

AFRICA IN AMERICA

DECOLONIZATION AND THE MAKING OF AN AFRICAN ORDER

INTRODUCTION

Let me first apologize if I disappoint some for not delivering a typical "July 26" speech. Given the broader purpose of this occasion to "Celebrate Africa," I thought I might address a topic that relates Liberia to her African vocation.

Here is how I addressed the issue elsewhere: Imagine the idea of Liberia as a potted plant taken from early 19th century America to West Africa. Was the plant placed in African soil? Is the plant still being nourished in its original pot? These questions remain at the heart of Liberia's unfinished task of nation building, a task that has been complicated, indeed exacerbated by the civil war of 1989 to 2003.

The challenge of our age is to disaggregate our historical problem from the new complications of the civil war. A serious reform agenda must then re-aggregate the old and the new and re-launch effectively the Liberia project.

That said, and as we gather here this evening to focus on the continent and recognize the independ-



Dr D Elwood Dunn delivering this essay as a speech in Philadelphia as the keynote speaker at a reception at the African American Museum of Philadelphia during Celebrate Africa 2009, African Art and Cultural Festival. Below, at Dr Dunn's right, Ms Gurley Gibson, who runs the Liberian



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ence of modern Africa's first Republic, the Republic of Liberia

DECOLONIZATION AND THE MAKING OF AN AFRICAN ORDER: THE ROLES OF NKURMAH'S GHANA AND TUBMAN'S LIBERIA

I would like to begin by pointing to the coincidence of Ghana and Liberia in the news headlines of late, at least in the African headlines. Ghana was the recent venue of President Obama's historic second visit to Africa earlier this month. Liberia's 162nd year of political independence on 26 July comes at a

time when a number of question marks are surfacing about the historic ties between Liberia and the United States. A focus on Ghana and Liberia also invokes the singular roles these 2 countries have played in the shaping of contemporary Africa. We could spend the evening paralleling Ghana and Liberia in the creation of an African political order in the aftermath of the Second World War - Ghana in the forefront of African nationalism; Liberia a symbol of African emancipation. Ghana a precursor of political progressivism in Africa; Liberia, a builder of African consensus.

The issue today is one of relevancy, the relevancy of the roles of Ghana and Liberia at the creation of modern Africa for the debate in contemporary Africa about the nature of a new African order within which to carry forward the African agenda of sustainable development.

In the course of my research on the relationship between Liberia and the United States, a relationship called "special" in the popular mind, it became evident that that relationship came to play a crucial role in the African quest for the creation of a distinctly African order in the midst of the Cold War international environment. Thus the Pan African project to decolonize Africa and install a Pan Africanist political order in the continent was only partially successful. This was the case because of the impact of the Cold War in that its politics delivered independence, but then stifled the Pan Africanist order. Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first president was the most prominent proponent of that



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order. William VS Tubman, Liberia's 19th president, was its most vociferous opponent. The resultant African order was one Nkrumah had feared, and Tubman had hoped would materialize.

The literature on African decolonization is clear about the role of Ghana's Pan-Africanist president in advocating a united Africa in the immediate aftermath of independence. That this vision was not achieved because of counter-action led by Liberia's President Tubman, has received scant attention. My remarks this evening are designed to speak to the question of why the African order centered in the Organization of African Unity responded more to Tubman's vision (some would say reaction) than to Nkrumah's. Implications might then be drawn about the contemporary effort of the Libyan Leader Muammar Gaddafi in his attempts through the African Union (successor to the OAU) to resurrect the union government idea of Nkrumah. A pertinent question is whether there is a counter movement to Gaddafi's campaign? And if so, then led by whom? Or better yet, is Africa finally settling down on a framework based in inclusive governance and designed to achieve sustainable development for all its peoples?

As Tubman and Nkrumah faced a decolonizing Africa, radical nationalism was confronting a complex international status quo. Tubman was prepared to do battle with a Ghanaian-led radical nationalism for both domestic and foreign relations reasons. Domestic, because the Liberian state had to come to terms with its new "African" neighbors in Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone and elsewhere on the continent. There were implications for majority rule

in Liberia itself. It was a challenge of moving forward, even if timidly, the process of Africanizing the Republic of Liberia. The foreign relations reasons for Tubman's actions were his pro-Western posture and his personal abhorrence of socialism, African or otherwise.

Tubman was able to carry forward his agenda because he found powerful support in the United States and among like-minded African states, the latter in the majority compared to a "progressive" minority led by Nkrumah.

As World War II ended, Africa moved from pawn to actor status in international affairs. Four African states were founding members of the United Nations - Ethiopia, Egypt, South Africa, and Liberia. As new actors these and subsequent African states bore promise of influencing the post-war international order as much as that order would in turn influence them.

Ghana's independence in 1957, followed a year later by Guinea's, effectively set the stage for the coming battle for Africa. The protagonists were not only Africa and the superpowers, but also an ideological or political divide among Africans themselves. Nkrumah had set the tone on Independence Day, 1957: "The independence of Ghana is meaningless," he declared, "unless linked to the total liberation of Africa."

Tubman responded not publicly but through diplomatic networks: Yes to African liberation, but no to African union government, and no to any form of socialism.

The issue was now joined - a pan Africanist per-

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spective, and a conservative alternative.

The Pan-Africanist perspective on an African order was clear and unequivocal. Africa needed to pool its resources to consolidate political independence and achieve rapid material and human development, as did the early United States of America and the Soviet Union in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution. In *Africa Must Unite*, Nkrumah wrote in 1963: "In my view, a United Africa - that is, the political and eco-

nomie unification of the African continent - should seek 3 objectives

1. overall economic planning on a continental basis
2. the establishment of a unified military and defense strategy, and
3. a unified foreign policy and diplomacy to give political direction to our joint efforts for the protection and economic development of our continent."

Already Nkrumah's "positive action" campaign had

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joined the unfolding events. Guinea becomes independent in 1958 under the leadership of nationalist Ahmed Sekou Toure amidst trying circumstances. Nkrumah comes to Guinea's rescue, resulting in a Ghana-Guinea Union, the declared nucleus of a united states of Africa. Mali's independence 2 years later under the leadership of nationalist Modibo Keita led to an expanded Ghana-Guinea-Mali Union. The independence of the former Belgium Congo, also in 1960, under the leadership of nationalist Patrice Lumumba elicited a secret Ghana-Congo Union. Progressive Africa was on the move!

In the face of this pan Africanist onslaught, a counter-rationale to African union was soon launched. It took the form of a well-staged diplomatic offensive that was directed from Monrovia. It involved the preparation of working papers, strategic conversations with high-level American and other Western officials, and the orchestration of a series of African

diplomatic gatherings, some initiated by Nkrumah that eventually culminated in the founding conference in Ethiopia of the Organization of African Unity. Reflecting detailed researching of the peculiarities of both the American and Russian Revolutions that produced union governments, 1 Liberian government working paper authored by a "Mr XYZ" suggested as follows:

"The leaders of Africa, that is, independent and those on the threshold of independence, should seek in the most human and realistic manner to look at history, examine facts and then speak truthfully to our emerging brothers who have come to look at independence as an end. The African leaders should tell them that due to our having been separated we have lost much of our oneness but we are determined to recreate it. They would outline ways in which we may once more become one not by magic or by signatures to documents which the people for whom these documents are signed know nothing about; rather they should start from the foundation. They should devise ways for all Africans to know each other socially, culturally and educationally. Next they should seek to establish areas of common action and operations - multilateral treaties of friendship and brotherhood, similar educational programs. As these progress the natural growth toward union inevitably will follow."

The working paper concluded:

"Indeed, to paraphrase the argument of Dr. Obafemi Awolowo, a large federation in which West Africa consisting of more than 60 million cannot in honesty adhere to a union predetermined by Ghana and Guinea whose total population is only 7 million, the formation of which union the leaders of these millions were not consulted. This is certainly not the way the 13 American Colonies whose inspiration we are told generated the Union, did it..."

The essence of the argument was that majority African support for the project of African unity was

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necessary for pragmatic reasons. The project could not be consummated through treaty signing alone, but treaty signing that preceded wide consultations, and then submitting any eventual treaty to ratification of the sovereign peoples of each of the African states involved. Liberia was in the late 1950s anticipating the independence of populous Nigeria and the "Brazzaville 12" or 12 former French colonies, all of whom became independent in 1960.

Now, Africa did interact at a number of landmark conferences between 1958 and 1963 - the first conference of independent African states (Accra, April 1958), the All-Africa Peoples Conference (Accra, December, 1958). Sanniquellie/1959 followed with Tubman seeking to reason with Nkrumah and Toure - to little avail.

Casablanca and Monrovia conferences followed in January and May 1961, respectively. Monrovia set the stage for what came next, and though the road to Addis Ababa was tortuous, Africa arrived there in May 1963 and created the OAU. The OAU was singularly an association, not a union of African states.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The OAU went on to live for some 4 decades. The verdict is still out on what it was able to accomplish. Some say the organization responded as best it could to the challenges of its member states in a difficult Cold War international environment. Nkrumah himself, still wedded to his pan-Africanist vision, offered this verdict from his Conakry exile in 1970: "The wave of military coups, and the stepping up of imperialist and neo-colonialist aggression in Africa since 1963, when *Africa Must Unite* was first published, have proved conclusively the urgent need for political unification. No single part of Africa can be safe, or free to develop fully and independently, while any part remains unliberated, or while Africa's vast economic resources continue to be exploited by imperialist and neo-colonialist interests. Unless Africa is politically united under an All-African Union Government, there can be no solution to our political and economic problems. The thesis of *Africa Must Unite* remains unassailable."

Ghana initiated the contemporary organizing of African unity through Nkrumah's "positive action" nationalist campaign. As Nkrumah sought to consummate the campaign through the creation of a united states of Africa, Tubman was alarmed and proceeded to collaboratively checkmate the effort. The two pioneering African leaders came quickly to symbolize contending African paths to post-colonial development. That these contending paths were influenced by the politics of the Cold War made for Tubman a significant advantage.

And so by the early 1960s a minority Africa spear-

headed by Nkrumah labored to erect an African order anchored in a federation of African states. Tubman, in response, employed his enormous political skills and the opportunities of Liberia's close ties to a cold-war-obsessed United States to posit a very different African order - a traditional association of independent African states characteristic of classical international governmental organizations. While the Nkrumah camp once referred to as the Casablanca powers hardly exceeded 5 countries, the Tubman camp was in excess of 20 countries as represented at the Monrovia conference of May 1961.

When all was said and done, the OAU that emerged at Addis Ababa in 1963 was a loose association of states and not a merger of sovereignties. Tubman felt vindication then, but even more so 3 years later when Nkrumah was overthrown in a military *coup d'etat*. Ghana's then unrelenting African union campaign came to an abrupt end.

Ghana and Liberia are today in very different places! Ghana seems to lead in restorative governance in Africa. Ghana qualifies for the United States Millennium Challenge Corporation fund. Ghana is portrayed by the United States as an African model state. As for Liberia, she seems, on the verge of 162 years of independence, the image of an aged autocracy digging itself out of a pit of a quarter century of instability and fratricidal conflict. The once privileged but asymmetrical relationship with the United States is ceding place, at its core, to different considerations as the United States peddles slowly while it observes closely the unfolding of events in Liberia.

Ghana and Liberia, once in the forefront in the making of Africa's immediate post-independence political order, now seem low-keyed as Africa strives to remake the old order. The making of a new order is being played out in the transition from the OAU to the African Union (AU). Though the AU was formally consummated in 2002, the transition is ongoing, for the old debate has returned with a new cast of characters. Libya, South Africa, and Nigeria have clearly replaced the Ghana and Liberia of an earlier era.

One must fervently hope that when Africa finally settles on a political order to regulate its affairs it will not be an order characterized by what Sekou Toure called "un syndicat des chefs d'Etat" ("a trade union of heads of state"), but an order structured by, and anchored in, the will of the people of Africa.

I thank you!

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