

EXCURSUS 2

Svend E. Holsoe on LIBERATED LIBERIA?

kind of thinking required for the successful conduct of foreign policy must at times be diametrically opposed to the kind of considerations by which the people and their representatives are likely to be moved. In the American case these inherent difficulties are vastly aggravated by the fact that the U.S. almost continuously either recovers from or prepares for a presidential election. Especially in the latter case, the temptation is overwhelming for an administration to gain electoral advantage by catering to the preferences of public opinion, regardless of their intrinsic merits in terms of foreign policy. It is part of the statesman's art to steer a middle course between respect for the perennial principles of sound foreign policy and the fickle preferences of public opinion.

These considerations shed illuminating light upon the apparent paradox of President Carter emerging from the primaries as almost unbeatable for the Democratic nomination while the U.S. under his leadership has suffered a string of humiliating defeats in its relations with other nations. The most spectacular of these defeats is, of course, the continuing captivity of fifty American hostages in Iran. By forswearing from the outset any form of violence in response to this outrage, Carter deprived himself of any serious leverage against Iran. Thus the U.S. is helpless in a situation that in another period of American history would have called for swift action settling the issue even at the risk of some American lives.

Nevertheless, the president, by putting the emphasis on saving fifty American lives by peaceful means, struck a sympathetic chord in American public opinion. Carter did what President Woodrow Wilson was alleged to have done: "He kept us out of war." It did not occur to public opinion or to Carter that American foreign policy has a duty, not only to fifty hostages, but also to the nation whose life and fortunes might be jeopardized by the actions or inactions of the president.

The anarchic character of the international system forces Carter, following historical convention, to contemplate physical violence, even nuclear war, as the ultimate factor in the settlement of international issues. Yet the irrationality of such violence makes him shrink from the use even of conventional violence lest it might escalate into nuclear war. Thus in an international crisis the president acts with utmost caution—if he acts at all—and he compensates for the lack of provocative action with bellicose talk.

The issue is not whether the president ought to pursue the national interest regardless of the possibility of nuclear war, but where to cross the line between concern for the national interest and fear of nuclear war. The problem is whether Carter, in his anxiety to avoid the apocalyptic abyss, has not chosen inaction as the easier alternative. The president seems paralyzed before the face of the future.

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...Isaac Bashevis Singer, recent Nobel Prize winner for literature, astonished the literary world when he was awarded the Nobel Prize for writing in Yiddish, long considered a dying language. Singer believes Yiddish will be resurrected just as Hebrew was after a lapse of 2,000 years.

The public is invited.

—*Huguenot Herald* (New Paltz, New York), April 23

We'll try to make it then.

The recent military coup in Liberia represents in a fundamental sense the usurption of the political, economic, and—most important—cultural dominance of the descendants of Afro-American colonizers, and a shift of power to the hands of indigenous Liberians. The April 12 assassination of William Richard Tolbert, Jr., Liberia's nineteenth president, caused the immediate collapse of his government and an end to a century of Afro-American rule.

Master Sergeant Samuel Kanyon Doe, leader of the military group, was promptly declared head of state and chairman of a newly created, seventeen-member People's Redemption Council. Doe moved swiftly to consolidate his power, calling in and imprisoning former Cabinet members. All airfields and borders were closed, and military officers were immediately appointed to take over the positions of superintendent of the nation's nine countries and five territories. Little resistance was encountered by the new regime. Members of the Progressive People's party (PPP) who had been detained because they had called for the overthrow of the Tolbert government were immediately released, and several were appointed to the new Cabinet. Five Cabinet posts were also given to members of the army, and three Cabinet members were held over from the former government.

Foreign governments and religious leaders in Liberia urged the new head of state to avoid public show trials and hangings of former officials. Nevertheless, on April 22 thirteen ministers and other top officials of the Tolbert government were executed by firing squad before a cheering crowd of thousands. Doe called for the population's return to normalcy and issued a proclamation declaring that anyone found disobeying the rulings of the People's Redemption Council would be dealt with summarily.

Although many were surprised by the suddenness and swiftness of the coup, the seeds of the revolt have been in gestation for a long time. There can be little doubt that the immediate cause was the inability of Tolbert's government to control the continued misuse of government money and property by officials. In addition, the recent expense of hosting the Organization of African Unity Heads of State meeting, the decreasing demand for iron ore (one of Liberia's major exports), and soaring inflation and energy costs all contributed to a rise in unemployment and a severe squeeze on Liberia's poor.

In comparison to many other African nations, Liberia's pace of modernization has been faster and the soundness of its economy more secure. In spite of this, a more fundamental issue remained to be addressed by the Tolbert government, and the coup has addressed it directly. Liberia's colonizers, nineteenth-century Afro-American settlers, along with their cultural descendants, have been the arbiters of modernity. If individuals were of settler background, they encountered little difficulty rising within the economic political system. Those who were of native parentage entered the modern urban world at the sufferance of the settler group. Consequently, people of indigenous origin were forced to compromise themselves and their heritage in order to participate in the development of their own country.

There is no doubt that President Tolbert attempted to broaden the political base to include the rural population and to involve them in the running of the nation. But he could not escape what his settler ancestry symbolized for the majority of Liberians. Now both groups—and the cleavage is not as sharp as it may appear—will need each other. For the immediate future it would not be surprising if the political situation continues to be unstable. Still, the major importance of the coup lies in the fact that indigenous peoples of Liberia are now, and are likely to remain, the arbiters of modernity for all the peoples of Liberia.

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EXCURSUS 3

Alexander Wilde on IS COLOMBIA ON THE BRINK OF ANYTHING?

In the 1940s, Colombia's great populist politician, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, used to explain in crowded plazas that Colombia was not one country but two. The first of these was the country of the people, the *país nacional*, the other was the country of politics, the *país político*. Colombia's problem, Gaitán thought, was the gulf between the two. The "country of politics" did not deal with the nation's real problems. It was a game with its own rules, self-contained and self-serving, dedicated to its own ends of patronage and power. Gaitán was cut down by an assassin's bullet in 1948, but as recent events in Bogotá have confirmed, his analysis is more valid than ever.

From February 27 to April 27 urban guerrillas held diplomats from some fourteen countries hostage in the embassy of the Dominican Republic. The tight drama played out there—the parleys between the government and guerrillas, the troops drawn up around the scene—vividly suggested the hermetic quality of the whole "country of politics." For the actors the immediate stakes were and are tangible, but Colombian society has looked on with detachment. The only difference from Gaitán's time (and it is an important one) is that the drama now includes more than politicians from the traditional Liberal and Conservative parties. Both the army and the guerrillas have become part of the *país político*.

None of the principals in the embassy standoff has been able to rally any substantial proportion of the population. The government of Liberal party President Julio César Turbay has claimed to be defending Colombia's democratic institutions. It has received ritual expressions of support from politicians, organized business, and the army (in a declaration headed "no to subversion, yes to democracy"). But mid-term elections held in March, in a calm and relaxed atmosphere, did not give it a public vote of confidence. Although the government lists gained a slim majority, the low turnout—less than a quarter of eligible voters—indicated widespread indifference.

The M-19 revolutionaries have seemed equally irrelevant. While claiming to fight for social justice and the people, they have acted in isolation from other organized forces of change. The democratic Left opposition—such as the renovationist Liberals and the independent broad-front Firmes movement—have condemned the guerrillas' methods as quixotic and counterproductive. In fact, guer-

rilla revolutionaries are nothing new in Colombia. They have attacked the government—first in the countryside, now in the city—for twenty years. They have been able to capture headlines and hostages, but never significant popular support. Including the urban M-19 and the rural FARC, ELN, and smaller groups, they number at most 2,000 against an army of 60,000 and police forces of 30,000.

The social transformation they seek is no closer than it was in 1960, but gradually they have become a regular part of the "country of politics." Their continuing attacks over several decades have underwritten a rationale for increasing repression. Their official counterpart, the army, has played an ever more important role in political life. Confronting each other at the Dominican embassy, the two armed camps symbolized a larger process of political decay: Together they maintained the value of violence—a traditional political currency in Colombia—and devalued that of participation.

Colombia has experienced a generation of dynamic economic development and rapid social change. Economic growth has averaged nearly 6 per cent annually over the last twenty years. Inflation, that substitute for civil war (as Albert Hirschman called it), has recently reached 30 and 40 per cent annually, after years at single-digit figures. Non-traditional exports have boomed, led by that "other" category in the accounts—drugs—that may now equal coffee. The result has been a pervasive sense of moral crisis. The country is awash in dollars. The black market rate is lower than the official one, charging, in effect, a laundry fee. Easy money and financial sleight-of-hand have produced an "emerging class," unprecedented political corruption, and a feeling of "insecurity" everywhere in daily life. The country feels itself, in the phrase of former President Carlos Lleras Restrepo, "coming unbound."

Politics should clarify a society's options, but to this point Colombia's democracy has not been up to the task. The still relatively free play of political forces has produced a sense not of conjuncture but confusion. The traditional parties have fragmented. New movements have struggled, unsuccessfully, against government harassment and the prevailing climate of disaffection. For more than a decade the one clear and consistent response to change has been militarization.

In a country that has had only five years of military rule in more than a century, the army has steadily extended its influence and authority. A state of siege, invoked to deal with the guerrilla threat and sense of political paralysis, has been in force almost continuously for the last thirty years. Now, with the Security Statute of 1978, the army has de facto control of large areas of the countryside and much authority de jure over administration of justice.

The *país político* has not yet been capable of debating what is at stake in this trend. A classic coup d'état does not seem in the cards, at least for now. The minister of defense, General Luis Carlos Camacho Leyva, is a formidable and ambitious man, with a law degree in addition to twenty years in government. But he already has considerable—some say the determining—influence over a wide range of policies concerned with internal subversion and public order.

The real danger is a kind of coup by easy stages that may one day find Colombia's battered democracy an empty shell. Both Camacho Leyva and President Turbay tend to equate the preservation of democracy with the control of subversion. An incident like the Dominican embassy takeover confirms for them the need for a harsh