

The International Republican Institute
2006 Freedom Dinner and Award Ceremony
Honoring First Lady Laura Bush and President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf
Thursday, September 21, 2006
Remarks by President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf

Thank you very much. First Lady Laura Bush, Senator McCain, Mr. Craner, Chairman Whitacre, members of Congress, members of the Administration, special guests, so many long-term friends, let me say how honored I am, how very pleased, to be here. It's a special honor to be able to share this event with the First Lady, Mrs. Bush. She has been so wonderful. We can't say enough for what she has done in Africa for the women, for the children. This honor is so well deserved and I'm just humbled to be here with you.

Many of you may know Liberia during a period of 140 years when we had stability. Our country was, we thought, moving on the path towards fulfilling its developing agenda. We even, as one of the first independent states in Africa, symbolized this exceptional state by having a Lone Star flag. You may recall, Mrs. Bush, we said that there were some similarity with Texas.

But it was clear upon the coup d'etat in 1980 that the 140 years of stability has masked the underlying tensions, the failure of successive governments to breach the long-standing divide within the population, and also to bring development to the people, particularly education. And so those years of calm disguised peace and stability were shattered by the coup d'etat. That's set in train 25 years of decline.

Fourteen of those 25 years chaos, death, destruction, many young people denied their future because they were conscripted into armies and into warring factions. That continued well during the period so well described by Senator McCain of going back and forth in exile, working with other compatriots to try to bring some sensibility, some normalcy, to our country. And it wasn't until 2003 that one might say, the U.S. having always been with Liberia through all those long years, that President Bush took a stand against a tyrannical regime of President Taylor and said enough is enough. The Liberian people have suffered enough and it's time to bring a change, time to do something else. The Liberian people will always be grateful for this very strong and principled stand taken by President Bush because that led to the change that brought us two years of transition and then led us to the 2005 elections.

IRI was particularly active in promoting these elections. Very quickly an office was established. They came, they did workshops. They brought political groups together. They worked with the media. They educated. They instructed. They supported. They assisted the process.

And after two rounds of elections in October and November, Liberia finally did the right thing: they elected me. And with those elections come hope by our people.

Hope to redress the many years of neglect. Hope to reclaim the future. Hope to renew our nation.

But it's a hope not just for me, or for Liberia. It's also hope for our continent because of what I symbolize, because of the expectations and the anticipation that I represent on behalf of African women. And so for them, we must make Liberia succeed. And so our government has started by launching our development agenda on four pillars.

The first is to consolidate peace and stability, and we've taken some bold moves in this regard. We've dismantled an entire army. We've dislodged a complete police force and we've sent them all into training to make sure that they're professionalized, they're educated, they not only protect the geographical integrity of the nation and protect people, but that they also know that their role is not to repress but to assist. The U.S. is a major partner to us in the restructuring of our security forces, and the United Nations peacekeeping forces provide essentially the safety while we reconstruct our security sector.

The next pillar is our economic revitalization and on that we're putting in place the policies that will enable us to create the environment to attract private capital and private investment. We've begun a program with the IMF that will enable us to tackle our debt. We've begun the process. We've already gained a generous system of preferences and we want to qualify for our goal and the other kinds of interventions that will enable us to expand our potential.

The third pillar is infrastructure and there perhaps our most important, rehabilitating our social and economic infrastructure. We've put education at the center of our development agenda because that's where we have to start if we are going to build a national capacity to be able to undertake all the other ambitious programs that we would like to do. And so primary, universal primary, free education is a primary goal, to be able to take our children off the streets and get them back into school. To be able to help those parents who are not able, who cannot afford to pay the tuition to send their children to school. So we have started to rehabilitate our schools all over the country.

The same goes for other social infrastructure, our clinics and hospitals, all of which have been destroyed over the years, to get them back so we can get our displaced population and our refugee population back into their communities where they can enjoy the basics. Our road system, our telecommunication system, and the infrastructure, things that are so vital for creating the environment for free enterprise, we're working to restore all of those.

And the last pillar is governance. Ensuring the things that IRI has been working on, that we do maintain democracy, the basic freedoms, the respect for human rights, that our judicial system will enable people to have proper recourse. And we will have the proper balancing of power and we've worked with your Congress in trying to ensure that our legislature helps to balance the executive.

And so in all of these areas, we have made much progress with the support of our partners because the four pillars rest on our ability to attract and maintain strategic partnerships; partnership within the country, partnership between government, and then governmental organizations, partnership between government and the business sector, and then partnerships between our country and its partners. And we'd like to thank all of you who have been represented in some of these partnerships and have worked with us.

If someone were to ask me why should the U.S. support Liberia? After all, it's a small country; 3.2 million people, the West Coast of Africa. I'd like to offer a few things that you might consider. Because we're a small country we are well endowed. Well endowed by nature in our natural resources, mineral resources, forest resources, agriculture resources, water resources, and a small population that enables us to address poverty and enables us to be prosperous, if we can put those resources for the good of the people.

The other reason is our long tenured and good relationship with the United States. From our very beginnings until now we've enjoyed that friendship. And even though we say that we know today we take primary responsibility for our development, and we must do that, and we also say that we want to be self-reliant, we want to be self-sufficient, we want to make sure that in these strategic partnerships there's a mutuality in benefits, a mutuality in respect, but we think that with all of that, the U.S. is a great partner to us and that's a good reason to maintain this relationship as we begin to explore those mutual benefits.

Another reason we think is that the U.S. has already made a major investment in Liberia's processes of change and in Liberia's transition from the difficult days to the hope and promise of the future. And we believe that the return on that investment will come when this government succeeds in carrying out a development agenda.

We also believe that Liberia has the potential to be a success story in Africa, to demonstrate that you can move a country from conflict and chaos into prosperity, into democracy, into a strong voice for freedom. And being able to be a leader in Africa in promoting all of these ideals for which our two countries have stood for so many years.

And if there's a final reason for the U.S. to be able to support Liberia in this effort to succeed, may I suggest that this one woman's success will make a big difference in the lives of African women. We are determined as a people to embrace the process of renewal. We are committed as a people to build a new Liberia out of a past of chaos and destruction into a future of promise and a future of hope.

As I said at our inauguration in which Mrs. Bush participated, one of the greatest joys we get is to make our children smile again. And those smiles are beginning to show as they see for the first time that there is hope. That their lives can be better. That they can be educated. They can enjoy better medical services. They can reach for their potential in a land with a government that responds to their needs.

I want to thank all of you for your contribution to where Liberia is today as we recommit to make sure that the return on your investment will be high indeed. God bless you.