

**“Africa and Its Place in the World:
An Evening with the ‘Iron Lady’”**

Lecture by

**Her Excellency Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
President of the Republic of Liberia**

The Landmark Theater, Richmond, Virginia
Saturday, November 6, 2011

The Board of Directors and Members of the Richmond Forum;

National, State, and Local Leaders;

Members of the Richmond Community;

Citizens of the Commonwealth of Virginia;

Visiting Friends;

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen:

Let me begin by expressing my gratitude for the invitation to be here this evening. The history of this building and this Forum is not lost on me, and I am grateful to share in the experience.

History is an account of our successes and failures, our mountain-top and valley experiences. Through traditions we live out the experience of history – avoiding our worst errors and ingraining the lessons of our finest hours into the next generation, daring them to match the greatness of those who have come before. I feel the same way about this Landmark Theater and this historic Forum.

This Theater stands as a monument to the desire of this community to educate and entertain. It was an investment in the intellectual health of the citizens of this community and has served as a space where the gifted, and maybe not so gifted among us, could share their talent with the world. It provided them a stage – a theater to fulfill their dreams and make a meaningful contribution to their society, enhancing their sense of worth and enriching the community. Over the years, some of the greatest entertainers have performed here.

For 25 years, the Richmond Forum has shared in that tradition by educating, challenging and inspiring this community. People with ideas have come from all over the world to this hall, to this Forum. During those years, you applauded the ideas you agreed with and questioned those with which you differed. Some of the women and men in whose shadow I stand today had significant impact on the world. It is thus a privilege for me to be here, and I sincerely thank you for granting me the honor to address the historic Richmond Forum as the first sitting Head of State.

I began by noting that we pass on our traditions to remind us of humanity's mistakes, to celebrate its triumphs. When a stranger is invited to share in a tradition, as you have invited me, it is an expression of respect and trust – trust that the tradition will be honored, trust that the stranger will appreciate and honor said tradition. It is my hope that over the course of our conversation this evening that confidence and trust will be validated.

A little over a week ago, I received an email from a woman who wrote that she heard that I would be at Virginia Union University, less than a mile away from her home. I want to acknowledge Gale Hudson -- I don't know if she is in the audience – to say to you, Gale, thanks for the encouraging and inspiring words: "As you honor God, He will honor you."

Dear Friends:

While I always welcome the opportunity to speak about my country, Liberia, speaking about Africa, and its place in the world, can be a tricky proposition.

First, there is the issue of addressing an entire continent as though it were a single country, like the United States, for example. As you well know, Africa is both massive and complex. How does one speak about a continent – with enough land mass to encompass the United States, China, the Indian sub-continent, the largest countries in Europe, and all of Eastern Europe – as a monolithic entity? This is simply impossible!

Africa's population reached 1 billion in 2009, and those numbers are dispersed among 53 countries. How, therefore, to compare my tiny country, with its population of only 3.5 million, to that of Nigeria's, with 150 million inhabitants? Again, impossible!

How is it possible that political unrest in Niamey, Niger, should have any effect on the investment climate in Swaziland, some 3,300 miles away?

How does one speak of Africa as one – from a South Africa that is capable of successfully hosting the 2010 Football World Cup, to a Guinea where impassable roads and organizational deficiencies make it a herculean task to hold a first-ever presidential election?

The second difficulty in speaking about Africa has to do with maintaining a balance between the continent's real problems and its prospects. As the leader of an African country, I am up against the perception of a continent where only bad things happen. The stereotypical "Africa" is perennially troubled by war and misery. This image inordinately dominates the landscape and has become the Africa brand, which stultifies the possibility of Africa as a market; of Africa as a place where the entrepreneurial spirit flourishes, where innovation happens and opportunities for investment exist.

Admittedly, I am from a country which, for over two decades, contributed significantly to this unflattering perception of Africa, given the brutality and horrors of Liberia's civil conflict. I have personally witnessed the anguish of war and hunger. Today, as President, I continue to confront the poverty and joblessness which are the legacies of those lost decades. It is, therefore, with the utmost respect for the real problems of our citizens who find themselves in terrible conditions that I make these comments.

Yet despite this diversity, there are common structures, systems and experiences that enable us to speak about Africa's 53 countries as one.

Without undervaluing their suffering, it is important to put Africa in perspective. According to a *Wall Street Journal* online article, and I quote: "The share of the African population dying in wars (including genocides) every year is on the order of .01 percent (one tenth of a percent) over the past four decades, and the percentage of the population composed of refugees was about 0.5 percent in 2005." Today, that percentage of people dying is 0.2 percent out of a population of 1 billion.

Before the recent financial crisis, Africa had experienced sustained economic growth over the last decade. The World Bank's Chief Economist, John Page, said about the continent, "For the first time in almost 30 years we've seen a large number of African countries that have begun to show sustained economic growth at rates that are similar to those in the developing world and actually today exceed the rate of growth in most of the advanced economies."

Between the 1990s and 2007, there was a 382 percent increase in telephone use across the continent, an 18 percent increase in access to potable water, and a 43 percent increase in the expansion of electricity grids. Also since 1990, there has been a 10 percent increase in literacy among women.

While maintaining a realistic grasp on the many challenges that countries face across the continent, it is important to keep our eyes on the tremendous opportunity that is Africa. Statistics show that while the rest of the world is experiencing declining birth rates and ageing populations, Africa – especially sub-Saharan Africa – remains the exception. By the end of the 21st century, one third of the human race will be found on our continent. Africa thus remains the youngest continent in terms of demographics.

Beyond the stereotypes and its obvious challenges, Africa offers hope and opportunity to its entrepreneurs, investors and its people in general. I trust, then, that our conversation will realistically assess the potential and challenges in Africa, and the place the continent is likely to occupy in world events.

There is another promising side to Africa's success. As stated by Steven Radelet in his book, *Emerging Africa*, "today, nearly 25 years after its onset, the debt crisis is finally winding down, for most African countries.

Debt burdens are significantly lower than they were just ten years ago, freeing up financial resources and relieving the time burden on senior policymakers who no longer need to constantly reschedule huge debt.

But just as important, as debt burdens have fallen, relationships between these countries and the donor community have fundamentally changed. Country-led poverty reduction strategies have replaced the heavy conditionality of IMF and World Bank stabilization and structural adjustment programs as the centerpiece of economic policymaking and of donor programs. The IMF's role is less dominant than it once was, and donor conditions are, imperfectly, more in line with country priorities. As debt burdens have fallen and economic policies have improved, relationships with donors have become much healthier and less adversarial, providing a stronger basis for donor support to bolster future development in the emerging countries." What this means is that Africa is taking control of its own destiny.

With this backdrop, I want (this evening) to focus on three trends that will shape Africa's future and place in the world: its youth, its economy, and its security.

YOUTH

Africa is a youthful continent, with more than 40 percent of the population under age 15. When I travel around my country, I see the children and wonder how we will respond to their needs, their health care, their need for clean water, among others. That population is projected to reach 1.9 billion by 2050. While the rest of the world is ageing, Africa's population is getting younger, especially in the West, Central and Eastern parts of the continent. Recurring high fertility rates in these regions mean that youthful age structures and high levels of population growth will continue in the foreseeable future.

Investors seeking higher returns will, in the medium term, be drawn to Africa, home to the world's fastest growing labor force which, by 2040, is expected to number 1.1 billion people. It is important to underscore that this expansion of Africa's labor force will be occurring as the rest of the world is retiring its workforce. Africa's youth will be the force driving economic growth. By improving the quantity and quality of our schools

and educational facilities, we are poised to reap the benefits of these numbers at a time when the continent will be a magnet for investment.

Africa also has the highest urbanization rates in the world; the percentage of Africans living in cities is expected to exceed 50 percent by 2025, representing a 473 percent increase since 1990. In 10 years Africa will have more than 55 cities with a population between 1 million and 5 million. This may surprise you, but Africa currently has a similar percentage of people living in urban areas as can be found in China and more than in India. Urbanization is driving productivity, demand and investment. Urbanization is also driving the expansion of infrastructure and improvements in the provision of services.

This rapid urbanization is also seeing the emergence of the urban African consumer. In 10 years the number of Africans with disposable income is projected to be around 128 million, up from 85 million in 2008. The projected aggregate spending power by Africa's 18 largest cities will be \$1.3 trillion by 2020.

These numbers can be of tremendous benefit if we adequately prepare for them. These demographic trends can and should establish Africa as a prominent driver of global economic growth in the future. As African cities become more interconnected through improvements in infrastructure, trade within Africa will also increase. Yet, as we speak today, it is still easier to ship goods from Japan to Ethiopia than it is to move goods from Jos, Nigeria, to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. This has to change. Expansion in our infrastructure will boost intra-African trade facilitating activities with economies of scale. It will also deliver peace dividends. The more interconnected our economies become, the more difficult it will be for any African country to allow its territory to be used as a springboard for armed incursions into neighboring States, or to facilitate global terrorism.

Africa's growing population, its youthfulness and urbanization lead us to a second trend that will define Africa and its role in the world – its economy.

AFRICA'S ECONOMY

Beginning in the mid-1970s, Africa's economic growth stagnated and regressed in extreme instances, while the rest of the world moved

forward. Sudan, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) – the largest countries on the continent – registered low to zero economic growth, thereby disproportionately affecting the quality of life for the average African. Slow economic growth also meant that those nations were incapable of the economic dynamism that would have benefited the surrounding region.

Africa's divergence from the economic growth occurring in the rest of the world happened for several reasons. A principal reason was government policy and governance, which account for between 25 and 50 percent of the difference in growth between regions. Governments instituted policies that scared away investors: they skewed economic policies to benefit themselves and their closest allies at the expense of people in their countries. These policies affected how interest rates were set, which industries were subsidized, which ones were highly regulated, and which ones were owned by the government.

The absence of good governance – an acute lack of efficient and accountable institutions, whether judicial, political or administrative – also contributed to slowing Africa's economic growth. There were few established, predictable rules, and it was not always guaranteed that contracts would be enforced. In the face of such uncertainty, investors kept their money out of Africa. Authoritarian regimes flourished during those lost economic years, and the policies they instituted stifled Africa's growth.

Today there is hope about the coming transformation of Africa's economic space. The numbers emerging from its largest economies give us reason to believe in the continent's coming economic expansion. Africa's collective GDP is projected at \$2.6 trillion in 2020, and consumer spending at \$1.4 trillion. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) recently noted that much of Africa is recovering fast from the global financial crisis. The continent is projected to register growth rates that are second only to Asia.

The upturn for Africa occurred not only because of an increase in commodity prices; economic growth occurred because of changes in government policy and the overall governance portfolio. Since the 1990s, the number of democracies has increased; governments became serious about reducing foreign debt and controlling inflation;

publicly owned enterprises that were a drain on government resources were privatized; taxes were lowered, and legal and regulatory regimes were strengthened. These measures served to increase investor confidence and enhance the investment climate.

Across the continent we are harmonizing our economic policy with our regional neighbors. We are learning from each other's successes and mistakes, and adopting best practices when we negotiate with investors. As a confirmation of this improved climate, foreign direct investment in Africa increased from \$9 billion to \$62 billion between 2000 and 2008. GDP has grown on average 4.9 percent a year in the same period. We are proud that Liberia, with a small population of 3.5 million and per capita income of less than \$200, has ample natural resources that have attracted over \$16 billion in direct foreign investment in the five years of my Administration.

Africa is poised to become an engine of global economic growth. That position will be determined by the final trend – good governance and security.

GOVERNANCE AND SECURITY

Earlier, I noted that Africa experienced zero or negative growth for two decades beginning in the 1970s. I also outlined some of the factors that contributed to this economic divergence from the rest of the world. Corruption was at the core of that divergence. More than simply diverting resources from legitimate public use, corruption steadily undermines a government and corrodes its legitimacy. It provides legitimate discontent or the pretext of discontent to elements seeking to come to power through the use of force. But corruption is even more insidious in that it scares away legitimate investors and encourages the exodus of domestic capital.

In sub-Saharan Africa, Botswana and Mauritius rank highest in Transparency International's 2010 Corruption Perceptions Index, with South Africa, Namibia, Ghana and Rwanda also placed in the top 10. TI is the global civil society organization leading the fight against corruption.

As a result of our own efforts to fight corruption, the Index shows that Liberia is making strong progress. Out of the 47 African countries

surveyed, Liberia ranked 11th; globally, we climbed 51 places, moving from 138th to 87th. Our Administration's strong leadership on anti-corruption issues includes ensuring the independence of the General Auditing Commission and the Liberia Anti-Corruption Commission, reforming financial management, and assuring Liberia's compliance with the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), under which we became the first African country to do so and to expand coverage to the forestry sector.

Civil wars, coup d'états, pre- and post-election violence also make investors nervous. Unless we can resolve our political differences peaceably, the bright future I described earlier will elude us.

We also cannot address the question of governance without taking into account inclusiveness. Despite significant gains, much remains to be done about the place of women in African society. My Minister of Gender and Development likes to tell the story of a kindergarten child who was recently asked what he wanted to become when he grew up. He immediately responded, "Vice President." Puzzled, the teacher asked him why Vice President and he had a ready answer, "Because being President is a woman's job." At the very least, this young man will grow up in a society where it is considered normal for a female to be President. However, we must still work to address the attitude that makes him think that if it's a woman's work, he can't do it.

Up to the latter part of this decade, only 19 countries had achieved 30 percent women's representation in national parliaments. By 2008, women occupied only 18 percent of parliamentary seats, with only 13 women in the highest positions of State out of 192 governments. Although this is changing gradually, women ministers tend to be concentrated in social areas rather than legal, economic, political and executive sectors of their government. Rwanda remains an exception and a trailblazer with the highest number of women parliamentarians in the world, at 55 percent.

Right here, in your own country, a continuing study by two Professors from Stanford and the University of Chicago has found that U.S. Congressional districts served by female legislators on average do better than those represented by men. U.S. Congresswomen apparently bring home 9 percent more discretionary spending than their male counterparts. The same study found that women also do

better at policy-making. It turns out that Congresswomen sponsor more bills and obtain more co-sponsorship of bills than their male colleagues. Should those results hold up under scrutiny, maybe it will be an encouragement for us to increase the number of women in our parliaments across the continent.

In Liberia, our women organizations are applying pressure for 30 percent women's representation in our Legislature, political parties and other organizations, and we are determined to win that battle.

We also continue to remove structural impediments to social mobility for women. Women have run six strategic ministries in my Government: Foreign Affairs, Finance, Justice, Commerce, Agriculture, Gender, and Youth of Sports. Two out of five Justices of the Supreme Court are women. Junior Ministers across sectors account for more than 30 percent of women in our government. A woman runs the National Port Authority of Liberia – the gateway to our economy. The Mayor of our capital and largest city is also a woman. At 12 percent, the number of female parliamentarians still has a long way to go before we reach that 30 percent goal, but it is important to note that this is the highest it has ever been in Liberia. Women in one of the outlying counties have already begun organizing themselves into groups and saving money to field female candidates in the 2011 general elections.

I am very encouraged by the young women with whom I interact across the African continent. They see in my presidency a vindication of something they have always believed, that "it is possible. We can make it happen." I am aware of the tremendous responsibility this carries, and I welcome the challenge with humility. It is my great privilege to be a source of inspiration to these African young women with aspirations to occupy the highest leadership positions in law, politics, economics and more.

As a matter of fact, when I depart the United States in a few days, I will be stopping over in Accra, Ghana, to address one such gathering of African women, the African Women's Development Fund (AWDF), an organization that has funded many initiatives to promote leadership and empowerment for African women, Liberia included. To mark AWDF's tenth anniversary, they have invited me to lecture on "African Women and Political Participation." I look forward to it.

Africa's capacity to take advantage of the numbers I described earlier will be directly linked to the status of women on the continent. In the long run, the continent will rise when women assume roles as educated and equal partners in society. As women become more educated and enter the workforce, fertility rates will drop and Africa will benefit from the demographic dividend, namely, when a generation has fewer children than the preceding one. When that happens, there are more people entering the labor force than there are dependents.

As much as I would like to focus on Africa's youthful population as a net positive, it would be naïve to ignore the security risks that come with an increasing urban, young and unemployed population. The civil war, from which Liberia had recently emerged when my Administration took over in 2006, was mainly fought by young men for whom the economy held no promise. In Sierra Leone, in Côte d'Ivoire and other countries with similar experiences, it was young people who fought the many wars. The stories of piracy off the coast of Somalia, of pre-election rioting in Guinea, and of the post-election violence that gripped Kenya, cause us to reflect on the dire consequences if we do not adequately prepare for the growing numbers and youthfulness of Africa's population.

We look with hope toward the forthcoming referendum in Southern Sudan, and encourage leaders on both sides to make the transition thus bringing peace to the Darfur population.

We continue to seek solutions to Somalia's internecine wars, knowing that a vibrant, peaceful Somalia could add much to Africa's economy. Until these regions become safe and democratic, it is difficult to imagine how their peoples will share in the coming economic expansion in Africa. We look forward to an increase in the number of democracies as several countries experience successive and peaceful regime change.

But the majority of African countries have created the environment for security and stability. The majority are meeting the challenges of human security, jobs, education, health, sanitation clean water, all of those poverty reducing measures that reduce conflict and instability.

As our continent becomes increasingly urbanized and younger, the institutions of governance must become stronger. We have to give

people the hope that a better tomorrow is possible and imminent. People must have a say in the decisions that affect their lives. Governments must be responsible to their people, and Government institutions must be accountable and efficient. Respect for the rule of law and access to justice must improve.

I am, I remain a confident African, a proud African, and bullish about our prospects and future. When I was elected President in 2005, it was not simply a repudiation of Liberia's violent past; it was an expression of hope for an alternative and a better future.

As I travel Africa's vast continent, I encounter the same hope: I see it in the eyes of young people, the civil society organizations, newspaper editors and reporters, the petty traders and the marketers. We understand the perception of Africa and the momentum of our recent negative past. Across the continent there is a tangible and distinct desire for a new day in Africa – of Africa as an engine of global economic growth, a continent ready to become a full partner in an integrated world.

I believe in this Africa – my continent, my home.

I thank you.