"A Certain Responsibility for the Morals of Liberia": U.S. Foreign Policy and the Liberian Forced Labour Scandal

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Introduction

In 1930, eighty-three years after a population of free blacks and freed slaves that left the United States to settle on the West Coast of Africa declared the independence of Liberia, the continent's first republic, a commission appointed by the League of Nations reported that there existed in the country a system of "forcible deprivation of the liberty of native subjects under conditions hardly distinguishable from slavery of the most oppressive type."[1] The investigation brought to light that this system of forced labour was in some cases the work of officials in the highest posts of the Liberian Government. The descendants of the black émigrés who had moved to Liberia to escape bondage and discrimination in the United States had turned to exploitation of the Indigenous African population as a source of personal and government revenue. This darkly ironic scenario captured the attention of the international community, and resulted in an investigation by the League of Nations. As a result, a long history of exploitation and subjugation of the Native population of Liberia at the hands of the Americo-Liberians was made public in the League Commission's report, causing many to question the fitness of the Americo-Liberians to rule the country.

The United States, though not a member of the League, also found itself entangled in the diplomatic fallout. One factor that motivated U.S. interest was the role of the United States in Liberian history. The settling of freed slaves and free blacks from the United States on the West Coast of Africa had been an initiative thought up, promoted, and financially supported by the American Colonization Society. The U.S. Government had

[1] "Report of the International Commission of Inquiry Into the Existence of Slavery and Forced Labour in the Republic of Liberia, 1930," (Hereafter cited as "League Report") Box 7012, 882.5048/392, Record Group 59 (hereafter RG 59), U.S. National Archives (hereafter NARA), 20.

never officially adopted a policy of colonization, nor had it assumed any responsibility for the Americo-Liberian colonists. Nonetheless, the fact that the republic was founded by people who had once resided in the United States — even though only as second class citizens — and had been assisted in their relocation by an American philanthropic organization could not be ignored. Throughout Liberia's history, the United States' perception of a moral obligation was cited by both Washington and Monrovia when U.S. assistance was extended or requested.

Yet, U.S. interest in Liberia went beyond a sense of moral obligation. In 1926, after two years of negotiations with the Liberian Government assisted by the U.S. State Department, the Firestone Tire & Rubber Company had worked out a concession deal in which the Liberian Government would lease the company up to a million acres of land for rubber cultivation at six cents an acre per annum and accept a $5 million loan through a third party bank. The forced labour scandal, rearing its head only a few years after Firestone had begun operations in Liberia, threatened the company's investment in two major ways. First, Firestone was charged with utilizing forced labour by some observers and blamed by others for precipitating the use of forced labour by the Liberian Government by draining the Liberian labour market.[2] Second, League intervention in Liberia could potentially threaten Firestone and the United States' operations in the Republic. If the League concluded that Liberia's lack of economic development was a major factor behind the use of forced labour, it might suggest an increase in Liberian government control over the economy and foreign investment. There was the further concern that if the League

[2] Raymond Buell voiced this second concern in his book *The Native Problem in Africa.* (*Volume II,* Hamden: Archon Books, 1965. Originally published in 1928).

concluded that the Liberian government was unfit to rule the country, the imperial powers in the League might try to bring Liberia into the colonial fold.

Between the United States' apparent historical commitment to Liberia and its general commitment to defending U.S. private interest abroad, the State Department was bound to become involved in the fallout of the forced labour scandal. Washington's response was, however, heavily influenced by the conscious revaluation and redefinition of the United States' role in the world that was taking place during the interwar period, a time in which the United States grappled with how best to react to its emergence as a prominent world power. In general, the 1920s were a period of U.S. economic expansion through the extension of both private enterprise and loans to the world at large. [3] In many cases, this expansion was accompanied by American advisers being imposed on the countries that were host to American corporations, recipients of American loans, or, as was often the case, both. By the end of the 1920s and into the 1930s, however, the Depression had

[3] This interpretation of U.S. interwar foreign policy was first introduced by revisionist historians. The pioneer of interwar revisionism, William A. Williams, contested the traditional claim that U.S. foreign policy at this time was characterized by isolationism— a conscious withdrawal from world affairs. (William Appleman Williams, "The Legend of Isolationism in the 1920's," *Science & Society* 18 (Winter, 1954), 1-20.; William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1959.) The revisionists saw the interwar period instead as being contiguous with the post-war American extension of power internationally. (Brian McKercher, "Reaching for the Brass Ring: The Recent Historiography of Interwar American Foreign Relations," in Michael J. Hogan ed., *Paths to Power: The Historiography of American Foreign Relations to 1941*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000. 183-85.) The revisionists went a long way in dispelling the notion of pure "isolationism" in the 1920s and 30s, so that even those who have sought to examine "isolationism" in the period more recently have generally not reverted to the hard-line traditional interpretation. (Examples include; Christopher McKnight Nichols, *Promise and Peril: American at the Dawn of a Global Age*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011. ; and Benjamin D. Rhodes, *United States Foreign Policy in the Interwar Period, 1918-1941: The Golden Age of American Diplomatic and Military Complacency*, Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2001.) Perhaps the most important contributions of the revisionist school were; i) the widening of focus from U.S.-European relations to the United States' interactions with the developing world as well; and ii) the examination of U.S. financial diplomacy as an integral part of U.S. foreign policy and imperial expansion. An excellent overview of "New Left" or revisionist historiography is; John Braeman, "The New Left and American Foreign Policy during the Age of Normalcy: A Re-Examination," *The Business History Review* 57 (Spring, 1983), 73-104.

thrown into question both the feasibility of continuing such an active *role* in the world economy and the belief in the American capitalist system that had underpinned it.

A number of historians who have recently sought to examine more closely the role American private enterprise and financial diplomacy played in early twentieth century U.S. foreign policy have identified the end of the 1920s as a time in which changing views of the United States' role in the world and the economic uncertainty that accompanied the market crash of 1929 precipitated a shift in Washington's approach towards foreign relations.[4] In *Financial Missionaries to the World*, Emily Rosenberg dedicates a great deal of attention to developing an account of the two competing interpretations of U.S. foreign policy in the 1920s — the traditional narrative of U.S. private expansion as beneficial and non-imperialist vs. the anti-imperialist and anti-banking narrative. Rosenberg argues that a shift took place at the end of the 1920s in which public opinion and government policy went from reflecting the "traditional" narrative to being more heavily informed by the broadly "anti-imperialist" interpretation.[5] There has also been a good deal of work done in

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[4] Key examples are; Jason Colby, *The Business of Empire: United Fruit, Race, and U.S. Expansion in Central America*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011. (Specifically pgs. 176-178); Akira Iriye, *The Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations Volume III: The Globalizing of America, 1913-1945*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993. (See Chapters 8 & 9); Anne L. Foster, *Projections of Power: The United States and Europe in Colonial Southeast Asia, 1919-1941*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2010. (Specifically pgs. 112-113.); and, to an extent, Thomas F. O'Brien, *The Revolutionary Mission: American Enterprise in Latin America, 1900-1945,* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996. Jeff Frieden provided an alternate interpretation in which he characterized the 1920s as a time in which foreign policy was somewhat paralyzed by the competition between proponents of internationalism and insularity to define U.S. policy. He argues that the market crash in fact resulted in a move towards a more coherent internationalist policy under F.D. Roosevelt. (Jeff Frieden, "Sectoral Conflict and Foreign Economic Policy, 1914-1940," *International Organization* 42 (Winter, 1988), 59-90.) Frieden, however, focuses almost entirely on American policy in Europe, glossing over the "dollar diplomacy" being carried out in the developing world throughout the 1920s, but particularly in the middle of the decade. He therefore is unable to comment on the general withdrawal from that form of financial diplomacy in the immediate wake of the market crash.

[5] Emily S. Rosenberg, *Financial Missionaries to the World: The Politics and Culture of Dollar Diplomacy, 1900-1930,* Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.; See also; Emily S. Rosenberg, *Spreading the American Dream: American Economic and Cultural Expansion, 1890-1945*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1982.

recent years examining the culture of American imperialism,[6] as well as the central importance of private corporations in extending the American empire abroad during the early twentieth-century.[7]

There has been relatively little written on the subject of U.S.-Liberia relations in the early twentieth century.[8] L. Beecher's doctoral thesis, "The State Department and Liberia 1908-1941," provides the most comprehensive account of the mechanics of the State Department's approach to Liberia in this period, but does little to frame his analysis in terms of the wider context of U.S. foreign policy.[9] Emily Rosenberg's "The Invisible Protectorate: The United States, Liberia, and the Evolution of Neocolonialism, 1909-40," seeks to place the United States' approach to Liberia in the wider context of "dollar diplomacy" and burgeoning "neocolonialism," but it offers only a brief treatment of U.S.-Liberia relations, especially of the complex forced labour scandal.[10] I.K. Sundiata's *Black Scandal* stands out as the only recent monograph entirely dedicated to examining the

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[6] Mary A. Renda, *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism, 1915-1940*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001.; Foster, *Projections of Power*, 2010.; Greg Grandin, *Fordlandia:The Rise and Fall of Ford's Forgotten Jungle City*, New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009.; Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease, eds., *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1993.

[7] Colby, *The Business of Empire*, 2011.; Foster, *Projections of Power*, 2010.

[8] Notable works that have dealt with U.S.-Liberia relations in this period are; Robert Earle Anderson, *Liberia: America's African Friend,* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1952.; Raymond L. Buell, *Liberia: A Century of Survival, 1847-1947*, London: Oxford University Press.; Raymond L. Buell, *The Native Problem in Africa*, Vol. II. New York: The Macmillan Co, 1928.; Raymond W. Bixler, *The Foreign Policy of the United States in Liberia*, New York: Pageant Press, Inc., 1957.; Frank Robert Chalk, *The United States and the International Struggle for Rubber, 1914-1941* (Ph.D. diss. University of Wisconsin, 1970); Arthur J. Knoll, "Firestone's Labor Policy, 1924-1939," *Liberian Studies Journal* XVI (1991), 50-75.; and sections of; J. Gus Liebenow, *Liberia: The Evolution of Privilege*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969.

[9] L. Beecher, "The State Department and Liberia 1908-1941: A Heterogeneous Record" (Ph.D. diss., University of Georgia, 1971).

[10] Emily S. Rosenberg, "The Invisible Protectorate: The United States, Liberia, and the Evolution of Neocolonialism, 1909-40," *Diplomatic History* 9 (July, 1985): 191-214.

United States' response to the Liberian scandal.[11] Sundiata's work concentrates on how the American response was tempered both by concern for Firestone's interests and African-American lobbyists both for and against U.S. intervention. In his book *Brothers and Strangers*, Sundiata gives a nod to the effect the scandal arising at period of transition in U.S. foreign policy had on the Department's response, but does not develop the idea in any depth in either book.[12]

This thesis explores the range of factors that influenced the United States' response to the forced labour scandal, with particular attention to the tensions that arose in U.S. interwar foreign policy as it reached a junction in the late-1920s. Examining the State Department's internal and official responses to the scandal reveals the trouble it had adopting an international approach and stepping back from unilateral involvement in foreign affairs in the early-1930s. While Washington's primary concern during the labour scandal seemed to be avoiding charges of imperialism at home and abroad by trying to abandon the use of capital and diplomacy to increase the power of both the U.S. Government and American private enterprise in Liberia, the *modus operandi* of 1920s was not so easily discarded. The belief in the importance of projecting U.S. economic power and culture to the far reaches of the globe through private enterprise that lay at the centre of 1920s foreign policy persisted.

The divergence between the two approaches accounts for the great deal of difficulty the United States had developing a consistent and coherent response to the labour scandal.

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[11] I.K. Sundiata, *Black Scandal: America and the Liberian Labor Crisis, 1929-1936*, Philadelphia: The Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1980.
[12] I.K. Sundiata, *Brothers and Strangers: Black Zion, Black Slavery, 1914-40,* Durham: Duke University Press, 2003. (Specifically, 142.)

Officially, the State Department initially sought to disengage from the Liberia situation by placing the matter in the hands of an international commission. But behind closed doors there was a constant push to rally support for increased U.S. involvement. Those who argued in favour of a larger U.S. role in Liberia often drew on a discourse that had been dominant in the 1920s, which held that American economic expansion was not imperialism, but instead promoted progress and liberty. Adherents of this belief also tended to see the United States as holding a unique position of being able to exert economic and a degree of political control over another country to *save* it from the imperialism of the European powers, without itself being considered to be an imperial power. This holdover from the 1920s met increasing scepticism from a growing number of critics.[13]

The rising tide of opposition to U.S. expansionism, amplified by a shaken faith in the capitalist system after the market crash in October 1929, was characterized by a public that was less and less willing to delineate between European colonialism and the dollar diplomacy of the 1920s.[14] By the late 1920s and early 1930s, a changing discourse around what constituted imperialism meant that it was no longer so clear that American economic forays into the developing world were different in kind from European imperialism. Washington therefore had to adapt its policies in order to avoid being accused of imperialism.

This paper will examine how the policy aims of the 1920s and 30s played into the U.S. response to the forced labour scandal in Liberia. Chapter I provides an account of the forced labour scandal in the context of the relations between the Americo-Liberian settlers

[13] Rosenberg, *Financial Missionaries*, 2003, 219.
[14] Ibid., 230-31.

and the Indigenous Africans who inhabited what became Liberia. Chapter II gives a brief overview of the history of U.S.-Liberian relations, paying particular attention to the Firestone investment. The third chapter focuses in on the State Department's response to the forced labour scandal, following the various changes that took place. In it, I argue that the Department's approach to the Liberia controversy reflects the wider struggle to define foreign policy as the 1920s confidence in and commitment to Dollar Diplomacy receded with the onset of financial depression. The story reveals not only the complexity of the scandal from the State Department's perspective, but also the inadequacy of its response in addressing the issue of Americo-Liberian abuse of the Indigenous population that was at the heart of the forced labour crisis.

Chapter I: *Settlers and Natives*

The African-American settlers who arrived on the West Coast of Africa in the early nineteenth-century had, in part, been sent with the hope that they would work alongside the Native inhabitants to build a nation of racial compatriots. Over time, however, it became evident that the majority of the Americo-Liberian settlers and their descendants had no interest in integrating with the much larger Native population. In fact, despite the American Colonization Society's grand visions of racial kinship, what emerged was a system of Americo-Liberian subjugation of the Indigenous people in order to promote the settlers' own political and economic power.[15]

In early January of 1817, a number of prominent political and legal figures launched the "American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Color of the United States"— later to be known as the American Colonization Society (ACS). The aim expressed in the organization's constitution was "to promote and execute a plan for colonizing (with their consent) the free people of color residing in [the United States]... [to] Africa."[16] The ACS spread quickly, opening chapters in various states and garnering the support of a range of white Americans who were drawn together by a mutual anxiety toward the growing free black population.[17] Robert Finley, a founding member of the ACS,

[15] Perhaps the best account of the development and entrenchment of Americo-Liberian oligarchic rule is Gus Liebenow's, *Liberia: The Evolution of Privilege*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969.)
[16] American Colonization Society, *Original Subscription List, 1817*. 1817. 1.
[17] The historiography of the ACS is marked by a prolonged debate over whether the organization was fundamentally motivated by pro- or antislavery aims. I have argued elsewhere that this has been a largely fruitless way of trying to understand what drew the members of the ACS, many of whom had markedly different opinions on the subject of slavery, together. (Shiraz Higgins, "Racists and Relocation: A Historiographical Overview of Interpretations of the American Colonization Society," unpublished, 2011.) What is obvious in the rhetoric of pro- and antislavery members of the ACS alike is a profound fear of the free black population. The key difference is that, while proslavery members supported colonization of free blacks, antislavery supporters saw colonization as a way to reconcile their support of manumission with their conviction that having more free blacks in the United States would destroy the country by bringing about

voiced these concerns clearly when he stated that free blacks remaining in the United States would "be unfavorable to… [the] industry and morals" of the nation and would place a "heavy burden" on white society.[18] The members of the ACS expected that by returning black Americans to "the land of their fathers," they would not only be saving the United States from inevitable race war, but would also "introduce the blessings of civilized society among a people sunk in ignorance and barbarism" through the freed blacks that emigrated.[19] Their vision was that black settlers would return to Africa and share what they had learned of civilized culture in America with their African brethren, thereby both solving the "race problem" in the United States and helping to "uplift" Africa to a higher level of civilization.

In 1822, the ACS laid claim to the territory on the West Coast of Africa that would become the colony of Liberia and began facilitating the emigration of free blacks and manumitted slaves from the United States. The territory also became a place for the United States Navy to deposit captives rescued from illegal slaving vessels — known in Liberia as "Congoes." The modest population of settlers from the United States, or "Americo-Liberians," was estimated at 11,500 by 1867.The number of Africans who settled in Liberia after being recaptured from slave ships by the U.S. Navy was tabulated at over 5,700 the

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unprecedented racial conflict. So long as the aim was to curb the growth or facilitate the decline of the free black population, xenophobic slavers and abolitionists alike could support the movement. Two works that do a good job of developing the racism of the colonization movement are; P.J. Staudenraus, *The African Colonization Movement 1816-1865*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1961.; and Claude A. Clegg, *The Price of Liberty: African Americans and the Making of Liberia*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004.

[18] Robert Finley, "Thoughts on the Colonization of Free Blacks," Washington, 1816. 4-5.

[19] Ebenezer Burgess, "Address to The American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Colour of the United States," Washington: Davis and Force, 1818. 2.

same year.[20] The Americo-Liberian and Congo settler population was therefore vastly outnumbered by the Indigenous population, which is estimated to have been between 800,000 and 2 million people in 1930, at which point it would have, if anything, shrunk since the nineteenth century.[21] Despite this demographic disparity, the Americo-Liberians declared the independence of Liberia in 1847, modelling its declaration closely on that of the United States. The declaration of independence marked the beginning of well over a century of Americo-Liberian oligarchic rule under which the Indigenous population was used as a means to support the settlers' hegemony.

One of the assumptions that had played a role in motivating support for sending African-Americans to Africa was that, since they were of the same 'race,' the African American émigrés and the native Africans would live together in harmony. Furthermore, as noted above, many in the ACS believed that the Americo-Liberians could play the role of missionaries of Christianity and American culture and industry, spreading the light of God and a Protestant work ethic to the "Dark Continent."[22]

The Americo-Liberians did, as the ACS had hoped, bring aspects of American

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[20] The population figures are derived from the total number of immigrants to Liberia between 1822 and 1867. (Liebenow, *Liberia,*1969. 8.) The population, however, may have been considerably lower, as the death rate and emigration rate was fairly high in the nineteenth century. In 1947 the Americo-Liberian population had reportedly remained at around 12,000 people. (Buell, *Liberia,* 1947, 7.)

[21] I.K. Sundiata, *Black Scandal,* 1980. 7.; While Sundiata gives the figure 1.5 to 2 million, in 1929, the Liberian politician who had exposed the forced labour scandal to the League of Nations, T. J. R. Faulkner, claimed that "the native population, instead of being a million and a half is only eight hundred thousand. His reasoning for proposing the lower figure was that; a) the Government had not taken a census; b) the amount of head tax collected denoted a smaller population; and c) the country was "becoming depopulated on account of forced labor." ("Memorandum of Conversation with Mr. Faulkner, Sept 16, 1929," M613, 10-14-5, Roll 14, 882.5048/99, RG 59, NARA.) ; The League Commission also reported in 1930 that "very large numbers" of the natives had fled Liberia due to the oppressive policies of the Government. (League Report, 175.)

[22] Two examples of this sentiment are; William McMurray, *A Sermon Preached in Behalf of the American Colonization Society*. New York: J. Seymour, John-Street, (1825). 12.; and John Wheeler, *A Sermon Preached Before the Vermont Colonization Society*, Windsor: W. Spooner, 1825, 9.

culture with them to the West Coast of Africa, but they were surely not the aspects the members of the Colonization Society had in mind. Despite the ACS' assumptions of shared race being grounds for cooperation, the Americo-Liberians did not see the Indigenous Africans as kin. In fact, the settler community set up a social hierarchy that mirrored the one they had faced in the United States, with culture replacing skin colour as the basis for division. The Americo-Liberians' attempts to recreate their own version of the American South in which 'civilized' versus 'uncivilized' stood in for 'white' and 'black' was uncannily comprehensive; many even mimicked the style of dress and built manor houses in the style of the Southern plantation mansions. Moreover, well into the twentieth century, official Liberian documents referred consistently to Indigenous labourers as "boys," a term taken directly from the lexicon of Southern racial discrimination, while it was not uncommon for the Indigenous people to call Americo-Liberians "white" people.[23] Americo-Liberians were also known to refer to the Indigenous people of the interior as "Bush Niggers."[24]

The Americo-Liberians' efforts to take on the role that had been played by Southern whites in their country of origin also affected their economic policies. Because manual and agricultural labour seemed to be inextricably linked to the systems of slavery and racial discrimination in the U.S. context, many of the Americo-Liberians "neglect[ed] almost entirely the Cultivation of the ground."[25] As the ACS reported in 1832, the settlers, for the most part had "imagined that they could obtain a subsistence in Africa with little or no

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[23] Liebenow, *Liberia,* 1969. 15.
[24] Henry F. Reeve, *The Black Republic: Liberia; Its Political and Social Conditions To-Day,* New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969. 131. (originally published 1923).
[25] Moses Jackson, "Moses Jackson to Eliott West, March 22, 1846," in *Slaves No More: Letters from Liberia 1833-1869*, ed. Bell I Wiley, Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1980. 257.; Liebenow, *Liberia,*1969, 12-13.

labour."[26] The result was that when the Americo-Liberians did turn to agriculture, they often sought to establish plantation like farms where they took on administrative roles, hiring or coercing Natives or lower class Americo-Liberian and Congo labourers to work their fields.[27]

The divisions between the Americo-Liberians and the Indigenous population were not only social and economic, but were also written into the laws of the republic and the regulations of interior administration.[28] In order to be a citizen, an Indigenous person had to prove that they were "civilized," which required renunciation of any traditional religion or customs; adopting Christianity and Western culture; and holding title to land. The application of this rubric was largely arbitrary and, as such, there was no guarantee that an Indigenous African would be granted citizenship or the vote, even if they met all of the conditions.[29] The policy therefore seemed to be geared more towards exclusion than assimilation, with very few Indigenous people managing to achieve citizenship and the franchise for the most part remaining limited to the Americo-Liberian community. The fundamental reason for this policy of exclusion was that extending political rights to the Indigenous population would immediately strip the vastly outnumbered Americo-Liberian population of the political dominance that enabled them to monopolize political power and gain privileged access to the territory's resources, human and natural.

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[26] *The Fifteenth Annual Report of the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Colour of the United States,* Washington: James C. Dunn, 1832. 5.
[27] For accounts of use of forced labour on private farms, see; "League Report," 1930, 148-53.
[28] A particularly striking example in the latter was the detailed information regarding the number of unpaid Indigenous "carriers" and "camp labourers" a given political official was entitled to enlist for incursions into the hinterland. (*Departmental Regulations: Supplementary and Revising Existing Regulations Governing the Administration of the Interior of the Republic of Liberia*, Monrovia: Montserrado Printing and Publishing Company, 1923. 2-3.)
[29] Yekutiel Gershoni, *Black Colonialism: The Americo-Liberian Scramble for the Hinterland*, Boulder: Westview Press, Inc., 1980. 22-25.

Despite not being considered citizens and being denied the right to vote, the Indigenous population was subjected to education, poll, and hut taxes. In addition to this, all Indigenous men were expected to provide the labour for public projects such as road building and the construction of barracks for the Liberian Frontier Force (LFF). Some obligatory labour for public works was common in most African countries in the early twentieth century, but generally such labour demands were limited to three months a year and the worker was paid something close to the minimum wage.[30] In Liberia, however, most of the time "nothing whatever, either food or pay, was allowed [the Native labourers] by the Government," and labourers were expected to provide or purchase their own tools.[31] Moreover, it was standard for Native labourers to do this unpaid labour for nine months of the year, with three months allotted for them to do their own agricultural work, the fruits of which the Government took a hefty portion to supply their barracks.[32]

For the most part, the Indigenous population received nothing in return for their contributions of labour to the country's various projects, food to the District commissioners and Frontier Force, and money to the Government's coffers. Members of Liberian Government constantly expressed their commitment to civilizing the Indigenous population; promoting the "advancement, and prosperity;" and offering them education and

[30] "League Report," 1930, 97.; That being said, it is not as if Liberia was the only place in Africa where this system was abused in the late nineteenth- and early-twentieth centuries. A well-known, and far worse, example of forced labour is King Leopold's rubber ventures in the Belgian Congo, which resulted in as many as ten million deaths. (Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999.) Further examples in the French and British African colonies can also be cited. (See Sundiata, *Brothers and Strangers*, 2003, 94-96.)
[31] "Mrs. W.T. Francis to Wm. R. Castle, Dec 22, 1929," M613, 10-14-5, Roll 14, 882.5048/184, RG 59, NARA.
[32] "Mrs. W.T. Francis to Wm. R. Castle, Dec 22, 1929," 882.5048/184, NARA.; "Memorandum of Conversation with Mr. Faulkner, Sept 16, 1929," M613, 10-14-5, Roll 14, 8825048/99, RG 59, NARA.; "League Report," 1930, 108.

healthcare services.[33] But whether it was unable, or simply uncommitted to, fulfilling these promises, little was done to help the Indigenous population during the first century of Liberia's history.[34]

The true views of the Americo-Liberians in power were made clear in how they spoke of the Native population itself. Side by side with talk of assimilation and improving the lot of the Native Africans, President C.D.B. King in a 1921 referred to the Indigenous population as "our largest and most important national asset," "the materials with which the foundation is to be made," and "our largest national economic asset, which if wisely used and directed will prove to be the greatest source of our strength."[35] This reflects a discourse of objectification in which Africans were reduced to little more than an economic resource for Americo-Liberians like King to utilize.

It was this view that underlay the widespread exploitation of the Native Africans, not only by the government through taxation and mandatory labour, but also by individual Americo-Liberians in positions of power. Chiefs and villagers in the interior were subjected to regular harassment and extortion by LFF officers and soldiers, and by the various government officials that oversaw the administration of the hinterland. It was not uncommon for chiefs of villages to be "arrested at a moment's notice, tied up… and

[33] "President's Annual Message 1921," The Collection of the Honourable Louis Arthur Grimes 1883-1948: Part I Miscellaneous Pamphlets and Documents (Grimes Collection Part I), Microfilm Roll (MFR) 2.
[34] A desire to maintain political dominance seemed to be one of the factors in the failure to provide education to the Indigenous population. In 1930, the League Commission reported that if conditions were to be improved for the native Africans, they must be given opportunity to obtain education. The commission argued that education of the Indigenous people had largely been neglected due to a "policy of suppression and seclusion for fear of competition." It was further stated that the maintenance Americo-Liberian rule had largely been "at the expense of the Indigenous peoples of the interior" and that, in order to maintain their position of power, the Americo-Liberians had consciously prevented education. "A policy of gross intimidation and suppression" had therefore been "fostered and encouraged" throughout the history of Americo-Liberian rule. ("League Report," 1930, 172-174.)
[35] "President's Annual Message 1921," Grimes Collection Part I, MFR 2.

dragged off to the District Commissioner, where they [might] be held... [or] threatened with death" if they did not produce money for bond.[36] The League Report also tells of LFF soldiers forcing women from surrounding villages to allow themselves to be "used... as [the soldiers'] wives," despite the fact that these women had "husbands and children at home." The League Report and Liberian Government archives are riddled with reports of the LFF soldiers and officers raiding villages for food and valuables, abusing the inhabitants and sometimes ransacking homes and "appropriating the women."[37]

Americo-Liberians also exported the Indigenous labourers for profit. While migratory labour pre-dated Americo-Liberian rule, it was under the Americo-Liberian colonists that it became a staple of the Liberian economy and developed into something that closely resembled a slave trade. Before the arrival of the Americo-Liberian settlers, the coastal Kru people had hired themselves out as contract labourers. Known for their skill as seamen, they could often be found working on European vessels going up and down the African Coast. Chiefs had also facilitated the export of labourers, charging shipping companies and employers in other African countries recruitment fees for labourers that they supplied and were then shipped to other parts of Africa.[38] The market for Liberian labour was vast and Liberian labourers were shipped all along the African Coast, to the island of Fernando Po, the Congo, Sierra Leone, and even South Africa.

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[36] "League Report," 1930, 138-39.
[37] Ibid., 144.; Just a few examples are: "Secretary of the Interior to President Howard, March 8, 1917," Liberian Government Archives (LGA) II, Box 4, Secretary of Interior, re: Central Province, 1912-1919, Holsoe Collection/Indiana University Liberia Archives (Hereafter HC).; Secretary of State to Commanding Officer of the Liberian Frontier Force, April 27th, 1920," LGA II, Box 11, War Department, 1920, HC.; "Saniquellie District Commissioner to Secretary of the Interior, March 8, 1925," LGA I, Box 1, Central Province Saniquellie District Commissioner, 1923-1930, HC.
[38] George E. Brooks provides an excellent account of the Kru migratory labour before Americo-Liberian rule in his monograph *The Kru Mariner in the Nineteenth Century: An Historical Compendium* (Newark: Liberian Studies Association in America, 1972.)

As the Americo-Liberians extended their control along the coastline, they increasingly took over the coastal trade that had been traditionally carried out by coastal tribes like the Kru, including that of labourers. By the early 1890s, the Liberian Government had intervened to turn the tradition of migratory labour into a source of government revenue by selling the recruiting rights to a German entrepreneur. When this ended, the Government began fining contractors of labour for each labourer that died abroad as a method of improving labour conditions, but also of profiting off of the labour trade. This eventually gave way to a system in which individual recruiters were required to purchase licenses from the Government, and pay a head tax for each labourer exported starting in 1903.[39]

As the twentieth century continued, the control of exportation of labour became an increasingly important source of Government revenue. The importance of the labour trade to the Liberian economy peaked during the 1920s, due to a dip in the Liberian economy which had been heavily tied up with German capital before World War I.[40] By this time, Liberia had been largely pushed out of the coffee and sugar markets in the early twentieth century by larger producers in South America and the Caribbean and was mainly exporting palm oil, though still a small producer of coffee, sugar, rubber, various ground nuts, Kola nuts, and other commodities.[41] But while the volume of these other exports tapered off, the trade of labourers continued to increase. The Liberian Government's records show that between 1919 and 1926 at least 4,268 labourers had been sent to Fernando Po under the

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[39] I.K. Sundiata, "Prelude to Scandal: Liberia and Fernando Po, 1880-1930," *Journal of African History* 1, 1974, 97-112. 103.
[40] F. P. M. van der Kraaij, *The Open Door Policy of Liberia: An Economic History of Modern Liberia,* Selbstverlag des Museums, 1983. 159.
[41] I.K. Sundiata, "Prelude to Scandal," 1974, 107.

formal agreement with the King of Spain signed in 1914.[42] This figure excludes labourers shipped to other parts of Africa and those who were shipped without the Government being notified, which was a fairly substantial number.[43]

The amount of money a recruiter made depended entirely on the number of labourers he managed to bring to the coast for export. Finding enough voluntary labourers was often not a simple task. Between subsistence farming, mandatory road labour, and years of labour exportation, the Indigenous labour force, though substantial, was being overexploited. The number of labourers willing to go abroad for the meagre wages offered on Fernando Po and elsewhere was diminished further after Firestone began operations in Liberia in 1926, since working for Firestone offered better wages without having to move abroad. The demand for labourers, however, did not go away. In fact, it had been growing as the colonies surrounding Liberia became disinclined to send their labourers abroad with reports of poor working conditions and unfair wages common, particularly in Fernando Po.[44]

It was in these circumstances that forced labour exportation by the Liberian Government became endemic in the wake of World War I. Forced labour in various forms had existed previous to the 1920s, but the growing demand for labour and the decreasing availability of other ways to gain capital coalesced, increasing the incentive to export

[42] "League Report," 1980, 38-39, 70.; Others have provided much higher figures for the general period. Henry Reeve claimed that in 1915, "2,000 boys were shipped to Fernando Po from Monrovia alone!" (Reeve, *The Black Republic,* 1923, 122.) The Liberian customs receivership reported collecting over twenty-two thousand dollars in head money tax in 1924, which, at a tax of $2.50 per labourer, is nearly 9,000 labourers. ("The 1924 Message (of President King), Monrovia, December 9, 1924., (pg. 18.)," Grimes Collection Part I, MFR 2.)

[43] It was a common practice amongst recruiters trying to evade the Head Money Tax, which in 1925 was $2.50 per labourer, to have labourers pretend to be "independent passengers" on the steamers that would carry them to their destination.; "Inspector of Customs to General Receiver of Customs, 1925," LGA I, Box 12, Correspondence, Customs Receivership, 1914-30, HC.

[44] Sundiata, "Prelude to a Scandal," 1974, 104-106.

labourers against their will. The ways in which labourers were procured were often brutal. Common methods included kidnapping members of the community, often the chiefs, and only returning them if labourers volunteered to be shipped away; fining chiefs large sums of money unless they provided labourers; or simply bringing the LFF in to capture labourers and force them to the coastline under guard. In some cases, recruiters threatened to destroy whole villages if enough labourers were not provided.

The League Report details the exploits of various Government officials in coercing labourers, District Commissioner Watson, Postmaster General Samuel Ross, Ed. H. Blackett, and Superintendant-cum-Vice President Allen Yancy, being the most prominent. In one case, a Paramount Chief named Jeh, and sixty other chiefs and sub-chiefs were summoned by the Commissioner of the Kru Coast after a disturbance in the region between a number of tribes. On arrival, the summoned chiefs were "stripped on the road, tied and flogged," and Jeh was "sent home to collect £100.0.0." It was not long before then Superintendent Allen Yancy got involved. Soon enough, Jeh had paid the Superintendent £360.0.0 more in order to be let out of court. On top of this, Jeh had to pay £300.0.0 to the central Government in Monrovia after being imprisoned by them, since the court proceedings by Yancy were not official but had merely been a means to extort money. This, however, did not stop Yancy demanding that the Wedabo chiefs pay him an additional £200.0.0 or provide him with 500 men to send to Fernando Po.[45]

On the day that Yancy had ordered the ship to pick up the labourers, he threatened that if the men were "not... [ready] by seven o'clock" he would "burn down... two towns." Almost immediately after this incident, Yancy "demanded 200 more" men be

[45] "League Report," 1930, 34-37.

given to him to send to Fernando Po. When Jeh failed to produce the labourers, Yancy "sent a large company of soldiers… to take the men." The soldiers then took a number of hostages from a few Wedabo towns, and held them for two months until "the full 200 young men surrendered." This incident took place in 1923-24, and Yancy was made Vice President of Liberia in 1928.[46]

This was not an isolated incident. After Yancy became Vice President he called a meeting of the Chiefs of Wedabo Beach and ordered that each Paramount Chief provide him with sixty men, or "for each man less than sixty" pay £10.0.0., saying "[i]f [a chief] does not pay and does not send men, I will send soldiers to destroy his town."[47] In June of 1928, a Mr. Alhaj Massaquoi lied to a group of 145 Kru and Grebo people, telling them they were being hired as stevedores on a ship, but instead sending them to Libreville as labourers.[48]A cable from Postmaster General R.A. Sherman to Secretary of State Barclay in 1927 referred to an event in which Samuel Ross tricked Natives from the interior to come to the coast "under guise of bringing rice for sale." The rice was then taken from them and this group of over "300 boys" were then put under guard by Government soldiers "to await [the] ship" that would take them abroad. When it arrived, they were "forced aboard a ship just as in [the] slave days."[49] In 1928, Samuel Ross made a deal with the Spanish in Fernando Po, agreeing to send 3,000 labourers, subcontracting the recruitment of 1,500 labourers to Yancy as per President King's orders. The League Reported that a large

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[46] "League Report," 1930, 38-41.
[47] Ibid., 41.
[48] Ibid., 59-60.
[49] "Postmaster General R.A. Sherman to Secretary of State Edwin Barclay, October 6, 1927," M613, 10-14-5, Roll 14, 882.5048/19, RG 59, NARA.

portion of these labourers were probably acquired using similar means as those described above.[50]

This is by no means an exhaustive list of instances of forced labour exportation, but it gives a sense of the kind of methods used to recruit labourers, and the involvement of government personnel in the system of coerced labour. Similar tactics were used for the recruitment of public works labourers. In an adaptation of the extortionist tactics of recruiters of labourers for export, letters were often sent to Chiefs from the "Government Road Time Keeper," which threatened that if men were not produced to work on the Government Road, the "Chief will be held" until the requested number of "boys" or an explanation of their absence was provided.[51] Government recruiters for public works labourers almost invariably involved the LFF to threaten the Natives if there was the least bit of resistance to providing labour and as mentioned above, the LFF was notorious for its abuses of the Indigenous people.

The League Commission reported that, along with forcing labourers to work on road and barracks building, "Frontier Force soldiers have invariably been used by the Government to coerce the labourers employed on special house building such as quarters for the District Commissioner and houses for the President." One labourer stated that the LFF "caught the men and the women, and brought them… to build… [the] house… [and] there were always soldiers behind to make us work faster."[52] Because of the poor conditions of labour, it was not uncommon for Indigenous people to flee their towns when

[50] "League Report," 1930, 73.
[51] Ibid., 138.
[52] Ibid., 144-145.

the LFF was approaching, in some cases sneaking off to makeshift "half towns behind big bush."[53]

Just as forced labour in Liberia was reaching its zenith in terms of both use and brutality, reports of the exploitation of Indigenous Liberians began to surface in Europe and the United States. In his 1923 book, *The Black Republic,* Henry Fenwick Reeve painted a vivid picture of an often brutal system of forced labour existing in Liberia. Reeve claimed that there existed a veritable slave trade in Liberia, and he translated the Liberian term for Indigenous labourers, "Boys," into "purchased slaves" to make his point clear.[54] Even more influential was Raymond L. Buell's 1928 book *The Native Problem in Africa,* which echoed Reeve's accounts of forced labour, but provided more information on the subject, and blamed the situation in part on the Firestone Company's draw on the limited labour force and the seven per cent interest that accompanied the 1926 loan.[55] In 1929, Lady Simon published her book *Slavery,* which featured descriptions of slavery happening in various corners of the globe, and spent a chapter providing a generally hyperbolic account of conditions in Liberia (a country she had never visited).[56] The same year, disgruntled presidential hopeful T. J. R. Faulkner, who had lost to King in 1927 by over 200,000 votes in a fraudulent election—there were at most 15,000 eligible voters in the country at the time-, wrote an article for the Baltimore *Afro-American* describing forced labour practices and tying President King to them.[57] At the same time, he warned the U.S. State Department

[53] "Secretary of the Interior to President King, March 5, 1923," LGA II, Box 4, Secretary of the Interior, re: Central Province, 1925-30, HC.
[54] Reeve, *Black Republic*, 1923, 132.
[55] Raymond L. Buell, *The Native Problem in Africa,* 1928.
[56] Lady Kathleen Simon, *Slavery,* London: Hodder and Stroughton, 1929.
[57] Buell, *Liberia*, 1947, 8.; King's guilt was later proven, despite the fact that "before the arrival of the League's Commission of Inquiry in 1930, President King sacrificed a girl child to obtain protection for

that he intended to notify the League of Nations of the conditions in Liberia on his visit to Geneva later in the year. For the first time in Liberian history, the exploitation of the Native population at the hands of the Americo-Liberians was being brought to the attention of the international community and the American public in a significant way. The forced labour scandal had begun.

himself." ("John H. MacVeagh to Secretary of State,October 6, 1934," Box 6998, 882.001/63, RG 59, NARA.)

Chapter II: *The United States and Liberia*

Faulkner's decision to warn the State Department of his intentions to approach the League speaks to the special relationship many Americo-Liberians perceived between their republic and the United States. As discussed above, it was an American organization that facilitated the settling of blacks residing in the United States on the strip of coastal land that became Liberia. Though the United States Government was only marginally involved, this connection played a major role in making Liberia a sole exception to the U.S.'s neglect of Africa in its foreign policy in the 1920s.[58] Official government relations with the Republic of Liberia were somewhat delayed due to racial prejudice and the problem of what precedent recognizing an independent black Government might set.[59] It was only under Abraham Lincoln in 1862 that the U.S. Government established official recognition the African Republic, at which point recognition was also extended to Haiti. But even though Liberia stood out among African countries as having a unique relationship with the United States, save for Lincoln's brief period of interest, U.S.-Liberian relations were largely limited to negotiations on small loans for the duration of the nineteenth century.[60]

It was in the first decade of the twentieth century that the United States began to pursue closer relations with Liberia, in light of increasing threats on Liberia's autonomy, particularly by France. In 1908, the Liberian President Arthur Barclay called for U.S. assistance, because it was becoming increasingly unclear to what extent Liberia could rely on European aid while maintaining its autonomy and territory — France in had managed to

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[58] The U.S. Government's support of the ACS had been limited to providing the Society with some funding during its early years of operation.

[59] D. Elwood Dunn, *Liberia and the United States during the Cold War: Limits of Reciprocity*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009. 12-13.

[60] Ibid., 12-13.

wrest a good deal of territory away from Liberia before Britain and the United States stepped in. In 1909, President Teddy Roosevelt requested a commission be sent to Liberia to determine what needed to be done to alleviate Liberia's financial woes, which seemed to be threatening to completely undermine its autonomy and place it in French or British possession.

The commission reported in 1909 that a loan agreement should be made in which Liberia would accept an American receiver of customs and American military advisers in the LFF in return for a loan financed by private banks. In 1912, Liberia signed a loan agreement in which it received $1.7 million from private banks based in the United States and some funds from Britain, France and Germany. And, just as the commission had prescribed, an American became the general receiver of customs, and the Liberian Frontier Force was put under American command.[61] This use of loans to introduce U.S. supervision of the Liberian economy and military is an example of the "Dollar Diplomacy" that marked early-twentieth century U.S. foreign policy.

Dollar diplomacy was a system in which the U.S. Government would negotiate loan agreements between private American banks and recipient countries, often developing countries that were deemed risky investments. In order to promote the further opening and integration of the world economy, and to entice banks to loan money to potentially politically or economically unstable governments, the U.S. government brokered these loan agreements so that the recipients of the loans would accept varying degrees of supervision by American experts.[62] Though it had existed as an important facet of foreign policy since

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[61] Dunn, *Reciprocity,* 2009, 15.
[62] Rosenberg, *Financial Missionaries*, 2003, 2.

1900, "dollar diplomacy" became a central pillar of the United States' approach to international relations under President William Howard Taft, inaugurated in 1909, the same year as the Liberia commission was making its recommendations.[63]

In terms of the wider context of "dollar diplomacy," the case of Liberia is, however, somewhat atypical. While the 1912 loan was largely extended by an American investment bank, Kuhn, Loeb and Company, small amounts of capital were also provided by France, Britain and Germany, who all had a certain amount of enterprise and capital at stake in Liberia. The economic supervision of Liberia was therefore shared between an American customs receivership, and one assistant receiver from each of the three other donors.[64] Including the European powers in the loan was a result of the fact that the United States viewed Africa as a European domain.

The acceptance of the loan was a fairly contentious issue amongst the Liberians, who were very protective of their independence. Though the Liberian Government had requested the assistance offered by the American Government, many Liberians feared what the stipulation of accepting American advisers might entail for the future of their control of the Republic. The loan was ultimately accepted in the face of the threat of economic insolvency and the possibility of being overrun by one of the surrounding colonial powers. If Liberia did not obtain funds improve its Frontier Force and secure a degree of formal support from the United States, external threats coupled with unrest amongst the Native population made the possibility that they might lose control of the country all together

[63] Donald F. Anderson, "The Legacy of William Howard Taft," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 12 (Winter, 1982), 26-33. 27-28.; It is believed that Taft was the one who coined the term "dollar diplomacy."
[64] Rosenberg, "The Invisible Protectorate," 1985. 195.

tangible.[65] In this context, the surrender of some control over the management of its finances and placing the Frontier Force under American supervision posed less of a threat to Liberian sovereignty than the alternatives. Furthermore, the Liberians seemed to feel safer accepting such a loan from the United States, which seemed less inclined to directly colonizing Liberia than those European countries that already had colonies surrounding the Republic.[66]

Relations between the United States and Liberia tightened further during the First World War, in which Liberia gave up its neutrality as per the United States' request when the latter entered the war in 1917. By the time the war ended in 1918, the United States and Liberia had begun discussing a larger loan agreement in which Liberia would receive $5 million, and the United States would send a much larger advising staff than under the 1912 loan. American advisers would help manage Liberia's finances, take an active role in arbitrating border disputes, increase American presence in the LFF, assist in hinterland administration, and help develop Liberia's education, agriculture, and sanitation systems.[67] A large part of the loan would be used to buy out the old loan, in order to get rid of the European influence that the old loan had entailed with its introduction of advisers from Britain, France and Germany. The United States, seeking to extend its unilateral control, would not be including European advisers in the new agreement.

The ambitious loan agreement, however, failed. Initially, the Liberian ruling elite was not interested in handing so much power over to American advisers, and the loan agreement was rejected by the Liberian Legislature. A postwar downturn in the Liberian

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[65] Rosenberg, "The Invisible Protectorate," 1985. 192-93.
[66] Dunn, *Reciprocity,* 2009. 14-15.
[67] Rosenberg, "The Invisible Protectorate," 1985. 199.

economy eventually forced the Liberians to accept a superficially renegotiated loan agreement in late 1921. By the time the agreement had been reached, support had dried up in the U.S. Though it did manage to get through the House, the agreement was quashed in the Republican-dominated Senate.[68]

With the failure of the loan agreement, official relations between the United States and Liberia were put on hold during the early 1920s. However, business relations began anew. As early as 1921, the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company's President, Harvey S. Firestone, was showing interest in establishing rubber plantations abroad and Liberia was one of the destinations under consideration.[69] Firestone's interest in Liberia was motivated by a larger project embarked upon by him and Henry Ford of trying to establish alternative rubber supplies for the United States.[70] At the time, rubber production had been largely controlled by European powers, with British rubber firms accounting for 70 per cent of production, and the Dutch Government controlling 25.5 per cent.[71] When rubber prices dropped in the early 1920s, the British producers banded together to slow production in line with a piece of British Government legislation called the Stevenson Plan. This was highly effective, and by 1925 rubber that had once been as low as $.14 per pound rose in price to $1.23 per pound.[72]

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[68] Dunn, *Reciprocity,* 2009. 16.; In part due to an economic downturn in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, there was a Republican backlash against Wilsonian internationalism. The effects of this included the United States' failure to join the League of Nations, which had been an initiative largely promoted by President Woodrow Wilson. (Rhodes, *United States Foreign Policy*, 2001, 39-51.)
[69] Beecher, "The State Department and Liberia," 1971. 129.
[70] Grandin, *Fordlandia*, 2009. 21-25.
[71] Arthur J. Knoll, "Harvey S. Firestone's Liberian Investment (1922-1932)," *Liberian Studies Journal* 14, (1989). 13-33. 15.
[72] Charles Raymond Whittlesey, *Governmental Control of Crude Rubber: the Stevenson Plan,* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1931. 41.

Under these circumstances, Firestone's maxim, "Americans should produce their own rubber," took on a much greater urgency. Firestone had grand plans. In 1923, he had already begun speaking ambitiously about establishing the grounds for "a $100,000,000 corporation."[73] By 1924, Firestone was opening serious dialogue with the Liberian Government about a large concession deal, and had already established a smaller concession to begin developing in the meantime.[74] The State Department saw an opportunity to revive its involvement in Liberia and soon became involved in facilitating the Firestone-Liberian negotiations, but consciously seeking to maintain at least the appearance of being an impartial mediator.[75]

It took more than two years to finally conclude the deal in December 1926. In the end, the agreement included a concession of one million acres of land to Firestone for rubber cultivation, and a five million dollar loan to Liberia from the Finance Corporation of America, a subsidiary of the Firestone Company that had been established solely for the purpose of circumventing the Liberian regulation against accepting a loan from a company that was also a concessionaire. Firestone had insisted on instituting the loan, which had been the major point of contention in the negotiations. Having already been acquainted with the application of Dollar Diplomacy, the Liberian Government was reluctant to accept a loan from Firestone which it believed would compromise its autonomy. Furthermore, the Finance Corporation was unwilling to budge in insisting on a seven per cent interest rate on

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[73] Firestone quoted in: "Overman Files on Liberia, pg. 1, *Beacon Journal,* May 29, 1923," Folder 3, Firestone Archives, HC.

[74] A communication between the American Consulate General in Liberia and the Secretary of State mentions a concession of 200,000 acres that was "granted by the Liberian Government within the last few weeks." This concession, however, receives little attention in the shadow of the concession and loan agreements that were concluded in 1926. ("American Consulate General to the Secretary of State, May 23, 1924," M613, 10-14-5, Roll 30, 882.6176/F51/-, RG 59, NARA.)

[75] Sundiata, *Black Scandal,* 1980, 38.

the loan, an increase of two per cent from the 1912 loan. During the two years of negotiations, the Liberian Government therefore sought to establish a concession agreement without a loan connected to Firestone.

Harvey Firestone had, however, come to deem the loan as an indispensible part of the agreement, at least in part for the very reasons the Liberian Government feared. Firestone had been introduced to the idea of bringing a loan into the deal early in 1924 when he was told by his Washington Representative Mark Felber that if he "could arrange for a loan of $2.5 to $5 million to wipe out Liberia's outstanding indebtedness and promote needed improvements... Mr. Firestone would virtually be the Government."[76] Firestone's loan agreement was modelled closely on the failed 1921 agreement, and therefore entailed a similar level of American supervision of the Liberian Government. The State Department was notified of Firestone's intentions later in the year, and tacitly agreed to assist in negotiations by referencing its role in facilitating "private loans of analogous character... particularly in Central America."[77] In general the Department saw this as an opportunity to both increase its influence in Liberia and to improve the lot of the Liberians themselves.[78] When the existing U.S. Financial Adviser to Liberia was informed of the plan, he stated his hopes that Firestone would be able to make "a model nation from these primitive people."[79]

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[76] "Overman Files on Liberia, pg. 4, 'Felber to HSF, March 6, 1924,'" Folder 3, Firestone Archives, HC.
[77] "Memorandum by the Assistant Secretary of State (Harrison), Washington, December 12, 1924," *Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereafter FRUS),1925, Vol II, 386.
[78] This did not apply only to Liberia. It was generally thought that the introduction of U.S. private enterprise and capital to the developing world could only have a positive effect on the countries that it was brought to. (Foster, *Projections of Power*, 2010, 43-47.; Iriye, *The Globalizing of America, 1913-1945*, 1993. 97-99.) The policy of U.S. economic expansion was also viewed as integral to American interest and the maintenance of growth. (Braeman, "The New Left and American Foreign Policy during the Age of Normalcy,"(1983), 73-104. 80.)
[79] "De La Rue to Castle, July 22, 1924," M613, 10-14-5, Roll 30, 882.6176F51/11, RG 59, NARA.

In the end, the loan, which established eight advising positions in Liberia to be filled by personnel who would be either appointed or approved by the State Department, was accepted despite its infringement on Liberian sovereignty because the Liberian Government was again in a desperate economic situation, facing potential collapse.[80] Beyond establishing increased American control over the African Republic, the loan also aimed to protect Firestone's investment against two major perceived threats. By allowing Liberia to pay off the 1912 loan, Britain, France and Germany could be from the picture, something that Firestone, who was very worried about British opposition to his rubber plans, saw as a necessity. If Liberia remained indebted to Britain, there was the chance that Britain could exert greater influence on the country to disturb Firestone's plans. The loan was also way for Firestone to be sure that the Liberian Government, which was in dire economic straits, did "not go to pieces within the next" five years, a period in which the company would not produce large profits since the rubber trees had to mature before being tapped.[81]

Ultimately, Firestone got his way, and with American capital invested in Liberia, the State Department had a new reason to be involved in the country's affairs. The Department's renewed involvement, however, was subject not only to the various motivations of its members, but was also complicated by a number of competing, if not

[80] Rosenberg, *Financial Missionaries*, 2003. 237.

[81] Knoll, "Harvey S. Firestone," 1989. 18.; "Memorandum by Dorsey Richardson, November 13, 1924," FRUS, 1925, Vol II, 382-383., cited in: Frank Robert Chalk, "The United States and the International Struggle for Rubber, 1914-1941" (Ph.D. diss. University of Wisconsin, 1970). 88.; De La Rue, the American Financial Adviser to Liberia, had himself assisted in Firestone coming to the conclusion that the loan was necessary when he told Firestone that "it was impossible to regard the investment of American capital in the Liberian Republic as being adequately protected unless, and until, such a loan plan was consummated." ("De La Rue to Castle, July 22, 1924" M613, 10-14-5, Roll 30, 882.6176F51/11, RG 59, NARA.)

outright contradictory, beliefs about what should guide U.S. foreign policy in the period of flux that characterized the late 1920s and early 1930s.

Chapter III: *Juggling Conflicting Commitments*

The United States emerged from the First World War a leading world power. As Europe sought to rebuild, Washington grappled with the beginning of the end of European predominance, and struggled to determine what its role in this new world would be. The brief bout of unabashed internationalism under Wilson quickly gave way to a more cautious foreign policy beginning when Republicans took Congress in the 1918 election, then continuing under the Republican Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover administrations. During the twelve years of Republican rule, government officials above all sought to avoid policies that would appear imperialistic.[82] A key determinant of policy was therefore what the American public and international community saw as imperialism.

Up until the late 1920s, the dominant discourse had been one in which the Dollar Diplomacy that was central to American foreign policy was viewed as a non-imperialist alternative to European colonialism. But in the context of the general revaluation of American capitalism and corporate culture that followed the 1929 market crash, a competing narrative that classed American expansion of power and European colonialism alike as imperialism and protested against both had gained influence over Washington's approach to international relations in the early 1930s.[83] Foreign policy choices in this period therefore reflected a heightened awareness of the optics of U.S. intervention in the

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[82] There was a tradition of antimperialism in the United States stretching back to its roots as a colonial possession of Britain. Woodrow Wilson, however, had done much to vocalize openly a revived antimperialism and a call for national self-determination. Wilson had very effectively spread this message, perhaps more so than he had even intended, employing the founder of modern public relations Edward Bernays to handle his international publicity campaign. What this means is that Wilson had very publicly framed the United States as an antimperialist power, something which could not easily be simply reversed by his Republican successors without making U.S. foreign policy has highly inconsistent. (For Wilson and antimperialism see; Iriye, *The Globalizing of America, 1913-1945*, 1993. 73-74.)

[83] Rosenberg, *Financial Missionaries,* 2003. 257.

affairs of other countries, and a deep desire to make sure that Washington's policies could not be equated with those of European colonial powers. Satisfying this often meant curbing the inclination to play a direct role in integrating foreign economies by exerting varying degrees of control over other countries' governments in order to avoid allowing U.S. foreign policy to fall under the shifting definition of imperialism.[84]

The mid-1920s — the "booming 20s"— were, in part, characterized by a widespread faith in corporate multinational capitalism. This economic model was reaching new heights and achieving greater prosperity for Americans than ever before, which in turn fuelled the faith that U.S. corporate capitalism was a source of boundless progress and prosperity for the larger world. At this time, most did not view the government facilitation of U.S. private investment abroad, whether through loans or concessions for cultivation or resource extraction, as imperialism. Even if the U.S. government was appointing or approving advisers to introduce, or impose, a corporate capitalist structure in another country, since the governments in these countries maintained a large degree of independence, it did not fit the narrow definition of imperialism operative at the time. Furthermore, there was a belief that, rather than being a selfish, exploitive system like European imperialism, facilitating the spread of U.S. private interest to the rest of the world would benefit both the United States and any country where American corporations set up operations.[85]

Despite this widespread acceptance of the culture of corporate capitalism and the dollar diplomacy that accompanied it, there was a growing antimperialist movement in the

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[84] Rosenberg, *Financial Missionaries*, 2003. 123.
[85] Ibid.,; Rosenberg discusses various facets of what she calls the "professional-managerial discourse" throughout the book, notable sections include, pgs. 2, 99, 105-106, 123, 131, 148, 192, 197, 219, 248, 257.

United States and abroad that was protesting the policies that stemmed from the dominant discourse.[86] It was in the wake of the First World War that the term imperialism began to be commonly applied to the use of private loans to establish control over foreign economies by antibanking activists.[87] Increasingly, antimperialists were not simply mobilizing against territorial acquisitions and the establishment of official colonies, but also against any direct military or economic intervention into foreign countries aimed at bringing them under some degree of U.S. control. This antimperialist movement gained momentum in the 1920s, and by 1928, as the markets which had been on an unbridled rise for the past half decade or so began to show signs of faltering, it had begun to unseat the foundational myth of limitless prosperity through international capitalism that had been more or less dominant for the past three decades.[88] By late 1929, not only had the market crash further shaken confidence in the old policies, but the uprisings against U.S. imperialism in Haiti, Nicaragua and elsewhere had further amplified domestic discontent.[89] All of this sparked a revaluation of policy, and a heightened awareness of the potential for the policies of dollar diplomacy that had previously escaped being labelled imperialistic would no longer so easily do so.

The Liberian labour scandal surfaced internationally in 1929, just as this period of transition was beginning. As such, Washington's response was often hesitant, and there was a good deal of disagreement among State Department officials as to what policies

[86]The antimperialist movement in the United States stretched back to the 1890s, and had initially centered around the criticism of the U.S. occupation of the Philippines. (Nichols, *Promise and Peril*, 2011, 65-67.)
[87] Rosenberg, *Financial Missionaries*, 2003.123.
[88] The growth in antimperialism at home was mirrored by growing nationalist elements in Latin America and other parts of the world. In Latin American countries that were host to American corporations, nationalism was often inextricable from antimperialism and, in turn, anti-Americanism. (Colby, *The Business of Empire*, 2011, 149-156.)
[89] Rosenberg, *Financial Missionaries*, 2003. 244, 237, 239, 257.

should be adopted in response to the crisis.[90] The scandal offered a number of opportunities to the Department to either seek further expansion of U.S. power, or to cultivate an image of the United States as a moralistic, antimperialist, and internationally cooperative world power. The U.S. government wanted to do all of these things, but, as became clear in the years after the scandal, these various policy goals were often at odds with one another. Ultimately, the Department's attempts to balance these divergent interests resulted in a highly ineffectual response to the labour crisis that left Liberia relatively unreformed and U.S. relations both with the African Republic and its biggest investor, Firestone, severely strained.

The State Department was aware of the fact that the Liberian government was using forced labour well before it became a public scandal. As early as 1915, the Secretary of State had been notified that "Liberian Government… is in the slave trade, under disguise."[91] The United States, however, expressed only a token concern with the matter. In early 1928, when the American chargé d'affaires in Liberia, W. T. Francis, reported to Assistant Secretary of State William Castle that Liberian Postmaster General Samuel Ross had with "the aid of the Liberian Frontier Force forced Natives down to the coast to ship to Fernando," Henry Carter sent a note to Castle saying that he could not "see that the

[90] Foster characterizes U.S. policy in South East Asia in this period as appearing :contradictory, swinging between isolationist pullback and involved responsibility." (*Projections of Power*, 2010. 144.) The same could be said for the United States' approach to Liberia.
[91] "Buckner to Secretary of State, April 12, 1915," M613, 10-14-5, Roll 4, 882.00/493, RG 59, NARA. ; "Richard C. Bundy to Secretary of State, Oct. 20, 1920," M613, 10-14-5, Roll 14 882.5048/-, RG 59, NARA. ; By 1927, still before the State Department had taken any action or, it seemed, real interest in the labour conditions, U.S. minister to Liberia, Clifton R. Wharton, had made it clear to members of the Department that forced labour existed on a large scale in Liberia. (See "Wharton to Castle, March 3, 1927," M613, 10-14-5, Roll 31, 882.6176F51/287, RG 59, NARA.; and "Mrs. W.T. Francis to Castle, December 22, 1929," M613, 10-14-5, Roll 14, 882.5408/184, RG 59, NARA.); In a 1930 Memorandum, J. P. Moffatt admitted directly that the situation had "been known for many years." ("Moffatt, Memorandum, January 17, 1930," Box 7010, 882.5048/202, RG 59, NARA.)

'slavery' business as presented...[by Francis] concerns either us or Firestone" and suggested that the report "be filed without making any attempt to reply."[92]

By June of the same year, however, Castle finally responded to Francis' communication, stating that he now agreed "that it would be unfortunate... if the question [of Liberian forced labour] were aired... in the League of Nations or... other quarters." The reason for this new interest in the subject was made clear when Castle said it was particularly important to avoid the information getting to the League "in view of the critical attitude taken by Professor Buell in his recent book on the Native Problem in Africa." Given the fact that Buell had been critical of Firestone and the increased U.S. supervision under the new loan agreement in his book, Castle saw it as "far from unlikely that an attempt may be made to shoulder Firestone and even the Department with the responsibility for... [the] commercialized slave trading... [and] the forced labor exacted from the Natives by... Liberian officials and their friends" that Francis had reported. Castle made it clear that it was "highly important that the Department and the Legation may be in a position to show beyond question where the responsibility for such conditions rests and be able to show that American influence had been exerted so far as has proved possible against such conditions" if the press or the League started asking questions. Castle finally requested that Francis prepare a strictly confidential memorandum on the extent of the use of forced labour in Liberia.[93]

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[92] "Francis to Castle, January 16, 1928," and "Carter to Castle, February 17, 1928," M613, 10-14-5, Roll 14, 882.5408/1, RG 59, NARA.

[93] Castle, did not however, think such responsibility being applied to Firestone would be completely baseless, since he recognized that "the methods of the Liberian Labor Bureau in recruiting labor for Firestone have a tendency to result in conditions analogous to those of forced labor." (NARA, RG 59, M613, 10-14-5, Roll 14, 882.5408/1, "Castle to Francis, June 21, 1928.")

In the meantime, Francis telegrammed King to notify him of the "advisability of preparing a statement in refutation" of Buell's "charges.. [that] the American loan and the Firestone concession" represented an attempt to infringe on Liberian autonomy and were harmful to the country.[94] King cooperated and sent a telegram to the Associated Press the day after Buell spoke at Williamstown Political Institute, saying that Buell's claims on this subject were "without any foundation in fact."[95] Having done what it could to refute Buell's charges of a predatory policy of exploitation in Liberia, the Department left the issue at that for the time being.

It was only once Francis had submitted his memorandum over eight months later in March of 1929 that it became clear that more had to be done to address the issue of forced labour. Francis had managed to amass a great deal of incriminating evidence against the Liberian Government that revealed fully to the State Department that there was a serious problem of forced labour in the African Republic.[96] Francis himself stated that the situation was threatening to attract public notice and that if it were "given publicity, Liberia might be crucified on the altar of public opinion."[97] Castle agreed that something had to be done, though he was careful to note that taking up the issue with the Liberian Government constituted "pretty direct interference in the internal affairs of another country." He argued, however, that this interference was excusable since the United States had "a certain responsibility for the morals of Liberia – at least in the eyes of the world-" and would be

[94]NARA, RG 59, M613, 10-14-5, Roll 14, 882.5408/4a,"State Department to King, August 18, 1928."
[95] NARA, RG 59, M613, 10-14-5, Roll 14, 882.5408/7,"King to Secretary of State, August 30, 1928."
[96] "Francis Memorandum on Forced Labour," M613, 10-14-5, Roll 14, 882.5408/19, RG 59, NARA.
[97] "Francis to Castle, March 22, 1929," M613, 10-14-5, Roll 14, 882.5408/19, RG 59, NARA.

"considered… delinquent if knowing what is going on… [it] let the matter pass without comment."[98]

In early May, a memo entitled "The Special Relationship Between the United States and the Republic of Liberia" was sent around the State Department by Department Official Henry Carter. This document further developed the argument for intervention by detailing the "special interest… the United States [had had] in Liberia" for the century since "the philanthropic efforts of a number of missionary societies within the United States" had brought the Republic into existence. The memorandum celebrated the involvement of the United States in Liberian history, and concluded that it was clear that the United States held a "special position as regards Liberia, perhaps that of a 'moral protector.'" This role was seen as coming with a degree of responsibility, the "denial of which would doubtless result in the prompt extinguishment of the Republic [of Liberia]."[99]

The timing of this memo reveals it as a clear attempt not only to rally support for a more proactive policy towards Liberia during the ensuing crisis, but also to establish further moral rationale for direct intervention if the time came. The belief that United States was seen by other nations and by Americans interested in U.S.-Liberia relations as having a responsibility to assist Liberia made the choice of policy a matter of domestic and international credibility. The memorandum argued that if the United States now, in Liberia's time of need, decided to stay aloof, then all those who knew of the two countries' relationship would be severely disappointed. One of the final points of consideration raised in favour of an increased U.S. role in Liberia was that, in view of what the State

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[98] "Castle to Carter, April 23, 1929," M613, 10-14-5, Roll 14, 882.5408/22, RG 59, NARA.
[99] "The Special Relationship Between the United States and the Republic of Liberia, May 1, 1929," M613, 10-14-5, Roll 14, 882.5408/23, RG 59, NARA.

Department knew, if it failed "to give Liberia a word of warning or to use… [its] moral influence" the United States would be exposed "to the charge of knowingly supporting for the sake of rubber dividends a Government which thrives on slave trade." [100]

The memorandum had the further aim of casting such intervention, if it did take place, as not only being un-imperialistic, but being an *antimperialist* venture. The memorandum therefore stressed the United States' history of assisting Liberia in warding off the imperial powers — France, Britain, and Germany- that had at various points threatened to compromise Liberia's territory and autonomy. The reference to "the prompt extinguishment of the Republic" if the United States was not willing to accept its responsibility was aimed at placing possible intervention in the context of the forced labour scandal in the same vein as the anticolonial interventions that had been requested by Liberia in the past to maintain its place as one of Africa's only independent nations.[101]

This framing of a direct U.S. role in confronting forced labour in Liberia in terms of the helping the African Republic defend its autonomy was, however, juxtaposed with Carter's proposal of what to do if Liberia did not heed the "moral influence" of the United States. In such a case, Carter noted that State Department could "threaten to withdraw from Liberia the moral protection" that it had become used to. [102] In other words, if Liberia did not comply with Washington's demands the United States could simply cut off relations with the Republic and leave it to fend for itself. The contrast between these two sentiments,

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[100] "The Special Relationship Between the United States and the Republic of Liberia, May 1, 1929," M613, 10-14-5, Roll 14, 882.5408/23, RG 59, NARA.
[101] Combating slavery had served as the justification for previous interventions in Africa by European powers. For example, Belgium's King Leopold was stripped of his holdings in the Congo when his use of enslaved and forced labour came to light. (Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, 1999.)
[102] "The Special Relationship Between the United States and the Republic of Liberia, May 1, 1929," M613, 10-14-5, Roll 14, 882.5408/23, RG 59, NARA.

the desire to avoid charges of self-serving exploitation of Liberia through Firestone, and the claim that if Liberia did not bend to the United States' "moral influence" it could be coerced to do so, encapsulates perfectly the divergent goals of American foreign policy of the time. On the one hand, Carter was expressing the need for the United States to avoid any appearance of imperialism, but in the same breath he was suggesting the use of diplomatic sanctions to ensure that Liberia followed instructions from the Department during the scandal.

The line between imperialism and trying to coerce a government to change its ways through threats is a fine one. So, even though there was a strong moral case to be made in favour of pressuring the Liberian Government to reform its Native policy, the Department would frequently shy away from doing so. During the mid-1920s, there had been popular support for a foreign policy based in part on establishing a role for the United States as an arbiter of morality in the world. By the end of the decade, however, it had become less clear that the increase of U.S. power and financial commitments that accompanied such a role were acceptable costs. As the common understanding of imperialism shifted to include more than just territorial expansion, it was more and more difficult to avoid charges of imperialism, something that was of central importance to the U.S. government. Therefore, as the scandal continued, the Department constantly vacillated between policies based on either one of these goals, as well as policies motivated by its interest in protecting the Firestone Corporation's position in Liberia.

Eventually, Washington decided it must act. In keeping with the recommendations of Carter, Castle, and Francis on June 5th, the State Department sent a telegram to the Liberian Government that had been in preparation for months. The telegram informed the

Liberian Government that the United States knew that "conditions of forced labor" existed both in the labour export business and in "general throughout the Republic," and demanded that the Liberian Government, among other things, facilitate a "rigorous investigation of forced labor conditions" throughout the country.[103]

Again, what motivated Department to act was the desire to make sure it *appeared* to actively oppose the use of forced labour in Liberia. In addition to the words of Carter and Castle, this was made clear by the Department's timing on sending the telegram. Sending a note of disapproval to Liberia had become considered a matter of absolute necessity when T. J. R. Faulkner, the disappointed Liberian presidential hopeful, had notified the Department of his intention to bring the issue of forced labour before the League of Nations as soon as possible after the International Labour Conference at Geneva being held on May 30th.[104] The Department had never before voiced any concern with the practices of forced labour to the Liberian Government, but now that it seemed that the issue might cause an international scandal, the State Department was now clear with the Republic that such labour practices were in fact "repugnant to the moral sense of mankind."[105]

Liberian Secretary of State Barclay responded tersely that the charges of slavery were "an old story," but that the Liberian Government would be willing investigate them.[106] His initial brief message was then supplemented by a longer statement in which Barclay suggested that a commission with international membership be appointed to look into the issue, but made it clear that the Liberian Government stood by a "solemn and

[103] "Secretary of State to the Minister in Liberia (Francis), Washington, June 5, 1929," FRUS, 1929, Vol II, 274-275.
[104] Phillip James Johnson, "Seasons in Hell: Charles S. Johnson and the 1930 Liberian Labor Crisis, (Ph.D. diss. Louisiana State University, 2004.). 155.
[105]Johnson, "Seasons in Hell," 2004. 275.
[106] "Francis to Secretary of State, June 11, 1929," M613, 10-14-5, Roll 14, 882.5408/26, RG 59, NARA.

categorical denial of the existence in the Republic" of the labour conditions that the State Department had identified.[107] Before receiving this part of Barclay's message, the Department had already concluded that an international commission needed to be appointed, and in its response it stated that "such a commission might appropriately be composed of one Liberian member, one American member and one European member."[108]

From Washington's perspective, the decision to work through the League of Nations was a compromise between adopting a policy of direct, unilateral U.S. involvement in Liberia, and one of general disengagement. This achieved a number of key goals. First, going through the international body on request of the Liberian Government made it difficult to accuse Washington of imperialist aims in its response to the labour scandal, since it was operating in and through the League. Second, while putting the investigation in the hands of the League avoided the appearance of imperialism in Liberia, having an American member on the commission allowed Washington to both cultivate an image of moral responsibility on an international level and maintain some influence over the commission. The latter would ensure that the State Department would be kept abreast and, in turn, notify Firestone of the commission's findings. The Department and Firestone would therefore be more prepared to respond when the commission eventually published its findings.

The Department had been keeping Firestone abreast of all of the developments – unfortunately for researchers, an unsigned memorandum was sent out to the members of

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[107] "Minister in Liberia (Francis) to Secretary of State, Monrovia, June 13, 1929," FRUS, 1929 Vol II, 277-280.
[108] "Stimson to Francis, Washington, June 22, 1929," M613, 10-14-5, Roll 14, 882.5408/33, RG 59, NARA.

the Department notifying the members that most communication with Firestone was to be carried out "by telephone or personal interview… in order to keep the Department off the record."[109] As the negotiations regarding the terms and composition of the commission continued, Harvey Firestone Sr. expressed that "he would prefer to abandon any further interest in Liberia rather than become involved in any way in the alleged forced labor and slavery situation."[110]

Though Francis' memorandum had reported that the Firestone Corporation did not make use of forced labour on its plantations, the truth was that Firestone had not entirely avoided the use of forced labour. This is not to say that Firestone's recruiters were coercing labourers to come work on the plantations themselves; in fact, Firestone's relatively high wages (still only $.24 per day) attracted many labourers. Yet, Firestone had also relied on a certain amount of labour that was supplied by government recruiters. In 1926, Firestone reported that it had in its employ 700 "Liberian Government recruited" labourers.[111] However, when Firestone became aware of the possibility of an investigation into forced labour, it told the State Department that the Liberian Government was "not connected with… [Firestone's] labour recruiting" at all.[112] The Department knew this to be false, as Francis had already reported in his original memorandum that at one point Firestone had briefly contracted a bush clearing job out to the notorious Yancy when it became difficult

[109] "Memorandum, September 4, 1929," M613, 10-14-5, Roll 14, 882.5408/214, RG 59, NARA.
[110] "Stimson to Francis, Washington, August 3, 1929," M613, 10-14-5, Roll 14, 882.5408/53, RG 59, NARA.
[111] "Ross to Firestone, Monrovia, June 14, 1926." M613, 10-14-5, Roll 30, 882.6176F51/226, RG 59, NARA.
[112] "Firestone to Carter, Akron, November 15, 1929," M613, 10-14-5, Roll 14, 882.5408/217, RG 59, NARA.

to meet labour demands through its own recruiting streams. These instances were, however, treated as innocent mistakes on the part of Firestone by both Francis and the Department.[113]

The State Department's faith in Firestone's intentions reflected the tendency of early-twentieth century officials to see U.S. corporate investment abroad as being a largely positive thing for both the companies and their host countries. During the 1920s there was, perhaps more than ever before and since, a faith in the power of big business to provide prosperity and progress both at home and internationally.[114] When Firestone had first secured its concession in Liberia, Castle commented that development in Liberia "through the loan and the Firestone project" satisfied both "the Department's traditional friendly interest in the welfare of Liberia and… its desire to assist American business and to obtain new sources of rubber supply."[115] Firestone's success in Liberia was therefore seen as benefitting all parties involved.

The evidence, however, suggests that Firestone's own recruiters were not coercing labourers to work for the company, and that most of Firestone's employ was free labour. Furthermore, Firestone's presence in Liberia did improve the lot of many Liberians. Though the wage of twenty-four cents *per diem* offered to Firestone's labourers was marginally lower than the wages in the other countries the company had considered establishing operations– the Philippines, Sumatra, and Sarawak-, $0.24 a day was an

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[113] "Memorandum on Forced Labor, March 22, 1929," M613, 10-14-5, Roll 14 882.5048/19, RG 59, NARA. 80-81.
[114] Colby, *The Business of Empire,* 2011. 157.; In "Happiness Machines," the first part of his four-part documentary series *The Century of the Self,* Adam Curtis' gives an excellent sense of the general trust Americans had in big business during the 1920s. He argues that this trust can be attributed to the extreme prosperity and growth that characterized the 1920s, as well as the birth and growth of public relations as an industry. (Adam Curtis, *Century of the Self,* BBC (2002).)
[115] "Castle to Francis, Washington, December 12, 1927," M613, 10-14-5, Roll 30, 882.6176F51/250a, RG59, NARA.

improvement on being paid nothing to work on public, and sometimes private, projects for the Liberian Government and its officials.[116] Acquiring money had become necessary for Indigenous people who were forced to pay hut, education and various other taxes, which were both a source of government revenue and a way for the Americo-Liberian regime to force the indigenous population into the cash economy. Therefore, being able to obtain capital without having to sign on to one to two year labour contracts on plantations or in mines in foreign countries stood to improve the quality of life for those who were employed by Firestone.[117] In 1928, President King reported that Firestone had paid over $1,000,000 in wages to its Liberian employees.[118] Harvey Firestone also proudly announced that so far as he knew Firestone was one of "the only employers of African labor to establish the American [eight hour] working day."[119]

It must be recognized, however, that the conditions of labour on the Firestone plantations were extremely primitive. A visitor to the Du plantation in 1927 stated that medical provisions were seriously lacking. With only an "emergency first aid dressing station about the size of a bathroom" to serve sixty "white personnel…and a Native force of about 8,000… [who were] concentrated in labor camps," the observer was at a loss for an explanation as to how there had "not been a serious epedemic [sic]." Furthermore, the "place where cargo was unloaded was a veritable quagmire," and all of the buildings were "temporary affairs" that were unlikely to last more than two rainy seasons.[120]

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[116] Wages were included in early budget sheets comparing the costs of investing in each of the four countries. ("Relative Comparison, 1924," Folder 3, Firestone Archives, HC.)
[117] There was also a limited amount of wage labour on the small number of palm, coffee, etc. plantations.
[118] Knoll, "Firestone's Labor Policy," 1991. 50.
[119] Firestone quoted in: Ibid., 51.
[120] "Macy to Castle, Monrovia, October 10, 1927," M613, 10-14-5, Roll 30, 882.6176F51/247, RG 59, NARA.

Firestone's presence in Liberia had also placed a fairly substantial financial burden on the Liberian Government, particularly due to the interest on the Financial Corporation's loan. The loan agreement Liberia had been pressured into by Firestone was granted at an interest rate of seven per cent on whatever funds were given to Liberia from the $5 million pool.[121] It was estimated in 1928 that the payments of interest and the wages of the American advisers required by the loan agreement was consuming up to twenty per cent of Government income. When in 1929 Firestone cut its payroll in response to falling rubber prices and the stock market crash, the Liberian Government lost a huge source of tax revenue.[122] Compounded with the growing international scandal, and the broader economic crisis, this drop put the Liberian economy in a desperate state, but the costs of maintaining the loan remained the same, and by 1931 were taking up 54.9% of annual Government revenue, which was sitting at less than half of what it had been in 1928.[123]

The interest on the loan had not been designed to bankrupt the Liberian government; Firestone's primary concern in Liberia was establishing a profitable rubber plantation. Firestone had pressured Liberia into accepting the loan plan in order to protect its investment. This was seen as justified because of the further investment and economic development Firestone's presence was predicted to bring to the Republic. Nonetheless, Firestone's concern was with its own profitability, not with making sure that the Liberian Government was solvent enough to handle the loan payments.

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[121] Suzanne K. McCoskey, "When Firestone Entered Liberia: Constructing the American Tropical Capitalist of the 1920s," unpublished, n.d. 3.
[122] Alfred Lief, *The Firestone Story: A History of the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company,* New York: Whittlesey House, 1951. 167-70.
[123] Sundiata, *Black Scandal,* 1980. 57-58.

In the same way, the fact that Firestone did use labour provided by the government reveals that even if Harvey Firestone had hoped to introduce the American work day and voluntary wage labour to the Liberian Natives, its primary goal was still rubber production, so work on the plantation would not be halted if labour that met these standards was not available. Moreover, despite what the Department, or even Harvey Firestone himself, may have wanted to believe, at the end of the day Firestone was in the business of rubber, not school, hospital, public road, and certainly not "model nation" building. If these happened to accompany successful business, then so be it, but if not, it was not the tire company's immediate concern to improve the lot of Liberians, but rather to maintain a satisfactory profit margin.

In September of 1929, the Department and Liberian President King had arrived at an agreement over the terms of reference for the forced labour commission that would investigate conditions in Liberia. The commission would be examining the existence of the use of forced labour for both private and public purposes – the latter of which the Department had to fight hard to have included- and was to be granted access to government documents and could subpoena witnesses. By early February 1930, the "International Commission of Inquiry into the Existence of Slavery and Forced Labour in the Republic of Liberia," or the League Commission, had begun its investigation.

While Cuthbert Christy, Charles S. Johnson, and ex-President Arthur Barclay, the League, American, and Liberian members of the commission respectively, gathered information on the situation in Liberia, members of the State Department began predicting what the fallout of the League Report would be. Given what the Department already knew about the conditions in Liberia, many were pessimistic about the future of the African

Republic. Many believed that the Liberian Government would be unable to weather the storm of public outcry at the commission's report, the contents of which were sure to be damning. Carter, now reporting from Monrovia where he had been positioned after Francis had died from yellow fever, spoke in broad terms about the "serious paralysis of responsible Government" in Liberia due to both economic destitution and the slavery investigation which he believed would probably implicate many high government officials.[124] Prentiss Gilbert, who worked in the Western European Affairs division of the Department, also thought "the complete breakdown" of the Liberian Government to be "not improbable" due to the "gross corruption in fiscal matters,... [the] conditions tantamount to slavery exist[ing] with the connivance of importance Liberian officials..., and... the condition of the aborigines... under the present Government."[125]

Both Carter and Gilbert spoke in general terms of the option of U.S. intervention in the case of such a collapse. Carter stated that the increasingly dismal political situation in Liberia may "invite more and more intervention" by the United States, which might be considered necessary "for the purpose of forestalling European intervention."[126] Gilbert believed that if the Liberian Government were to collapse, the United States "would find itself under pressure to take some definite steps, both on the part of American interests...

[124] "Carter to the Secretary of State, Monrovia, April 10, 1930," Box 6996, 882.00/819, RG 59, NARA.
[125] "Prentiss Gilbert, Memorandum on the Present Situation in Liberia, April 30,1930," Box 6996, 882.00/882.5, RG 59, NARA.; Earlier in the year, ex-Chargé Wharton, still in Liberia, had reported to the Department that it was "apparent [that] the educated natives... [were] secretly meeting... and preparing to show a united front to obtain more power should the opportunity arise." Motivating these meetings was the hope that the Commission would reveal the Americo-Liberians as "unfit to run the Government," providing an opening for "educated natives to supplant the Americo-Liberians in running the Government." The possibility of facilitating a Native run Government was, however, given little to no attention, the political movements were simply raised as a matter of interest to be considered when discussing the political dynamics in Liberia. ("Wharton to Secretary of State, Monrovia, January 8, 1930," Box 6996, 882.00/818, RG 59, NARA.)
[126] "Carter to the Secretary of State, Monrovia, April 10, 1930," Box 6996, 882.00/819, RG 59, NARA.

[in Liberia]" and those in the United States who had an interest in the United States' "historical relations with Liberia." Gilbert then voiced the familiar quandary of intervention in Liberia, stating that "on the one hand… entering more deeply into the affairs of the Liberian Republic would be criticized as imperialism, [but] on the other, failure to act would be subjected to criticism by adherents of the Liberian idea… and also perhaps by foreign Powers." [127]

In September of 1930, the State Department was forwarded a summary of the League Report by American commission member Johnson. This resulted in further speculation about what would happen when the report was released to the public. Castle thought the Department had to prepare for the worst, and that it must begin considering the idea of the United States taking responsibility for Liberia. This was contrasted with the option of allowing the League to make Liberia a mandate of Germany or some other European power. Castle suggested as an option rule by "white officials from the United States" secretly under the jurisdiction of the Firestone Company in a system "similar to the old East India Company" in which the Liberians would still have a "semblance of power, without… any real power at all."[128]

Again, members of the Department had begun to present familiar arguments for a policy of more direct intervention in Liberia. Castle's proposal in particular was something of an extreme form of the Dollar Diplomacy of the mid-1920s, modelled on British

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[127] "Prentiss Gilbert, Memorandum on the Present Situation in Liberia, April 30,1930," Box 6996, 882.00/882.5, RG 59, NARA.

[128] "Castle to Secretary of State, September 18, 1930," Box 6996, 882.00/846, RG 59, NARA.; It is worth noting that Firestone came out clean in the League Report. There were some implicit nods to the fact that Firestone had, in its first few years of operation, utilized Government recruited labour, but the League Report pointed out correctly that the Liberian Government officials were the culprit in the labour issues with Firestone. (League Report, 155-167.)

corporate colonialism. Ironically, Castle was himself collapsing a distinction between dollar diplomacy and direct colonialism that had been so integral to protecting the foreign policy of the early twentieth century against charges of imperialism. The less radical suggestions of Carter and Gilbert drew on the idea of defending Liberian autonomy as a moral justification for an increased role of the United States in Liberia. But they too saw the protection of American interests in Liberia as an important justification for intervention. In general, the State Department was in agreement with the sentiments expressed by Carter, Gilbert and even Castle, but all three were suggesting a much greater role in Liberian affairs than the Department felt would be possible to accept without being seen as imperialist. The Department therefore eventually opted to minimize the U.S. role in Liberia when the report was published.

Despite all the speculation behind the scenes about what would take place in the event of the Liberian Government collapsing because of its corruption and maltreatment of its subjects, the Department continued to reassure King of its support.[129] When the Department became aware of what would be published in the League report, it coaxed King to reform policy in order to maintain his control of the country.[130] So even though the King administration was now known to have been deeply involved in the brutal system of forced labour, the Department decided to limit its intervention to prodding King to implement a set of reforms which would, in effect, allow him to maintain the status quo.

The reforms suggested by the League Commission included bringing an end to Liberia's closed door policy— opening Liberia to further foreign investment—,

[129] "Carter to the Secretary of State, Monrovia, Jun 4, 1930," Box 6996, 882.00/884, RG 59, NARA.
[130] FRUS, 1930, Volume III. 355-357.

"[e]xtension of education to all alike," an overhaul of Native policy, "stricter control of Frontier Force soldiers," and for the "[r]oad program to be curtailed." The League had also made some more general recommendations, such as calling for the "[b]arrier between civilized and uncivilized to be broken." In all, the League had found at the root of the forced labour scandal a suppressive and exploitative approach by the Americo-Liberians to ruling the Native population, and many of the reforms were therefore targeting this, rather than forced labour directly.[131]

By early November, Washington had retreated further from involvement in Liberia, deeming direct assistance in implementing reform in Liberia too active a role for the United States to take on. In a memorandum of a conversation with Harvey Firestone, J.T. Marriner, Chief of the Division Western European Affairs, stated that the State Department would lean towards "the appointment of an international group" to oversee reforms since "the matters investigated by the Commission" were of "international, rather than local concern." The Department also made it clear that "there was little prospect" that the United States Government "even if requested to do so by the present Liberian administration, would consent to exercise supervision over Liberian elections" which were traditionally characterized by rampant fraud.[132]

On December 3rd, 1930, the Department learned that King had resigned, and given Vice President Yancy's previous resignation, Edwin Barclay, who had been Secretary of State under King and was likely involved in the forced labour scandal to a degree, would be taking over the presidency. Secretary of State Stimson responded immediately to the

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[131]"League Report," 1930. 171-184.
[132]NARA, RG 59, Box 6996, 882.00/857, "Conditions in Liberia, November 5, 1930."

Chargé in Liberia, Reber, stating that he should refer to the new President only as "Mr. Edwin Barclay," signalling a withholding of recognition of the Barclay administration.[133] In a discussion with Firestone about the situation, Stimson made it clear that he "saw no likelihood of the American Government being willing to assume responsibility in Liberia" and that the League would be the one that would probably take the task on.[134]

Ellis Briggs of the Division of Western European Affairs echoed this in a late December memorandum on the situation. He stated that though "the corruption and ineptitude of the Americo-Liberian governing minority" had caused a crisis which was placing "strong demand" on the American Government for "positive action, and that the reforms needed were "beyond the capacity or manifested desire of the Liberian officials," the United States could not assume responsibility for reform alone. Briggs argued that such involvement would "inevitably lead to active and long-continued participation in Africa which,... could not fail to arouse the hostility of... [some] as imperialism." Such a course of action could therefore "render the continued espousal of the Monroe Doctrine difficult to justify" and would offer no "compensating gain, in profit or prestige" to the United States.[135]

Briggs' memorandum made clear the one of the major considerations at play in the U.S. government's retreat from any chance of any policy of unilateral reform supervision in Liberia. Though the King administration had been implicated in the forced labour scandal, taking on a major role in Liberia was deemed to be not worth the risk of being labelled

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[133] "Secretary of State to the Chargé in Liberia (Reber)," FRUS 1930, Vol. III. 381.
[134] "Chargé in Liberia (Reber) to Secretary of State, Monrovia, Dec 13, 1930," FRUS, 1930, Volume III. 386.
[135] "Memorandum by Mr. Ellis O. Briggs, of the Division of Western European Affairs," FRUS 1930 Vol. III . 391-393.

imperialist. While support for expressions of U.S. power had already been waning by the late 1920s, in the wake of the 1929 financial crisis, increasing the United States' administrative commitments abroad was increasingly infeasible. With many investment firms folding, the U.S. government finding itself short of funds, and growing opposition to what was increasingly seen as the 'imperialist' policies of the 1920s, there was no longer the funds nor the will to motivate policies which would increase U.S. involvement in the affairs of other, far away, countries.

A further problem was that even if the State Department did decide to facilitate Liberian reform, it was taken for granted that United States' had only ever had relations with the Americo-Liberians. So U.S. involvement based on the historical relationship between the two countries entailed that such intervention would be in favour of the Americo-Liberians. The major problem with this was that any of the significant reforms aimed at bringing about a more equitable political and social structure in Liberia would weaken the position of the Americo-Liberians, and therefore intervention to bring about such reforms would be imposed against the will of the group with which the United States had the historical relationship. So while citing the historical ties of the two nations provided a strong justification for intervention in favour of Liberian autonomy under Americo-Liberian rule, invoking it to support reforms which would probably bring an end to, or at least severely weaken, Americo-Liberian predominance was almost paradoxical. This hampered the chance of any real reform, since if any country had the ability to push Liberia to reform, it was the United States.

It was therefore decided that the problem would best be handled by an international committee administered by the League, and the plan received President Herbert Hoover's approval.[136] By early 1931, the Department had effectively handed over the situation to the International Committee on Liberia of the Council of the League of Nations, though the Department sent Reber as the American representative. Aside from continuing to refuse recognition to the Barclay regime until reforms were made, the Department withdrew from any direct action in Liberia. Having fully submitted the question of Liberian reform to the League, the Department was no longer in a position to exert its will on Liberia in any substantial way without looking like it was circumventing the international organization for its own purposes.

Despite this, Firestone had continued to urge the Department to seek a greater role in Liberia. Negotiations between the Liberian Government and Firestone had always been tense and this trend continued in the wake of the forced labour scandal as Firestone's attempts to renegotiate the loan agreement were repeatedly frustrated. The Department seemed to begin to regret is decision to give up any chance at unilateral action in Liberia by agreeing to place the issue of reform before the League. Firestone was having trouble working alongside the League Committee, which did not share its view that the best way to get Liberia back on its feet would be to put it under American control for at least a few years.[137] The State Department expressed privately its "entire sympathy with this attitude" and its belief that "complete executive and administrative control… for a period of probably 10 year" would be required to make the necessary reforms.

Officially, however, the Department was clear that: "Inasmuch as the Liberian question is… being handled by the League of Nations, the President would be unwilling to

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[136] Chalk, *The State Department and Liberia 1908-1941*, 1971. 184.
[137] "Secretary of State to the Consul at Geneva (Gilbert), Washington, January 13, 1932," FRUS 1932 Vol. II. 687-88.

accept responsibility in the matter except upon request by the League."[138] Having committed to international control of the situation, the Department could not simply abandon League Committee on Liberia. This became an increasingly difficult reality for the Department to face as it became clear that the Committee's ideas for Liberian reform differed greatly from those of the United States or Firestone.

Under the new Committee on Liberia, another commission had been sent to the Republic to build on the League Report on Forced Labour's recommendations for reform. The so called "Brunot Commission" came back with similar recommendations as the Forced Labour Commission, but also recommended that twenty foreign assistants be taken on by the Liberian Government, requiring $398,000 to pay the combined salaries. It was suggested by the Brunot Commission that the Liberian Government could get the money to pay these advisers from the Finance Corporation loan. The Liberia Committee, however, thought that rather than deepening Liberia's debt, the Government should obtain extra revenue through an increase in rent from 6 to 50 cents an acre on Firestone's concession, introducing an export tax on rubber, and by putting a hold on the payment of interest on the Finance Corporation loan until Government revenue was above $650,000 a year.[139]

This plan, presented by the League Committee in May, 1932, was deemed "thoroughly unworkable and impractical" by the American representative on the Committee.[140] In fact, the Department detested the plan so much that it began to show serious interest in unilateral action in Liberia again. This was expressed by Washington in

[138] "Secretary of State to the Consul at Geneva (Gilbert), Washington, January 13, 1932," FRUS 1932 Vol. II. 687-688.
[139] Sundiata, *Black Scandal*, 1980. 59.; Chalk, "The U.S. and the International Struggle," 1970. 185.
[140] "Memorandum by Mr. Ellis O. Briggs of the Division of Western European Affairs, Washington, May 17, 1932," FRUS 1932 Vol II. 726-27.

its refusal to cooperate with the League Committee unless an American was put in control of Liberia. In response to the Committee's request that the United States help procure funds to support its reform plan, Reber, on behalf of the Department, stated that the "American Government would not be willing to recommend the Finance Corporation…[enter into] any financial negotiations until a satisfactory administrative plan [one that placed Liberia under the control of a single American General Commissioner] had been agreed to by Liberia."[141] The Liberian Government offered a compromise in which three Americans, "white or black," would be appointed as provincial commissioners, but the Department was so unimpressed with this proposition that it simply instructed the American Minister in Liberia, Mitchell, not to reply.[142]

In June, the Department made a final attempt to bring about more comprehensive American control in Liberia.[143] Secretary of State Stimson requested that Mitchell, in a "frank, informal and unofficial conversation with Barclay," try to convince the new President to: 1) "request the League of Nations to appoint one properly qualified foreigner as 'Commissioner General'"; and 2) make the proposal contingent "upon the appointment by the League of an American citizen as 'Commissioner General,'" in which case "certain adjustments regarding the [Finance Corporation] loan contract" would be facilitated – adjustments that the Liberian Government badly wanted to have made to lighten the load of

[141] "The Consul at Geneva (Gilbert) to the Secretary of State, Geneva, May 22, 1932," FRUS 1932 Vol II, 731.
[142] "The Minister in Liberia (Mitchell) to the Secretary of State, Monrovia May 26, 1932," Ibid., 732.; "The Secretary of State to the Minister in Liberia (Mitchell), Washington, May 27, 1932," Ibid., 732-33.
[143] In the interim, there had been some moves to try and validate U.S. intervention in reaction to reports of attacks on the people of the Kru Coast. It was alleged that these attacks were being carried out by the LFF on the orders of Barclay as reprisals against those who had testified against King and the other Liberian officials to the League Commission. The Department, however, could not muster the political will, and eventually dropped this.

the interest payments. Mitchell was instructed to leave no memorandum or record of this conversation.[144]

Despite a positive initial response from Barclay, the plan came to nothing.[145] Ultimately, neither Liberia nor the League Committee was prepared to accept what the British Representative to the Committee pointed out would "amount to practical administration of the country being centered in American hands."[146] The League, while in agreement about the idea of a General Commissioner with broad powers being appointed, did not think he should be an American, but rather insisted he be from a neutral country.[147] By the time the issue came before the League Committee in September, the Department had fought so hard for the American solution that when Liberia accepted the League reform plan, the Department decided to back off from Liberia all together.

The Department was therefore forced to implement its Liberia policy largely through the Firestone Corporation. The company Castle had once termed "the one hope Liberia has for the future," had therefore become the only hope for the future of the Department's role in Liberia.[148] Firestone's policy of avoiding negotiations with the League made it impossible for the League Committee to continue with its reform plan, which depended on proposed changes being made to the Company's agreement with Liberia. As a result, instead of offering the Department a way of being involved from a distance with the League reform, working alongside Firestone proved just as fruitless as the

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[144] "The Secretary of State to the Minister in Liberia (Mitchell), Washington, June 18th, 1932," FRUS 1932, Vol II, 738-40.
[145] "The Minister in Liberia (Mitchell) to the Secretary of State, Monrovia, June 24, 1932," FRUS 1932 Vol II, 742-43.
[146] British Representative as quoted in: Chalk, "The U.S. and the International Struggle," 1970. 190.
[147] Ibid., 190.
[148] Beecher, "The State Department and Liberia," 1971. 183; Quoting "'Castle to Division of Western European Affairs, Washington, January 6, 1932,' 882.01 Foreign Control/182 $\frac{1}{2}$, DF, DSNA."

Department's own policy of stubborn refusal to accept the Liberia Committee's reform plan. Relations only worsened when Liberia suspended the 1926 loan agreement, refusing to pay interest to the Finance Corporation.

For a few months, the Department did what it could to help Firestone pressure the League and Liberian Government to have the legislation rescinded. To maintain this assistance, Firestone had heavily lobbied the Department, sending its lawyer Everett Sanders, who was also the Chairman of the Republican National Committee, to convince Stimson to put his efforts on side with Firestone. Stimson's attempt to convince the British of the importance of having the legislation repealed, however, was met with indignation, and a firm refusal to help Firestone out of a situation that the British believed the company had got itself into. The embarrassment caused by the British reaction drove Stimson to begin to separate the Department from Firestone.

As the Republican interwar period drew to an end, the Department had begun to make amends with the Committee again, rejecting Firestone's stubborn insistence on an American display of naval force to pressure the Republic to repeal. Stimson even refused to receive the Firestones the next time they visited Washington.[149]

Along with souring relations with Firestone, the Department and, therefore, the League which depended on the support of either the United States or Firestone to implement its reforms, had failed to address the forced labour issue effectively. This failure can largely be attributed to the lack of a consistent approach to the scandal. Had the State Department decided either to intervene, or to put its efforts behind the League, it certainly would have been able to achieve far more than it did. Instead it wavered between

[149]Beecher, "The State Department and Liberia," 1971. 194-96.

these opposing policies and accomplished little. This vacillation was a product of numerous factors chief amongst which was the period of transition U.S. foreign policy was in when the labour scandal struck. While the Department seemed to feel compelled to abandon the dollar diplomacy that had characterized its approach to Liberia for the previous two decades in lieu of growing opposition to such policies as imperialistic, old habits were hard to break. There were many good reasons to take an active role in Liberia at this time, but they only seemed to have enough force to confuse U.S. policy, not sway it in favour of unilateral action.

Conclusion

By the time the period of Republican predominance had come to an end, the State Department seemed to have achieved nothing in Liberia. Barclay, who had been Secretary of State under King, was President, continuing the Americo-Liberian predominance. Washington was only just beginning to smooth things over with the League, and this was at the expense of its relations with the Firestone Company. Almost none of the reforms that U.S. officials had sought to bring about in Liberia were achieved. Reports of harsh reprisals ordered by Barclay against those coastal tribes and chiefs that had come forward to the League to report on conditions in Liberia had gone unpunished.[150] In addition to brutally attacking the coastal Kru, the LFF continued to coerce labourers for work on public projects.[151] In general, the Department seemed to have categorically failed to address the forced labour scandal.

This failure meant that the Americo-Liberian abuse of the Indigenous population that lay at the heart of the forced labour scandal went unaddressed. The fact that when the State Department began working on the Liberia issue again under the Roosevelt administration in 1934 it was to help Firestone re-negotiate the loan agreement shows that Washington was far more interested in promoting the needs of American corporations than in facilitating or pressing for progressive reform. Moreover, it reflects the resurgence of the trends of American corporatist diplomacy as seen in the 1920s.

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[150] "Liberia Legation to Secretary of State, October 31st, 1931," Box 6996, 882.00/896, RG 59, NARA.; "Reber to Secretary of State, April 20, 1932," Box 6997, 882.00/949, RG 59, NARA.;
[151] "Reber to Secretary of State, February 3, 1931," Box 6996, 882.00/874, RG 59, NARA.; "John MacVeagh to Secretary of State, April 30, 1934," Box 6997, 882.00/1018, RG 59, NARA.

Despite coming to the aid of Firestone, Washington took measures to reduce its official involvement in Liberia. Though the renegotiated agreement signed in 1935 was favourable for Firestone, securing it higher profit margins, it also brought about a reduction in the number and power of the American advising staff. The U.S. was ready to walk away from Liberia and no attempts to reform the Liberian social or political structure were made.[152]

The forced labour scandal had presented the United States State Department and League of Nations with an opportunity to bring a change to the system of exploitation of the Indigenous population that underpinned minority rule in Liberia. Reform, however, was at least in part a casualty of U.S. indecision and protection of private interest. In trying to balance and waffling between the 1920s commitments to corporate culture, the internationalist approach spurred on by 1930s antimperialism, and historical commitments to Americo-Liberians and Firestone alike, Washington failed to provide support to the League that was indispensible for successful reform.

During the early twentieth century, the United States had taken measures to increase its control over Liberia through both the loan of 1912 and the Firestone loan agreement of 1926. In the process of doing so, it had accumulated a larger degree of influence over Liberia than any of the European powers had in the past, and was therefore in a unique position to promote reform in the Republic. Washington, however, squandered the political control it had developed and eventually seemed to give up all-together on the African Republic. With the help of the United States' apparent apathy, Americo-Liberian

[152] Rosenberg, "Invisible Protectorate," 1985. 208-209.

rule was, if anything, strengthened in the wake a public scandal caused by the transgressions of Liberia's ruling class.

Despite the scandal of 1929 and the international outcry that resulted, political power in Liberia remained concentrated in Americo-Liberian hands until 1980 when Americo-Liberian president William Tolbert was toppled in a violent coup led by Samuel K. Doe, a Master Sergeant of Indigenous descent. With the central authority greatly weakened, Doe could only hold on to power for so long. In 1989, Doe was deposed by Charles Taylor, a half-Indigenous, half-Americo-Liberian ex-pat who had returned to Liberia and formed an army. The country quickly descended into chaos and a civil war broke out. The war caused over 740,000 Liberians to become refugees, 1.2. million became internally displaced persons, and between 150,000 and 300,000 were killed.[153]

The Firestone Company remains in Liberia today, though the civil war and unrest of the 1990s forced it to scale back its operations considerably. As recently as 2009, Firestone was accused of both using both forced labour and child labour on its plantations.[154] Harvey Firestone's vision of establishing the American working day in Liberia seems to have been lost somewhere in the chaos of Liberian history.

Though these events and the failure to introduce reform to Liberia in the wake of the forced labour scandal are not necessarily directly causally connected, the lack of reform certainly allowed for the perpetuation of certain trends that contributed to Liberia's decline into mayhem in the late twentieth century. The Americo-Liberian mandate of maintaining

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[153] Nicholas Cook, "CRS Report for Congress, Liberia: 1989-1997 Civil War, Post-War Developments, and U.S. Relations," 2003, accessed via Wikileaks. 9-10.

[154] International Labor Rights Forum, "Stop Firestone," http://www.laborrights.org/stop-child-labor/stop-firestone accessed March 20, 2012 ; World Rainforest Movement, "Liberia: Lawsuit against Firestone for slavery and child labor on rubber plantations," http://www.wrm.org.uy/bulletin/102/Liberia.html accessed March 20, 2012.

their superiority by denying the Indigenous population education and basic rights not only created deep social tensions, but also meant that the large majority of the Liberian population remained uneducated and exploited for decades after the scandal. Therefore, when Americo-Liberian hegemony did come to an end, the lack of any comparably organized and cohesive political movement to take its place eventually resulted in a civil war so chaotic that the United States was wholly unwilling to make an attempt to intervene and re-stabilize the country that had once been informally considered an American ward.

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