



Liberia: America's Stepchild is the sixth offering of World Story, WGBH's ongoing series of specials on modern world history for PBS.



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Liberia: America's Stepchild

Nancee Oku Bright, Narrator: In April 1980, a tragedy unfolded in my country, the small West African nation of Liberia. People had come to celebrate a military coup against their government, and the cold-blooded murder of their president. They watched as 13 former Cabinet members were stripped, tied to poles, and executed.

It was hard to believe in that moment that Liberia was Africa's oldest republic, founded 133 years before on the promise of peace and freedom for the American Blacks who settled here during the time of slavery. But now, the peace had ended, and there was worse—much worse—to come.

Liberia's story began in 1820, when 86 Black passengers set sail on the *Elizabeth* from the United States for the west coast of Africa. It was 200 years after the first Africans were bound and shackled, transported against their wills to the New World. Now their descendants were heading back to Africa, back to the land of their ancestors.

The voyage began with a reading from Deuteronomy, chapter 11, the passage in which the Israelites were promised a land of milk and honey if they obeyed the Lord's commandments. They carried everything they owned. There was no turning back. The passengers had waved good-bye to their families and friends, many of whom they knew they would never see again.

The genesis of the voyage was a slave revolt on the island of Santo Domingo, today's Haiti, and the violence it unleashed only miles away from America's shores.

It was there, in 1791, that Toussaint L'Ouverture led an uprising of Black slaves. Hundreds of slave owners were killed and their plantations set ablaze. After years of oppression and exploitation, the slaves turned on the white plantation owners.

Tufuku Zuberi, Director, African Studies Center, University of Pennsylvania: Africans basically said: "Enough is enough. We must be free. The only way to make it happen is by armed rebellion against our oppressors, against our enslavers." They're not successful in Brazil, but they are successful in Haiti. The word of that spreads like wildfire amongst the enslaved Africans. They don't have a newspaper, but they hear freedom is on the way.

Narrator: Waves of white refugees from Haiti poured into U.S. ports, and the tales they told filled Southern whites with absolute terror.

On December 21, 1816, a remarkable gathering of men met in Washington, D.C. There were Quakers, who detested slavery, and slaveholders, who detested free Blacks. Together they formed the American Colonization Society. Its purpose: to send free Blacks to Africa to reduce the possibility of slave revolt in the U.S. and also to extend what they called the civilizing influence of Christianity to the "Black Continent."

Members of the organization included Bushrod Washington, nephew of George Washington; Francis Scott Key, who wrote "The Star-Spangled Banner"; and James Monroe, future president of the United States. Most free Blacks were deeply suspicious of the group's motives, yet some joined the enterprise despite their misgivings. Others felt that once in Africa, they could finally determine their own future.

Zuberi: Because here folks made the conscious choice of leaving the United States and returning to Africa under the notion, many saying: "I could never be free in the United States. How could these people who enslaved me for these many years accept my humanity? They will always question whether I am a human." This was a common sentiment amongst many of those who returned to Africa.

Narrator: Five weeks out of New York harbor, after a calm voyage, the *Elizabeth* came within sight of Africa's west coast, at Sierra Leone. Here, on a small island they waited for land. They couldn't have picked a worse time or place. It was the rainy season in a disease-ridden marshland with little fresh water—a death trap.

Zuberi: You read the letters they wrote back—this turns out to be a two-year wait—and everybody is getting sick. They're getting malaria because they're not immune to malaria. The mosquito bit them, they got sick, and they died. And they died in large numbers. It was a total catastrophe.

Narrator: With land assigned to them, the survivors sailed down the coast to settle what would become Liberia. Over the next 40 years, thousands of Blacks from America, the West Indies, and other parts of Africa joined them.

They took with them the American experience of slavery. They would come to dominate, exploit, and neglect the indigenous people they met on the coast. But they also married them and assimilated with them. A century and a half later, there remains a schism between the descendants of the newcomers and the indigenous people.

Most of the early Black settlers built their homes here, along the St. Paul River. They brought with them some of the place names they'd left behind: New Georgia, White Plains, Maryland in Africa, Mississippi of Africa, Virginia.

They transplanted the architecture of Southern plantations, where most American Blacks still lived as slaves. My great-grandfather, who came from North Carolina, lived in a house very much like this one.

Many of the first Black settlers were literate, and quite a few had owned businesses in the United States. Yet for almost a quarter of a century, white governors of the Colonization Society oversaw the new settlements. They even sent back reports on how the settlers dressed, kept their homes, and set their tables.

Fanny Simpson-Padmore, Descendant of Settler: The dining room had a cupboard there for glasses, had a sitting table here for cooler; here the dishes cupboard; here the icebox; here the table from one angle to another, with at least six chairs here and six chairs here. So you can see how it was designed up, but all is breaking down.

Narrator: The settlers had to share the land with indigenous tribes, whose customs were far from theirs. This is Dimeh, a traditional village in the interior, home to the Gola, my mother's people. The Gola, along with the Kissi, are some of the oldest inhabitants of the region. More than a dozen other tribes migrated later—the Kpelle, Vai, Mende, Dei, Kru, Gio, Mano, Krahn, Bella, Loma, Grebo, Bassa, Mandingo, and Gbandi—each distinct from the others. The settlers would enter the ethnic mix.

Long before the settlers arrived, though, the Zoes, our ceremonial spirits, celebrated death, welcomed the harvest, and initiated the young into adulthood. Today I dance with them, but as a child, I feared them and the great powers I believed they had.

The land was bountiful. The tribes traded with Europe since the 16th century, offering traditional hand-loomed cloth. Prized red pepper, called grains of paradise, led Europeans to name this the Grain Coast. And there were cowry shells and soap for sale, too. But no trade was as profitable as the slave trade. All the coastal tribes were involved, some more powerful than others, like the Bassa.

Nathaniel Gaye, Farmer: They were warring people. They had very strong, ancient armies, and so they could sweep up anybody they met on the way. That's how they occupied the entire seacoast. They had two major trades: salt and slavery.

Narrator: The countryside may look idyllic, but it has known terrible violence. Here indigenous tribes raided each other for slaves. They also fought the settlers, who were trying to put an end to slavery while attempting to expand and subdue the natives. A few tribes allied themselves with the newcomers, allowing them to dominate the coast with help from the U.S. Navy.

In the area they controlled, the Colonization Society and the settlers were determined to create a sort of Black America overseas.

Zuberi: Many began to look at Africa and to look at it with missionary eyes: "I can go and help civilize Africa." They're not going to take up speaking the African language, although they might ultimately. But that is not their mission. Their mission is to teach English. Their mission is to form schools. Their mission is to convert the heathens so that they can be nice and civilized and practice Christianity.

That implies a certain attitude towards the place and the people that you're colonizing, and they came with that attitude. And as a result, they rendered the indigenous inhabitants of that area as second-class entities.

Gaye: Okay, the settlers came; they came with a bright light. They came to educate the people, build new cities, as we can see today. But the fact was, the people wanted them to accept their culture, which they didn't agree to. This is what brought a conflict.

Joseph Guannu, Historian: Wherever the settlers settled, they married indigenous women, but the offspring, they come completely [with the] settler mentality, settler culture, settler values, because once you look back again into one of the reasons why this country was founded, this country was founded to serve as a beachhead for the dissemination of civilization and Christianity in Africa.

Narrator: In 1847, 26 years after the settlers arrived from America, they declared themselves an independent republic to be called Liberia. Its great seal, fashioned after the seals of American states, gave picture to the motto "The love of liberty brought us here."

The flag was based on the American flag, the government on the U.S. government, the constitution on the U.S. Constitution. And like the American Constitution, no mention was made of the indigenous people.

Joseph Jenkins Roberts, a freeborn Black from Virginia, was elected the first president. He would be received in the courts of Napoleon III and Queen Victoria, who gave him a gunship to combat slavery along the coast. He and his senators, all American-born, resolved to create a country based on the principles of justice and equal rights.

The capital city was named Monrovia in honor of America's president James Monroe, who had secured \$100,000 through Congress for colonization. Far-flung business ventures flourished, and a university was built.

In this nascent democracy, presidents would be elected, and in one case impeached. Yet the early leaders also established an oligarchy that exploited the locals. Eighty years after its establishment, in an Africa now divided among Europeans, Liberia—the only Black republic—came under intense scrutiny. The story involved young men from the Kru tribe.

Ibrahim K. Sundiata, Chair, History Department, Howard University: In the 1820s, the British landed on Fernando Po to establish an antislavery base. And they brought Kru laborers from Liberia—what became Liberia—brought them down, built a settlement, and then left. But Kru laborers continued to come.

Now, as Liberia grew in the 19th century, it tried to control Kru migration, it tried to tax it, charge head monies, so that eventually the state in the 1920s is charging foreign users of Kru labor. And then when labor no longer wanted to go, it began coercing labor.

David Levering Lewis, W.E.B. DuBois Biographer: The Liberians, it is true, were negotiating labor agreements with the Spanish, who controlled the island of Fernando Po, and were sending Liberians to work the plantations there. And the terms, it was a virtual kind of enslavement.

Sundiata: A person would sign up for a two-year contract, put their "X" in a book, be recruited by a headman, marched to the coast, and then put on a ship bound for Santa Isabelle on the island, where the island was producing cocoa. And often these people were not paid. Sometimes they were underpaid; sometimes they never returned. And so then you had forced labor, which was not slavery per se, but of course if the worker never returned, it seemed very much like slavery. And also the workers had very little choice in saying no.

The people who benefited from this traffic were a minority of Liberians—a group around President C.D.B. King, King's brothers, future president Tubman in Maryland County, a number of women who provided food and comfort, and certain indigenous headmen who provided labor.

Lewis: The League of Nations so found a strong report criticizing the Liberian government, a report written, drafted by Charles Spurgeon Johnson, an outstanding African American sociologist.

Narrator: The League demanded the practice cease, and the Liberian legislature compelled the president to resign. Liberia almost lost its sovereignty as Britain and France called for the country to be mandated.

Sundiata: In the 1920s, forced labor was de rigueur in parts of colonial Africa—still in the Belgian Congo, still in the French colonies, still in the Portuguese colonies. And so here you have little Liberia being picked out as an example of forced labor. Well, the major investor in Liberia was Firestone Rubber of Akron, Ohio, and there was some evidence that Firestone Rubber was using coerced labor.

Narrator: In the 1920s, as the U.S. automobile industry was expanding, Harvey Firestone, the tire magnate, was looking for a way to break the British monopoly on rubber. He found an opportunity in Liberia. Rubber was Liberia's white gold.

W.E.B. DuBois, an African American intellectual, had taken a special interest in Liberia's welfare. He had visited there in 1923 as a U.S. special envoy and regarded West Africa as his motherland. So when he heard that Firestone was interested in Liberian rubber, he took the initiative.

Lewis: He wrote a letter to Harvey Firestone, encouraging him to pursue this interest, but at the same time, rather typically, lecturing Mr. Firestone that this was a trust, it couldn't be business as usual, exploitation should not be in the cards.

Narrator: Firestone negotiated a 99-year lease for up to one million acres, at six cents an acre. Any gold, diamonds, or other minerals found on the land would belong to the company. The company promised to develop Liberian infrastructure.

Lewis: Liberia has a wonderful natural harbor which only needed developing, and the Firestone corporation said that it would do that. There were all sorts of infrastructural commitments that were supposed to eventuate from the agreement.

Narrator: Firestone did not build the promised port, but it did, however, provide the Liberian government with a loan.

Lewis: The terms of that loan were clearly designed to hostage the Liberian government for many, many years. That debt, to liquidate that debt, would virtually place the Liberian government at the mercy of the Firestone corporation.

Narrator: And so Firestone established the world's largest rubber plantation. The company earned huge profits and made some of the Liberian elite rich.

The new republic wasn't perfect, but it was the only one in Africa. It was a beacon for Africans, West Indians, and African Americans enchanted by a country governed by Blacks.

During World War II, large numbers of American Blacks went to Liberia as part of the still-segregated American Army. They built a hospital in anticipation of the U.S. forces landing in North Africa. Ossie Davis was among them.

Ossie Davis, Medical Officer, 26th Station Hospital: Liberia happened to me just at the point where I was leaving boyhood forever, and on the verge of manhood and identity. My first impressions were ones of welcome and semi-homecoming, because the minute I saw the people, you know, I could see my own uncle Joe, my own aunt Effie, and all the people, they looked so much like the people I had just left in the States.

Narrator: Gladys East came from Philadelphia in 1944 to work as a missionary.

Gladys East, Missionary: A lot of people who went were very happy to go, and I've read of some just kissing the ground because they were in a free country. It was the only free country aside from Ethiopia, because the other countries were colonies—Ghana, all of them.

Narrator: Gladys East was conscious of preparing the new generation of Liberian women for the future, among them my mother.

East: It was a boarding school, and you had to look after everything for the children—not only feed them, but look after their health, their recreation, as well as have a school.

Narrator: In 1943, at the height of World War II, FDR came to North Africa to visit the troops that had just landed there.

Newsreel Narrator: Homeward bound by Army air transport, the president's next stop is the tiny African republic of Liberia. Here, American Negro troops are helping guard the coastline of this friendly little nation.

Davis: It was a high moment, a high moment when Roosevelt came. He had that personal power to lift and make things broad. And there we were, you know, watching him and the Liberian contingent. We felt honored and exalted by his presence. I felt that America is reinvigorating a connection established between these two that goes all the way back to 1827 or further, and that this was picking up the pieces, and that, you know, we would knit this thing together, and Liberia would be the pipeline through which American largesse could be provided to the rest of the continent.

Narrator: After the war, Liberia became a refuge for those who fled colonial Africa. It attracted young revolutionaries like Nelson Mandela, who received support from the government to fund his anti-apartheid activities.

Amara Essy, Foreign Minister, Ivory Coast, 1990–1998 (translated): For our generation, Liberia was fantastic. It was the first independent African state and a neighbor to the Ivory Coast. We were still a colonized African country, and our dream was to be free someday. Our dream was to become like Liberia, and for me, the day I set foot in Monrovia, I was very happy, because finally I was on free African soil.

Narrator: By this time, Liberia had entered a new age with its 18th president. He was William Vacanarat Shadrach Tubman. A former jurist and teacher, he had led Liberia since 1944.

Tubman oversaw an unprecedented building boom. He turned Monrovia into a modern city. Africans called it "Little America." He granted women the right to vote. He instituted an open-door policy to increase foreign investment and a unification policy to integrate what had become two different Liberias—one Westernized and the other not.

William V.S. Tubman, President of Liberia, 1944–1971: When we took office, there were those that came from the United States who considered themselves a separate class. Now nobody's afraid of each other, people from the Grebos, the Krus, the Bassas, the Kpelles, the Mandingos, the Lomas, and all those people go freely and interchange.

Amos Sawyer, Professor, University of Liberia: That, I think, was a major psychological lift to enabling all Liberians in the political sense to see themselves as equal, operating in political jurisdictions that were of equal legal standing, equal political standing. I think that was something that created a basis to build upon.

Newsreel Narrator: The royal yacht *Britannia* arrives in Monrovia in the African republic of Liberia with Queen Elizabeth, who is winding up her tour of African nations accompanied by the Duke of Edinburgh, Prince Philip. She is greeted by President and Mrs. Tubman.

Narrator: Tubman was a consummate diplomat. He brought kings and queens to Liberia and traveled like an emperor abroad. It was hugely extravagant, but it placed Tubman and Liberia on the world stage.

The country's upper class reveled in Western ways. The rest of Africa, no matter how poor, seemed to love it, too. Not only could Africans be great politicians, but they could also do it with style and flair. But all this pomp and circumstance emphasized the gap between rich Monrovia and the poor hinterland. Tubman had a luxurious retreat with a farm and private zoo. His tastes combined the best of the West with the country diet of his youth.

Jimmy Barrolle, President Tubman's Butler: He liked whiskey, the one we call Black Label whiskey, made in England. His food he like is palm butter, palm butter and rice. Cigars—sometimes he smoked about four or five cigars a day.

Narrator: With his cigar and top hat, Tubman became a power broker in Africa; he was one of the founders of the Organization of African Unity. And at the same time, he was tightening the bonds with the U.S. Americans trained the Liberian army, and in the Kennedy years, the Peace Corps was everywhere. In a divided world, Tubman would come to master Cold War politics. He invited the U.S. to make Liberia a key staging post for America's fight against communism in Africa, and prospered accordingly.

Herman Cohen, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, 1989–1993: They were always willing to give us facilities in Liberia. For example, we had unlimited use of Robertsfield, Robertsport. We had two vast antenna stations there, one for diplomatic communications, one for Voice of America broadcasting. We had an Omega navigation station there run by the Coast Guard. So it was a perfect relationship for us.

Narrator: Tubman also used the Cold War as an excuse to increase his own power. He would gag the press and use ideology to quell opposition.

Tubman: Don't you know that communism is infiltrating everywhere? You wait and see a house burning before you provide the means to extinguish it? Prevention is better than cure. That's what we're trying to do: prevent.

Sawyer: We all grew up on this diet of, shall I say, Tubmanism, whatever that is—the grand old man who ran the country and who organized the system that was rather personal in nature. And those of us who had gone to school, to university during that period, had wished, perhaps, for a slightly more open society.

Narrator: But openness and democracy were not thriving in Liberia. Tubman celebrated the occasion when he changed the law to allow himself unlimited terms in office. His rule went from personal and paternal to authoritarian, because, he said, people liked it that way.

Reporter: Why doesn't the two-party system work in Liberia?

Tubman: The two-party system does work in Liberia when people are not satisfied, but when they're satisfied they simply don't bother. The last two elections I had no opposition; the first three elections I had opposition. But there is nothing to prohibit it. The law is there. And I like an opposition. I told them, I tell them all the time, I like an opposition party; I want an opposition party; we encourage it. But I'm not going to hand over the thing to you. You've got to fight for it.

Narrator: Tubman's close friend and ally, David Coleman, did challenge Tubman. What happened next is hotly disputed. Tubman supporters accused the popular Coleman of plotting to have Tubman killed with this gun, but Coleman's daughter believed that her father had been set up.

Paulita Coleman Padmore: It was their plot, Tubman's plot, to... in order to arrest all the independent party people or kill them as they planned.

Narrator: Coleman was pursued at the family farm.

Padmore: My mother saw all these soldiers jumping out and just surrounding. They just start getting out of their cars and surrounding the house with guns pointed towards the house. And my mother, she went and [lay] down on the grass outside. She said, "God, are you dumb?"

Narrator: David Coleman and his son John were shot dead. Few dared attend their funeral. With Coleman's death, all formal opposition ended.

All over Africa, the military were seizing power. A cautious Tubman turned his attention to his army. He was proud of it, but just in case, he kept it small so it couldn't pose a threat to him.

Tubman: One of the most important things in military, [for a] soldier, is obedience. His first duty is obedience, his second duty obedience, his third duty obedience, and everything is obedience.

Narrator: Tubman required obedience from everyone. He created the ironically named PROs, or Public Relations Officers, whose sole function was to keep tabs on citizens and foreigners alike.

Archbishop Michael Francis, Archdiocese of Monrovia: Tubman violated rights of the people with the PRO system. Everybody got something, and they kept their mouth closed, and they continued to report. So he had his hands on the pulse of this country.

Narrator: When Tubman died in 1971, the nation both wept and exhaled. His great but flawed presidency had come to an end. Tubman's 27-year reign had gone from open to closed, from democratic to dictatorial. Called the father of African democracy, he was an autocrat at home. He had strangled all political freedom and expression, and this left a boiling pot of national frustration for his successor to inherit.

The next president, William R. Tolbert, came from the same ruling clique. He was vice president for 19 years under Tubman, but now he was determined to change Liberia.

No top hat for him. With casual safari suit, Tolbert welcomed Pat Nixon to Liberia. She came to represent the United States at his inauguration on January 3, 1972. Tolbert proclaimed he wanted a government that was genuinely African. He wanted Liberia to be a force for African unity and civil rights.

William R. Tolbert, President of Liberia, 1971-1980: We must ally ourselves against the common enemy of poverty and disease as we march with the eternal cadenza of peace, of human upliftment, and of dignity at home and abroad....

Guannu: He promoted Liberian culture; therefore he promoted African culture. So under him there was a movement to get away from this illusion that Liberians were Americans planted here in Africa.

Narrator: In his quest for a more open society, Tolbert loosened the reins of government control over people's lives, allowing a free press, debate, and dissent.

Francis: He dismantled the PRO system, certain kinds of apparatus, security apparatus, and the press became free—I mean, free. People could say what they wanted to say. He allowed political organizations, the university students and so forth. So for the first six, seven years, there was a lot of freedom.

Narrator: Tolbert began to tear down slums, replacing them with the first low-cost housing estates. He built roads and negotiated better deals with foreign companies, including Firestone. The American ambassador thought he was heavy-handed. He further alienated his American allies by welcoming the first Soviet, Chinese, and Cuban ambassadors to Liberia, realigning Liberia's position in the Cold War equation. At the United Nations, he spoke against U.S. positions.

Tolbert: We must equally insist on full recognition and respect for the national rights of the Palestinian people by the state of Israel, especially their right to self-determination and a state of their own. Israel must withdraw from all occupied Arab territories.

Narrator: But his problems were at home. The economy stagnated, and the old guard of his party was resisting his political reforms. A fresh generation of student activists appeared on the scene and took full advantage of their newfound freedom to speak out.

Gabriel Bacchus Matthews, Dissident: Our philosophy will be what it's always been: to work towards the achievement of an equal and just society in Liberia; to work for a society based upon freedom, justice, and total equality.

I saw this as a society that had remained impervious to change. You had a society led by a political party which had been entrenched in power for more than 100 years. This country was like a teakettle that was boiling. And if they're all practical people and they want to keep this society going, they will have to open it up. They will have to lift up the lid and allow the steam out.

Narrator: Increasingly, Tolbert became a tragic figure. His efforts to modernize the economy came up against the oil crisis of the 1970s. His bringing more indigenous people into government was resisted by party hard-liners and ignored by his opponents. The general perception continued to be that the ruling elite consisted only of people of American settler ancestry.

Essy (translated): There was this problem, and the president of the Ivory Coast, I remember, advised President Tolbert to pay attention to the natives. One of the problems we saw at that time and for which President [Felix] Houphouet-Boigny had tried, let's say, to motivate President Tolbert was to integrate the natives in the economic development, but most of all in the political process.

Narrator: Tolbert was also being accused of personal corruption and nepotism. When he received the keys to a new private jet, he joked that he needed it because he wanted progress fast. A daughter was deputy minister of education, a son was ambassador at large, and a younger brother was minister of finance. Altogether, 23 of his relatives were in senior government positions.

The economy was in disarray. Unemployment was rising. When Tolbert proposed raising the price of imported rice, Liberia's staple food, expecting that local production would consequently increase, this was the last straw. Political dissidents took advantage of his proposal.

Matthews: The president was one of the largest growers of rice in the country, and the price increase would have made him obviously a beneficiary. His brother was the largest importer of rice in the country. There were people who were close to the president who also had licenses. At the time you had to have a license to import rice, and licenses were given to specific people. Well, we posed a challenge to this increase, the salaries, as they were. And we said that if the government would not rescind this decision, we would put people on the streets.

Narrator: On April 14, 1979, thousands of Liberians took to the streets. The demonstration turned into a riot. The police shot into the crowds, killing civilians. The organizers were arrested.

Francis: It was a radical turning point. For nearly 24 hours, this government was paralyzed, the Tolbert government. He never expected this. We never expected it. It took everybody by shock that people would get on the street [and] destroy things. He was not really a politician; he was a minister and a good businessman, and he didn't have the control over the country, as Tubman had.

Narrator: The lower ranks of the army sympathized with the demonstrators. They quickly realized that Tolbert's hold on the government was tenuous.

Sawyer: Many soldiers who were in the military at the time have talked about the president's appearance to them. He'd address them on the morning of the rally. When they came from Todi and all of that, the president came down in the morning in his morning robe and his pajamas to talk to these soldiers before they were deployed, and his was an approach of an appeal. And it dawned on many young fellows that this question of the military being the bedrock of the authority, of the state, and that they had some powers. The rank and file of the military began to feel its own power.

Narrator: Not confident in his own soldiers, Tolbert requested support from the president of Guinea, who sent in troops to calm the situation, infuriating the Liberian army. Now under intense pressure, Tolbert was forced to release the organizers of the demonstration.

Tolbert: The organizers of that demonstration were granted amnesty and are now free, enjoying all the political and human rights of Liberian citizens, including the right to form and manage their own political organization and to use their headquarters for that purpose, with the express provision by government that they operate within the limits of the laws of Liberia.

Narrator: But his authority was undermined. He appeared ineffectual and weak. By now, he had lost support in the army, he had lost the support of his party, and he had lost support in the streets. In the capital, there was talk of rebellion.

Sawyer: One could sense that unless we could break some impasse, there were violent disruptions on the horizon.

Narrator: In the early morning of April 12, 1980, a group of enlisted men entered the executive mansion and fought their way into the presidential quarters. President Tolbert was shot and disemboweled.

The man who led the assault was Samuel Kanyon Doe, a 28-year-old master sergeant with an eighth-grade education, leader of Liberia's first military coup.

Samuel K. Doe, Military Leader of Liberia, 1980–1985; President of Liberia, 1985–1990: We know that what we have done has never happened before in the history of Liberia, but it was much necessary because of the following reasons: There has been uncontrollable corruption.

Narrator: The military, which earned \$80 a month under Tolbert, were promised an immediate reward.

Doe: We have directed that all enlisted men and men of the armed forces of Liberia and law enforcement agencies are to be paid \$250 a month.

Narrator: At first, much of the country seemed jubilant. A "man of the soil," it was said, would finally rule Liberia. Some even went so far as to compare Doe to an earlier savior.

Minister: Jesus Christ was born unto a poor man and in the stable among animals; David, the Israelite, destroyer of Goliath, a poor shepherd boy; head of state Samuel Kanyon Doe, a master sergeant, member of the People's Redemption Council, sergeant, and enlisted man. The analogy is strong in history.

Narrator: People came from all parts of the country to celebrate. Like the majority of the people, Doe was from one of the indigenous tribes. His supporters thought of the coup as getting rid of Americo-Liberian domination.

George Boley, Doe's Minister of State for Presidential Affairs: The so-called Americo-Liberians have come into a society that they didn't understand, and quite frankly refused to understand, over the years, either out of fear or out of ignorance or just out of the sheer incapacity or inability to comprehend the dynamics of this society.

Narrator: The coup leaders' People's Redemption Council prepared a list of enemies of the state. It included members of the Tolbert family and current and former government officials. Tolbert's Cabinet was stripped, paraded in public, and humiliated. All were damned as Americo-Liberian.

Francis: The Cabinet Tolbert had, 80 percent—even those called Americo-Liberians—all their parents were not Americo-Liberians, you see. So... But it was something that had been ingrained into them, etc., and so they came up with that: "And it is our time now."

Narrator: The army moved swiftly to arrest and prosecute so-called enemies of the people. At the Ministry of Justice, a series of trials took place. Indigenous Cabinet ministers, such as Jackson Doe, tried desperately to disassociate themselves from the fallen regime.

Jackson Doe, Cabinet Member: Officials of my background—I would like to put it that way—sat down and watched many things happen. This is why I started out by congratulating the head of state and members of the People's Redemption Council for this change.

Inquisitor: Please tell us how many houses, lots, and/or farms do you own?

Narrator: Jackson Doe's life was spared, but others were not so fortunate. The trials were organized by the new justice minister, Chea Cheapoo. His predecessor was his foster father, who was about to be executed. The foster father was Americo-Liberian, while Cheapoo was indigenous. So here, in effect, is Cheapoo washing his hands of his father's death.

Chea Cheapoo, Justice Minister: The tribunal deemed it necessary in their judgment to have found the gravity of their crimes to be equal to the death penalty, so they imposed that penalty. I don't know in what manner I had anything to do with it.

Sawyer: On the day of the executions of the 13 people, I was in my classroom in the university, and some reporter came and told me. He said, "You know, they're going to have some executions, but they've delayed them because there are not enough poles." And that was an ominous sign of what was to come. I sort of packed my bags and went home, took a bath, and went to bed feeling sick, very, very sick.

Narrator: My father, whose family had emigrated to Liberia from Nigeria and Sierra Leone, had once been a leader of Tolbert's party. When the new Doe government demanded that former officials turn themselves in, he complied and found himself sharing a cell with some men who had been sentenced to death.

Robert I. E. Bright, Former Leader, True Whig Party: The sun was up. Everything was bright and clear. But all of a sudden, everything became dark. It stormed. We were in the cell, [so] we didn't know why. We couldn't account for it. But everything went dark, and it really stormed. The day was dark, very, very dark. It was a dismal day.

Narrator: In this atmosphere of random justice, my father was released. But 13 others were awaiting execution. Of those, only four had actually been sentenced to death, and two had been recommended for pardon. The bodies were dumped in a mass grave. In the days following the revolution, people chanted, "Indigenous women give birth to heroes; Americo-Liberian women give birth to thieves."

At his first press conference, sitting with his mother, Doe looked less like a victorious leader than a man who had triggered events he hardly controlled. He didn't know who many of the executed ministers were, nor did he understand the complexities of the task ahead.

Reporter: Can you tell us what plans you have for the country immediately?

Doe: I can't tell you that now.

Reporter: What are the main problems facing the country, do you think?

Doe: No problem.

Reporter: If you were to identify one particular area of the country, economy or justice, which would you become more interested in?

Doe: Well, the minister of economic can elaborate on that one.

Reporter: Yes.

Reporter: Sir, would you be changing your policy or reviewing with the United States?

Doe: We will still continue the old policy.

Narrator: Praise for the coup came from Libya, Ethiopia, Cuba, and other Eastern bloc countries. U.S. condemnation of the killings was swift, yet six weeks after the coup, a previously scheduled American delegation arrived to offer support.

Man: ...have the opportunity to come and visit with you and the other officials of your government to discuss the needs of your peoples and to also discuss future relations between our two nations.

Cohen: Samuel Doe represented a rebellion of the country people, the original inhabitants. The population of Liberia, the majority being country people, sort of liked that. It showed that the Americo-Liberians were no longer dominant, and it was a popular change. So the United States had no reason to change that or try to go against that. We accepted Samuel Doe like the people of Liberia did.

Guannu, Doe's First Ambassador to the United States: They had no idea of the workings of the international political system. They had no concrete nor rational understanding of the social dynamics on the ground, so within a year or two, that government, the People's Redemption Council, became more corrupt than all the governments that preceded it.

Narrator: But for the Americans, particularly Ronald Reagan, the new Cold War warrior in the White House, Doe was a useful ally.

Ronald Reagan, President of the United States, 1981-1989: It's been a pleasure to welcome Liberian head of state Samuel K. Doe on his first visit to the United States. It's especially fitting that we should be meeting this year as the United States and Liberia celebrate 120 years of diplomatic relations. Our discussions gave us an opportunity to reaffirm the special friendship and mutual respect between our two countries. Clearly a firm bond unites Liberians and Americans, who have come together professionally and socially throughout the years.

Narrator: The U.S. strategy for Liberia was spelled out in a then-classified White House document: Liberia was important to protect valuable U.S. facilities and military access rights; to protect U.S. private investment; to prevent the spread of Libyan, Soviet, and other hostile influences; and, because of the unusual historic relationship, to avoid a major defeat or embarrassment for the United States through Liberia's political or economic disintegration.

This was Doe's proudest moment. He did everything Washington wanted, including criticizing other African states for not being sufficiently anticommunist. He also challenged some African leaders to fistfights for insulting Ronald Reagan.

Blaine Harden, Correspondent, *The Washington Post*: Doe, also at the time, was said to have learned how to speak English better by watching the Great Communicator communicate on videotape. And he had a satellite dish set up so that he could watch all of Reagan's speeches.

Narrator: In the first four years of Doe's regime, he received almost \$500 million from the United States—more than any previous Liberian administration.

Harden: Doe managed somehow to convince that there was an East-West rivalry there and that American money would be helpful in keeping out the Soviet threat, which seems ridiculous—and was—but Doe did expel, I think, all of the Soviet diplomats at the time. It was crude, but it seemed to be helpful.

Cohen: We had the dilemma, do we support this gentleman, or do we not? And initially the Cold War tilted us in favor of supporting, because we got reciprocal treatment. We were supporting certain governments that were clearly not going to use their assistance for development but use it for other reasons, and we supported people like Mobutu [Sese Seko] in Zaire and a few others.

Narrator: In spite of American aid, life in Liberia grew worse. Streets were filthy; development stopped; poverty increased; health care and education collapsed. Doe considered the national treasury his own.

Harden: Doe and his people had about a third of the \$220 million economy. They had... Doe's people, they could basically take a third of it for whatever purpose they wanted—for buying cars, for buying clothes, whatever.

Narrator: Doe's corruption was becoming an embarrassment to the U.S. The White House pressured Doe to return Liberia to civilian rule. Finally, in 1985, elections were held, with the largest turnout in Liberian history. Doe manipulated the election and declared himself the winner.

Harden: It was very clear that it was stolen. I mean, I went to a barracks where people were voting often, marking ballots and stuffing them in boxes, and I went out to a polling place 20, 30 miles out of Monrovia where people came in to vote, and soldiers were there to intimidate them as they were marking their ballots, and so they would end up voting for Doe.

Doe: I, Samuel Kanyon Doe, solemnly swear that I will support, uphold, protect, and defend the constitution and bylaws of the Republic of Liberia.

Cohen: He should have lost, but he rigged the election. But at that time all West African elections were rigged. It was a very normal thing to do, for the government to win the election even though they had less than the majority of the vote. So it did not trouble us at all.

Narrator: Doe's inauguration was not celebrated in all quarters.

Harden: I remember describing it in a radio interview at the time as similar, at least from what I could pick up, to the sadness that people felt in the United States when John Kennedy was shot.

Doe Opponent: We thought Doe was going to lead us, but Doe betrayed us. He's a criminal. We're going to get Doe. We're going to bring Doe before justice.

Narrator: Thomas Quiwonkpa from the Gio tribe of Nimba County in the northeast was one of the 17-man junta that had brought Doe to power. Quiwonkpa fled the country after he and Doe fell out. Now, one month after the elections, he entered Monrovia with rebel soldiers to challenge Doe. He declared he had the blessings of both the U.S. and the Liberian people. But, in fact, U.S. Embassy officials had tipped Doe off about the possibility of this coup.

Quiwonkpa's troops quickly rounded up Doe's officials. They took over the national radio and television station, and for six hours Liberians believed that Doe had been overthrown. But then forces loyal to Doe arrived on the scene to smother the revolt. The victorious Quiwonkpa soon turned victim.

Boley: We got here just in time. This is the prize. We've got it. It's a miracle.

Narrator: George Boley, Doe's closest advisor, celebrated victory.

Boley: I think it's the best thing that's ever happened.

Narrator: Quiwonkpa's body was taken to the executive mansion to be viewed by Doe.

Doe: Fellow Liberians, I take this opportunity to inform the nation that the coup has failed. I am still the commander in chief of the armed forces of Liberia and head of state.

Narrator: It was a victory. But Doe had other troubles: He was losing the support of his main ally, the United States.

Cohen: We were starting to get quite tough with him. And the fact that the Cold War was ending I think was no coincidence. We had less need for his cooperation. I remember I went to see him with Secretary of State [George] Shultz in January of 1987, and he was very upset, Doe saying: "I'm your best friend. I kicked out the Libyan Embassy that was here, and I support you all over in the UN, even in the nonaligned movement. I'm always one of three or four African countries that's on your side, and all the rest are against you. And what are you doing? You're cutting off our military assistance, and you're lowering our economic assistance. It's all one-sided now. I'm your friend, but you're not my friend anymore." So he understood that things were changing.

Narrator: Shultz's warning was more diplomatic.

George Shultz, U.S. Secretary of State, 1982-1989: Fiscal austerity in the short term is essential to long-term prosperity. We're getting a little fiscal austerity at home, and it hurts. The situation calls for statesmanlike decisions. The result is not usually immediate, but there is no more important task.

Cohen: He actually became hysterical with Secretary Shultz at the time, even though later everything was friendly; there was a nice dinner.

Harden: And Shultz said, "Well, we'll send you some help," so they sent over 17 bean counters, basically, from the State Department. And they were just despairing. When I saw them, they were basically packing up their stuff and going home and saying, "This is a hopeless endeavor." And they left.

Narrator: With or without U.S. support, Doe was bent on staying in power. Since Quiwonkpa's insurrection, Doe had brutally suppressed any dissent in Nimba County. Time and again, he would send soldiers of his tribe, the Krahn, on a campaign of terror against Manos and Gios—a tribal war.

Doe: And those who are considered to be innocent in Nimba at this particular time, I'm appealing to them to leave Nimba immediately, or else your relatives, your children will never be seen again.

Elizabeth Blunt, BBC Correspondent: When I first came to Liberia in 1986, when I first started this job, one of the things that impressed me was that it was one of the least tribal countries in the region—a lot of intermarriage, and people were not at all hung up about their tribe. They could be quite proud of it. They could say, “This cook shop has real Vai cooking here,” whatever. And I saw that gradually evaporate, and I think that was the most damaging, the most corrosive effect of President Doe’s government.

For people up in Nimba County, nothing has ever been worse than what happened to them. The army was sent into Nimba, and they would go round all the houses. They’d drag out young men. They would beat them; some of them, they would kill them. The army created enormous ill feeling, and that drove the boys over the border to become rebels, and they were just there waiting to be organized by Charles Taylor.

Narrator: Charles Taylor, an old crony of Samuel Doe, crossed the Liberian border on Christmas Eve, 1989. A mixed Gola and Americo-Liberian, Taylor graduated from an American college and broke out of a Massachusetts jail, where he had been held after Doe accused him of embezzlement. Now he was back, with Libyan-trained guerrillas and rumored to have the backing of affluent Liberians who wanted to get rid of Doe.

Charles Taylor, Leader, National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL): This war is about justice; it’s about equality and about fair play. This war is about the right to self-determination and the safeguard of the sovereignty of this nation.

Narrator: Despite his rhetoric, his war turned into a war of retribution. Thousands of Manos and Gios joined Taylor, seeking vengeance against Doe’s Krahn and their allies, the Mandingos.

Atrocities were routine. Entire villages were abandoned by people trying to escape the fighting. Families were burnt alive, children raped and decapitated. It was ethnic cleansing at its most cruel, and much of it was carried out by soldiers who were themselves children.

Augustine Konneh, Former Child Soldier, United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy (ULIMO): People has put us together to fight our brothers and sisters, to get rich out of us. And those little ones holding the guns, they are not intelligent; they cannot think. A little boy, even if you are in the home, just watch a little boy how he can behave in the home, and imagine you take a gun and give it to him?

Narrator: Boys got high on power as well as drugs. I spoke to one in a refugee camp in Ghana.

Marshall G. Kollie, Former Child Soldier, NPFL: I am Marshall G. Kollie. I was 15 years old when I joined the NPFL in 1991. There was certain leaf in the bush called war face. You take the leaf, you squeeze it in your hand, you put it in your eye, and you’ll see that your eyes will be red for about a week. It was called war face. You just want to make yourself like a kind of a bogeyman that people would be afraid of, that you place your eye on somebody and they will be afraid. You’d never be afraid when you’re taking the drugs. Actually, you’d be over-brave, and all the things you’d be doing, I mean, you’d just be going... You will be doing it unconsciously, but you would be really brave. There is nothing that would move you. You’d just smile, laugh the whole day. As soon as they shoot here, you’d like to go there.

Narrator: During these months of terror, Liberians were still so emotionally tied to the U.S. that they believed America would save them from themselves.

When U.S. Navy helicopters landed in Monrovia, it was thought that they had come to rescue Liberians. Instead, they were there to evacuate American citizens.

Richard Boucher, U.S. State Department Spokesman: Due to the potential threat to lives, all Americans are strongly advised to depart Liberia immediately. In order to assist Americans, we have arranged special commercial flights to transport American citizens and their immediate families from Liberia to the neighboring country of Cote d’Ivoire.

Woman: I'm scared to death, and I'm worried for my country. And I'm scared for everybody.

Reporter: What do you think the United States should do?

Woman: Step in and take over.

Cohen: We were just given a direct order from the White House not to do anything. But I remember meetings where [Brent] Scowcroft's deputy, Robert Gates, who had come from the CIA, he was denigrating the historic relationship. He says: "It's meaningless; it doesn't govern us anymore. We treat Liberia just like any other country, and we have no real interest there."

Narrator: Doe also wanted the U.S. to step in—to keep himself in power.

Doe: Being a lover of democracy, America would have stepped in to put a stop to this bloodshed. But then I don't know what they are thinking about. But we are still hoping America would join us in searching for peace for this country.

Narrator: By mid-1990, Taylor's troops had captured most of the country and were advancing rapidly on Monrovia. Doe's situation was growing desperate.

Cohen: We had an aircraft available in Freetown ready to pick him up. We told him that. But actually, I was supposed to go there and say: "Okay, now is the time. Get your family and everyone, and get on the plane; let's go." But I never got to that point; it was vetoed.

Taylor: We are not going to let any criminal be taken out of this country by anyone. No one is taking Doe out. He will be caught by us or killed by us.

James L. Bishop, U.S. Ambassador to Liberia, 1987–1990: I think we could have done some things differently at the end. But the Bush administration pulled us back and told us that they didn't want us to do that because they didn't want to accept any degree of moral responsibility for Charles Taylor becoming the next head of state of Liberia. I think that was a mistake.

Cohen: I felt that the White House had an error of judgment at that point. Whatever would have happened with Taylor after that, at least the country would have been spared the devastation of its infrastructure and all of its facilities there.

Narrator: Liberians sought help everywhere. Finally, it was the 16-nation Economic Community of West African States [ECOWAS] that created ECOMOG, a special military peacekeeping force.

Nicephore Soglo, President of Benin, 1991–1996 (translated): I became involved in the peace process in my role as ECOWAS president. Like I said earlier, I believe that no African or man of heart could just stand by and accept the suffering endured by the Liberian people.

Narrator: The presence of peacekeepers gave Monrovia a fragile sense of security. But Taylor was still threatening to launch a final assault if Doe didn't resign.

Doe: I remain here to fight the supporters of Charles Taylor. I remain here to say no to America. America is fighting Doe because Doe wants his country to be developed, period.

Narrator: The African peacekeepers set up headquarters in this building at Monrovia's port. Here, on September 9, 1990, Doe arrived to meet the force commander. He had no idea that Prince Johnson, the leader of yet another faction, was gunning for him.

Prince Johnson: No, no, no. Don't do this to me. I just spoke to the American ambassador, and I'm here to make a decision now.

Blunt: We could hear voices outside. There was an argument starting between Doe's people, who were outside, and Prince Johnson's people. And the voices got more and more angry.

Samuel Dickson, Port Worker: Now, from that point, the shooting started. And Elizabeth Blunt and [journalist] Mr. Ivan Fiske were under a table, and fortunately for me, I was in that particular room they were in.

Blunt: I lay on the floor along the window wall, and then I could just hear the sounds of this tremendous gun battle, and it went on and on and on. Every time you thought the shooting had stopped, it started again.

Dickson: When they start shooting from downstairs, Doe came in here and was surrounded by his bodyguards, and they refused even during... Even in the shooting, all the bodyguards fell right... right in the middle of this room. All of them fell on top of Doe.

Blunt: I had no idea what was going on, and this went on for an hour and a half—it was the early afternoon—and then eventually it died away, and we waited, and then it seemed to be safe to come out. I came out into the corridor and sort of... In the washroom opposite, there were bodies in the corridor, sort of piled into the washroom. And there were bodies in the front hall at the foot of the stairs where we had been standing to watch the president go up. And then... I was being really stupid at this point, and it took me a few minutes to say, “Look, what happened to the president?” And they said, “They carried him.”

Narrator: Doe was driven through the streets of Monrovia. The next day he was pleading for his life...

Doe: So please, please... please loosen me so I'll tell you... please...

Narrator: ...while Prince Johnson was seeking the backing of the U.S.

Johnson: Tango! Tango! Sunshine calling. Emergency, over. Tango, this is Sunshine. If you are listening to me, this is emergency, over. Tango, Tango, come in. I want to speak with Mr. Porter or the U.S. ambassador. Over.

Blunt: It's certainly true the Americans were in touch, not just with Prince Johnson, but with all the parties. And what was said and what was encouraged, I don't know.

Narrator: Doe was castrated, and his ears were cut off by Johnson's men. He would die a day later. But even after his death he had his supporters, who tore through the streets, shouting, “No Doe, no Liberia.”

The war didn't end with Doe's death. For the next seven years, it touched all of our lives. I look at these graves, and I think, what happened to this place? Someone's father, someone's daughter, someone's brother. Over 150,000 Liberians died, four of my family among them. Two-thirds of the country fled their homes. Six thousand children were made to kill.

The towns and villages I knew as a child had all become killing fields.

More and more factions cropped up, and some ECOMOG soldiers joined in the plunder. There was no respite. Liberians were exhausted and desperate for peace. Numerous peace agreements were brokered and violated, but peace only came when there was nothing left to destroy.

Finally, after seven years of mayhem, elections were called for July 19, 1997. There were 13 candidates. The campaign trail for Charles Taylor, who already controlled much of the country, led ironically to the Samuel Doe Soccer Stadium.

People sang, “He killed my ma, I will vote for him; he killed my pa, I will vote for him,” hoping that a vote for Taylor would mean an end to the bloodshed.

Liberians lined up to vote in overwhelming numbers. It was their first presidential election in a decade. When the ballots were counted and certified as fair by international observers, including Jimmy Carter, Taylor had won with 75 percent of the vote.

Taylor: I promise you today 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.

Narrator: When Taylor assumed the presidency, people hoped that he would turn the country around. So far, not much has happened. Instead, in no time, Taylor has become an international pariah, implicated in the destabilization of his neighbors and accused of fueling diamond wars and growing rich—just another strongman.

When Monrovia spruced itself up to commemorate 150 years of Liberian independence, it was the monument dedicated to unity between the natives and the settlers that got special attention. And it was here that a wedding party stopped to take a photograph, much as they did in the old days. In a way, this is a statement of faith, an implied trust that Liberia will one day be a place where peace prevails, and people flourish.

The independence was celebrated with pomp and well-pressed uniforms. It was an African occasion, but the trappings were still American, a relic of the shared, distant past.

Liberia may indeed be a stepchild of America, but it is also a rightful daughter of Africa, with a rich history, a history of triumph, of sadness, of disappointment, and of hope.