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“The Moral Right and Duty of the United States”: The United States and Liberian Independence during the Scramble for Africa

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**“The Moral Right and Duty of the United States”: The United States and
Liberian Independence during the Scramble for Africa**

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MA Thesis North American Studies

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Introduction

In late 1843, twenty-one years after the American flag had been hoisted at Cape Mesurado, the British ambassador to the United States wrote a pressing letter to the American Secretary of State Abel Upshur. The British government had in recent years become troubled by Liberia's continued expansion, which included the creation of hard Liberian borders and more importantly, a claim to sovereignty and a commitment to taxation on trade within those borders. This act infuriated Liberia's neighbors, which at that point were the British colony of Sierra Leone to its west, a litany of tribes under increasing French influence to the north and east, as well as the newly created French protectorate of the tribes of the Grand-Bassam and Assini regions to the east that would later become Ivory Coast. The European powers not only disliked a tax on their trade in the region, the French and the British had also been vying for the lands that the American Colonization Society (ACS) had acquired since as early as 1822, when Britain offered military protection to the ACS in exchange for a portion of the lands that the ACS laid claim to.¹

As Britain deliberated on possible measures to be taken against Liberia, its government was apprehensive due to Liberia's ambiguous relationship with the United States. Unsure of Liberia's status as a political entity and unwilling to provoke a counter-reaction from the United States, ambassador Fox asked Secretary of State Upshur to define the exact nature of the relationship between the United States government and the colony of Liberia, which in 1843 was still officially ruled by the American Colonization Society. In his letter, ambassador Fox asks Upshur to define "the nature and extent of the connexion [*sic*] subsisting between the American colony of Liberia, on the coast of Africa, and the Government of the United States," to what extent the colony of Liberia enjoys the "official

¹ Niels Hahn, *Two Centuries of US Military Operations in Liberia: Challenges of Resistance and Compliance* (Alabama: Air University Press, 2020), 14.

patronage and protection” from the United States Government, and if the US holds itself responsible for the “acts of the authorities of Liberia.”² This thesis, much like ambassador Fox, seeks to ascertain the nature of this ambivalent relationship between the United States and Liberia, with a particular research focus on the US-Liberia relationship during the period known in the Western world as the Scramble for Africa. Therefore, this thesis will answer the following research question: What was the nature of the relationship between the United States and Liberia during the Scramble for Africa and what was the American role in continued Liberian independence between the 1880s and the onset of World War I?

There are multiple reasons to conduct research on this theme in the chosen historical period. The primary reason is Liberia’s unique situation during the Scramble for Africa: when European powers moved to partition and divide Africa amongst themselves during the Scramble, all but two African countries would fall under foreign spheres of influence. By 1898, only Ethiopia and Liberia could claim independence. Through a combination of warfare, political pressure, treaty-making and land-acquisition (both legal and illegal), the rest of Africa had lost their sovereignty.³ Singular in its efforts to fight off European powers, Ethiopia had secured its independence by defeating an Italian expeditionary force at the 1896 Battle of Adwa. In explaining Ethiopia’s successful defense of their sovereignty, historians usually point to a combination of Ethiopia’s economic prosperity and unified hierarchical political structure that prevented European forces from using a divide-and-conquer strategy that had worked on other African regions with a diffused and heterogenous tribal culture.⁴

² “Documents Relating to the United States and Liberia,” *The American Journal of International Law* 4, no. 3, Supplement: Official Documents (1910): 211.

³ Steven Press, *Rogue Empires: Contracts and Conmen in Europe’s Scramble for Africa* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press: 2017), 4.

⁴ William Seger, “The ‘Independence’ of Ethiopia and Liberia” (presentation, Africana Studies Student Research Conference, Bowling Green State University, February 23rd, 2018).

Moreover, Seger points out that the existence of Christianity as the official state religion afforded the Ethiopian regime a sense of legitimacy with European countries, who often employed a rhetoric of “civilizing and Christianizing” efforts in Africa to justify their colonization efforts.⁵

To be sure, the Liberian situation differed vastly from Ethiopia. As a country with American roots, it’s main (and perhaps only) similarity with Ethiopia was that it practiced Christianity: it differed in almost all other aspects from Ethiopia. Due to a growing schism between native Africans and Americo-Liberians it lacked strong political unity, it possessed a weak military force and it was perpetually experiencing financial woes.⁶ Additionally, it found itself geographically wedged in between areas under the control of Britain and France, both of which practiced aggressive colonial policies in Africa. Moreover, although the existence of Christianity in Ethiopia appeared to have protected it, it did not prevent Italy from attempting (and later succeeding) in invading and colonizing Ethiopia. These factors make for a fascinating case study, as Liberia’s relation to the United States during the Scramble for Africa explains Liberia’s unique position as the sole African country that avoided European colonialism, yet was never fully independent.

Secondly, by approaching African colonization from an American imperialist framework this thesis hopes to reduce the existing void in scholarship that analyzes the intersection of the Scramble for Africa, African colonization efforts within an American imperial framework and Liberian studies. Therefore, this thesis connects with two specific

⁵ William Seger, “The ‘Independence’ of Ethiopia and Liberia” (presentation, Africana Studies Student Research Conference, Bowling Green State University, February 23rd, 2018).

⁶ Monday B. Abasiattai, “Sierra Leone and Liberia in the Nineteenth Century,” in *The History of West Africa*, ed. J.F. Ade Ajayi and Michael Crowder (Essex: Longman Group, 1974), 318.

strands in the historiography on American imperialism, the Scramble for Africa and the history of Liberia.

Firstly, a body of work on the post-1847 relationship between the United States and Liberia exists within the field of military studies as well as in Liberian studies, but it is a marginalized topic within the field of American studies. In this context, the early history of Liberia and its historical connection to the United States are well-known amongst American historians, though most of the scholarly attention seems to be focused on early Americo-Liberian identity-forming or on the nature and interests of Liberia's founding organization, the American Colonization Society.⁷ This thesis does not engage with the problematic origins of the American Colonization Society as a discussion of pre-Civil War Slave Power is not within its scope. It will, however, touch on the extent of the political influence that Southern politicians and slaveholders held on the federal level in regards to African colonization.

Secondly, this thesis aims to expand on existing ideas on the American empire: to US history scholars, Liberia's 1847 independence is generally seen as the cut-off point for historical research regarding American involvement in Liberia or indeed, any considerations of Liberia as part of America's "greater empire."⁸ There are some scholars who have focused on Liberian-American relations in other time periods, most notably military historians who have done excellent research into Liberia's role as an American military stronghold in Africa during the Cold War and America's involvement in the Liberian Civil War. However, as one of the most essential periods in world history, US-Liberian relations during the Scramble for Africa remain vastly under-researched. The scant scholarship that does exist on Liberia

⁷ See *Slavery and the Peculiar Solution: a History of the American Colonization Society* by Eric Burin and *The African Colonization Movement 1816-1865* by P.J. Staudenraus, as well as various articles by Douglas Egerton and Matthew Spooner.

⁸ See *How to Hide an Empire* by Daniel Immerwahr.

during the Scramble for Africa either glosses over the underlying reason for Liberia's independence, mentions American influence but fails to analyze it thoroughly, or simply chalks Liberian independence up to pure "luck."⁹ This thesis therefore attempts to fill the void in scholarship that discusses the relationship between the United States and Liberia post-1847, and will contribute to a new understanding and broader definition of what has been called "the Greater United States," as it will reinforce the historical connection between two countries that are generally seen as entities with distinct and different histories.

Concluding, this thesis aims to approach late nineteenth-century Liberia from the perspective of 19th century American foreign policy and positions African colonization and its consequences within the framework of US expansionism. It asks what the United States' role was in Liberia's unique independence during the Scramble for Africa and how the American-Liberian relationship could subsequently be characterized. Ultimately, this thesis argues that the United States played a definitive role in Liberian independence during the Scramble for Africa, that the groundwork for Liberia's independence had been laid by America's policy on Liberia in the forty years prior the Berlin Conference, and that the Liberian-American relationship from 1847 until 1912 can be best described as a clandestine suzerainty: a concealed *de facto* relationship between a suzerain, the United States, and a subordinate polity, Liberia, wherein Liberia exercised autonomous internal control but the United States controlled its foreign policy to a great degree, with America's ultimate goal being Liberian independence from European colonialism.

This paper further aims to show the extent of US-Liberian relations during the Scramble for Africa and provide a clear understanding of the nature of Liberia's status as a polity, as well as the degree to which it fell under America's sphere of influence during the

⁹ John D. Hargreaves, *Prelude to the Partition of West Africa* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1963), 347.

Scramble for Africa. To do so, this thesis is divided into three chronological chapters. To contextualize the nature of US-Liberia relations during the Scramble for Africa, chapter 1 will introduce the pre-1830 US-Liberia relationship by discussing the extent of American governmental involvement in founding and defending early Liberia. This chapter further discusses the complex web of overlapping interests that governed American involvement in early Liberia. High-ranking federal officials who simultaneously sat on ACS boards promoted American military involvement in early Liberia, which created a strong bond between the US federal and state governments and Liberian settlers. This American involvement in Liberian affairs continued after the ACS gradually turned governmental power over to the Liberian settlers, but this involvement developed from military aid into diplomatic aid. This led to a period of what can be defined as ambiguous paternalism on the side of the United States, which is discussed further in chapter 2.

Chapter 2 expands on this pre-independence period and discusses the transition of Liberia's status as settlement under the American Colonization Society to an independent and internationally recognized republic. As Liberia proclaimed itself an independent republic in 1847, European powers that sought to increase their influence in West Africa would carefully start to challenge Liberian borders and laws, unsure of a US reaction and the nature of American patronage of Liberia. Meanwhile, contentious domestic policies regarding race in the 1840s and 1850s kept the US from recognizing Liberia's independence, further complicating their relationship. This chapter argues that this period of ambiguous paternalism lasted from 1862 until the onset of the Berlin Conference of 1884 and was characterized by careful and precarious American diplomacy that balanced its interests in Liberia, both commercial and political. Simultaneously, American diplomats attempted to keep European aggression at bay while carefully avoiding any formal ties or obligations to Liberia. Establishing US involvement in and with Liberia during this time demonstrates the extent of

US foreign policy changes regarding Liberia during the Scramble for Africa. As European aggression mounted during the preamble to the Scramble for Africa, this delicate political situation became harder to preserve. Some European powers, including Britain, France and Germany, began making concerted efforts towards expanding their influence in West Africa in the 1870s and 1880s, forcing America to increase its diplomatic efforts to keep Liberia independent.

Finally, chapter 3 will discuss the United States' role during the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885, as well as America's involvement in Liberia during the Scramble for Africa, and describe its evolving stance on Liberia during this period with a particular research focus on the United States' political and military influence and pressure on European powers. As the period of ambiguous paternalism ended with the Berlin Conference, other powers by then had understood that the United States would afford Liberia a certain degree of protection in the face of intense European colonialism. The relationship between the US and Liberia during the Berlin Conference and the Scramble for Africa became a public secret: to American and European audiences, the extent of America's informal protection of Liberia was unknown, but by 1884 the European monarchs and politicians understood and accepted America's guardianship of Liberia. This chapter shows that, contrary to public statements by the Arthur administration, the primary reason that the United States was invited to the Berlin Conference was its protection of Liberia, and that aggressive European colonialism forced the United States to abandon its position of cautious diplomacy and engage in a direct intervention in Liberia. This period of public secrecy lasted throughout the Scramble for Africa and ends in 1909, when President Taft publicly acknowledged the United States' interests in and historical connection with Liberia in his annual message to Congress and sent a special commission to Liberia to investigate its needs and conditions. This public admission of special interest ended more than 60 years of ambiguity and diplomatic tiptoeing, laying the

groundwork for increased American involvement in Liberia, which would play an important role in the American presence in Africa during in World War II and the Cold War.

The historical period that this paper follows corresponds with conventional dating of the Scramble of Africa, which usually takes the Berlin Conference of 1884-85 as the start of the Scramble for Africa and World War I as the end.¹⁰ All three of the chapters employ a qualitative analysis of primary sources consisting of diplomatic cables, contemporary newspaper articles, public speeches, annual messages and other public statements made by prominent politicians and public officials, as well as legal documents and other official government records. These include diplomatic cables and other microfilms, documents and records from the US Department of State archived by the state-run Office of the Historian, the National Archives and Records Administration and the Library of Congress, as well as historical documents that appeared in the *African Repository and Colonial Journal*, the former periodical from the American Colonization Society itself. Britain and France are the most relevant European powers included in this research as they posed the greatest threat to Liberian independence and sovereignty due to their colonial aggression and border encroachments in West Africa. To supplement this analysis, secondary sources on the partition of Africa, early Liberian history, US public policy towards Liberia, the Berlin Conference and general histories of West Africa were utilized.

This thesis will show that the words written in Secretary of State Upshur's reply to ambassador Fox guided American foreign policy on Liberia for almost half a century, as his words echo in almost every correspondence between an American Secretary of State and their European and Liberian counterparts. He reaffirmed US ambivalence on Liberian matters and his letter reflects Congress' difficulties in clearly labeling the US government's

¹⁰ See *Rogue Empires: Contracts and Conmen in Europe's Scramble for Africa* by Steven Press.

relationship to Liberia. Upshur described to Fox the legal character of the ACS, explaining that it founded Liberia while existing as a “voluntary organization” that wished to introduce Christianity and civilization to Africa. This method involved enticing slaveholders to emancipate their slaves by promising to rid the slave-holding States from the “inconvenience of an increase of free blacks among them,” following the narrative laid out by the ACS.¹¹ Upshur, wary of officially involving the United States in the business of colonization, further distances the America from Liberia by claiming that it was not established under the authority of the US government and that as such, “those authorities are responsible for their own acts.”¹² His simultaneous defense of Liberia and its borders however, shows the difficult position that the incorporation of the ACS had put him in, as Upshur struggles to fully commit to Liberia’s independence: “(...)that it [The United States] would be very unwilling to see it [Liberia] despoiled of its territory rightfully acquired, or improperly restrained in the exercise of its necessary rights and power as an independent settlement.”¹³ It is this standpoint that the US would find itself defending throughout the remainder of the 19th century.

¹¹ “Documents Relating to the United States and Liberia,” *The American Journal of International Law* 4, no. 3, Supplement: Official Documents (1910): 212.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 214.

Chapter 1: US-Liberia relations, 1817-1847

Even though Secretary of State Upshur argued differently, the United States federal government had been intimately involved in Liberia since its inception in 1817. Amongst scholars of American history, the misconception exists that support for African colonization was scattered and existed mainly on state and regional levels as charitable organizations, and that cohesive federal support for colonization was lacking.¹⁴ Indeed, following the establishment of the ACS, local state chapters of the colonization society sprung up in Maryland, Kentucky and Mississippi, all of which would create their own colonies on the West-African coast bearing their states' names (Kentucky-in-Africa, Maryland-in-Africa, etc.). According to some historians, these state chapters of the ACS received little to no interest from the federal government and relied mainly on private donations. However, the idea that the ACS itself was unable to secure federal support is incorrect. In fact, the political power of the group's founding members extended well into the federal government, with such members as Speaker of the House Henry Clay, House Representatives Daniel Webster and John Randolph of Roanoke, and Supreme Court Justice and George Washington's cousin Bushrod Washington as the organization's first president. This chapter argues that this entanglement of political power created strong federal and state support for the ACS since its founding, and that this federal support would continue publicly until Liberia's 1847 independence. Therefore, this chapter lays the historical groundwork for American involvement in Liberia in the period that preceded Liberian independence.

When the ACS bought a small island off the West-African coast called Sherbro Island as a landing post for the first colonists, it did so in large part with government funds which the organization received through a political scheme thought up by its powerful backers.

¹⁴ Christine Whyte, "Between Empire and Colony: American Imperialism and Pan-African Colonialism in Liberia, 1810-2003," *National Identities*, 18, no.1 (2016): 74.

High-ranking politicians and public figures in power carefully played into national discussions and racist sentiments surrounding slavery, the growth of a free black population and recent international geopolitical developments in order to divert federal funds towards their own goal of African colonization for black Americans. They handily used the shortcomings of the 1807 Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves, which outlawed the transatlantic slave trade in the United States but left the enforcement of the Act to the states themselves. After the Act went into effect in 1808, states were obligated to intercept slave traders who tried to illegally smuggle captives onto American shores. However, as the 1807 Act did not require repatriation of the captives, it became customary for US Navy boats to bring intercepted slave ships to the Southern states where the captives were auctioned off as slaves, effectively engaging in the very trade that they were tasked with prohibiting.¹⁵

The ACS used the failures of the 1807 Slave Trade Act to write a scathing report, called the Managers' report, which laid bare these shortcomings and promoted an alternative solution to the US Navy engaging in the slave trade. According to the report, no other remedy "can be found, short of a restitution of those injured people, to the country from which they have been iniquitously torn, nor can such restitution be so effectually accomplished in any other mode, as by their colonization upon the western coast of Africa."¹⁶ As the Managers' report was aimed at the shortcomings of the 1807 Act, the Board of Managers' arguments concerned solely the repatriation of illegally imported enslaved peoples. Nevertheless, in its conclusion the Managers' report extended this repatriation also to "the free people of color of

¹⁵ Eric Burin, "The Slave Trade Act of 1819: A New Look at Colonization and the Politics of Slavery," *American Nineteenth Century History*, 13, no.1 (2012): 6.

¹⁶ *The second annual report of the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Colour in the United States: with an appendix* (Washington: Davis and Force, 1819), 16.

the United States, who may voluntarily seek the same asylum.”¹⁷ This could be due to the organization’s ideology; powerful members of the ACS included Southern slaveholders who viewed the presence of free black people as a threat to their business model and feared that black freedom might inspire slave uprisings. It could also be that this was a strategic choice for the ACS, as black colonization had been proposed before by Thomas Jefferson among others, and extending colonization to include all black Americans might gain the ACS more popular support.¹⁸

In order to discredit the 1807 Act, the ACS Managers’ report showed how the first and second section of the 1807 Act directly contradicted each other. The first section of the Act promises harsh punishments for anyone engaged in the slave trade by fining “every person engaged in building, fitting out, equipping, loading or otherwise preparing or sending out” slave ships a sum of \$20,000 dollars and making it a high misdemeanor to engage in the import of slaves to the United States.¹⁹ Moreover, anyone convicted of importing slaves to the United States would be sentenced to prison for anywhere between five to ten years and receive a fine between \$1 and \$10,000 dollars, whereas buyers of imported slaves had to pay up to \$800 per enslaved person that they bought.²⁰ As the ACS argued, the second section of the Act completely belied these harsh punishments as it “allowed for the governor *to sell for the benefit of the State, any negroes, mulattoes, or persons of color, brought into it in*

¹⁷ *The second annual report of the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Colour in the United States: with an appendix* (Washington: Davis and Force, 1819), 16.

¹⁸ Eric Burin, *Slavery and the Peculiar Solution: a History of the American Colonization Society* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005), 10.

¹⁹ *The second annual report of the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Colour in the United States: with an appendix* (Washington: Davis and Force, 1819), 12-13.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

violation of the laws of the United States,” something which indeed happened regularly.²¹ In their opinion, the second section rendered the 1807 Act “in direct contravention, not only of its positive and express provisions, but of its very spirit and title” and allowed for the express admittance of the import of enslaved peoples.²² Shortly after the publication of the ACS Managers’ report, Charles Fenton Mercer, Virginian Congressman and founding member of the American Colonization Society, saw his chance and drafted a bill that adopted the measures proposed by the ACS Managers’ report, which he himself had also co-written. Congress, eager to find a more sustainable solution to the Transatlantic slave trade, passed Mercer’s bill as the 1819 “Act in addition to the acts prohibiting the Slave Trade,” which transferred the responsibility of returning freed African captives from the states to the federal government, and directed \$100,000 of federal funds towards the creation of a governmental agency on the African coast to resettle the freed captives.²³ Signed into law by president Monroe, it gave the ACS access to federal resources that had hitherto been unavailable and made long-term African colonization, for the first time, a feasible objective, signaling a long-lasting relationship between the United States federal government and what would later become known as Liberia.

As the ACS took over the organizational aspect of African colonization, the US government provided money, supplies, tools and weapons to be transferred on the first American overseas colonization voyage. In 1820, the ACS chartered the three-ton merchant ship *Elizabeth* while also receiving federal protection from the US Navy sloop of war

²¹ *The second annual report of the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Colour in the United States: with an appendix* (Washington: Davis and Force, 1819), 15.

²² Ibid.

²³ P.J. Staudenraus, *The African Colonization Movement 1816-1865* (New York: Columbia University, 1961), 50.

Cyane.²⁴ During the landing of the ships at Sherbro Island, a Navy Lieutenant passed away, likely of malaria, as did three white ACS agents and 22 black colonists, marking the first official death of an American during an African colonization effort.²⁵ The inhospitable natural environment and hostile population prompted the ACS to abandon the idea of settling Sherbro Island, opting instead to explore the possibility of acquiring property on the mainland.

Again, the United States government played a significant role in aiding the ACS in settling the mainland. A second expedition was planned, this time accompanied by the United States Navy brig *Nautilus*, which arrived at the shores of Liberia in July of 1821. Following the coastline southeast, the *Nautilus*' captain Robert Stockton, as well as the new ACS agent, a physician called Eli Ayres, decided on a piece of land called Cape Mesurado. Unable to persuade the local chief, whom the Americans named "King Peter," to sell them a piece of land, Captain Stockton is rumored to have pulled out his firearms and put them to King Peter's head, forcing him to give up a tract of land 130 miles long and 40 miles wide, for which the local chief received a supply of trade goods, firearms, supplies and liquor worth \$300.²⁶ Ayres assumed control of the would-be colony and was named the ACS' official agent to Liberia on May 12, 1822, three weeks after the American flag had been raised at Cape Mesurado. From its inception, the tract of land that would grow into Liberia was

²⁴ R.W. Shufeldt, "The U. S. Navy in Connection with the Foundation, Growth and Prosperity of the Republic of Liberia" (An address delivered before the American Colonization Society, 1877).

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Harrison Oladunjoye Akingbade, "The Role of the Military in the History of Liberia 1822-1947," (Ph.D. dissertation, Howard University, 1977), 19.

procured by the American Navy and controlled by the privately-run but government-funded American Colonization Society.

The arrival of American agents in West Africa provoked near-immediate reactions from the British, who had been launching trade expeditions into Liberian territory from nearby Sierra Leone. Fearing encroachment from Liberia onto British-desired territory, the British merchants and officials attempted multiple methods of engagement with the newly created colony of Liberia. In one instance in 1822, a British schooner offered military assistance to colonial agent Elijah Johnson, who was scrambling to protect the colony from skirmishes with native tribes, on the condition that “ground was given for the erection of a British flag.”²⁷ Johnson refused, proclaiming somewhat prophetically, “we want no flagstaff put up here that would cost more to get down again than it would to whip the natives.”²⁸ When their attempts at annexation failed, the British resorted to other methods: shortly after Johnson rebuffed the offer, a lieutenant in the British Navy published a book shortly wherein he accused the American Colonization Society of perpetuating the West African slave trade, in an attempt to discredit the new colony. This forced the ACS to publish their own statement reaffirming their commitment to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”²⁹ The attempt to discredit the young colony failed, partly due to unwavering support from the American government. The early period of Liberian colonization saw strong support from the United States which funded Liberian state-building while simultaneously keeping British aggression

²⁷ R.W. Shufeldt, “The U. S. Navy in Connection with the Foundation, Growth and Prosperity of the Republic of Liberia” (An address delivered before the American Colonization Society, 1877).

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Nnamdi Azikiwe, *Liberia in World Politics* (Negro Universities Press, 1970), 56.

to a minimum for over a decade by creating Navy patrol routes that surveyed the coast of newly-created Liberia.

This federal involvement in African colonization was supported domestically for a variety of reasons. Through their support of the American Colonization Society, the American government engaged in idealistic imperialism of their Western model of a Christian society, which was supported by a zealous portion of American politicians. Although the goal of the ACS had always been to create a place on the West African coast where black Americans could settle, motivated by both pro-and antislavery sentiments, it was assumed that this would go hand-in-hand with a systematic spread of Christianity.³⁰ This position is reflected in an official report of the ACS-agent Samuel J. Mills, a reverend who visited Sierra Leone in 1817 on an exploratory mission for suitable land for their project:

The altars on these mountains, which the natives had dedicated to devils, are falling before the temples of the living God, like the image of Dagon before the ark. The time is coming when the dwellers in these vales, and on these mountains, will sing hosannahs to the Son of David. Distant tribes will learn their song. Ethiopia will stretch forth her hands unto God, and worship.³¹

This Christian zeal was handily used by the American Colonization Society in their search for support for their colonization project. The concept of proselytizing Christianity and civilizing Africans served two goals for the ACS. Firstly, it attracted free and enslaved black Americans, who often already belonged to a Christian denomination and would be therefore more likely to see Liberia as a viable alternative to the US. This idea was promoted by the ACS' colonization journals which, throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, would

³⁰ Yekutiel Gershoni, "Christians and Muslims in Nineteenth Century Liberia: From Ideological Antagonism to Practical Toleration," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 42, no.3 (2008): 414.

³¹ *Fourteenth Report of the Directors of the African Institution* (London: Ellerton and Henderson, 1820), 91.

circulate in African-American communities in order to attract free black Americans to Liberia. These journals would contain stories of successful transatlantic journeys, mostly based on letters from colonists that praised their new homes, their new freedom and the absence of an oppressive white population. The journal also drew on the Christian faith of the free blacks by stating that colonization would lead to “the sound of Christian instruction, and scenes of Christian worship, which are heard and seen in this land of brooding pagan darkness—a thousand contented freemen united in founding a new Christian empire.”³² Secondly, by arguing for the spread of Christian and Western values among Africans, the ACS was hoping to lure American evangelical backers to their cause. This would prove to be a successful venture as churches donated vast amounts of funds and goods. In return, organized religion was heavily involved in the early Liberian community. A group of Virginia Baptists formed a congregation before shipping off to Liberia, and after arriving in Liberia their congregation would build the first Liberian church in 1822, one of the first Western buildings ever constructed in Liberia.³³

The other major institution involved in the settlement of Liberia was the United States government, both at the state and federal level. A close look at Liberia’s early history reveals an intimate relationship between the United States government, state governments and the American Colonization Society, the colony’s driving force and provisional government in the years prior to 1847. Multiple developments in the early 1830s led to continued US government involvement in African colonization. Primarily, the ACS’ relative success in

³² Unknown, “Our Obligations to the Coloured Man,” *The African Repository and Colonial Journal* 20 (1844): 153. <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.hwrch5>

³³ Andrew N. Wegmann, “’He Be God Who Made Dis Man’: Christianity and Conversion in Nineteenth-Century Liberia,” in *New Directions in the Study of African American Recolonization*, ed. Beverly Tomek and Matthew J. Hetrick (Gainesville: University Press of Florida. 2017), 70.

establishing a colony in West Africa led to scrutiny of the Society's legal status. Prior to 1831, the ACS was still legally defined as a voluntary organization: "a voluntary association of individuals banded together for the purely philanthropic purpose of colonizing free Negroes inhabiting the various states of the Union in some place, preferably in Africa."³⁴ According to Huberich, this "ill-defined nature" of the organization had not only raised legal questions about African colonization, but its legal ambiguity had also become a barrier to multiple donations to the organization.³⁵

To circumvent both of these issues, ACS leadership decided to incorporate their organization in order to relinquish their charitable nature in favor of the right to acquire and govern lands in West Africa. As a chartered company, the ACS argued, it could create and control colonies similar to how the East India Company and the Hudson's Bay Company had done in the past, provided the company obeyed the laws of the country it was part of.³⁶ ACS leadership cunningly decided to apply for incorporation in the state of Maryland, presumably due to its strong political ties to local state officials through its subsidiary, the Maryland State Colonization Society. Their successful application became a focal point in the national debate on states' rights, as the ACS' claim to African lands would create a situation wherein states could sanction the establishment of corporately owned colonies that then fell under US jurisdiction, and therefore under US protection. This question puzzled Congress, and an 1844 Report of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs articulated the political ramifications of such state powers:

³⁴ Charles Henry Huberich, *The Political and Legislative History of Liberia Volume I* (Central Book Company: New York, 1947), 23.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 26.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 229.

Has a State, in our system of government, the power of establishing colonies by either mode, and, as a necessary consequence, the power of making treaties and carrying on wars for their protection and defence? When such a power is claimed for a State, obviously involving the peace of the Union, it ought to be clearly shown. War by a State with any foreign nation is war on the part of the whole Union, which is bound by the guarantees of the Constitution to defend her.³⁷

Scholars have argued that the state of Maryland was never empowered to grant companies full political and governing sovereignty over colonies, but as Hall points out, politicians were more concerned with finding opportunities to remove black Americans from the country than they were discussing the constitutionality of such actions.³⁸ The incorporation of the ACS paved the way for increased US government involvement in African colonization and transatlantic empire-building. Furthermore, the ACS' initiative for African colonization could count on the support of expansionists who, at the peak of the manifest destiny movement, had gained support for their beliefs that the United States was destined to expand across the continent and beyond. Emboldened by the Louisiana Purchase, the War of 1812, and the acquisition of Florida through the 1819 Adams-Onís Treaty, US expansionists, although unsure of the exact nature of an American colony on Africa's west coast, supported an overseas territory that was based on American civil society.³⁹

Secondly, Nat Turner's 1831 slave rebellion greatly increased white fears of slave uprisings and expedited the government's need for a solution to the 'problem' of a growing black population, both free and enslaved. The violent uprising seemingly validated the ACS'

³⁷ Charles Henry Huberich, *The Political and Legislative History of Liberia Volume I* (Central Book Company: New York, 1947), 31-32.

³⁸ Richard L. Hall, *On Afric's Shore: A History of Maryland in Liberia, 1834-1857* (Baltimore, MD: Maryland Historical Society, 2003), 25.

³⁹ Brandon Mills, "The United States of Africa": Liberian Independence and the Contested Meaning of a Black Republic," *Journal of the Early Republic* 34, no. 1 (2014): 81.

prophecy of upcoming race wars, silenced colonization critics and amplified colonization efforts in numerous states. In Virginia, high-ranking officials and “principal slaveholders suddenly openly favored colonization and relocation efforts,” and local chapters of the ACS saw their contributions skyrocket.⁴⁰

In addition to this, Maryland state legislators quickly passed an act in late 1831 that granted the ACS a total of \$200,000 for the next twenty years, and instituted a board of Managers “to remove from the State the people of color then free, and such as should thereafter become so, to the Colony of Liberia in Africa, or such other place out of the limits of Maryland as they should consent to go to.”⁴¹ Moreover, among black Americans in Virginia, especially in the counties of Southampton and Hanover, Nat Turner’s rebellion prompted a renewed need for relocation, as white rage in the wake of the rebellion led to the massacre of dozens of innocent free and enslaved blacks. As three artillery companies met up with local volunteer and militia groups outside of Southampton, an indiscriminate massacre of mostly innocent blacks followed, lasting multiple days and killing at least one hundred blacks.⁴² To escape the murderous mobs, many hundreds of free blacks in multiple countries agreed to an immediate departure to Liberia if possible and by December 1831, nearly 350 Virginian blacks boarded the *James Perkins* and set sail for Liberia.⁴³

⁴⁰ P.J. Staudenraus, *The African Colonization Movement 1816-1865* (New York: Columbia University, 1961), 179.

⁴¹ *Proceedings of the Maryland State Convention, to Frame a New Constitution* (Annapolis: Riley & Davis, 1850), 222, <https://msa.maryland.gov/megafile/msa/speccol/sc2900/sc2908/000001/000101/html/am101de--222.html>.

⁴² Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York, 1943), 301-302.

⁴³ P.J. Staudenraus, *The African Colonization Movement 1816-1865* (New York: Columbia University, 1961), 180.

There existed many reasons for the American government to get involved in the creation of Liberia. The existence of slavery and white fears of slave revolts amplified calls for segregation and black deportation, while a Christian zeal to convert Africans created support from American evangelicals. As the next chapter will show, American politicians that envisioned a Christian American empire also looked to Liberia as an opportunity to expand America's influence abroad and promote commercial interests. In fact, part of the US involvement with and support of the ACS demonstrates the transimperial nature of Liberia's national roots. Liberia didn't simply come forth out of American (anti)slavery politics that culminated in church-based humanitarian efforts towards colonization and relocation: these philanthropic efforts were often rooted in ideas on transatlantic imperialism and were funded with American money, guns and blood.

1.1 The Allure of an American Empire in Africa

By 1830, the process of transatlantic American imperialism had been underway for a decade. The creation of local infrastructure, government buildings and housing was being financed with millions of (current day) dollars of government money, under the auspices of the American Navy that patrolled Liberian waters. Even though government funding for the colony would be reduced under President Jackson's administration, the president continued to support the colony with funds and military aid. As the debate on the merits of government aid for Liberia continued in the United States, more politicians began viewing Britain as both an example as well as an adversary in the American-Liberian context. The British colony of Sierra Leone, founded thirteen years before Liberia, served as an example for any Western power that was interested in black colonization efforts. Proponents of black colonization pointed to the Christianization of Sierra Leone's native inhabitants and the opportunities that

a Western trading post in West Africa brought.⁴⁴ Opponents pointed to the financial drain Sierra Leone had put upon Britain's funds, as well as the high death rate among colonists due to disease and clashes with native Africans.⁴⁵ Others were wary of the fact that an American colony on the West African coast meant that America would share not only a border with the British colony of Canada at home, but also with the British colony of Sierra Leone in Africa.

Determined to prove Liberia's value to a doubtful United States' government, the ACS set out to create an American stronghold on the West African coast which they envisioned as the basis of an American empire in Africa. Using funds that were made available to the ACS by way of the 1819 Slave Trade Act, ACS agent and *de facto* governor of Liberia Jehudi Ashmun militarized Liberia's capital Monrovia, fortified the city walls, and carried out America's anti-slave trade policies along the West African coast in the hopes that a show of strength would convince the government to continue supporting the colonization efforts. Aided by the US Navy, Ashmun raided local towns that he suspected of piracy and slavery and fought multiple petty wars with local African tribes starting in 1822. In December of that year, an outnumbered group of colonists fought off an attacking group of indigenous Africans, which would later inspire a controversial national holiday that would continue to divide descendants of the Americo-Liberians and indigenous Africans to this day.

Multiple armed conflicts followed, throwing Liberia into a state of martial law and making them "dependent on the US Navy," while simultaneously having the patrolling US

⁴⁴ Monday B. Abasiattai, "Sierra Leone and Liberia in the Nineteenth Century," in *The History of West Africa*, ed. J.F. Ade Ajayi & Michael Crowder (Essex: Longman Group, 1974), 312.

⁴⁵ P.J. Staudenraus, *The African Colonization Movement 1816-1865* (New York: Columbia University, 1961), 186.

Navy ships serve as a deterrent to European powers.⁴⁶ Continuing his tour de force and decisively defeating local tribes in the next couple of years, Ashmun then set his sights on the existing slave trade networks that ran past and through what he considered Liberian land. As part of his anti-slave trade campaign, Ashmun took aim at major West African slave markets, and in 1826 he organized one of the largest American military operations in Africa at that time, targeting the French and Spanish slavers of Trade Town, a “notorious slave market” situated one hundred miles southwest of Liberia’s capital city Monrovia.⁴⁷

Achieving a hard fought victory over the slavers, Ashmun used the presence of British and US naval ships to pressure local kings to both abandon the slave trade and accept the Liberian colony as the dominant ruling entity. Although impressive to American expansionists and abolitionists, his attacks on European-supported slave towns with the aid of the US Navy went directly against official US foreign policy, outlined by the Secretary of the Navy at the time, which stated that “American agents in Africa were to avoid foreign entanglements with Europeans.”⁴⁸ In fact, according to Secretary of the Navy Samuel Southard, President John Quincy Adams himself disapproved of Ashmun’s actions, writing:

The President thinks it necessary to disapprove of his conduct in those expeditions, so far as it has any connection with the government. As agent of the United States, for a specified object, he had no justifiable cause to break up establishments supposed to belong to the owners of the *Clarida*, or any other persons, and to take the people from

⁴⁶ Niels Hahn, *Two Centuries of US Military Operations in Liberia: Challenges of Resistance and Compliance* (Alabama: Air University Press, 2020), 14.

⁴⁷ Harrison Oladunjoye Akingbade, “The Role of the Military in the History of Liberia 1822-1947,” (Ph.D. dissertation, Howard University, 1977), 42.

⁴⁸ Eugene van Sickle, “Reluctant Imperialists: The U.S. Navy and Liberia, 1819-1845,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 31, no.1 (2011): 116.

there to the agency, to be maintained at the public expense.⁴⁹

In the long term however, Ashmun's show of strength proved fruitful, as federal funding of the ACS and its colony were under intense scrutiny in the late 1820s. This was mainly due to the advent of Jacksonianism in 1829 and the subsequent *laissez-faire* economical approach by the new administration, which led to increased scrutiny of the allotted federal aid to Liberia and the American Colonization Society. President Jackson's auditor Amos Kendall calculated in 1829 that the state had funded the Liberian project with \$264,710 since the 1819 Slave Trade Act and urged Jackson to implement budget cuts and withdraw government aid to Liberia completely.⁵⁰ Jackson, charmed by the idea of American expansion and the shows of strength of the US Navy, did cut costs but ignored Kendall's advice on fully cutting government aid to the ACS, appropriating multiple financial packages which totaled \$62,000. These funds were being used to promote colonization and finance new immigrants for the first six months; newly arrived settlers received six months of housing in of the assigned dormitories, as well as six months of medical care by the colony's doctors.⁵¹

Additionally, after 1830 the ACS fell out of favor with Southern slave-owning politicians who accused the ACS of being an abolitionist organization, leading to a vastly reduced number of private donations. Many of these prominent politicians had been initial

⁴⁹ *American State Papers: Documents, Legislative and Executive, of the Congress of the United States*, ed. Asbury Dickins and John W. Forney (Washington: Gales & Seaton, 1860), 759, <https://books.google.nl/books?id=4Eyiv7uBFK4C>.

⁵⁰ Katherine Harris, *African and American Values: Liberia and West Africa* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985), 34.

⁵¹ Monday B. Abasiattai, "Sierra Leone and Liberia in the Nineteenth Century," in *The History of West Africa*, ed. J.F. Ade Ajayi and Michael Crowder (Essex: Longman Group, 1974), 316-317.

backers of the ACS after it had presented itself as a way to decrease the growing black American population. As Ashmun waged war on the African slave trade and numbers of black colonists departing for Liberia stagnated, Southerners increasingly saw the ACS as a failed experiment that did nothing to strengthen the institution of slavery. After Southern support dwindled, government aid would continue on the condition that its funds would only be used for settling African recaptives, as the federal government maintained a strong anti-slave trade policy, and for the aid of the US Navy, which continued assisting the ACS in expanding its colony through dubious land acquisitions that led to petty wars with local Grebo tribes.⁵²

The other major reason for intense government scrutiny of ACS funding were the persistent rumors of slave practices in Liberia. A wealthy Liberian colonist and future first president of Liberia, Joseph Jenkins Roberts, notified the Society in a letter of these allegations, which were met with great alarm within the ACS. Letters from contemporary settlers seem to corroborate Jenkins' story, including a letter from Peyton Skipwith, a manumitted slave who traveled to Liberia. In an 1834 letter to his former enslaver, he discusses Liberia's economic inequality, the high death rates due to disease and clashes with native Africans, as well as the existence of slavery in Americo-Liberian society. The wealth gap between the rich Americo-Liberians, consisting mostly of merchants and landowners who were part of the first wave of colonists, and the poor laborers who arrived later, had led to the presence of slaves in Americo-Liberian households. According to Skipwith, "those that are well off do hav the nativs as Slavs and poor people that come from America hav no chance to make alving for the nativs do all the work [*sic*]."⁵³ Upon hearing these allegations,

⁵² Niels Hahn, *Two Centuries of US Military Operations in Liberia: Challenges of Resistance and Compliance* (Alabama: Air University Press, 2020), 17.

⁵³ Peyton Skipwith, *Letters of Peyton Skipwith to His Former Master John Hopewell Cocks* (Virginia: University of Virginia Library, 1834).

the ACS implemented severe punishments for perpetrators, fining and jailing first-time offenders and enforcing the death penalty for anybody who was convicted of aiding or practicing slavery or engaging in the slave trade itself. These measures would prove insufficient in abolishing the slave trade as slave markets and slave trade routes would continue near or around Liberian settlers in the 1830s, sending the relationship between the ACS and the federal government into a negative spiral as both parties blamed each other. The federal government accused the ACS of being too inept to efficiently dismantle the slave trade, while the ACS blamed the US government for failing to come to Liberia's aid in combatting the African slave trade. Notably, this period marks the start of the United States' gradual separation from Liberia. An unwillingness to acknowledge Liberia as a protectorate or US-protected entity started growing within the federal government, which would soon play a significant role in the European perception of and aggression towards Liberia. As Eugene van Sickle points out, "there was no reason to fear a colony the United States refused to claim."⁵⁴ Thus, American inaction led to continued slave trading through or near Liberian land, while European trading ships regularly ignored Liberia's claims to sovereignty by refusing to pay trade taxes and skirting local laws in order to trade with local tribes.

1.2 Reluctant Protection and European Interest, 1830-1847

Government aid to Liberia would continue to dwindle after 1830. As the Jackson administration committed solely to military assistance in combating the local African slave trade but refrained from further financial aid, ACS leadership realized it had to expand quickly in order to gain access to resources, trade routes and better farmland to achieve

⁵⁴ Eugene van Sickle, "Reluctant Imperialists: The U.S. Navy and Liberia, 1819-1845," *Journal of the Early Republic* 31, no.1 (2011): 117.

financial independence from the United States. Using the presence of the newly established United States African Squadron, the ACS fortified their grip on the coastal areas from local tribes in the 1830s and pushed inwards into the Liberian hinterlands, encountering the Dei and Gola tribes who themselves had been embroiled in military campaigns after the death of a local king left a power vacuum. As the ACS pushed inwards, prominent Americo-Liberian families established flourishing business empires at the coastal cities and villages, having made their fortune in the coastal trade. The aforementioned Joseph Jenkins Roberts, already an accomplished merchant in the United States, rose to economic and political prominence in the 1830s, first becoming high sheriff and later Lieutenant Governor and acting Chief Justice of Liberia. His and other prominent families owned property and stocks and traded primarily in fruits, palm oil and ivory, with the United States and Britain being the most important trading partners.⁵⁵

As Liberian trade increased and American influence and support waned, the Americo-Liberians began to conceive of their own distinct identity, leading to the creation of the Liberian Constitution of 1837, which was codified the following year and created the Commonwealth of Liberia. Drawn up by the colonists themselves, the document represented the colonists' agency and their pursuit of happiness that had started on American shores. Notwithstanding one minor change made by the Society, the document was made fully by the Liberian people and limited the legislative power of the Governor of Liberia, who was appointed by the ACS.⁵⁶ The drawback of increased Liberian commerce and the creation of a constitution was an increase in conflicts with other regional powers, as they became emboldened in their dealings with an increasingly independent entity that was seemingly

⁵⁵ Katherine Harris, *African and American Values: Liberia and West Africa* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985), 66.

⁵⁶ R. Earle Anderson, *Liberia: America's African Friend* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1952), 75.

unclaimed by the United States. The only perceivable obstacle standing between Liberia and regional aggressors became the presence of US naval power in the Liberian region, sending a signal to Britain and France that Liberia was only moderately supported by the United States. This conditional support left the door open for regional powers to test the boundaries of the relationship between Liberia and the United States.

Almost immediately after the creation of the Commonwealth of Liberia, the Society decided to implement a tariff on imported goods as part of a larger plan to raise the necessary revenue for the newly created state. British merchants who had been trading up and down the Liberian coast prior to its creation saw this as a threat to their business model, and many refused to pay the tax, arguing that the colony could not collect taxes as they were not an independent state. This conflict led to a long diplomatic exchange between Britain and the United States, first through its American ambassador to Britain, Edward Everett, and the US Secretary of State, Daniel Webster, and later through ambassador Fox and Secretary of State Upshur. In both cases, the relationship between the United States and Liberia was at the center of the discussion. Secretary of State Webster defended Liberia's borders in an 1843 letter to Everett, calling the wishes of the Americo-Liberian colonists "quite reasonable" and claiming that the United States had "a deep interest in the welfare of the people of Liberia, and is disposed to extend to them a just degree of countenance and protection," as it had received the "aid and support of this Government" in the past as well.⁵⁷

The American government portrayed Liberia as a humanitarian project which served as a powerful tool in the fight against international slave trade and the "civilization of the African continent," creating a sense of goodwill and common purpose with the British anti-

⁵⁷ *Message from the President of the United States*, 1844 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1844), document 162: 2, <https://books.google.nl/books?id=UZIHAQAIAAJ>.

slavery policies.⁵⁸ In December of 1843, ambassador Everett contacted Webster's successor Abel Upshur, notifying him of the British Foreign Secretary's response to Webster's characterization of the United States' relationship to Liberia. Lord Aberdeen, Britain's Foreign Secretary, seemingly persuaded by the noble goals that the ACS had painted, ensured Mr. Everett of Britain's sympathy to Liberia's purpose as a conduit for African civilization and anti-slave trade power and agreed to a certain sense of self-determination and sovereignty for Liberia, and instructed his naval personnel "to avoid involving themselves in contentions with the local authorities of the Liberian settlements."⁵⁹ However, reciprocating Upshur's ambiguity, Lord Aberdeen left a significant legal grey area for Britain to maneuver in, stating, "in places of the possession of which British settlers have a legal title, by formal purchase or cession from the rightful owners of the soil, no foreign authority has, of course, any right to interfere."⁶⁰ Lord Aberdeen's response shows that Britain cleverly used the United States' refusal to commit to Liberia's security and sovereignty by acknowledging the "local authorities of the Liberian settlements" while simultaneously characterizing Liberia as a "foreign authority" to which British traders had a right to refuse paying taxes to.⁶¹

In its early days, Liberia depended greatly on funds and military assistance from the United States for its safety and the United States Navy was integral to the establishment of Liberian borders, as it assisted in dealings with native Africans as well as with European (slave)traders. By the 1830s, American unwillingness to commit to a deeper relationship with

⁵⁸ *Message from the President of the United States*, 1844 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1844), document 162: 5, <https://books.google.nl/books?id=UZIHAQAIAAJ>.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 6.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 6-7.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 7.

Liberia opened the door to aggression from the British government and British traders in the form of tax evasion and border conflicts.

The question arises: what was Liberia's approach towards the United States, and what type of diplomacy was being practiced from the Liberian side? Correspondence between Ralph Randolph Gurley, a spokesperson for the American Colonization Society in Washington, and the Tyler administration reveals that the Americo-Liberians constantly reminded the United States government of their involvement in and commitment to early Liberian community-building, which Gurley argued included their continued responsibility for the African American colonists. Additionally, the ACS regularly attempted to strengthen the ties between Liberia and the United States government. Letters from Gurley to Secretary of State Webster and President John Tyler demonstrate how the American Colonization Society used previous American commitments to Liberia to secure new ones.

In his letter to Webster, Gurley places significant emphasis on the United States' involvement in early Liberia, claiming that right after the first land purchase of Cape Mesurado, the first emigrants were "placed under the care of an agent of the Government with such means of subsistence and defense (...)," which is a debatable claim, as the ACS agent was never officially a government official.⁶² Gurley goes on to list a number of arguments in an attempt to persuade Webster to bring Liberia's "difficulties and claims distinctly to the considerations of the governments of Britain and France."⁶³ He points out that half of the US states had spoken out in favor of the ACS's endeavor in Africa, cites Liberia's determination to stop the transatlantic slave trade and demonstrates the country's

⁶² *Message from the President of the United States, 1844* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1844), document 162: 13, <https://books.google.nl/books?id=UZIHAQAIAAJ>.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 14.

position as an African outpost for American commerce, civilization and Christianity, while lamenting Liberia's lack of "adequate assistance and protection from this nation."⁶⁴

Another letter from Gurley to Webster, written in March 1843, lists the long history of American assistance to Liberia, again including the claim that the first ACS agent acted as an American official as well as the important role that the US Navy played in securing Cape Mesurado. Gurley also reminds Webster of prior safety guarantees given to Liberia by US officials, some more than twenty years old; he includes official messages from the Navy Department to US Navy Captain Spencer from 1822 and 1823 to his letters, wherein Captain Spencer is told to "afford all the aid and support in your power to Dr. Eli Ayres, the agent of this Government and the colonists."⁶⁵ In the second message, the Navy Department refers to Liberia as "the American settlement," and instructs Spencer to "afford to the settlement and to the agent of the Government all the aid and protection in your power."⁶⁶ Finally, hoping to legitimize his request for aid, Gurley shares an account of Chief Justice Marshall from December 1831, wherein Justice Marshall argues for the aid of the federal government to Liberia, concluding that "the power of the Government to afford this aid is not, I believe, contested."⁶⁷

Gurley's correspondence with high-ranking federal officials affords unique insights into the goals of the American Colonization Society and its Americo-Liberian stakeholders. Understanding that Liberia is dependent on American help, Gurley offers a plethora of

⁶⁴ *Message from the President of the United States*, 1844 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1844), document 162: 15, <https://books.google.nl/books?id=UZIHAQAIAAJ>.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 16.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 17.

arguments in the 1830s to persuade America to expand its aid. As rumors of slavery, fears of a financial drain and Jacksonian *laissez-faire* government approach led to a decrease in popularity of the ACS and a gradual withdrawal from US aid, the undertone in correspondence from Gurley transforms from idealistic to realistic, which reflected the prevailing attitude within Americo-Liberian circles and the American Colonization Society concerning American involvement in Liberia. By the 1840s it had become clear that the American government was unlikely to increase aid. In response, Gurley's letters from this period began echoing the dominant Americo-Liberian sentiment that Liberia should achieve full independence from the United States and the American Colonization Society. Gurley stops making the case for increased American aid, which is shown in his 1844 letter to President Tyler. In it, he suggests that the American Colonization Society was moving towards a new type of governance. Gurley then implored the President to take action, either by committing to the relationship between Liberia and the United States, or granting it independence.⁶⁸ Essentially, Gurley, who had just resigned his post at the ACS, was asking President Tyler the same question as ambassador Fox asked Secretary of State Upshur: what does Liberia mean to the United States?

Ultimately, the United States refused to commit fully to Liberia's protection in the 1830s and 1840s. Instead, the vague words offered by Secretary of State Upshur to British ambassador Fox exhibit the extent of American defense of Liberia. As Liberia found itself without strong legal footing to fend off growing encroachment of European powers as a privately held territory, America's unwillingness to commit to Liberia became a catalyst for Liberian independence. After British-American diplomatic correspondence ended, the British

⁶⁸ *Message from the President of the United States*, 1844 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1844), document 162: 11-12, <https://books.google.nl/books?id=UZIHAQAIAAJ>.

decided to test America's protection of Liberia. In April 1845, the British brig *Lily* seized a Liberian schooner in Grand Bassa's harbor under the pretense of slave trade suspicions. The British took the schooner, the *John Seys*, and its crew to Sierra Leone for a legal inquiry, where they were acquitted of any wrongdoing, though the British forced the owners of the schooner pay for the legal expenses. Moreover, "the British continued to hold the *John Seys* on the pretext that the Liberian settlers possessed no sovereign rights, that they were not authorized to establish a national flag, and that the *John Seys* was therefore a vessel having no flag."⁶⁹ This brazen act of invasion, paired with the loss of a schooner on the basis of lack of sovereignty, highlighted not only Liberia's internal military weakness but also showcased American apathy towards Liberia's affairs, exposing its weakened state as a unclaimed territory. This event led the new Liberian governor Joseph Jenkins Roberts, Liberia's first black governor, to push for full sovereignty and recognition as an independent state. The following year, Roberts' annual message to the Legislature of Liberia included a fiery plea in favor of full independence and sovereignty, arguing that Liberia had in fact always been a sovereign state:

I am decidedly of the opinion, that the Commonwealth of Liberia, notwithstanding its connection with the Colonization Society, is a sovereign, independent state – fully competent to exercise the powers of government (...)– those of levying and imposing duties on imports, and regulating the trade of foreigners within its own purchased dominions.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Charles Henry Huberich, *The Political and Legislative History of Liberia Volume I* (New York: Central Book Company, 1947), 788.

⁷⁰ Joseph Jenkins Roberts, "Governor Roberts' Annual Message," *The African Repository and Colonial Journal* 22 (1846): 159, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.hwrch7>.

Roberts' makes a passing yet clear reference to the infringement of Liberian borders by British traders and Royal Navy, particularly their refusal to pay taxes to Liberia, while also denouncing Liberia's dependence on the United States:

We have associated the idea, that colonies have always commenced their existence in a state of political subjection to and dependence on a mother country, and for that reason could not be sovereign states nor exercise the powers of sovereignty until that dependence terminated. Hence we often talk as if Liberia needed to go through the same operation. But Liberia never was such a colony; she never was in that state of dependence, and therefore needs no such process in order to become a sovereign state.⁷¹

Roberts' intentions and goals are clear: he sees an immediate move to independence as essential to safeguarding Liberia's borders and enforcing their taxation laws, and the United States' passivity stood in the way of exercising these rights. In July of 1847, Liberia's settlers would declare Liberia's full independence from the American Colonization Society and effectively from the United States. As Joseph Jenkins Roberts was being elected to the presidency, the British Naval Captain Murray arrived in Monrovia, carrying the authority of England's Prime Minister to salute the Liberian flag and recognize Liberia's independence. As he did, Britain became the first country to recognize Liberia, while the United States refrained from official recognition until 1862.

⁷¹ Ibid, 162.

Chapter 2: Ambiguous Paternalism and an American Prologue to the Scramble for Africa, 1862-1884

To analyze the role that the United States played in Liberian geopolitics during the Scramble for Africa, it is essential to understand four events that took place between Liberia's declaration of Independence and the Berlin Conference, as well as the American response to these events; America's 1862 recognition of Liberian independence, the 1870 British loan to a financially drained Liberia, the 1879 French offer to Liberia to make it a protectorate and a French annexation of Liberian territory in 1884. These events show the complicated triangle of Western interests that an independent Liberia had to balance in the second half of the 19th century. Additionally, this chapter argues that the United States was unwilling to fully grant Liberia independence as it actively inserted itself in Liberia's foreign policy decisions, effectively establishing a suzerainty, with Liberia as the dependent state and itself the suzerain prior to the onset of the Scramble for Africa.

As Liberia's independence gained widespread recognition in Europe, paradoxically starting with their dangerous neighbor Britain, the United States withheld their official recognition of Liberian independence until 1862, primarily due to the United States' racial policy towards black-led countries which did not allow the presence of black representatives in Washington D.C. As Senator Benton once stated in regards to Haiti: "It [the United States] will not permit black consuls and ambassadors to establish themselves in our cities, and to parade through our country, and give their fellow blacks in the United States proof in hand of the honors which await them (...)." ⁷² It wasn't until the American Civil War had started and the Republican Party controlled the House, Senate and the presidency that the United States

⁷² Mary Treudley, "The United States and Santo Domingo, 1789-1866," *Journal of Race Development* vol. 7 (1916), 226, quoted in Robert William Price, "The Black Republic of Liberia, 1822-1912: A Ninety Years Struggle for International Acceptance" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois, 1980), 29.

acknowledged Liberia's independence. Abraham Lincoln provided the impetus for the recognition process in 1861, stating that he was unable to see any good reason to "persevere any longer in withholding our recognition of the independence and sovereignty of Hayti and Liberia."⁷³

The next year, both countries would be granted official recognition by the United States, and were appointed official diplomats, with the US eventually dispatching America's first black consul, James Milton Turner, to Liberia. The United States also signed a treaty of commerce and navigation with the Republic of Liberia which included duty-free trade between the two countries, as well as a promise from the United States to not interfere in Liberian areas without Liberia's consent, thereby ostensibly acknowledging Liberia's maturity and independence from the US. However, an important loophole was implemented in this clause of the treaty that would shape the relationship between the United States and Liberia for the next half century. The majority of the Articles in the 1862 Treaty pertain to the protection of private property, reciprocal freedom of commerce and movement of peoples, as well as other economic advantages that fall under the general recognition of both countries as a 'most favored nation' by the other. However, a subtle addition to Article VIII allowed the United States to continue interfering in Liberian affairs: "The United States Government engages never to interfere, unless solicited by the Government of Liberia, in the affairs *between the aboriginal inhabitants* [emphasis added] and the Government of the Republic of Liberia (...)."⁷⁴

⁷³ *Message of the President of the United States to the Two Houses of Congress at the Commencement of the Third Session of the Thirty-Seventh Congress* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1861), <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1861/message-of-the-president>.

⁷⁴ *Treaties and Conventions Concluded between the United States of America and Other Countries* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1889), 633, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/coo1.ark:/13960/t61554s7q>.

Omitting foreign affairs as an area of non-engagement in the 1862 treaty gave the United States free rein to interfere in Liberia's foreign policy, in the interest of either Liberia or the United States. The treaty effectively reinstated America's influence in Liberian affairs after fifteen years of American absence in West Africa. Economically, the treaty provided a boost to Liberia, which now could export goods like sugar, coffee and palm oil duty-free to the United States, while the United States found a new market for their cotton and wool. The treaty provided Liberia with vital funds, as the country continued to experience economic hardship. However, after the US Navy was gradually called away from West Africa's shores and completely left when the Civil War started, a military vacuum had started growing, which Britain had handily used to its advantage.

America's fifteen year-delay of official recognition had shaken up the geopolitical relations in West Africa considerably. The British, the most threatening European power to Liberia, became the first to recognize the country in 1848, which drove Liberia reluctantly towards its immediate neighbor in search of economic and military help with the skirmishes between the Americo-Liberians and local tribes. This rapprochement did not immediately resolve the border disagreement between Britain and Liberia, and the 1860s saw multiple disputes between British traders, the British government and Liberia. The United States' recognition of Liberia's independence was viewed by the Americo-Liberians as a sign of renewed commitment to Liberia's plight, as Liberia moved to not only officially request interposition from the American government in 1869 to resolve the Anglo-Liberian dispute, but even to ask the United States for protection "if necessary."⁷⁵

Liberia's request to the US government shows the precarious position they were in, as it had been forced to move tepidly through a geopolitical space that was dominated by three

⁷⁵ "Documents Relating to the United States and Liberia," *The American Journal of International Law* 4, no. 3, Supplement: Official Documents (1910): 220.

Western powers that sought to increase their sphere of influence into Liberian territory. Moreover, Liberia's enduring but erratic relationship with the United States had been unreliable since Liberia's independence, nevertheless, the country had few alternatives in terms of protection. This reliance on the United States for its independence and aid in foreign affairs had reinforced the suzerainty between Liberia and the United States, but this relationship had become a watered-down version of their pre-1847 connection. In his reply to the 1869 Liberian request for aid, US Secretary of State Hamilton Fish reiterated the standpoint first formulated by Abel Upshur more than 25 years earlier; the US would use its diplomatic powers to mediate any conflicts between Liberia and other powers if asked, as the US wished to avoid major conflicts between Liberia and its neighboring European powers.⁷⁶ Fish continued however, affirming to the Liberian minister of foreign affairs that America regards Liberia's progress "with deep solicitude" yet refused to provide military protection from border encroachments by European powers as that would be "a violation of all the traditions and policies of the United States since they first entered the family of nations."⁷⁷ Moreover, between 1862 and 1884 the United States would refuse loan requests from Liberia on four different occasions, consistently proving themselves to be an unreliable partner on both military and financial concerns.⁷⁸

Lasting Anglo-Liberian boundary conflicts did not deter Liberia from seeking financial aid from Britain. The US' seeming indifference to Liberia and their refusal to provide adequate military protection and financial aid forced the country to look to its immediate neighbor in times of need. Liberia's dire financial situation reached its boiling

⁷⁶ "Documents Relating to the United States and Liberia," *The American Journal of International Law* 4, no. 3, Supplement: Official Documents (1910): 220

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Judson M. Lyon, "Informal Imperialism: The United States in Liberia, 1897-1912," *Diplomatic History* 5, no. 3 (1981): 223.

point in 1868, which pushed the country towards Britain for relief. In his inauguration speech, the newly elected Liberian president Payne acknowledged the possibility of having to take out a loan abroad, a scenario which he called “anxiety-inducing” as it meant that Liberia might have to seek reconciliation with Britain.⁷⁹ The following year, that scenario had become a reality, as Payne devoted a whole section of his annual message to Liberia’s national debt, calling it “not as great as was supposed” but keeping the door open to seeking a loan from Britain.⁸⁰ Payne argued that, in the past, Britain had proven to be willing to loan money to Liberia and might therefore be willing to enter into another loan agreement; in fact, by 1869 Britain was already Liberia’s largest creditor. In his annual message, president Payne acknowledged his country’s need to modernize to become financially stable, which was accurate given that access to Liberia’s minerals and other resources was limited since the existing infrastructure did not allow for large deposits to be transited from the Liberian hinterlands to the coast.⁸¹

After the ascent of a new Liberian administration in 1870, the incoming Liberian president Roye continued loan negotiations with Britain. The choice by presidents Payne and Roye to seek out a British loan might seem counterintuitive, given the fact that British traders had routinely violated Liberian tax laws and the continued Anglo-Liberian border dispute had soured the relationship between the two nations. Yet for Liberia, their options were few and Britain had shown in the previous 23 years to be willing to do more for Liberia than the United States. Britain had been the first to acknowledge Liberian independence and had already agreed to multiple smaller loans to Liberia during the 1860s, while America’s Civil

⁷⁹ James Spriggs Payne, “Inaugural Message of President Payne,” *The African Repository and Colonial Journal* 44 (1868): 140, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.hwrccj>.

⁸⁰ James Spriggs Payne, “Annual Message of President Payne,” *The African Repository and Colonial Journal* 45 (1869): 43, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.hwrccj>

⁸¹ Ibid.

War and refusal to provide financial aid had left Liberia to fend for itself. Moreover, Britain was Liberia's second-biggest trade partner after the United States.

Wary of Britain's intentions, America kept a close eye on Liberia's dealings with Britain. Unwilling to financially aid Liberia but equally unwilling to see Liberia fall to Britain, America interposed itself in the Anglo-Liberian negotiations. This is evidenced by an 1870 letter from ACS agent H.W. Dennis, who notified his associates of incoming president Roye's trip to England, where he sought to secure a much-needed loan for Liberia. According to Dennis, the primary object of president Roye's trip to England was to secure a loan and simultaneously settle the ongoing territorial dispute with the British, which would solve two of Liberia's biggest challenges (the third being the ongoing internal conflicts between the Americo-Liberians and the tribespeople). On his trip, only one of those two goals was met as he successfully took out a loan from the British government but failed to solve the border dispute. Before returning to Liberia however, the president's escort crossed the Atlantic and visited the United States, an unofficial detour for reasons unclear.⁸²

Without any historical diplomatic cables on Roye's trip to the United States, one can only speculate to president Roye's intentions, but given the two countries' history, it is plausible that president Roye wanted to discuss his loan negotiations with Britain with the American government before returning home, or perhaps determine if the US would match Britain's loan offer. Whatever the case, Roye returned home without an American loan and one year later, without receiving significant aid from the United States, Liberia would officially enter into a loan agreement with Britain, borrowing as much as \$500,000 at an

⁸² H.W. Dennis, "From Mr. Henry W. Dennis," *The African Repository and Colonial Journal* 46 (1870): 254, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.hwrcccl>.

interest rate of 7%, with the British holding a lien over Liberian customs revenue as a guarantee.⁸³

The loan and the implementation of its funds were hugely unpopular in Liberia and, coupled with persisting economic troubles, led to Roye being deposed in late 1871. The Liberian Secretary of State, writing to the US consul in Liberia, listed the grievances against Roye which included tyranny, unconstitutional acts to enhance his political power, as well as securing the British loan, which he alleged Roye had been receiving and spending personally.⁸⁴ Three years later, Liberia defaulted on their interest payments to Britain, leading to a twenty-four year debt repayment dispute with Liberia's strongest ally and greatest threat, which ultimately forced Liberia to sign an unfavorable treaty with Britain in 1885. Additionally, the Anglo-Liberian border disputes concerning Liberia's western boundary worsened now that Liberia had defaulted on their loan, leading to another intervention by the United States Rear Admiral Shufeldt, who fruitlessly visited Liberia in 1873 on a mediation mission. Shufeldt, who had traveled to Liberia multiple times in the twenty years prior, witnessed first-hand the aggression from British traders and the Royal Navy towards Liberia and would later call the British traders on the Liberian coast "the most grasping and unscrupulous of men" for stoking wars between Liberian tribes and the Americo-Liberians.⁸⁵

A similar sentiment about the British actions in Liberia existed among the higher echelons of the American government. An 1879 diplomatic cable from the Acting Secretary

⁸³ Nnamdi Azikiwe, *Liberia in World Politics* (Negro Universities Press, 1970), 112.

⁸⁴ *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1872 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1873), document 255, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1872p1/d255>.

⁸⁵ R.W. Shufeldt, "The U. S. Navy in Connection with the Foundation, Growth and Prosperity of the Republic of Liberia" (An address delivered before the American Colonization Society, 1877).

of State William Hunter to American consul to France, Edward Noyes, reveals how the American government had grown increasingly suspicious of British actions and intentions in West Africa, writing, “You are doubtless aware that the policy of the adjacent British settlement of Sierra Leone has of late years been one of encroachment, if not of positive unfriendliness, toward Liberia (...).”⁸⁶ Hunter’s letter to Noyes shows American suspicion of British intentions in regards to Liberia, however, the letter, although critical of Britain, was originally aimed at another European power: France. France governed Liberia’s eastern neighbor Ivory Coast and had been steadily advancing their own colonization agenda at the expense of Liberia’s territories. This encroachment meant that by the early 1880s, the United States had to contend with another major threat to Liberian independence.

Due a rising number of conflicts between Liberian tribes and the Americo-Liberians in the 1870s and continuing border disputes with Britain, Liberia was forced once again to search for military help from an external power. The result of Liberia’s strained relationship with Britain over the loan default and America’s unwillingness to aid Liberia financially or to militarily engage with Britain or France, meant that Liberia was running out of options. Deciding to go with the devil they didn’t yet know, the country this time looked to its other neighbor, France, for help with their internal and external conflicts. French traders to the north and east of Liberia had engaged in similar undermining acts as the British, entering Liberian territory and trading with tribes without paying taxes to the Americo-Liberians. However, France’s presence in West Africa however was more recent and less established than Britain’s, whose colony, Sierra Leone, predated Liberia. France’s presence grew in the late 1870s, as France had been searching for ways to increase its influence in West Africa

⁸⁶ *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1879* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1879), document 179, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1879/d179>.

through the creation of new trading posts on the Ivory Coast and Guinea, as well as the possible acquisition of the Gambia through negotiations with the British Empire.

Throughout the early 1870s, French interest in West Africa was limited as the country paid more attention to matters on the European continent, but this changed in 1879 when France started pursuing a more aggressive colonial policy. Hargreaves argues that historians have been unable to point to the exact catalyst for the change in French colonial policy, but 1879 would come to be known as the year in which France developed a tighter grip on its colonial possessions and started pouring resources into Algeria and Senegal in order to develop a stronger military presence in their African holdings.⁸⁷

As France was locked in a power struggle with Britain in West Africa, it aimed to develop a French presence in Ivory Coast and the Guinea-region and looked to independent Liberia as an viable opportunity for expansion. The United States, seeing France strengthen its grip on its African colonies, quickly made it clear to France that Liberia was off the table and in 1879 charged France with offering to make Liberia a French protectorate. If this was true, it would create an immediate border conflict between Britain and France in West Africa and would push American influence completely out of Africa. Citing reports from Navy Commander Shufeldt and the United States consul to Liberia, the acting Secretary of State Hunter accused France of diverting the independence of Liberia by offering it military protection in exchange for more influence in West Africa and foresaw Liberia becoming a pawn in the battle for West Africa between Britain and France.⁸⁸ Moreover, Hunter alleged

⁸⁷ John D. Hargreaves, *Prelude to the Partition of West Africa* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1963), 199-200.

⁸⁸ *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1879* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1879), document 179, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1879/d179>.

that both Britain and France had illegally encroached upon Liberian territory in recent years and demanded an explanation from France, asking if France's policy "may be merely antagonistic to British encroachment, and designed rather to aid that feeble republic [Liberia, my addition] to maintain its independent *status*, with development of trade with France and French possessions (...)."89

Hunter's question suggests that United States was open to French aid to Liberia if such aid translated to increased commerce between the countries, but that French colonialism in Liberia would not be tolerated. France vehemently denied the charges, calling them legally impossible as France does not have a consul present in Liberia who could officially offer Liberia protection and instead accused two Liberian consuls in France of seeking military protection from France for Liberia. According to the American consul in France, the two Liberian consuls had "represented nobody but themselves" in their search for "fame as the prime movers in a great governmental enterprise."⁹⁰ The US's accusations are unverifiable through historical sources, but most importantly, the government's combative reaction to rumors of French transgression in West Africa betrayed the nature of the relationship that existed between the United States and Liberia. The diplomatic messages show that the United States became progressively more involved in Liberian affairs since the 1862 American-Liberian treaty and did not shy away from using aggressive rhetoric to deter European encroachment. This was evidenced in 1884 as well, when the United States increased its efforts to protect Liberia as France unexpectedly seized Liberian territory while Britain and

⁸⁹ *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1879 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1879), document 179, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1879/d179>.

⁹⁰ *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1879 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1879), document 180, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1879/d180>.

Liberia were negotiating a treaty that would solve the lingering north-west boundary issue. French troops occupied Kent Island in the Mannah River, west of the capital city of Monrovia and a possible part of the Anglo-Liberian treaty, eliciting the ire of US Secretary of State Frelinghuysen, who wrote a scathing letter to the French diplomat in Washington in which he argued that Liberia, “although at no time a colony of this government, it began its career among the family of independent states as an offshoot of this country, and as such entitled to the sympathy and, *when practicable, to the protection* [emphasis added] and encouragement of the United States.”⁹¹ This marked the first time that the United States threatened another European power with the possibility of military action in order to defend Liberia, which was a distinctly different approach to Liberian foreign affairs than a mere 15 years earlier, when Secretary of State Fish refused to commit to Liberian protection as it would “violate the traditions and policies of the United States.”⁹² Moreover, Frelinghuysen stated in the same letter that Britain, in their negotiations with Liberia, had acknowledged the “relationship of quasi-parentage” between the US and Liberia and advised France to do the same, since “the United States would consider a French claim to territory in the Mannah River as threatening the integrity and tranquility of Liberia.”⁹³

Deterred by the United States, France limited its claims to another river and entered into prolonged negotiations with Liberia over the disputed territory. The Secretary of State’s diplomatic outreach to France also exposed the concealed US-Liberian suzerainty, a relationship that became harder to maintain as the European aggression in Africa increased. On the eve of the Berlin Conference, the United States diplomats had to walk a fine line to

⁹¹ “Documents Relating to the United States and Liberia,” *The American Journal of International Law* 4, no. 3, Supplement: Official Documents (1910): 222.

⁹² *Ibid*, 220.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 223.

avoid sending military troops to Liberia to counter Britain and France and maintain the US' official position on Liberian independence, while simultaneously not shying away from stronger language when Liberia's independence was threatened. As Judson M. Lyon put it, "the US government felt compelled to assist the Americo-Liberians only when the continued existence of their settlements was threatened."⁹⁴ This period of ambiguous paternalism would soon come to an end with the onset of the Scramble for Africa, where it would be replaced by an active American role in Liberian foreign affairs.

⁹⁴ Judson M. Lyon, "Informal Imperialism: The United States in Liberia, 1897-1912," *Diplomatic History* 5, no. 3 (1981): 222.

Chapter 3: Public American Protection and the Scramble for Africa, 1884-1912

The years preceding the infamous 1884-85 Berlin Conference were tumultuous for Liberia. Domestically, the Americo-Liberians had been fighting multiple skirmishes with the Grebo people, an indigenous group that had been resisting Americo-Liberian hegemony in Maryland County. Internationally, Liberia had defaulted on its loan to Britain and was unable to secure its borders from encroachments from both Britain and France. Financially drained and militarily weak, Liberia once again officially asked the US government for assistance with their internal conflicts with the Grebo people in 1875 and 1878. The US agreed, sending a single warship, which fell within the boundaries of the 1862 American-Liberian treaty which allowed for US military aid to assist the Americo-Liberians in their dealings with the native tribes. However, Rear Admiral Shufeldt, a veteran of Liberian affairs, later admitted that the American warship would serve “not only suppress the natives” but that the presence of a US warship would also “indirectly (...) moderate the zeal of the white traders.”⁹⁵

Adhering to the 1862 treaty, the US called its ship back after settling the Grebo-conflict, but Admiral Shufeldt’s addition of the “white traders” indicated that the United States were keenly aware of the French and British encroachment of Liberian borders and hoped to indirectly deter their aggression. This show of support marked the first time that the US, albeit indirectly, used their military to discourage British and French aggression in West Africa. The United States also felt compelled to act diplomatically as European powers increased their presence in West Africa. The American Secretaries of State again issued warnings in 1880 and 1884 to France and Britain to respect Liberia’s boundaries after French

⁹⁵ R.W. Shufeldt, “The U. S. Navy in Connection with the Foundation, Growth and Prosperity of the Republic of Liberia” (An address delivered before the American Colonization Society, 1877).

and British military had been entering Liberian territory.⁹⁶ Moreover, the German Empire had also been steadily building their presence in West Africa, beginning in the 1850s when German trading companies started using Liberia as their base of operations for trading missions into Gabon and Cameroon. By the early 1880s German warships were regularly patrolling West African waters to provide assistance to German traders in the region. This led Secretary of State Evarts to reassure the Liberian government that the United States would come to its aid if Liberia asked it for help in protecting American trade from attacks from pirates or local tribes, as it had done three years earlier, without explicitly mentioning Liberia's European neighbors.⁹⁷

On the eve of the Scramble for Africa, it became clear to the United States that mounting European colonialism in Africa would endanger Liberia's independence, leading to sharper rhetoric and actions from the US. At this point, Shufeldt's 1877 speech to the American Colonization Society calls to memory the reasons behind increased American aid to Liberia in the late 1870s and early 1880s. Firstly, the history of Liberia had led many Americans and Americo-Liberians to perceive of Liberia as a product of the United States. Multiple American presidents in the 1890s and early 1900s would refer to Liberia as an "offshoot" of the US, a country based on American religious beliefs, language and culture, in order to legitimize support for Liberian independence. Liberia's American roots had not been forgotten by the American government. As chapter 1 showed, the intimate relationship between the American Colonization Society and the federal government had led to many observers to conceive of Liberia as being a *de facto* colony of the United States. This is also

⁹⁶ R. Earle Anderson, *Liberia: America's African Friend* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1952), 86.

⁹⁷ *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1881 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1882), document 435, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1881/d435>.

confirmed by Shufeldt, who relayed the story of his travel companion calling Liberia “the only American colony on the west coast of Africa.”⁹⁸ Moreover, American observers unironically saw the story of Liberia’s creation as an echo of America’s own origins. To many Americans, the Americo-Liberians were a civilized group of Christians, yearning for freedom, who crossed the ocean to an uncivilized continent where they bravely withstood the dangers of barbarous lands. Not coincidentally, early Americo-Liberian colonizers had molded the story of Liberia’s birth in the image of their home country, as evidenced by the 1848 inaugural speech of Liberia’s first president Joseph Jenkins Roberts:

At a time when they were almost without arms, ammunition, discipline, or government—a mere handful of insulated Christian pilgrims, in pursuit of civil and religious liberty, surrounded by savage and warlike tribes bent upon their ruin and total annihilation—with 'a staff and a sling' only, as it were, they determined, in the name of the 'Lord of Hosts,' to stand their ground and defend themselves to the last extremity against their powerful adversary.⁹⁹

Meanwhile, the undertone of a Christian civilization mission in Africa, which was propagated thusly by the American Colonization Society, resonated strongly with many white Americans who had been introduced to Liberia through *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe and *Northwood* by Sarah Hale. Both works painted a favorable image of Liberia as a haven for black Americans who wished to spread Christianity in Africa, as the character George Harris in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* confirms:

The desire and yearning of my soul is for an African nationality. (...) Where, then, shall I look? On the shores of Africa I see a republic, - a republic formed of picked men, who, by energy and self-educating force, have, in many cases, individually, raised themselves above a condition of slavery. (...) As a Christian patriot, as a

⁹⁸ R.W. Shufeldt, “The U. S. Navy in Connection with the Foundation, Growth and Prosperity of the Republic of Liberia” (An address delivered before the American Colonization Society, 1877).

⁹⁹ Joseph Jenkins Roberts, “President Roberts’ Inaugural Address,” *African Repository and Colonial Journal* 24 (1848): 121, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.hwrch9>.

teacher of Christianity, I go to *my country* – my chosen, my glorious Africa! (...) I go to *Liberia*, not as to an Elysium of romance, but as to a *field of work*.¹⁰⁰

The popularity of these works helped spread the idea that Liberia was an attractive destination for black Americans desiring to escape slavery and racism while creating a Christian civilization based on American society on the shores of Africa, which created strong public support for the independence of Liberia. Lastly, strengthening ties with Liberia and maintaining Liberia's independence would be the only viable opportunity for the United States to protect their access to African resources. Witnessing the increasing interest from European powers pre-1884, the United States knew that it would be nigh impossible to create a new base of operations on the coast of Africa that could compete with the European presence there, leaving the only option to be to pursue an African Open Door Policy. Moreover, anti-imperialist sentiments in American politics prevented the government from engaging in European-style colonialism, leaving Liberia as the only viable option for American access to African trade and resources.

The tensions between France, Britain and Germany in West Africa became an important catalyst for the Berlin Conference, where European powers aimed to divide Africa into European colonies without going to war with each other. This chapter argues that the Berlin Conference also functioned as a watershed moment for American-Liberian relations, one wherein the suzerainty between the United States and Liberia became a public secret to the European powers. The primary sources that this thesis has discussed up until this point show that between 1862 and 1884, precarious US diplomacy obfuscated and denied the true nature of the relationship between the US and Liberia which caused confusion with the European powers whose policies were intended to broaden their respective spheres of

¹⁰⁰ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York: Penguin Group, 2008), 489-492.

influence in West Africa. The Berlin Conference functioned as the start of a new period wherein colonial powers understood and accepted the US's informal protection of Liberia but refrained from publicly acknowledging the American-Liberian relationship.

3.1 The Berlin Conference and the United States, 1884-1885

As the European powers were increasing their presence in Africa and tensions rose, King Leopold of Belgium had been lobbying governments for what he claimed was a scientific and philanthropic enterprise deep in Africa's interior. His International Association of the Congo lend credence to his claims of philanthropy and allowed him to gather support for a conference of the Great Powers in order to come to a peaceful partition of Africa. When the German chancellor Otto von Bismarck announced the Berlin Conference and its goals, many were surprised to see the United States as one of the invitees to the Conference. After all, the US had no formal ties to any African country, nor had it publicly stated any intention to get involved in the colonization of Africa. Moreover, the goals that were stated prior to the Conference seemed to logically exclude the United States from intimate involvement.

When asked to explain the goals of the Berlin Conference to US Congress, John A. Kasson, one of the American plenipotentiaries at the Conference, outlined the agenda of the Conference to Secretary of State Frederick Frelinghuysen as follows: "(1) Freedom of commerce and freedom for all flags on the Congo. (2) Freedom of Commerce and free navigation for all flags on the Niger. (3) Definition of the right of seizure of such territories as have yet been subjected to the flag of any civilized state."¹⁰¹ However, none of these points

¹⁰¹ "Message from the President of the United States, Transmitting a Communication from the Secretary of State in Relation to the Congo Conference," in *Index to the House of Representatives for the Second Session of the Forty-Eighth Congress, 1884-1885*. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1885), 15.
<https://books.google.nl/books?id=CjpHAQAIAAJ>.

seemed to justify America's involvement at the Conference. Indeed, the idea of free trade along major rivers into Africa was alluring to the American government, and it was in their best interest to have the European powers agree to a peaceful partition of Africa. This would make America an interested party, though not one that needed to send a plenipotentiary with full powers to sign a treaty, as the United States had no official ties to any African country or colony, nor a base of operations, either commercially or militarily.

The US decision to send two plenipotentiaries has been the subject of much historical discussion, and the complex web of diplomatic exchanges that preceded the Berlin Conference leaves room for multiple plausible explanations for America's participation. Munene, for instance, has argued that the United States' official recognition of King Leopold's International Association of the Congo, the first recognition of the Association in the world, ultimately led to recognition by the European powers.¹⁰² Leopold, who was closely involved in organizing the Berlin Conference, may consequently have pressed von Bismarck to include the United States as a useful ally to his alleged humanitarian cause. In *King Leopold's Ghost*, Hochschild argues a similar point: in 1883, King Leopold sent the former American minister to Belgium, Henry Shelton Sanford, to the United States to lobby President Arthur and Congress on Leopold's behalf. Both the president as well as Congress were extremely receptive to Leopold's claims that the trade along the Congo River would be duty-free. According to Hochschild, Leopold cleverly flattered American politicians by stating that the constitution of the Congo Free State "would be modelled on that of the United States," leading to the subsequent support of the American government for King Leopold's

¹⁰² G. Macharia Munene, "The United States and the Berlin Conference on the Partition of Africa, 1884-1885," *Transafrican Journal of History* 19 (1990): 75.

creation of his personal country and by association, the start of the Scramble for Africa.¹⁰³

Thus, the role that the United States played in legitimizing Leopold's endeavor may have led to a seat at the table in 1884-1885. It is very plausible that King Leopold's lobbying of major powers influenced the choice of attendees at the Berlin Conference. However, this thesis contends that, while Munene's and Hochschild's argument is extremely likely, America's previous two decades of involvement in Liberian matters had simultaneously led to a mutual understanding with the European powers that Liberia fell under American protection and that the United States was indeed a legitimate stakeholder in West African affairs. King Leopold and Chancellor von Bismarck, both shrewd politicians and power brokers, likely understood that a discussion on the partition of West Africa without America's presence would be impractical at best and, at worst, detrimental to their cause.

Initial domestic reactions to the American attendance of the Berlin Conference were skeptical. Given that the US had no formal ties to any African country, American politicians demanded justification from the Arthur administration for American participation of the conference. On January 5, 1885 the House of Representatives passed a resolution that called for information surrounding the "causes and motives of the participation of this Government in the Berlin Conference" while the conference was still ongoing.¹⁰⁴ Secretary of State Frelinghuysen's response to the House inquiry echoed the official goal of the Berlin Conference, which was to ensure freedom of commerce for Great Powers, including the United States, along the Congo and Niger rivers, alongside establishing the methods of

¹⁰³ Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: a Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (London: Papermac, 2000), 246.

¹⁰⁴ "Message from the President of the United States, Transmitting a Communication from the Secretary of State in Relation to the Congo Conference," in *Index to the House of Representatives for the Second Session of the Forty-Eighth Congress, 1884-1885* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1885): 3, <https://books.google.nl/books?id=CjpHAQAIAAJ>.

annexation of African land that avoided wars between those same powers, essentially arguing that America was there to develop peace between power-hungry European countries while creating business opportunities for American companies.¹⁰⁵ This seemed to satisfy the House, but messages between the attending representatives and high-ranking officials from the Department of State show that there were ulterior motives for attending the Berlin Conference.

The Arthur administration also saw the conference as an opportunity to end the constant frictions between Britain, France and Liberia for the foreseeable future. In fact, the American plenipotentiaries argued behind closed doors that it was the sole reason the United States was invited. This is evidenced by a message from John A. Kasson, one of the two American representatives at the Conference, to Secretary of State Frelinghuysen wherein Kasson states in clear terms that “the reason alleged for inviting the United States is that Liberia is under their protection.”¹⁰⁶ In Frelinghuysen’s correspondence with the House of Representatives, he neglects to mention Kasson’s remark and instead limits the State Department’s goals to those of the Conference. The discrepancy in the State Department’s communications to the House and its own internal correspondence demonstrate the discretion that officials practiced as they attempted to conceal the United States’ commitment to Liberia from the public, as well as from Congress. Kasson’s message also evidences the evolving understanding by other powers of the American-Liberian relationship; the United States was invited to the Berlin Conference on the premise that it acted as a protector of Liberia which

¹⁰⁵ “Message from the President of the United States, Transmitting a Communication from the Secretary of State in Relation to the Congo Conference,” in *Index to the House of Representatives for the Second Session of the Forty-Eighth Congress, 1884-1885* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1885): 4, <https://books.google.nl/books?id=CjpHAQAIAAJ>.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 15.

implied that King Leopold and Chancellor von Bismarck, and European powers more broadly, acknowledged that relationship between the two countries. This meant that the United States was fully responsible for Liberia's independence at the Conference.

Since Liberia had no formal ties to Western powers and it was for all intents and purposes an independent republic, it would normally be included as a territory that could have been partitioned by the European powers under point 3 of the Berlin Conference agenda: "(3) Definition of the right of seizure of such territories as have yet been subjected to the flag of any civilized state."¹⁰⁷ It can be argued that the phrasing of this point leaves room for Liberia to stay an independent republic, since it might be classified as a "civilized state" by colonial powers because of its Western language, religion and culture. This idea is refuted by a second message from Kasson, which demonstrates that the State Department was also quite aware of the implications of America's position as Liberia's defender. In an October 15, 1884 message from Kasson to Frelinghuysen, Kasson acknowledges that the third objective of the Berlin Conference "may touch us in our relation as protector of the Republic of Liberia, and in respect to the possible enlargement of its territory," and he warns Frelinghuysen that the United States will have to "limit the claims of foreign acquisition" in regards to Liberia at the Conference.¹⁰⁸ These messages between the foremost plenipotentiary at the Conference and the American Secretary of State show that within the State Department, Liberia's status as an informal protectorate was a known obligation and that the

¹⁰⁷ "Message from the President of the United States, Transmitting a Communication from the Secretary of State in Relation to the Congo Conference," in *Index to the House of Representatives for the Second Session of the Forty-Eighth Congress, 1884-1885* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1885): 15, <https://books.google.nl/books?id=CjpHAQAAIAAJ>.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 18.

United States representatives at the Berlin Conference were willing to honor that obligation in the face of European aggression.

Surprisingly to Kasson, during most of the Berlin Conference Liberia remained a subject of little importance as is evidenced by the correspondence between Kasson, Frelinghuysen and Congress. Although Kasson initially anticipated to be forced come to the defense of Liberia at the start of the Conference, no other country broached the topic of territorial disputes surrounding Liberia. Most of the telegrams between Kasson and Frelinghuysen concern menial arguments about the voting format used at the conference, recognition of the flag of the Congo Free State and the importance of freedom of commerce in the Congo Basin. The few documents related to the Berlin Conference that do mention Liberia are an 1884 document by the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, which recommends passage of several resolutions adopted by the Berlin Conference, as well as a letter between Secretary of State Frelinghuysen and the Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Relations. In both of these documents, Liberia is presented as an example of a successful civilization mission undertaken by private individuals “in barbarous countries through the consent of local authorities,” and is used as an argument in favor of King Leopold’s civilization mission through his International Association of the Congo, itself a private undertaking as well.¹⁰⁹ Instead of a point of contention at the Berlin Conference, Liberia therefore became an example of a successful colonization effort put forth by the United States which, lobbied by king Leopold to vote in favor of Leopold’s initiative, saw the

¹⁰⁹ “Message from the President of the United States, Transmitting a Communication from the Secretary of State in Relation to the Congo Conference,” in *Index to the House of Representatives for the Second Session of the Forty-Eighth Congress, 1884-1885* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1885): 166-172, <https://books.google.nl/books?id=CjpHAQAIAAJ>.

Berlin Conference and its goals as an opportunity for the US to engage in commercial trade along some major African trade routes and rivers.

The lack of dispute around Liberia might be explained by looking at the American expectations of the Berlin Conference. The American diplomats were keen to strictly limit the topics to the three points on the agenda, perhaps in fear of facing a coalition of British, French and German diplomats hoping to advance their own country's geopolitical policies in West Africa. This is evidenced by a telegram from Secretary of State Frelinghuysen to Baron von Alvensleben, who invited the United States to attend the Berlin Conference on behalf of the German government. In it, Frelinghuysen accepts the offer on the condition that "the business to be brought before the Conference is to be limited to the three heads mentioned in your note, dealing solely with the commercial interests of the Congo region and of Western Africa."¹¹⁰ Frelinghuysen then asserts that while international territorial claims may come up, "the Conference is itself not to assume to decide such questions" and emphasizes to von Alvensleben that if the United States is to attend the conference, the US then "reserves the right to decline to accept the conclusions of the Conference."¹¹¹

In the end, the Americans got their wish: the Berlin Conference concluded by agreeing to turn the Congo Basin into a zone of free commerce while the European powers agreed to keep any wars between them out of Africa, giving the US their desired protection of commercial interests in West Africa. Perhaps equally important was the omission of Liberia's territorial status as a point of discussion from the Conference. Although the Berlin

¹¹⁰ "Message from the President of the United States, Transmitting a Communication from the Secretary of State in Relation to the Congo Conference," in *Index to the House of Representatives for the Second Session of the Forty-Eighth Congress, 1884-1885* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1885): 19, <https://books.google.nl/books?id=CjpHAQAIAAJ>.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

Conference seemed like a success story for the United States, the election of Grover Cleveland midway through the Berlin Conference prevented the United States from ratifying the Berlin treaty. Cleveland, who ran on an anti-imperialist platform, refused to submit the treaty to the Senate for ratification. Proponents of the treaty, including plenipotentiary Kasson and expansionist Senator John Morgan, argued in favor of the treaty citing commercial interests but ultimately failed to successfully appeal Cleveland's decision.¹¹² In similar anti-imperialist fashion, Cleveland's opposition to United States expansionism led to the failure of a canal treaty with Nicaragua as well as an increase of British fishing rights off the coast of Canada, as Cleveland propagated a conciliatory approach with Britain. During his first term, Britain was also able to claim multiple islands in the Pacific Ocean that the United States had hitherto informally claimed.

Cleveland's anti-expansionism policies and his rejection of the Berlin Conference created the expectation that the United States would distance itself from Liberia and Africa as a whole, as Cleveland wanted to distance the United States from any forms of colonialism or imperialism. Yet in a puzzling turn of events, under Cleveland the United States would commit to a stauncher position on Liberia's independence from European powers. The explanation for this is twofold: first, the historical connection between the United States and Liberia undoubtedly played a role. As was noted earlier, popular books like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had popularized the idea of an independent Christian nation based on American civil society in Africa, and although the idea of African colonization itself lost popularity after the Civil War, the concept of Liberian independence had been firmly established amongst the American population and would be politically hard to abandon. Moreover, by rejecting the Berlin Conference treaty, the Cleveland administration kept its promise of being anti-

¹¹² G. Macharia Munene, "The United States and the Berlin Conference on the Partition of Africa, 1884-1885," *Transafrican Journal of History* 19 (1990): 77.

expansionist and anti-imperialist while it in practice created a situation in which the United States' ability to act as a suzerain to Liberia without having to formally claim the territory was maintained. This allowed Cleveland to secure America's sole commercial port of entry into Africa without officially committing to an overseas colony while simultaneously enjoying the freedom of commerce into the Congo Basin that the Berlin Conference treaty guaranteed, essentially enjoying the advantages of an Open Door policy without incurring extra costs or being tied to international treaties. Regardless of the political processes that may have added to America's participation of the Berlin Conference or its refusal to ratify, Kasson's correspondence with Frelinghuysen during the Conference shows that the European powers during the Berlin Conference were fully aware of America's role in protecting Liberia, which America committed to for political, historical and economic reasons. Any attempt to divide spheres of influences in West Africa would be doomed without the attendance of the United States, and Europe knew it.

3.2 European Encroachment and American Diplomacy

As the Berlin Conference progressed, the European presence in Africa did not stall. In fact, since the United States asked that no discussions during the Conference would pertain to territorial claims, European powers continued to pursue new territories during the Conference itself. This practice continued into the early years of the first Cleveland administration, which commenced in 1885. The incoming Secretary of State Bayard therefore asked the new American minister to France, McLane, in January of 1886 to get intimately acquainted with France's occupation of Kent Island less than two years earlier as preparation for renewed

French aggression.¹¹³ Six months later, Bayard again sent a telegram to McLane warning him that “French officials have recently been carrying on intrigues with tribes within the long established and universally recognized boundaries of the Liberian Republic,” as if the tribes were independent entities, circumventing Liberian officials and evading taxes.¹¹⁴ These telegrams show that the United States stayed very much involved in Liberian foreign policy and, in particular, with French encroachment.

These concerns over French aggression culminated in December of that year when President Grover Cleveland dedicated part of his Annual Message to Congress to the plight of Liberia, which marked the first time that a sitting US president publicly acknowledged America’s commitment to Liberia’s independence. In his speech, Cleveland referenced the aggressive policies of Britain and France: “The weakness of Liberia and the difficulty of maintaining effective sovereignty over its outlying district, have exposed that republic to encroachment.”¹¹⁵ President Cleveland reminded Congress of the historical relationship between the United States and Liberia, calling the country “an offshoot of our own system” whose “efforts to create a nucleus of civilization in the dark continent have commanded respect and sympathy everywhere, especially in this country,” and that although “a formal protectorate over Liberia is contrary to our traditional policy,” in Cleveland’s opinion it is America’s “moral right and duty” to assist Liberia in maintaining its sovereignty.¹¹⁶ Cleveland’s public commitment to Liberia was unique; not only did a sitting US president publicly acknowledge America’s commitment to an independent Liberia, he also proposed to

¹¹³ “Documents Relating to the United States and Liberia,” *The American Journal of International Law* 4, no. 3, Supplement: Official Documents (1910): 223.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 224.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

provide Liberia with a small Navy vessel for its own defense, marking the first time that the United States agrees to supply military aid to Liberia without it being directly related to Liberia's internal struggles with the Grebo and Kru peoples.

President Cleveland's show of force, coupled with continued diplomatic work from Secretary of State Bayard in 1886 and 1887, seemed to keep French encroachment at bay during Cleveland's first term. Additionally, in November of 1885 the United States mediated a new border agreement between Britain and Liberia concerning Liberia's northwest boundary with Sierra Leone, a conflict which had lingered for almost a quarter century. Liberia's indebtedness to Britain forced it to give up a considerable tract of land to the British while receiving a small financial compensation for it in return. In his 1885 Annual Message, Liberian president Hilary Richard Wright Johnson lamented the loss of "what had been considered part of the public domain," but celebrated the treaty for its guarantee of financial compensation and the end of "unlawful ingressions" into Liberian territory.¹¹⁷ This hid the fact that the loss of tax revenue would have outweighed the financial compensation, but with the British appeased Liberia's borders were safe for the moment. Perhaps paradoxically, the first years of the Scramble for Africa proved therefore to be the quiet ones for Liberia which, aided and advised by the United States, acquiesced to British demands while resisting French expansion into their territory. As the French Empire in West Africa grew and European competition for control intensified, this would prove to become increasingly more difficult.

In the wake of the Berlin Conference, the French presence in West Africa ballooned. The French Empire sponsored multiple military expeditions in the late 1880s and early 1890s that would eventually establish a strong French rule in West Africa, which stretched from the coast of Senegal to the inland Lake Chad from west to east, and from Algiers to the Ivory

¹¹⁷ *The Annual Messages of the Presidents of Liberia 1848-2010*, ed. D. Elwood Dunn (Berlin: K.G. Saur, 2011), 336.

coast north to south. By 1892, the enormous French Empire in West Africa had already swallowed all the territory surrounding Liberia and Sierra Leone, leaving Liberia to be the only nominally independent republic on the Atlantic seaboard. Meanwhile, the British Empire had expanded into the south of Africa, controlling what we now know as South Africa and Botswana, while holding onto Sierra Leone on the west coast. In the south of Africa, Namibia, Angola and Mozambique had fallen to German and Portuguese colonialism. In the northeast, the British Empire had expanded into Egypt and Sudan, while Italy was encroaching on Ethiopia through Somalia and Eritrea. The growth of France's colonial empire spilled over into Liberia's borders, forcing the Liberians to commence new border negotiations and leading to another American diplomatic intervention, while British competition with France signaled the end of a relatively peaceful five years for Liberia.

After France's failed annexation of Kent's Island in 1884, it retracted its original claim and pursued a limited amount of Liberian territory. This French claim had stood since 1884, and as the French presence in West Africa grew, Liberia's bargaining position weakened. The United States used its diplomatic offices again to intervene in the Franco-Liberian border dispute in June of 1892, but its rhetoric was substantially less combative than during Cleveland's first administration when France's presence in West Africa was considerably smaller.¹¹⁸ When word of the negotiations reached the United States, its diplomats consequently advised Liberia to acquiesce, fearing that a similar deal might prove to be unattainable in the future. A message from the American ambassador to France, Coolidge, to Secretary of State Foster shows the extent of American control over the negotiation process. In his telegram, Coolidge summarizes the arguments in favor of the

¹¹⁸ *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*. 1892 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1893), document 119, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1892/d119>.

French deal and informs Foster that he “had not hesitated” to advise the Liberian representative of these arguments during the negotiations in 1892.¹¹⁹ That same year, the border agreement was signed. Advised by the United States, Liberia ceded the land east of the Cavalla River in return for 25,000 francs and a guarantee from France to recognize the sovereignty of Liberia under the new border agreement. Arguing that Liberia had not settled the disputed lands and that it was unlikely to get a better agreement in the future, American ambassadors celebrated its signing. Both presidents Harrison and Cleveland mentioned the Franco-Liberian border agreement in their Annual Messages to Congress in 1892 and 1893, reiterating their commitment to Liberian independence while accepting the agreement that Liberia and France had made. The Franco-Liberian border negotiations were once again a testament to America’s influence over Liberian foreign affairs and showed that this time the United States, in the face of overwhelming European encroachment during the Scramble for Africa, choose appeasement to secure Liberia’s independence.

The British, maintaining their colony of Sierra Leone, found themselves as threatened by French dominance in West Africa as Liberia did. Scrambling to find a way to make Sierra Leone self-sustaining, the British Foreign Office annexed the territory land inwards behind Freetown and imposed a tax on the indigenous people based on the size of their huts.¹²⁰ The annexation and subsequent taxation led to the devastating Hut Tax War of 1898 with the indigenous tribes, while it also sent a signal to the Western powers that the British were determined to hold on to Sierra Leone and perhaps even expand their territory. Fearing this British expansion, the United States preemptively issued a warning in 1897 to Britain that a

¹¹⁹ *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*. 1892 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1894), document 298, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1893/d298>.

¹²⁰ Judson M. Lyon, “Informal Imperialism: The United States in Liberia, 1897-1912,” *Diplomatic History* 5, no. 3 (1981): 226.

possible expansion into Liberian territory would invoke feelings of concern with the US “should any prospect of its absorption by a foreign power develop in the future.”¹²¹ This diplomatic intervention, similar to the one issued to France in 1892, would prove insufficient to keep European encroachment at bay.

By 1903, Britain and Liberia had negotiated another border agreement, solidifying the existing boundary between Sierra Leone and Liberia while agreeing to enhance trading across their border. The move was a rare olive branch from Britain, which had previously relied mainly on encroachment as a means of improving their colony’s economic output. The British hoped that the trade agreement would improve Sierra Leone’s ailing economy, but they quickly became disappointed in Liberia’s unreliable public administration and lack of trade route regulation. The British were forced to defend and regulate the Liberian part of the trade route, costing them six thousand pound per year which was more than they received through the new trade between Sierra Leone and Liberia.¹²² By 1904, French West Africa had fully connected the northern tip of Algiers to the south of Ivory Coast, and from the west coast of Mauritania to the eastern border of Chad where it bordered British Sudan, encompassing roughly 4,5 million square kilometers. The British meanwhile were holding onto Sierra Leone and Ghana in West Africa, while the majority of their African colonies were in the northeast and south of the continent. To strengthen their presence in West Africa, Britain reneged on the 1885 and 1903 border treaties and occupied new Liberian territory under the guise of retaliatory attacks on Liberian tribes that had raided the eastern territories of Sierra Leone.¹²³ The Kanre Lahun district, as the territory was called, became another

¹²¹ “Documents Relating to the United States and Liberia,” *The American Journal of International Law* 4, no. 3, Supplement: Official Documents (1910): 228.

¹²² Judson M. Lyon, “The Education of Sir Harry Johnston in Liberia, 1900-1910,” *The Historian* 51, no. 4 (1989): 629.

¹²³ Nnamdi Azikiwe, *Liberia in World Politics* (Negro Universities Press, 1970), 104.

longstanding Anglo-Liberian dispute when the British refused to leave the district and forced Liberia to accept a yearly lease of four thousand pounds as payment for the territory. They subsequently tasked Sir Harry Johnston, a former colonial administrator, with obtaining Liberian charters for his companies in order to extract Liberia's natural resources. The British presented Johnston's proposal as a win-win situation that would allow both Johnston's company as well as Liberia to make a significant sum of money. In reality, Johnston's proposed deal demanded a great deal of British autonomy in Liberia:

These charters proposed to grant Johnston's companies the rights to exploit a major proportion of Liberia's mineral resources and wild rubber, provided for the appointment of two English customs inspectors in Monrovia, and permitted the establishment of a frontier force commanded by European officers. In return, Johnston would arrange for a loan of £100,000 for Liberia and promised to use his influence to resolve that country's problems with England and France.¹²⁴

The Liberian president Barclay was faced with a grim dilemma: give up autonomy to British business interests or suffer economically while risking future land annexation. Meanwhile, the French used Liberia's financial malaise to renegotiate their 1892 treaty, claiming that due to Liberia's failure to effectively administrate their own territory, indigenous tribes had asked the French for protection.¹²⁵ Liberia, unable to fight two battles at the same time, agreed to Harry Johnston's proposal after much delay while lobbying the United States for help with the French dispute. The severity of the new border disagreements was reflected by the Liberian commission that traveled to Europe for border negotiations. It was Liberian president Barclay himself who headed to London and Paris in 1905-1906, joined by his Secretary of State and Deputy Attorney General to try and assuage the two European powers' ambitions, an exceptional act of diplomacy. When the commission, headed

¹²⁴ Judson M. Lyon, "Informal Imperialism: The United States in Liberia, 1897-1912," *Diplomatic History* 5, no. 3 (1981): 223.

¹²⁵ Nnamdi Azikiwe, *Liberia in World Politics* (Negro Universities Press, 1970), 106.

by President Barclay, reached out to the United States for assistance, their message conveyed the urgency of their situation, writing, “we wanted substantial backing from the United States Government (...) which would be more than a perfunctory declaration of friendship.”¹²⁶ The commission pressed the United States for “substantial aid” in rejecting the French proposals, which was denied by the American ambassador to France. Instead, the ambassador repeated the 1892 American argument for acquiescence:“(...) he advised us to sign the treaty, urging that if we rejected it, the French would likely make further encroachments.”¹²⁷ After their meeting with the American ambassador, the commission decided that they would prefer another treaty over the risk of a military struggle with France and signed the disadvantageous treaty.

3.3 The Price of American Intervention

By 1907, Liberia’s independence had become dire: the country had lost thousands of square miles to Britain and France since 1885 and it was unclear whether Liberia’s neighbors would respect their new border agreements. Moreover, Liberia had forfeited a great deal of autonomy in the 1905 charter with Sir Harry Johnston, which allowed Britain to permanently maintain two British customs officials and a white frontier force within Liberia’s borders. Additionally, Liberia owed nearly one million dollars to external debtholders at the turn of the decade.¹²⁸ Perhaps most disheartening was the indifferent position the United States

¹²⁶ Arthur Barclay, F.E.R. Johnson and T. McCants Stewart, *Report of Liberian Commission to Europe in Re Franco-Liberian Border and Certain Anglo-Liberian Matters* (Liberia: Liberian National Central Archives, 1907), 4.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ Nnamdi Azikiwe, *Liberia in World Politics* (Negro Universities Press, 1970), 106.

seemed to have taken on Liberian matters. It had dawned on Liberia's ruling class that European powers would not adhere to international law or age-old treaties anymore and that the sovereignty of their country had never been more insecure.

This realization is reflected in the annual messages from Liberian presidents: up until 1905, most of the Liberian presidents were preoccupied with maintaining friendly relations with the European powers. Nearly every presidential address to the Liberian legislature involved the phrase "the Republic continues to maintain friendly relations with all foreign powers."¹²⁹ This changed after the signing of the charters in 1905 and the ensuing French annexation as evidenced by the Liberian commission's report: "Great States meet and partition small States without any consultation of the latter."¹³⁰ President Barclay reiterates his urgency in his 1907 annual message: "While West Africa remained outside the circle of political life of the world, we could afford to jog along quietly and conservatively (...) but, now, that phase has passed."¹³¹ When Johnston's company failed and Johnston himself left Liberia in 1907, the remaining British officials in Liberia intensified their expansion efforts. They immediately implemented reforms that expanded British control in Liberia, refusing trading rights to Monrovia, forcing changes to the Liberian constitution and broadening their control over Liberian customs.¹³² These British-enforced reforms would prove to be a step

¹²⁹ See *The Annual Messages of the Presidents of Liberia 1848-2010*, ed. D. Elwood Dunn (Berlin: K.G. Saur, 2011).

¹³⁰ Arthur Barclay, F.E.R. Johnson and T. McCants Stewart, *Report of Liberian Commission to Europe in Re Franco-Liberian Border and Certain Anglo-Liberian Matters* (Liberia: Liberian National Central Archives, 1907), 10.

¹³¹ *The Annual Messages of the Presidents of Liberia 1848-2010*, ed. D. Elwood Dunn (Berlin: K.G. Saur, 2011), 449.

¹³² Judson M. Lyon, "Informal Imperialism: The United States in Liberia, 1897-1912," *Diplomatic History* 5, no. 3 (1981): 231.

too far for the United States and were the leading cause for increased US involvement in Liberia.

Three major developments in the 1900s led to increased American involvement in Liberia. First, the American minister to Liberia, Ernest Lyon, had been a staunch supporter of Liberian independence since his appointment in 1903. His efforts throughout the early 1900s to keep the American Secretary of State informed of European encroachment played a pivotal role in conveying to the United States the true danger that France and Britain posed to Liberia's independence. Secondly, the appointment of Elihu Root as Roosevelt's Secretary of State gave the Liberians an ally to their cause, and more importantly, a Secretary of State who wanted to keep British aggression at bay through arbitration. As Secretary of War, Root had successfully resolved the Alaska boundary dispute with Britain in favor of the United States, and when ambassador Lyon informed Root of the British reforms in Liberia in March of 1908, Root immediately reopened diplomatic negotiations with Britain over Liberian affairs.¹³³ Lastly, the decision by the Liberian Legislature to send yet another commission to the United States in 1908 to discuss European encroachment seemed futile, yet it would prove to be the catalyst for a reciprocal American commission that would deliver a scathing report of European encroachment and American passivity in Liberia. Having seen the writing on the wall, this Liberian commission was formed in January of 1908 immediately following the British reforms and it visited Washington later that year to ask for assistance in maintaining Liberia's independence.

By this time, the Liberian cause had received attention and support from the black community in the United States. Prominent black journalists and intellectuals had been

¹³³ Judson M. Lyon, "Informal Imperialism: The United States in Liberia, 1897-1912," *Diplomatic History* 5, no. 3 (1981): 232.

publishing articles in support of Liberia in 1906 and 1907, and when the commission arrived in the United States it was joined by Booker T. Washington who had taken a special interest in Liberia's cause.¹³⁴ After meeting with Washington and the Liberian commission and receiving the reports from the American minister Lyon, Root told President Roosevelt that "Liberia is very much in need of assistance" and that is "our duty to help her."¹³⁵ Root, although not openly critical of France and Britain, saw the encroachment of the two powers as one of the foremost problems endangering Liberia, which he called "an American colony."¹³⁶ He implored President Roosevelt to dispatch a commission to Liberia in order to "constitute the most effective measures of relief."¹³⁷ One day later, President Roosevelt sent a special message to Congress asking for authorization of the commission to Liberia, calling it "an imperative duty for us to do all in our power to help the little Republic which is struggling against such adverse conditions."¹³⁸

The American commission arrived in Monrovia in May of 1909 and would originally count Booker T. Washington as one of its commissioners, but due to poor health he sent his private secretary in his stead.¹³⁹ The three commissioners returned to the United States by June and would finally submit their report to the Taft administration on March 25th, 1910, but

¹³⁴ *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1909 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1915), document 721, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1910/d721>.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ "Documents Relating to the United States and Liberia," *The American Journal of International Law* 4, no. 3, Supplement: Official Documents (1910): 228.

¹³⁹ Judson M. Lyon, "Informal Imperialism: The United States in Liberia, 1897-1912," *Diplomatic History* 5, no. 3 (1981): 237.

their interviews with American newspapers had already shown the commission's tentative conclusions. In an interview with *The World Today*, commissioner Sale pointed to Liberia's precarious position as a play toy between Britain and France:

Abyssinia on the east and Liberia on the West are the only parts of the continent which the black man now holds. Like every other portion of the continent, these portions are coveted by the European Powers, and Liberia finds itself no easy task to maintain herself. (...) England and France declare that they have no designs on Liberian territory; but each is suspicious and jealous of the other, and between them Liberia is kept in a constant state of apprehension.¹⁴⁰

Through their interviews with several publications, the commissioners attempted to create a favorable public opinion of Liberia's cause, hoping that when the report finally made it to Congress, little political difficulty was to arise when deciding the proper form of aid to Liberia. The report delivered a searing verdict of European aggression, describing Liberia to be "helpless to obtain a definitive fixation of her boundaries" while "she has at every turn been forced to yield to each new aggression."¹⁴¹ The commission took special umbrage with Britain's recent behavior, accusing the country of being more interested in annexing Liberia than seeing it prosper, and therefore proposing that the United States replace Britain as "the friendly counselor and advisor of Liberia."¹⁴² Although less forcefully, France's aggressive encroachment was also criticized by the commission, who called France "a thorn in the side of Liberia."¹⁴³ The commission was expecting France to annex new Liberian territory in the

¹⁴⁰ Unknown, "Our Responsibility in Liberia," *The Literary Digest*, December 25th 1909, 1167.

¹⁴¹ *Message from the President of the United States*, 1910 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1910), document 457: 10.

¹⁴² *Ibid*, 12.

¹⁴³ *Ibid*, 14.

near future and thus far considered Franco-Liberian treaties as deliberate attempts “to provide a pretext for future occupation.”¹⁴⁴

The report also discussed the Americo-Liberians’ struggles with the tribes in the hinterland, the state of Liberia’s infrastructure and poor financial situation as well as the potential of its resources and agriculture, ultimately concluding that Liberia has been paying off its loan in a duly manner and that its resources should be sufficient to keep the country independent with minimal help. This help, according to the commission, could not come from Britain, France or even Germany, which had become Liberia’s biggest trading partner. Although the commission did not deem Germany an immediate threat to Liberia’s independence, its colonial aspirations and competition with Britain and France also made it an untrustworthy partner.¹⁴⁵ The United States, in the eyes of the commission, was “the only country which can give them effective aid” since it allegedly had no ulterior designs on Liberia and could effectively assuage the other European powers.¹⁴⁶

Concluding, the commission agreed with the original assessment of Secretary of State Root, who had written to President Roosevelt that “the duty of the United States towards the unfortunate victims of the slave trade was not completely performed by landing them upon the coast of Africa” and that the US “rests under the highest obligation to assist them.”¹⁴⁷ In fact, the commission called America’s efforts to aid Liberia “painfully meager” and called

¹⁴⁴ *Message from the President of the United States*, 1910 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1910), document 457: 15.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 28.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 29.

¹⁴⁷ *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1909 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1915), document 721, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1910/d721>.

upon the US government to “fulfill its duty” by implementing a broad set of recommendations.¹⁴⁸ These recommendations included:

- That the US assumes the role of Liberia’s attorney in order to settle its boundary disputes;
- That the US assumes Liberia’s debt and as a debt guarantee takes control of Liberian customs, as it had done in Santo Domingo;
- That Liberia appoints an American financial adviser;
- That the US sends three Army officers to train a well-functioning Liberian police force;
- That the US creates a permanent research station in Liberia to improve public health;
- And that the US establish a naval coaling station in Monrovia to increase safety and promote commerce.¹⁴⁹

President Taft, who had been groomed by his predecessor Roosevelt, forwarded the report in its entirety to Congress on March 25, 1910 and told Congress that he “concur in the views of the Secretary of State” and trusts that the US would “fulfill our national duty to the Liberian people.”¹⁵⁰ Meanwhile, black intellectuals and journalists continued publishing articles that favored assistance to Liberia. One such journalist travelled to Liberia and attempted to highlight the many cultural similarities between Liberia and the United States:

You are constantly passing little settlements that bear such familiar names as Virginia, New Georgia, Clay-Ashland, New York, Louisiana (...). And if you stop to talk with Liberians in any part of the country, you learn quickly that these are not the names of

¹⁴⁸ *Message from the President of the United States*, 1910 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1910), document 457: 31.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 31-36.

¹⁵⁰ William H. Taft, “Special Message,” 1910, *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/special-message-326>.

a glory that has departed. It is a curious fact that the American spirit is stronger in Liberia than in many parts of the United States itself.¹⁵¹

Yet nothing came of the commission's recommendations. Judson M. Lyon has argued that Taft's international ambitions had already been too grand for the Senate's liking, which used the Monroe Doctrine to argue that the US should not get more involved in Africa in striking down the proposal.¹⁵² However, a last-ditch effort by Taft to provide aid to Liberia succeeded. Congress agreed to send an American agriculture-specialist and a team of officers to Liberia in order to increase their agricultural output and train an effective Liberian police force. Additionally, the United States organized a \$1.7 million dollar loan for Liberia in 1912, provided jointly by Britain, France, Germany and the United States and overseen by an American financial representative.¹⁵³

The loan was of immense importance to Liberia's independence as it would cover all of Liberia's outstanding debt. Liberia's forty year lease was beneficial to the small republic and America's leadership organizing this loan meant that the encroachment by France and Britain was effectively over. However, to guarantee repayment the US demanded that it was to be granted "control of the administration and collection of the customs of the Republic, whether on exports or imports, and of said rubber tax" during the forty year lease.¹⁵⁴ This assumption of Liberia's financial control by the United States again greatly reduced Liberia's autonomy but Liberia was out of options. It was greatly indebted to Britain, had already lost

¹⁵¹ Edgar Allen Forbes, "Notes on the Only American Colony in the World," *The National Geographic Magazine* 21, no. 9 (1910): 720.

¹⁵² Judson M. Lyon, "Informal Imperialism: The United States in Liberia, 1897-1912," *Diplomatic History* 5, no. 3 (1981): 240.

¹⁵³ *Liberia*, British Foreign Office (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1920), 16-17.

¹⁵⁴ Nnamdi Azikiwe, *Liberia in World Politics* (Negro Universities Press, 1970), 118.

hundreds of miles of coastline to both France and Britain, and was heavily reliant on German trade. Some Liberians protested this “financial imperialism” and some European and American representatives in Liberia were attacked by displeased citizens, but the Americo-Liberian politicians celebrated American aid, calling the loan “a fresh lease of life.”¹⁵⁵

The United States was an active stakeholder during the Berlin Conference, and was recognized as such by the European powers. Their recognized status as the protector of Liberia led president Cleveland to refuse to ratify the Berlin treaty, as he hoped to enjoy the economic advantages the treaty provided without having to submit to it. Additionally, Cleveland expected the informal recognition of America’s protection of Liberia to safeguard its independence. His gamble did not pay off, and Liberia paid the price during the Scramble for Africa. France and Britain violated previous treaties with Liberia while American presidents choose appeasement with them, leading to substantial losses of Liberian land and autonomy. Only when Liberia was on the verge of becoming a British colony under expansionist president Roosevelt, did the United States intervene. The loan that the United States organized guaranteed Liberian independence, but also gave the US far-reaching control of Liberia’s finances, similar in nature to the control that Britain exerted in 1907. American intervention was perhaps the response many Americo-Liberians had been waiting on for decades, though when it finally came, it was at a high price.

¹⁵⁵ *The Annual Messages of the Presidents of Liberia 1848-2010*, ed. D. Elwood Dunn (Berlin: K.G. Saur, 2011), 336.

Conclusion

Throughout the 19th century, the United States played an important role in Liberian affairs, either through active engagement with its foreign and domestic policies, or through ambiguous passivity. This paper has taken a holistic approach to US-Liberian relations in the 19th century, comparing American policy on Liberia during its formative years with US-Liberia relations from 1884-1912. Through this comparison, this study has shown the ways in which American aid to Liberia throughout the 19th century fluctuated, dependent upon domestic changes in American racial politics, economic considerations, as well as a sense of moral obligation. These fluctuations undoubtedly shaped the Liberian struggle for independence during the Scramble for Africa. Although the sparse literature on US-Liberia relations largely examines these historical periods in a vacuum, this study's holistic approach has demonstrated the extent of the close ties between the American government and pre-independence Liberia, how the official American position on post-independent Liberia was guided for 40 years by non-committal diplomacy established by Abel Upshur, and that the United States was forced to gradually deviate from this position through increased European aggression in West Africa. In taking this approach, this study has contributed to a deeper understanding of US-Liberia relations during the 19th century and puts forward that the United States regularly acted as a suzerain to Liberia, actively participating or acting in Liberia's stead in its foreign affairs without committing to an official protectorate, while simultaneously allowing Liberia to exercise autonomous domestic control.

Black colonization, although not a novel idea, only became a viable concept after the American government's response to the illegal transatlantic slave trade proved to be inadequate. As an alternative, a collection of men from the slaveholding South, with some support from abolitionists, created the American Colonization Society aimed toward promoting black colonization in Africa. Due to their strong political ties, the Society was able

to secure federal funding and naval aid for their colonization efforts, which enjoyed broad popular support due to the rising belief in manifest destiny and the notion that African colonization was inherently a Christianizing mission. In addition, the Society largely profited off of white fears of increased slave rebellions. Moreover, to some politicians, the ACS's projection of American military power in Africa spawned visions of a transatlantic American empire.

The advent of a Jacksonian *laissez-faire* governmental approach, fears of a financial drain and persistent rumors of Liberian slavery led to intense scrutiny of the American Colonization Society and would eventually cause the American government to gradually separate itself from the Liberian project. Decreased American protection and increased Liberian autonomy consequently precipitated the first signs of European interest in Liberia, as Britain started to test the limits of the US-Liberia relationship by circumventing Liberian tax laws and militarily intimidating the Americo-Liberians. As it dawned on the Americo-Liberians that American help was unreliable and that a colony had no legal grounds to enforce laws, they pushed for independence.

After Liberia declared independence in 1847, the United States completely separated itself from Liberia. It refused to recognize the independence of a black republic, terminated all funding, and in the years leading up to the Civil War, the US even pulled away its Navy from Liberian shores, leaving behind a power vacuum in West Africa. In the US's absence, Britain increased its sphere of influence in West Africa by providing Liberia with necessary loans while simultaneously encroaching upon Liberian territory. The US only renewed its presence in Liberian politics in 1862 when a Republic-led Congress decided to recognize Haiti and Liberia. The US and Liberia signed a treaty that allowed the US to interfere in Liberian foreign policy as it saw fit, but the 1860s and 1870s remained marked by American indifference to the Liberian plight: it refused to provide Liberia with loans or military aid,

pushing the ailing country further towards France and Britain. Liberia's deteriorating financial situation and internal struggles with rebellious tribes forced it to request aid from France and Britain, progressively indebting itself to the two European powers vying for its territory. As a result, Liberia's neighbors increasingly attempted to include Liberia in their sphere of influence, forcing America's hand. Unwilling to see Liberia fall to Britain or France, though equally reluctant to intervene militarily, the US utilized forceful diplomatic language to assuage the European powers. This proved sufficient until the start of the Scramble for Africa in the 1880s.

By 1884, the United States was contending with the presence of British, French and German traders and troops in the Liberian region. The US increased military aid to help the Americo-Liberians with their internal struggles, hoping that a show of strength would also serve to deter the Europeans. Meanwhile, many American observers had become sympathetic to Liberia due to the country's American cultural roots, English language and Christian beliefs. Moreover, popular books like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Northwood* had introduced Liberia to the general public, creating public support for increased involvement in Liberia. This served politicians seeking to safeguard American access to African trade and resources well, leading to US support for King Leopold's International Association of the Congo, the organization through which he sought to divide the African continent amongst European powers. This support, coupled with America's protection of Liberia in the previous twenty years, resulted in the controversial American participation of the Berlin Conference. From a strategic perspective, the Berlin Conference was a short-term victory for incoming president Grover Cleveland, as the US retained their commercial port of entry into Africa and European powers avoided war, whilst Cleveland refused to ratify the treaty and was therefore able to fulfill his anti-expansionist campaign promises. Cleveland's strong rhetoric in favor of and public commitment to Liberia held off European encroachment, but by 1892 Liberia was

embroiled in another Franco-Liberian border dispute. Recognizing the strong presence of France in Africa, the US advised Liberia to acquiesce to its demands, signaling to Britain and France that it was unwilling to send military aid. Gradually, Liberia lost land and autonomy to the two European powers until an American commission visited Liberia in 1908 and delivered a scathing report of America's lackluster aid, advising an aid package that would greatly increase the American presence in West Africa. Congress, still unwilling to deviate too much from Upshur's 1843 policy and defy the Monroe Doctrine, eventually passed a watered-down aid package that effectively ended the French and British encroachment but also supplanted British control over Liberia's finances with American control.

Most scholars of American history see Liberian history as its own distinct field of historical research, which has led very few historians to consider the reasons for Liberia's unique independence during the Scramble for Africa. This thesis however, has shown that America's extensive involvement in Liberian politics in the 19th century most accurately resembles a suzerainty. Between 1817-1847 and 1862-1912, the US exercised far-reaching control over Liberian external (and sometimes internal) affairs, and this extensive involvement for the majority of the 19th century played a significant role in Liberia's ability to secure independence during the Scramble for Africa. Embedded in this thesis is an argument for renewed academic interest in the American-Liberian relationship and a reimagining of the concept of "the Greater United States." As this thesis has only touched briefly on well-deserving topics of scholarly interest, much more is to be learned about the American-Liberian relationship, including the role that public opinion played in American aid to Liberia, and more specifically, the role of transnational black activism between the two countries during the Scramble for Africa. From the perspective of US foreign policy and international relations studies, the American-Liberian relationship might be characterized as one of the earliest examples of American support of a country's independence outside of the

Western Hemisphere. Other examples of non-traditional American spheres of influence might yet be identified, however, this is only possible by broadening our perception of the Greater United States, which might reveal new questions that were hitherto assumed to be unrelated to the US, but will give further insights into American influence and imperialism on a world scale.

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