election would be held according to schedule, Taylor threatening violence should it be delayed. The LPC’s George Boley called for the closure of KISS-FM, accurately labeling it a disruptive propaganda tool.<sup>374</sup> Roosevelt Johnson, run out of the country by Taylor and Kromah in 1996, commented on the subject in an interview with the weekly news magazine *West Africa* in May 1997: “How do I run my campaign? How can I canvass in Gbarnga and beyond, running my campaign and educating the people? Even the radio station we have cannot reach anywhere... The people must be educated. The people have only this information about the NPFL and her [sic] radio station[s], what Taylor tells the people.”<sup>375</sup> The week of the election, *West Africa* carried interviews with the candidates, but Taylor, according to the magazine, declined to participate because he “did not want to conduct his campaign in the international media.”<sup>376</sup> Taylor’s competitors proved incapable of mobilizing when and where it counted and to the degree necessary, and he won the election with seventy-five percent of the vote.

During the election campaign, Taylor portrayed himself in similar populist vestments to those worn by Doe and the PRC in the early 1980s. David Harris writes that although “the NPP was certainly well oiled and well financed,” the question of Taylor’s credibility was a potential stumbling block.<sup>377</sup> “Perceptions of Taylor as crook, a warlord, a profiteer and the one who was

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<sup>372</sup> Lyons, *Voting For Peace*, 58.

<sup>373</sup> Harris, “From ‘Warlord’ to ‘Democratic’ President,” 438.

<sup>374</sup> “LPC Leader Calls Kiss-FM Radio ‘Disruptive’,” *SWB*, W31/0045/WB (8 November 1996).

<sup>375</sup> Ben Asante, “The ‘Most Wanted Man’ (II),” *West Africa* 4148 (5-11 May 1997), 715-717.

<sup>376</sup> “The Candidates,” *West Africa* 4156 (14-20 July 1997).

<sup>377</sup> Harris, “From ‘Warlord’ to ‘Democratic’ President,” 446.

most desperate for the presidency,” Harris notes, “held much currency.”<sup>378</sup> Taylor’s threat of a return to war if the elections were delayed provided election organizers with an incentive to carry the process forward and likely gave ordinary Liberians pause in their choice of candidate. According to international election monitors fielded by UNOMIL, the Organization of African Unity, the European Union, the Carter Center, Friends of Liberia (FOL) and other groups, the elections were generally free and fair.<sup>379</sup> Some imbalances were noted, among them the various candidates’ lopsided access to media outlets. Efforts to equalize campaign resources were ineffectual, and other radio stations, such as Star Radio, established by the Swiss NGO *Fondation Hirondelle*, only came on the air two days prior to the election. FOL, the Carter Center, and UNOMIL all noted the problem. Several weeks before the election, former U.S. President Jimmy Carter glossed over the issue: “There are a number of newspapers published and FM radio stations broadcasting,” he observed, “representing the views and interests of a range of candidates.” More importantly, “Charles Taylor controls the only operating low frequency station, giving him almost exclusive coverage of more remote areas of the country. We helped to make arrangements for the expedited delivery of another low frequency transmitter from Italy, and expect a total of three to be operating by July 10”<sup>380</sup> – a mere nine days prior to the election, after several tentative dates had already been set and then delayed, and months into the process. Either the transmitters arrived too late or not at all, or perhaps they simply did not function, as Taylor’s shortwave service was the only one to reach hinterland audiences prior to the election. Samuel Kofi Woods, a leading human rights activist in Liberia, asserted that “Two weeks before the elections Taylor was the only candidate with time on radio and television. How could people make choices on the basis of one-sided information?”<sup>381</sup>

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<sup>378</sup> Ibid.

<sup>379</sup> Lyons, *Voting For Peace*, 56.

<sup>380</sup> Jimmy Carter, “Visit to Liberia and Nigeria,” The Carter Center (25 June 1997).

<http://www.cartercenter.org/viewdoc.asp?docID=21&submenu=news>, Accessed 9 February 2003.

<sup>381</sup> Didier Seroo, “Interview With Samuel Kofi Woods of Liberia,” *African Affairs* 99 (2000) , 107.

UNOMIL, likewise, acknowledged that equal access to air time was a key element in establishing the fairness of the elections.<sup>382</sup> Information operations were familiar territory for the UN, and the observer mission had embarked on a public affairs campaign to enhance the peace process and promote knowledge of medical and health issues, using air time borrowed from local stations in Monrovia.<sup>383</sup> UNOMIL's public education campaign also placed a great deal of emphasis on the message that Liberians could "trust the UN." According to some ECOMOG officers the approach seemed to imply that Liberians could not trust ECOMOG, thereby undermining its credibility and neutrality and reinforcing Taylor's anti-ECOMOG propaganda.<sup>384</sup> In any event UNOMIL was barely able to keep its own house in order, much less manage broadcast resources. According to Colonel Carlos Frachelle, a Uruguayan army officer who served with the mission, its lateral communications system "consisted of radio channels for UNOMIL, radio channels for UN agencies, radio channels for NGOs, and radio channels for ECOWAS" – all operating without the benefit of a secure frequency, and complicated by difficult terrain and weather, a hostile political climate, and a complex network of users.<sup>385</sup>

International observers did little to redress the issue of media access. Taylor was not required to relinquish or share any of his resources, the complaints of his competitors were largely ignored, and the only measure of any substance turned out to be a gross miscalculation. UNOMIL, the United Nations Development Program, and Search for Common Ground, a U.S.

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<sup>382</sup> United Nations Electoral Assistance Division, "Elections in Liberia: Role of UNOMIL in Supporting the Electoral Process," Background on the Elections in Liberia (New York : United Nations Department of Public Information, 17 July 1997).

[http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/dpko/co\\_mission/unomilBOE.htm](http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/dpko/co_mission/unomilBOE.htm), Accessed February 9, 2003.

<sup>383</sup> "Field Missions Make Waves," *United Nations Peace Missions: 1997 Year in Review* (New York : United Nations Office of Communications and Public Information, 1998).

<http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/yir97>, Accessed February 9, 2003.

<sup>384</sup> "Problematic Peacekeeping," *Africa Confidential* 35, no. 5 (4 March 1994), 2-3. The reality of ECOMOG "credibility" or "neutrality" was a farce, of course, so the argument held little water. Still, Inienger seemed to have at least brought an increased measure of discipline to the ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Group's general comportment

<sup>385</sup> United States Institute for Peace, Conference on "Managing Communications: Lessons From Intervention in Africa," National Defence University, Fort McNair, Washington, D.C., 20 June 1996. <http://www.usip.org/oc/sr/managingcomm.html>, Accessed 9 February 2003.

based NGO specializing in conflict management, requisitioned and distributed 5,500 radio wind-up sets around the country in order to ensure broader access to UNOMIL's radio shows.<sup>386</sup> Tuliameni Kalomoh, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General in Liberia, noted that voting Liberians were "reassured that the UN had confidence in the process."<sup>387</sup> According to the Secretary-General's Final Report on the mission, its "countrywide public information campaign, conducted through radio and the print media, did much to assist voter education."<sup>388</sup> Without more broadcasters it is difficult to see how this last initiative accomplished anything but provide Taylor with thousands more potential listeners. Post-election observer reports were generally more concerned with the effective implementation of the democratic process than with a just choice of candidate, and praise and congratulations for the newly elected President were correspondingly fulsome. In this sense, the obvious discrepancy in the equalization of campaign resources should come as no surprise.

## Conclusion

The NPFL's long-term denial-of-resource tactics made it possible for Charles Taylor to build, maintain, and ultimately profit from an unparalleled wealth of broadcast media facilities and equipment. In the initial phases of the fighting in 1990, the speed of the NPFL advance maximized its territorial gains, and by extension its access to a network of rural radio stations installed under the Doe regime. At the same time, lacking any proprietary broadcast capability, its chief spokespeople aggressively pressed their cases in the BBC and other foreign media, a ploy that raised their international profiles and resulted in internal consequences for the rebel group.

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<sup>386</sup> "Field Missions Make Waves."

<sup>387</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>388</sup> United Nations Security Council, *Final Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Observer Mission in Liberia*, UNDOC S/1997/712 (12 September 1997).  
<http://ods-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N97/234/17/IMG/N9723417.pdf?OpenElement>, Accessed 9 February 2003.



Liberian media was polarized between Charles Taylor's NPFL and the Monrovia enclave. The general brutality of the civil war and the violence of rebel attacks facilitated a scorched earth campaign, minimizing the potential for the NPFL's enemies to acquire similar media assets. For a brief period in the late summer and early fall of 1990, NPFL radio was the only domestic source of information available to Liberians. The NPFL embarked on a concerted propaganda campaign against ECOMOG and ECOMOG nationals, and Charles Taylor encouraged Liberians to seek extreme solutions to the problem of foreign intervention. This move prompted ECOMOG's Nigerian field commander, Major General Joshua Dogonyaro, to rebuild the Monrovia government's broadcasting capability. He thus restored the Monrovia-Gbarnga divide in order to counter a second front in the military crisis between ECOMOG and the NPFL.

NPFL radio was used in a number of different ways. Taylor and the NPFL used extremist language to demonize their opponents and issued directives for Liberians to destroy their enemies. Taylor was portrayed as a presidential, and to a lesser extent messianic, leader. In the early stages of the war when the NPFL had no proprietary broadcast resources to speak of, rebel spokesmen specifically relied on access to the BBC to promote a sense of omnipresent authority and enhance perceptions of NPFL success. They built on this approach once they had access to their own radio network. The Voice of the NPFL, broadcasting from both mobile and stationary transmitters throughout the country, targeted ECOMOG in a number of ways. First, Taylor portrayed the ECOWAS intervention as a foreign invasion and colonial occupation of sovereign Liberian territory. Second, Taylor called attention to the transgressions committed by his enemies, using the media to discredit them in the minds of the reading and listening public both in Liberia and abroad. Third, he exploited internal differences within ECOMOG, emphasizing competing national interests and ethnic divisions, at a time then those differences were particularly pronounced. Fourth, Nigeria's lead role in ECOMOG was portrayed as part of an "anglophone conspiracy", playing up the perceived split between anglophone and francophone states in ECOWAS.

Ethnic rivalries resulted in a wide array of human rights abuses being committed against Krahn and Mandingo on the one hand and Gio and Mano on the other. Broadcast evidence suggests a link between domestic ethnic groups and a wider, regional network of ethnic loyalties. Many non-Liberian West Africans living in the country, particularly Nigerians, Ghanaians, and Guineans, suffered greatly as they were taken hostage, placed in concentration camps, expelled, and hunted down by Taylor's NPFL, in much the same way that indigenous Liberian groups were victimized. The issue of Taylor's intentionality is complicated by the lack of clarity surrounding the extent to which Liberian warlords were actually able to control their forces. NPFL radio broadcasts in which Liberians were expressly directed to take action against various communities provide some measure of understanding in this respect. Similarly, rebel responses to such messages, recorded in the memoirs of ordinary residents who survived the violence, shed some light on the question. The harsh conditions under which rebels, child soldiers in particular, conducted their daily lives also suggests that the Voice of the NPFL may have been a highly effective means of directing rebel atrocities.

By 1994, Taylor had suffered severe military and territorial defeats, temporarily losing his headquarters in Gbarnga and with it his core broadcast capability. Working from a position of weakness he performed a bold *volte face*, embracing the enemies he had once vilified and insinuating himself into the corridors of central power in Monrovia. With unprecedented access to the capital, Taylor took the opportunity during renewed hostilities in April-May 1996 to destroy independent media outlets, pillage their equipment, and reestablish his own propaganda machinery, part of it in the relative safety of his recaptured rural headquarters. By the time of the 1997 elections, Taylor's enemies were unable to mobilize political constituencies or project themselves in anything resembling the manner in which Taylor had done. They were thus in no position to compete, and external attempts at equalizing uneven access to campaign resources failed to adequately address the situation.

## CONCLUSION:

### Policy Recommendations

The growing significance of “peace radio” and “hate radio” in recent years suggests that any consideration of the subject must turn to policy recommendations in order to be truly relevant. In the 1990s, political manipulation of ethnic fears through the mass media in Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovia, and Serbia reinforced the notion that “[m]edia credibility and public credulity in a society cannot be assessed in isolation from the role of power.”<sup>389</sup> In Rwanda, “Propagandists echoed and magnified the hatred and suspicion sown” by radical leaders responsible for the 1994 genocide, and “developed the same themes over and over, both before and during” the bloodshed.<sup>390</sup> Such extreme cases of violence have forced scholars to seek out and explain the lessons learned in order to provide policymakers and other observers with the tools to intervene. Genocide historian Frank Chalk, for example, has pointed out that “The mass media have three major functions in genocide: demonizing the intended victims; undermining support for the victims among members of the dominant group; and encouraging mass participation and acquiescence in the genocide.”<sup>391</sup> Once such behaviors have been identified, intervention in one form or another is but a decision away. Jamie F. Metzler, Deputy Staff Director and Senior Counselor of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in the U.S., for example, once proposed – with Rwanda in mind – a standing UN “jamming squad” to disrupt hate media broadcasts abroad.<sup>392</sup>

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<sup>389</sup> Thompson, *Forging War*, 296.

<sup>390</sup> Alison Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda* (Paris: International Federation of Human Rights; New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999), 65. See especially the chapter “Propaganda and Practice,” 65-95.

<sup>391</sup> Frank Chalk, “Radio Propaganda and Genocide,” Occasional Paper (Montreal, QC: Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies, November 1999).

<sup>392</sup> Jamie F. Metzler, “Information Intervention: When Switching Channels Isn’t Enough,” *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 6 (November/December 1997): 15-21; see also Metzler, “Rwandan Genocide and the International Law of Radio Jamming,” *American Journal of International Law* 91, no. 4 (October 1997): 628-651.

The record of responses to the abuse of the mass media in Liberia provides some useful lessons. Under Doe, despite long-term indicators that freedom of the press was a rare and diminishing quality of civic life and that the new regime was interested only in ensuring its own survival, foreign development efforts proceeded apace. Convinced of the virtues of economic and development theory regarding the mass media, they provided a corrupt regime with physical assets that helped to legitimize its authority and broadcast its propaganda. The qualification that an apolitical approach to a highly volatile and politicized situation would protect, and ultimately enhance, the long-term goals of the rural radio project proved to be misguided. Future projects of this sort must be predicated on sober consideration of the potential for abuse.

Foreign intervention proved equally inept in responding to Taylor's media onslaught. Radio stations were frequently military targets, and so there is little need to suggest the destruction of such resources in order to prevent broadcasts of hostile propaganda. What is more germane here is the nature of the intervention force itself. ECOMOG was highly vulnerable to NPFL radio on several fronts: its lack of professionalism, poor preparation, and low overall credibility made it all the more vulnerable to Taylor's invective. ECOMOG's response, to implement a media campaign of its own, helped somewhat to palliate the effects of rebel disinformation, although at the conceptual level it involved a highly aggressive approach that may have only added to the confusion of listeners. If radically polarized media voices encourage audiences to seek "truth" in some elusive, empirical middle-ground rooted in ethical, objective news reports or still more accessible "pavement radio" – even at substantial risk to personal safety – then such counter-measures may be useful in cultivating the critical senses of listening audiences, as well as providing accurate news. In terms of peacekeeping, further research into ECOMOG radio and the force's broader information strategy may suggest possible approaches for those seeking to counter anti-intervention propaganda.

Taylor's media attacks and ethnically targeted violence also point to some of the problems inherent in regional peacekeeping. ECOMOG, again, was vulnerable to the NPFL's

media message because of the ethnic composition of some of its national contingents. Worse, ordinary residents were in turn targeted for their putative links to these foreign elements. This was complicated by the active links forged between ethnic diasporas in Liberia's border regions and armed entities – official or otherwise – in surrounding countries. The threat of ethnic militarization was sufficient justification for Taylor to target specific ethnic communities. Given all the other problems with ECOWAS-ECOMOG involvement in Liberia, greater care must be taken in authorizing regional peacekeeping ventures, as opposed to international missions where cross-border ethnic alliances are not a factor.

Monitoring the campaign resources of election candidates in unstable environments, particularly following extended periods of conflict, is only useful if efforts at equalizing access to them are well planned and implemented. In Liberia, radio receivers were distributed to a populace largely in thrall to the media message of a single candidate *before* the means to broadcast alternative content were in place. This was both foolish and self-defeating. Granted, even if the campaign resources of political competitors had not been destroyed by Taylor's forces, or if alternative broadcasting had been in place for weeks or months prior to the elections, the NPFL leader had years to build up his lead. Still, election monitoring should be carefully thought out, since ad hoc measures like those discussed in this thesis may just as easily backfire.

Conflict radio under Taylor was a highly effective organ of the NPFL, and was deployed with sufficient momentum to keep its targets on the defensive throughout the civil war and during the 1997 elections. Indeed, as President, Taylor has continued to bully and badger independent media and target enemies using his own resources. In 2001, the Committee to Protect Journalists, a prominent human rights NGO, listed Taylor in its annual compendium of "Enemies of the Press." According to its report:

Since he became president of this war-plagued nation in 1997, Charles Taylor has been single-minded in clamping down on the independent press. He has jailed outspoken journalists on trumped-up charges, censored some media outfits at will, and forced others out of business through abusive tax audits. The popular Star Radio was effectively banned in March 2000. Since August, at least eight

journalists have been jailed in Liberia on baseless charges of espionage. In September, Taylor, known for his erratic and bloody tactics, pledged to become "ferocious" with local media that did not toe his line. Several papers immediately closed down and their staffs fled the country en masse.<sup>393</sup>

A proactive approach, then, rather than a reactive one, must be taken when dealing with conflict radio. What this means in practical terms will be a function of context, resources, and political will.

Finally, foreign journalists must consider the extent to which they wish to be associated with warlords like Taylor. The decision to host such individuals can have grave consequences, not the least of which includes becoming, however inadvertently or obliquely, a party to the conflict. Robin White and the BBC, for example, have been vilified by Taylor opponents for their willingness to host the warlord. Reading through transcripts of *Focus on Africa* interviews between White and Taylor, one does not come away with the impression that the latter was given free rein to spin reality to his heart's desire. White consistently fenced with the NPFL leader – on the air – when the warlord's facts did not jibe with other available news coverage of the events in question. The British journalist was credible and fair in his treatment of Taylor; that said, when this author asked him whether he ever got the impression that Taylor considered his BBC access to be in any way proprietary, he replied in the negative, observing somewhat fondly that the warlord "understood the game".<sup>394</sup> The decision to participate in such a "relationship", as opposed to interviewing news sources in a less premeditated fashion, may be an inherently personal and professional choice. Media policymakers, however, need to consider how preferential (or at least sustained) access to their programs may impact the dynamics of conflict by extending a measure of legitimacy or contributing to the disinformation efforts of warlords. Giving voice to the likes of Taylor, however neutrally or objectively this is achieved, may simply not be worth career-enhancing ratings.

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<sup>393</sup> Committee to Protect Journalists, *Enemies of the Press 2001* ([http://www.cpj.org/enemies/enemies\\_01.html](http://www.cpj.org/enemies/enemies_01.html), Accessed 18 March 2003).

<sup>394</sup> Interview with Robin White, 3 February 2003.

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## APPENDIX:

### Sources and Method

A few brief comments on sources and method are in order. BBC Worldwide Monitoring and the Foreign Broadcast Information Service provided perhaps the most valuable materials in this study. Although the two agencies divide their monitoring duties and share the results, the each has its own particular strengths. The BBC's Summary of World Broadcasts tend to be, appropriately, abbreviated summaries of the original material, while FBIS archives contain much more raw, unedited transcriptions of a range of media – radio broadcasts, public addresses and demonstrations, and domestic Liberian publications. Where there was duplication, I relied on the more complete FBIS transcript, especially when discussing specific speeches and addresses. There are, on the other hand, two distinct advantages to the BBC material. First, it is available, for the years 1980-1999, on Lexis-Nexis, and is thus much more easily searchable than FBIS documents. The difficulty with the latter lies in its CD-ROM index, which includes dates and titles of articles, but not their original provenance, a crucial elision for propaganda researchers. Second, and more importantly, SWB documents pinpoint the test broadcasts of new stations as they come on the air, thus permitting the sort of historical anchoring that I have attempted in this thesis.

Print media such as *West Africa* and *Africa Confidential* provided critical background, as did Africa Watch/Human Rights Watch and U.S. Department of State human rights reports. Reading through the seven years of *West Africa* relevant to the civil war, one would never know that ECOMOG troops ever did anything wrong in Liberia. Still, the newsweekly's reports were useful for the information gleaned from NPFL propaganda – and cited as such – as it tended to appear in close proximity to contradictory evidence, thereby highlighting the competing messages floating through the Liberian ether. Some of the reports filed by West Africa's stringers also included detailed accounts of events and conditions that were difficult to find elsewhere. One of its writers in particular, Lindsay Barrett, consistently took note of Taylor's instrumentalized



propaganda, but his pieces tended to be more analytical than empirical, and so for the most part they were not included in this thesis. Despite some duplication of articles between *West Africa* and *Africa Confidential*, the latter offered some fascinating details on the military campaigns of the civil war, as well as some very useful maps. U.S. Department of State country reports on human rights were exceptional sources of evidence on broader issues such as freedom of the press, although often frustratingly short on precision. Africa Watch/Human Rights Watch publications, with their usual academic rigor, included exceptional field research and oral testimony dealing with more specific events.

Published personal memoirs included some of the richest evidence of the impact of NPFL propaganda on Liberian and non-Liberian civilians and fighters. One can only hope that the recollections of Mark Huband, William Ardill, G. Henry Andrews, Leonard Brehun, and Henrique Topka inspire other survivors of the civil war to put pen to paper, especially for the years after 1990. The only caveat here is that perhaps, as the product of literate minds, such written works reflect a minority opinion among Liberia's largely illiterate majority. An extensive program of interviews, particularly with Liberia's former child soldiers, may provide a crucial evidentiary link between the "voice of authority" and elements of its listening audience that is more relevant within the framework of a society steeped in oral tradition.

In the interests of crafting what I hope is an illuminating narrative of events and themes, I concentrated primarily on a qualitative assessment of the evidence. In the first chapter of this thesis, the voice of authority tended to be riddled with the contradictory, sometimes nonsensical musings of an increasingly self-interested and obscure Doe. In light of this, assigning intent was particularly challenging. Further research should, perhaps, incorporate a measure of anthropological and psychological theory in order to make sense of Liberian propaganda between 1980-1989. Taylor used propaganda extensively and aggressively in his quest for power, and the evidence for the latter half of this thesis yields much clearer indicators. I am confident that the themes outlined here are accurate, and also hold true for the later years of the war. I suspect that a

more scientific study may reveal deeper truths about when and why Taylor manipulated information, necessitating a rethinking and rewriting of the war, ethnic relations, the peace process, and the regional and international context. As such, future research should include quantitative evaluations of NPFL broadcasts and Taylor's appearances in foreign media, in order to determine, for example, periods of peak activity.