

**Challenges of National Transformation: The Liberian Case**

**Carlson Lecture**

**by**

**Her Excellency Madame Ellen Johnson Sirleaf**

**President of the Republic of Liberia**

**at**

**Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs**

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**My Friend, Dean Brian Atwood;**

**Students, Faculty, and Staff of this great Institute;**

**Ladies and Gentlemen:**

I am immensely pleased to be back here in Minnesota – and at this Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs. I am also delighted by the opportunity afforded me to see old friends again.

I would like to thank my friend and colleague of many years, Dean Brian Atwood, for the invaluable work he does to foster and advance public discourse on democracy, civil liberties, and social justice here at this Institute and across the United States of America, in Africa, and in other regions of the world. I thank him also for his many years of support for Liberia through the National Democratic Institute.

This Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs stands as a towering testament to a great American statesman and social justice advocate, former Vice President Hubert Horatio Humphrey, an accomplished Legislator of this state and a national leader of the United States of America. Vice President Humphrey was a central figure in President Lyndon Johnson’s administration which presided over one of the

greatest periods of social and economic transformation and opportunity in the United States and across the world.

This Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs therefore truly embodies the essence of the life of the late Vice President Hubert Humphrey: It is among the premiere professional schools of public affairs in the United States. It distinguishes itself in shaping public policy in this state, throughout the United States of America – and in the wider international community. It provides leadership and management expertise to public and non-profit organizations – and as a result of the work this Institute does, it gives meaning and reach to the democratic principles and values – and seeks to find answers to common global problems. These were the hallmarks of the life of Hubert H. Humphrey.

I therefore feel honored to be here to participate in this interactive forum which is consistent with the Humphrey tradition of public engagement and dialogue.

Four years ago during a pre-campaign visit to this hospitable Twin-City area, I had the opportunity to visit this Institute. Although at that time I was an undeclared candidate for the Presidency of Liberia, I was encouraged – and indeed strengthened in my resolve by the demonstration of support for my candidacy. Today, I come here as the first democratically elected female President of Liberia and the Continent of Africa to say, as we say in Liberia, “Thank you” to my fellow Liberians in this state and throughout the United States of America – and to you, our American friends, for standing by us.

After a long and complicated history of freedom and repression, success and failure, Liberia started the transition to democracy, with elections in 2005. We had very little to build on but the will of a very resilient people to survive and the desire of a hopeful people to live a normal life. The period of transition must also be transformation through a socio-economic and political reordering; indeed, a national renewal – one that would signal a fundamental break with the past and bold and decisive steps to address the problems that for decades had stunted our progress, undermined national unity, and kept old and new cleavages in ferment. To achieve this transformation, we will face challenges – both internal and external.

Our internal challenge is two-fold – first, to reconstruct our broken nation – its infrastructure and institutions; to restore basic services to our citizens, to reform our military and para-military institutions which for nearly a quarter century, especially during our 14 years of civil war, were transformed because warring factional forces owed their allegiance not to the state but to specific groups and interests. Second, to reduce pervasive poverty by providing employment opportunities to our people to restore their dignity; to renew and restore the spirit of hope; and to build the values of individual self confidence and integrity.

The external challenge is similarly two-fold. First, to restore our country’s bilateral image; to move from the characterization of a failed state to that of a potential post conflict success story; to rebuild lost partnerships with nations and institutions; to provide the required peace through economic cooperation and integration. Second, to

regain our country's creditworthiness and regional competitiveness; to demonstrate an influential leadership role on global development issues.

We have come a long way in meeting these challenges. Our formulated vision as stated in our Poverty Reduction Strategy or "Lift Liberia" is clear – to build a new nation that is peaceful, secure and prosperous with democratic and accountable governance based on the rule of law, with equal opportunities and equity for all citizens. Our development agenda in pursuit of that vision, embodies four pillars – Peace and Security, Economic Revitalization, Governance and the Rule of Law and Infrastructure and Basic Services.

A new 2000-person army undergoing training with support from the United States is expected to be professional and well equipped to protect our geographic integrity, to contribute to development through its engineering contingent, to respond, when called to national emergencies with due respect for the rights for citizens and the rule of law. Other para-military bodies are undergoing similar training in preparation for the eventual drawdown of the U.S. Peacekeeping Force which still has primary responsibility for the security of the state. An omnibus security sector reform bill, to be submitted to the Legislature, will rationalize the sector removing duplications and setting mandates that are clear and enforceable. Where applicable, civilian oversight of security units will be included.

We are proud of our progress on the economic front. United Nations sanctions on our forestry and diamond operations have been lifted in response to new laws and policy measures that ensure proper management and use of these resources. In response to a revised Investment and Revenue Codes, direct private investment in the country's vast mining and agriculture sectors are on the rise. Growth of 9.5 percent in 2007 gave assurance of reaching double digit targets albeit now reduced to 7 percent due to a scaling back of investment on account of the global financial crisis.

Diversity in exports by identifying commodities that qualify to take advantage of the eligibility for AGOA will counter this downturn as will the right balance among conservation, commercialization and community benefits in forestry operations.

A \$4.7 billion external debt is now reduced by \$2 billion and will be all gone when we reach the Completion Point under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) program sometime next year.

Government revenues at a paltry \$80 million when we took office in 2006 is now close to \$300 million providing the basis to increase the lowest monthly civil servants salary from \$15 to \$70 and to tackle the payment of some 15 years arrears to demobilized soldiers, civil servants, foreign missions, regional institutions and international organizations.

We continue to strive for progress in good governance and the rule of law; our effort recognized by the achievement of Threshold status under the Millennium Challenge Account. Efficiency in public service requires capacity that comes from a critical mass of qualified persons operating in a merit system. We are well advanced in

moving in that direction, with support from partners under special programs that facilitate the reparation of our citizens like many of you in this room.

Inherited systemic corruption embedded in the society for decades is under attack through exposure, audits and investigations. We became the first African country to complete the annual report under the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) and so was recognized by Transparency International at its Doha conference two months ago.

A weak judicial system to exert punishment through the rule of law is under reform. Strict adherence to the new Public Procurement law through training and punishment for violation, and passage of the Code of Conduct for Public Officials, by the Legislature, will reinforce efforts to address corruption and improve good governance.

Fighting corruption as pervasive and deep rooted in depravation will require much more than that. It will require well paid and well placed qualified civil servants, widely installed financial management systems, a political audit system and a judicial system with the integrity and will to pursue offenders as required by law.

Good governance and the rule of law also require as a central objective, an informal civil society participation in the processes of governance. To the point of a fault, we have upheld democratic values such as free speech, freedom of association and an unprecedented freedom of the Press. We continue to respect the separation of powers doctrine of our constitution and are promoting the building of democratic institutions including political parties.

The restoration of infrastructure and basic services is well on course. Electricity and pipe borne water have been restored to certain areas of the capital city for the first time in fourteen years. Roads, clinics, hospitals, schools and other public buildings are being renovated or built in all fifteen counties. Next year, the University of Liberia will move into a \$22 million facility at the destroyed Fendall campus. Three regional community colleges to be built and made operational within the next two years will enable youths to obtain quality higher education without the hardships of relocation to the Capital City. Children in certain remote rural areas will for the first time go to school in a government facility and young girls whose parents cannot afford tuition, benefit from scholarships to attend public and private schools.

This is made possible through the Liberian Education Trust (LET), a fund which I established in 2006 with contributions from individuals and institutions here in the United States who help us to achieve our 50/500/5000 goals – the renovation or construction of 50 schools, training of 500 teachers and scholarships to 5000 girls over a three year period. To date, we have raised \$2.5 million and well on the way to achieving the goals with 26 schools built or renovated, 200 teachers trained and 5000 scholarships granted to girls in the majority of the 15 counties.

A similar private initiative, the Sirleaf Market Women Fund has raised over \$3 million to support the building and renovation and modernization of markets throughout the country. A literacy program for market women supported by LET is far gaining momentum throughout the country.

You may have heard that, in celebration of International Women's Day, I co-convened with President Halonen of Finland, a women's colloquium in Monrovia. About 500 women from all over the world joined a similar number at home to celebrate Liberia's progress.

Dear Compatriots and Dear Friends, perhaps the best progress we have achieved is the restoration of HOPE. One can see this in the eyes of children as they walk to school. One can see in the gait of farmers who slowly move back to their communities on roads that get them there in good time. One can see this in the eyes of market women who can now work under better conditions. One can see this in the eyes of the youth who know that they have a stake in the future, that they will have the opportunity to be anything they want to be. We need only, collective as Liberians, to agree that the future is ours to reclaim.

Thank you.