

UN (Christopher Herwig)



Rebel armies attempted to gain control of capital city of Monrovia during civil war

Lessons from Liberia's Success

Thoughts on Leadership, the Process of Peace, Security, and Justice

BY JOHN W. BLANEY

The ending in 2003 of the 14-year civil war in Liberia and the subsequent progress made there is a 21st-century success story not only for Liberians, but also for Africa, the United Nations (UN), the United States, and many others. Over 250,000 people lost their lives during this struggle, with great suffering endured elsewhere in West Africa as well. Economically and socially, the country of Liberia, historically long renowned as sub-Saharan Africa's shining example, was decimated by this conflict and by rampant mismanagement and corruption. Today, Liberia still has serious problems, but under the leadership of President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf,

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impressive progress continues. There is stability, basic living standards are up, children go to school, development assistance projects blossom from many quarters, new Liberian security institutions are matriculating, and even private sector investment is responding with additional badly needed jobs. How was Liberia afforded the priceless opportunity of becoming one of the greatest turnaround stories of the 21st century?

This article will not attempt to tell the entire fascinating story of ending the war and winning the peace in Liberia; that would take a book. Rather, the purpose is to glean lessons learned from this success—that is, insights that may prove useful elsewhere, albeit each conflict is unique.

The Situation

By 2003, Liberia had been ruled autocratically by warlord President Charles G. Taylor since his questionable election in 1997. Since Taylor is presently on trial for war crimes at The Hague, it is inappropriate to dwell upon him or his role. Suffice it to say that by early 2003, two different rebel movements and their armies—Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), and the smaller Movement for Democracy in Liberia—controlled most of the country. Taylor's forces made forays into the interior and held the capital, Monrovia, as well as the second biggest city, Buchanan.

By July 2003, the civil war was quickly escalating. The international ceasefire agreement was again in tatters, and negotiation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was bogged down in Ghana. Moreover, both rebel combatant parties, especially their military commanders in the field, opposed and threatened any outside peacekeeper interventions.

After all, they held the port of Monrovia, leaving the rest of the capital increasingly under siege. With almost 1 million people starving inside the city, and Taylor's forces weakening, they could see military victory within reach. The rebels' intent was not just to see Taylor relinquish power, but also to take Monrovia, seize power, and sack the city in the best 12th-century meaning of the word. Taylor had been pressed militarily and diplomatically to leave Liberia, which he eventually agreed to do as long as an international peacekeeping force was brought into the country.

Taylor's departure, however, would not by itself stop the war or cancel the other objectives of the rebels. A bloodbath of retribution could ensue, with hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons caught in the middle of the fighting. Of course, Taylor's forces would have to fight on, and there was a distinct possibility that the two rebel armies might begin fighting one another for power. Finally, West African peacekeepers who had arrived recently (Economic Community of West African States Mission in Liberia [ECOMIL]) were likely to become combatants, as had happened when West African peacekeepers intervened several years earlier (as the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group).

Analysis

Liberia offers valuable insights into conflict management and moving chaotic situations toward stability as well as building the institutions of security and justice. In 2003, Liberia was not, as is often stated, a classic peacekeeping operation (if there is such a thing). Peace did not initiate sequentially with an internationally negotiated ceasefire and peace agreement followed by a complex

peacekeeping mission. Rather, by mid-2003, the baseline situation was increasingly chaotic and violent, and not just a complex situation with peacekeepers permissively deployed. In fact, the actions of a very few outsiders still left on the ground were designed to try to move the situation away from an abyss and back into some sort of complex mess that would permit peacekeepers.

Those of us there were successful in that undertaking, but the reason this part of the actual story of Liberia is important is that it relates directly to the first analytic point. We must understand what kind of situation we are facing, and then adapt our strategy, sequencing, and leadership style appropriately. This is hardly a new thought, but it is a critical one that is missed constantly. As Sun Tzu wrote, “Do not repeat the tactics which have gained you one victory, but let your methods be regulated by the infinite variety of circumstances.”¹ Although these thoughts from about 500 BCE are obviously about war, they also apply to the pursuit of peace, including how to prioritize and balance making progress with security and justice even when there are simultaneous pressing needs in other sectors.

For example, in Liberia the alleged peacekeeping maxim that security must precede all else did not really hold. It was a blend of diplomacy, peacemaking, and some deception that ended that war on the battlefield, long before any ground was secured by friendly forces, and before the CPA was concluded on August 18, 2003.

Breaking with the political leadership of LURD, General Mohamed Sheriff negotiated on the battlefield the terms of LURD’s ceasefire, its pullback, and the permissive entry and interpositional placement of the ECOMIL peacekeepers. A few U.S. and West African negotiators repeatedly passed through “no-man’s

land”—that is, between Taylor’s forces and those of LURD—in order to conclude a deal with General Sheriff. In this fashion, diplomacy not only stopped the fighting, but also enabled the permissive entry of ECOMIL as peacekeepers, not as combatants.

The point here is not that what was done in Liberia was better or worse than in other cases, but that there is no iron-clad template that fits all circumstances; there is no certain sequence, no perfect universal blend of defense, development, and diplomacy, and no stable formula to pursue security and justice.

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This commonsensical observation is often resisted. After leaving Liberia in mid-2005, I was drawn to study other difficult situations, such as Iraq and Afghanistan. During my long absence from the United States, a plethora of studies, manuals, and guides had been written on how to conduct antiterrorist, counterinsurgency, and complex stability operations, and how to create “fusion” among all U.S. agencies and partners for maximum impact, and so forth. Most of these works were produced in response to continuing violence and other problems in Iraq and Afghanistan. Most all of these and others that followed are quite thoughtful and well done. Of course, many of them struggle mightily with security and justice issues, and with the inclusion of indigenous peoples.

But there is a problem: while these works and case studies are excellent stimuli, they will

never substitute for creative but disciplined thinking and leadership, as some of them imply. A personal anecdote may illustrate this assertion.

I was recently at the CIA—that would be the Culinary Institute of America. I had an epiphany when watching a master chef work. While seemingly all chefs love cookbooks, great chefs do not use them when creating new masterpieces. It must be similar for competent leaders who face crises, especially those actually on the ground. In other words, there are not now, and will never be, strategic cookbooks adequate for handling each new crisis, though historical knowledge and analytic stimulus from them will certainly help. Insofar as security and justice go, there will never be one sequential relationship or recipe that will serve universally.

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What is less relative and absolutely critical, however, is the ability to recognize accurately how complex the situation at hand is, and how to adjust one's leadership approach. Not understanding the complexity of a situation, and not appropriately adjusting to it, usually results in failure in establishing reasonable security and justice regimes and relationships, among other things.

If Sun Tzu seems too archaic, more contemporary treatments of the relationships between complexity and leadership can be found. See, for example, the works of David Snowden and Mary Boone and the Welsh *Cynefin* school of thought. Again, I

am extrapolating from their theory to help explain our success in Liberia, an application that Snowden and Boone did not address and may not condone. To oversimplify, the characteristics of a chaotic situation (without clear cause and effect relationships) call for stronger, more immediate action. Less chaotic but still complex or complicated situations are best managed by group methodologies and wider communication or by expertise. Although they wrote "A Leader's Framework for Decision Making" after the events of 2003, the model they presented screamed *Liberia* in many respects.²

To reiterate, the objective in mid-2003 Liberia was to move the situation out of chaos and into something still complex but more manageable. To that end, before the CPA, diplomacy moved first and decisively on the ground to disengage the LURD from Taylor's forces by getting them to cease fire, pull back several miles, free up the port and food for the starving multitudes, and permissively allow non-Liberian African (ECOMIL) peacekeepers to be placed between Taylor's forces and the main rebel army to the north of Monrovia, and between Taylor's forces and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia, the other rebel army, to the south.

Toward Networking

The months until UN peacekeepers began to arrive in October 2003 proved difficult on the ground. There were many serious ceasefire violations, which both ECOMIL and the U.S. Embassy had to stamp out. But even then, as the situation changed, the Embassy began to alter its style of leadership as it sought to reengage as many foreign and indigenous groups as it could to help keep the war stopped. For example, as other evacuated foreign embassy

staff and nongovernmental organizations trickled back into Liberia, we quickly helped them integrate back into postconflict stabilization efforts and restarted informal contact groups. There were Liberians who helped as well. Most famously, there were a number of Liberian women's peace groups, none of which were key players perhaps, but all of which helped promote peace in different ways and at different times.

ECOMIL was commanded by a brave Nigerian general, Fetus Okonkwo. It successfully spearheaded peacemaking and peacekeeping efforts in Liberia. The U.S. Marine Expeditionary Unit not only did a great job supporting the West Africans and the U.S. Embassy, but also briefly deployed a few hundred Marines on the ground.

As mediator of the Liberia Peace Process, Nigerian General Abdulsalami Abubakar's leadership was remarkable throughout and fundamental to success, and he came back repeatedly to Monrovia during the postconflict period to keep the lid on violence. Then, too, there was the indefatigable role of the International Contact Group, led ably by the European Commission and Ghana.

African heads of state not only opened a path for the departure of Taylor from Liberia, but also pushed strongly for the peace process at many points. And, of course, the dialogue with all the former combatant parties was intense in the postconflict period, as were exchanges with the successor governments to Taylor's (that is, the brief government of President Moses Blah, followed by the Interim Government led by Gyude Bryant). The media were also engaged constantly.

The message is clear. Once each tipping point is achieved, and the situation and its characteristics begin to change, the leadership

and programmatic approach should change with it. In the immediate postwar period, U.S. Embassy Liberia, in order to help keep the transition moving further from chaos and war to complexity and peacekeeping, sought to repopulate the universe of parties who would push for peace in a variety of ways. In other words, we began to move toward a web-building/web-based approach to advance the peace process and counter constant attempts by "opponent webs" composed of those dedicated to returning Liberia to war and chaos. And there was no shortage of them.

Of course, while we helped stop the war and hung on for a while, steady progress only came after another and soon dominant member of the "web of peace" arrived—the much larger follow-on force of UN peacekeepers and others, brilliantly led by General Jacques Klein.

In sum, in the postconflict period, we helped build up or rebuild multilateral, nongovernmental, and Liberian webs, and encouraged these groups to probe and push carefully into the grey of a complex and still simmering situation, gradually achieving greater stability. The group approach was also able to absorb failures and shocks better, usually without risking the situation moving back to war.

In fact, there is another fine theoretical work on this area of thought, *Governing by Network*, by William Eggers and Stephen Goldsmith, which has valuable insights on better handling complex situations via networks.³ Again, this work is extrapolated ex post facto to apply to the different situation of Liberia in order to better explain and map the successful route taken there.

Maintaining Momentum

Just as Liberia's evolving chaotic baseline situation required changing our leadership

approach, it also largely dictated how security and justice had to be approached as just part of the conundrum of a postwar collapsed state. What we faced on the ground was grim. An article appeared in *The Economist* in late 2002 about Liberia, forecasting it as the world's worst country for 2003.⁴ It was, indeed, a horrible year in Liberia.

It would be hard to convey the devastation of Liberia after a 14-year civil war and the corrupt patrimonial systems of governance practiced during and before that time. Where, then, to start?

Although there is no certain sequence, perhaps in many terrible situations like this one, the place to start is with the people themselves, and giving them hope. Even while being hit by mortars and small arms fire, we plotted out what should be done sequentially and simultaneously once the fighting stopped. There were so many things to do: things that had to be launched alongside humanitarian assistance and essential services—simply to start to revive a dead state.

Security and justice reform were huge in this kind of postconflict calculus. In Liberia,

The DDRR program in Liberia disarmed and demobilized over 109,000 combatants, who surrendered tens of thousands of AK-47s, over 7 million rounds of ammunition, and thousands of rocket-propelled grenades, heavy machineguns, and crew-served weapons. The UN also moved to remove and dispose of loose ordnance and at least address the sealing of Liberia's difficult borders. Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of internally displaced Liberians and refugees were returned home.

Detractors argue that the UN started the DDRR program in Liberia too quickly on December 7, 2003, before enough UN peacekeepers were present. Indeed, there were serious riots at Camp Schefflin for the next 10 days, and this initial effort was shut down. But these events illustrate prior points about pushing out of chaos and into something more manageable. On the ground, the dynamic was simple: either start to disarm the warring factions very soon, or risk a quick return to war. The riots, by the way, were planned attempts to overwhelm the UN, either to create instability or to get more money, or both, and would have happened whenever the DDRR program kicked off.

What critics miss, but General Klein and I did not, is that starting the DDRR program quickly kept the combatants, who still had intact chains of command, focused on material gain rather than on coup attempts or on restarting general conflicts. In other words, while a tactical setback, starting disarmament and demobilization was, strategically, the correct thing to do. By doing so, the forces of peace retained critical momentum and the capacity to shape the future. Furthermore, many thousands of weapons were collected during that initial disarmament outing.

I encouraged General Klein to take this course of action and believe it was the correct

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the UN led the way in developing and tailoring a disarmament, demobilization, reintegration, and rehabilitation (DDRR) program. It would take far too long to explain all the UN, bilateral, and multilateral programs involved, but in general, a successful DDRR program was absolutely central for security, reconstruction, and overall progress.

one. The lesson here is especially important. When actually shutting down conflicts and reducing chaos, we must keep the tempo of events in our favor, sometimes by acting boldly even when unsure of what is going to happen in response to what we do. Rarely can we afford to simply sit tight and wait to see what happens next. Success is gained by keeping tempo on our side. Failure is often guaranteed by robotically following some inflexible, linear list of things to do in nonlinear, chaotic situations.

Another Sun Tzu quotation about the importance of momentum would be appropriate, because controlling momentum and the importance of assessing and adapting to situational complexity are themes lost in today's discourse. It is dismaying to see in contemporary times only more and more strategic cookbooks with simplistic linear graphs moving from conflict to peace.

Security Institutions

Given the chaotic starting place of Liberia in 2003, it is easier to see the importance of building the country a new police force and new armed forces, and getting a new start on rebuilding its devastated judicial system and the rule of law. The collapse and chaos of the war, combined with the long-term rot of corruption, had deeply compromised Liberia's security and justice institutions.

A rather balanced multilateral approach to donor funding was maintained throughout this period; however, this was not the case for rebuilding Liberia's police force or its army. The United States financed most of the rebuilding of the police force that was implemented through the UN.

In general, financing support for foreign security forces is unpopular among the parliaments of the world, sometimes including the

U.S. Congress, but thankfully bipartisan support emerged among powerful Members of Congress. Senators John Warner, Hillary Clinton, John McCain, and others championed Liberia's cause in this area and supported other types of badly needed assistance.

The corrupted police force that operated during the Taylor years was largely left intact after the war. Had it remained, it would have posed a threat to peace and to the entire reconstruction and recovery effort. So initially, the United States placed even greater priority on creating a good police force than on building Liberia's army. However, Washington also

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became heavily involved in the construction of a new small but capable army for Liberia, utilizing a private sector contractor.

In the case of the army, the UN was careful to slowly wind down the existing force structure, which was part of the CPA. But the longer term objective was always to create a new smaller, apolitical, and professional force that would respect the rule of law and human rights. This effort is still under way.

In sum, there was ample justification for rebuilding the police and military from the ground up, with much change of personnel based on competitive entry and background checks. It has been and will be critical for stability and justice in Liberia, especially after the UN mission leaves, as it must some day.

Justice and Legitimacy

The postwar starting point on justice was also dismal due to chaos and long-term rot.



UN (Christopher Herwig)

Justice was for sale during the Taylor years and basically dispensed under a patrimonial system. There had been no genuine systemic rule of law for years. There was a desperate need for a spring cleaning, but there was also the necessity to maintain a clear line of political legitimacy throughout the postwar transitional reform process. Much of the answer for both issues, building justice anew and maintaining legitimacy, resided in ensuring that the CPA-mandated election was held as stipulated in 2005, but many opposed that for various reasons.

From the outset, I was questioned in some quarters about supporting Vice President Blah as the successor to Taylor. However, his appointment to that office, and then his brief time as President, took place in accordance with the constitution of Liberia, and provided a linkage of legitimacy and an orderly transition until an interim head of government could be appointed in accordance with the CPA.

Serious objections and challenges to holding the presidential election on time in 2005 came from several quarters. Some senior statesmen and respected figures in Liberia suggested national conventions and a rewriting of Liberia's constitution before any election. Such a process would likely have taken many years.

Meanwhile, some interim government officials moved strongly to stop or at least to postpone the 2005 elections. Of course, that would have prolonged their time in office as unelected officials. There were also other sinister reasons why some sought postponement. My position remained clear in 2003, 2004, and 2005: nothing should be allowed to stop or postpone the 2005 elections from occurring on

time, or the freedom and rights of the Liberian people would be seriously jeopardized. Before leaving Liberia, all these threats were overcome, and a free and fair election was held on time. Today, there is absolutely no doubt who is the legitimate head of state in Liberia.

The general lesson here is to be sensitive to the issue of legitimacy in postconflict states undergoing transitions of power, elected or otherwise. In truth, there were indeed some reasons why election postponement seemed somewhat logical in Liberia, as there may seem to be in other cases. But for whatever reason, there is a terrible risk incurred once a country leaps into a political void where no one has clear title as head of state and is acknowledged as in charge. Political legitimacy and justice must be thought through as a whole, as a simultaneous equation, or serious stability and other problems could arise.

The sequencing of all the elements of a successful peace process will differ by case, with a key variable being the complexity of the situation at hand and the corresponding leadership and policy approach that must be tailored to fit. Control of momentum during the peace process must also be carefully considered and usually retained. In the case of Liberia, ending the war in 2003, and keeping it stopped, initially required some flamboyant, nondemocratic, and unusual actions (that is, to end chaos). Keeping the election on track also called for repeated strong and sometimes unilateral methods, as did the related issue of ensuring that political legitimacy remained intact.

Whenever the situation calmed down and moved from chaos to mere complexity, however, a unilateral leadership role was shunned in favor of networking and inclusiveness. These groups, mostly in turn led by the UN and the International Contact Group, slowly achieved

greater stability, institutional rebirth, economic stabilization, and much more.

All of this prompted both cheers and jeers, including charges that I was at times a bully or acting as a proconsul. Frankly, that is not important. The U.S. Embassy's leadership approach and actions were not determined centrally by my personality, but rather varied with the perception of what was required to best deal with a changing situation, which moved back and forth from chaotic and desperate to more stable at times. It must be added that then-Secretary of State Colin Powell "kept my back" and was our staunchest ally throughout, artfully parrying distant critics at home who sought to interfere with our work and foil triumph.

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The donor approach to security and justice could not be one of gentle surgery because the baseline situation was so grave. As the situation gradually improves, however, security and justice are becoming more and more the responsibility of Liberians.

Did we do it all correctly in Liberia? Nonsense. Is there much left for all parties to do in order to shore up success in Liberia? Absolutely. But consider, if for only a moment, where things stood in Liberia in 2003, and where things stand today—and smile. **PRISM**

Notes

¹ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Lionel Giles (London: Luzac and Co., 1910), 28.

² David J. Snowden and Mary E. Boone, “A Leader’s Framework for Decision Making,” *Harvard Business Review* (November 2007).

³ Stephen Goldsmith and William D. Eggers, *Governing by Network* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution Press, 2004).

⁴ “The World’s Worst: Liberia,” *The World in 2003*, report published by *The Economist*, November 2002.