

**Red, White and Blue Rubber: American Involvement in the Liberian  
Slavery Crisis, 1928-1934**

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**~ In remembrance of my grandfather John A. Menge, the Peace Corps Evaluator for the program in Liberia in 1968 ~**

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## **Introduction**

*Man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains. Many a one believes himself the master of others, and yet he is a greater slave than they.*— Jean-Jacques Rousseau

In 1930, the U.S. government and the League of Nations collaborated on an investigation into the existence of slavery in Liberia, the land of liberty that had been founded by the American Colonization Society in the nineteenth century as an asylum for former American slaves. By the early twentieth century, the realities of social injustice in Liberia stood in sharp contrast to the ideal of freedom that the country symbolized. By 1930, roughly 15,000 Americo-Liberians violently struggled to assert control over 2 million indigenous people living in Liberian territories.<sup>1</sup> In a tragic paradox, the Americo-Liberian political elite, themselves the descendants of former American slaves, stood accused of enslaving the indigenous populations in Liberia for their own economic gain.

A League of Nations Commission of Inquiry, comprised of the League representative Cuthbert Christy, the American sociologist Charles S. Johnson, and the former Liberian president Arthur Barclay, spent four months in the coast and hinterland of Liberia, interviewing Liberian politicians, chiefs, and indigenous laborers, and investigating the slavery allegations. According to the Commission's Report, produced in the fall of 1930, the Liberian political elite had been buying indigenous people in the hinterland to work as domestic slaves, authorizing the shipment of forced labor to contractors in the Spanish colony of Fernando Po, and using unpaid and unfed labor for

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<sup>1</sup> The term "Americo-Liberian" will be used to refer to the descendants of former African-American slaves who became the ruling political elite in Liberia. Grouping the various peoples of Liberian hinterland with a single signifier presents many problems. Here, the word "indigenous" is used to collectively refer to the Kru, Gerbo, Kisi, Mano, Kpele, Bandi, Bwao, Fawpo, Sikon, Gola, Gio Ghor-Gebee peoples. The main ethnic groups that fell victim to slavery were the Kru and Gerbo peoples.

private gain.<sup>2</sup> For the next four years both the League of Nations and the U.S. State Department struggled to work with the Liberian government to implement a tenable plan for reform.

The questions of why the League of Nations investigated Liberian slavery and why the U.S. government actively participated in the investigation have not yet received full answers. All historical accounts cite the American business interests in Liberia as a crucial factor that led to U.S. involvement. In 1926, the American rubber magnate Harvey Firestone, with the support of the U.S. Commerce Department, had invested in one million acres of Liberian land for rubber plantations, and his company's subsidiary, the American Finance Corporation, had provided the Liberian government with a 5 million dollar loan, on 7% annual interest. The Firestone Company had cozy relationships with the U.S. State Department, even though the U.S. government was not willing to secure the investment with military force. Nnamdi Azikiwe, editor of the *West African Pilot* and the first President of Nigeria, wrote the first survey of the Liberian crisis in 1934, painting it in Manichean terms: an attempted American takeover of the sole Black Republic in Africa, motivated by a mix of paternalism and racism.<sup>3</sup> Azikiwe's reading of the crisis is not surprising, given that he was writing in the pre-history of African nationalism and was himself a committed anti-imperialist. After Azikiwe, the earliest historical accounts of the Liberian slavery crisis were based exclusively on printed material and failed to scrutinize the U.S. motivations for involvement.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Report of the Liberian Commission of Inquiry*, June 1930. League of Nations, C. 658.M272. Hereafter cited as *League, Report*.

<sup>3</sup> Nnamdi Azikiwe, *Liberia in World Politics* (Westport, CT: Negro Universities Press, 1934).

<sup>4</sup> For a historiographical overview, see Emily Rosenberg "Invisible Protectorate," *Diplomatic History* 9:3 (1985): 191-214. See for example R. E. Anderson, *Liberia: America's African Friend* (Chapel Hill, 1952), R. Bixler, *The Foreign Policy of the United States in Liberia* (New York, 1957), J Liebenow, *Liberia: The Evolution of Privilege*, G. Brown *The Economic History of Liberia* (Washington DC, 1941).

I.K. Sundiata's *Black Scandal*, the first examination of American involvement based on primary research, described the U.S. motivations as Machiavellian self-interest, "Nowhere is it more obvious than in the Liberian crisis that disinterested humanitarianism was not the motive force behind intervention [...] Economic motives do appear to have been major factors."<sup>5</sup> Sundiata argued that Firestone hoped to open new labor supplies for his plantations, by breaking the Liberian government's forced labor monopoly, a claim with little evidentiary support.<sup>6</sup> Sundiata also argued that the U.S. hoped to "avoid adverse criticism of American investment" through its involvement in the slavery investigation, but he did not adequately explain why this concern compelled the State Department to take on-the-ground action.<sup>7</sup> Emily Rosenberg wrote about the Liberian slavery crisis in her work on dollar diplomacy, and she echoed Sundiata's arguments.<sup>8</sup> The Liberian slavery investigation has received only brief mentions in the historiography of twentieth century abolitionism. Suzanne Miers, and Frederick Cooper have mentioned the Liberian slavery crisis in their works, but have focused less on the U.S. and more closely on British and French efforts to end slavery during this period.<sup>9</sup>

This thesis, while acknowledging that U.S. economic and political motives were relevant to the Liberian slavery crisis, argues that the U.S. took an active interest in the issue because the allegations occurred specifically during a larger international moment when liberal and humanitarian causes had a renewed importance. It is significant in terms of the U.S. position that the slavery crisis in Liberia broke just two years after the League

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<sup>5</sup> I.K. Sundiata, *Black Scandal: America and the Liberian Labor Crisis*, (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1980): 36.

<sup>6</sup> Sundiata, *Black Scandal*, 40-41. The sources that Sundiata cites are from after 1928, the year Liberian slavery was first discussed in the State Department.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 42.

<sup>8</sup> Emily Rosenberg, "Invisible Protectorate," 206.

<sup>9</sup> Suzanne Miers, *Slavery in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 2003): 140-1, F. Cooper, *Beyond Slavery* (Chapel Hill, 2000): 130.

of Nations passed the first international anti-slavery convention in 1926. During the twentieth century, the humanitarian aspects of the anti-slavery cause had been used to justify Western intervention in Africa. Historically, “forced labor” allegations had also been used to challenge imperial relationships that were alleged to be excessively harmful to indigenous populations – a notable example is Leopold II’s rule over the Congo. Given the existing international anti-slavery sentiment, the U.S. State Department advocated for a League investigation because they were concerned that an investigation, devoid of U.S. participation, could irrevocably tarnish the image of benevolent American overseas investment.

The initial U.S. response to the Liberian crisis was decidedly involved. Senior members of the State Department, including Under Secretary of State William Castle, handled the Liberian slavery issue directly. Along with other State Department officials, he devised a plan for a comprehensive investigation so that, as a 1928 State Department memorandum explained, “If this story gets out [...] we should be able to say that we have acted and what we have done.”<sup>10</sup> It is of additional importance that the slavery investigation occurred in Liberia, a country that carried its own symbolic significance, given its historic anti-slavery foundation and its location near British colonies. While League reports indicated that forced labor also existed in other American protectorates and territories in the 1920s, the unique image of Liberia as the land of liberty, and the historical memory of the special U.S. relationship to the country, contributed to the U.S. government’s involvement in the crisis.

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<sup>10</sup> State Department memorandum, 1928, United States National Archives hereafter cited as USNA, RG 59, 882.5045/24. (Microfilm M113, roll 14).

Despite this initial resolve to display leadership, in the long run, the Liberian crisis was as much a story of American inaction as action.<sup>11</sup> After 1930, the international discussions on Liberia drifted away from the issue of slavery to focus more broadly on Liberia's political and economic problems. The slavery investigation had opened a Pandora's box, bringing attention to the extreme social and political disorder in Liberia, issues that went beyond the purview of the 1926 Slavery Convention. From 1930-1934, the League hastened to develop a broader development strategy for Liberia and the initial focus on the slavery issue was lost. The Liberian situation remains a fascinating case study of the larger forces that compelled the U.S. to pay attention to a humanitarian issue, but it is also significant for the limits of action to effectively end slavery.

This thesis considers the American response to the Liberian slavery crisis in three sections. Chapter I frames the context of the slavery investigation. It describes the historical foundation of Liberia, considers Liberia's economic and political relationships with the U.S. and its role in the international order during the interwar period. Chapter II focuses on the history of the early twentieth century anti-slavery moment in the League of Nations and explains how the circumstances of this history compelled the United States to take an active interest in the question of Liberian slavery. Chapter III focuses on the impact of the League investigation, and discusses why the investigation did not result in an end to Liberian slavery. The conclusion discusses how the lessons of the Liberian crisis can be applied to the present, and relate to the twenty-first century fight against slavery.

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<sup>11</sup> Christopher L. Brown in *Moral Capital* (Chapel Hill, 2003) examined the specific forces that compelled the British government to move from humanitarian concern to anti-slavery action in 1807. This thesis utilizes a similar approach to analyze U.S. action in Liberia.

## **Chapter 1: The Origin of Inequality**

An overview of the social, economic, and geopolitical forces that impacted the slavery crisis in Liberia is necessary to contextualize the 1930 League investigation. Slavery emerged in Liberia from the deep-seated inequality between the Americo-Liberian elite who ruled the country and the indigenous people in the Liberian hinterland that the elite sought to “civilize” and bring under its control. The Liberian slavery crisis would eventually draw international attention in the 1930s because of its geopolitical importance to the West. Liberia was wedged between British and French colonial possessions in Africa, and due to the history of its foundation, there were also American interests in the country. Liberia’s importance to the United States dramatically increased in 1926, when the American rubber magnate Harvey S. Firestone invested over \$5 million in the country to guarantee an American source of rubber.

### ***The Foundation of Liberia***

What Liberia stood for was often more important to the West than the reality of political and social conditions on the ground. Liberia was conceived as a simulation of American society on the coast of West Africa. In 1816, the philanthropic American Colonization Society provided funds to purchase African territory as an asylum for former American slaves. Liberia was founded as an inducement for Southern slaveholders to free their slaves, and be absolved of any financial requirements to cover the transition to freedom.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Abel Upshar to Henry S. Fox., Sept. 25, 1843, USNA, RG 59, 882.51, (microfilm M114).

The government and society of Liberia were explicitly based on the American model. Similar to the American flag, the Liberian flag is a banner of eleven red and white stripes, with a single white star (originally a white cross) against a blue square background in the top left corner. The Harvard academic and evangelist Simon Greenleaf, who had never been to Africa, slightly modified the U.S. Constitution to create a new Liberian constitution, and he presented it to the American Colonization Society for implementation.<sup>13</sup> The fact that the African-Americans who immigrated to Liberia had neither created nor designed the country's government, and were themselves products of the vastly unequal slave society in the United States, provides some explanation for why the democratic ideals that were embodied in Liberia's founding document would later be so haphazardly applied. The phrase "all men are created free and equal" was included in the founding documents of Liberia, but as Charles Johnson, who would later serve on the League's 1930 Commission of Inquiry in Liberia noted, "the aborigines were disregarded just as the Americans' slaves had been disregarded."<sup>14</sup> Virtually upon the country's inception, forced domestic servitude and pawning became widespread practices.<sup>15</sup> From birth, Liberia was a land of liberty in language only, because the provisions of the Constitution were not heeded in practice.

Although the "colony of Liberia," received an ambiguous guarantee of support from the U.S. government, in 1843 U.S. Secretary of State Abel P. Upshar stressed that Liberia was an "individual enterprise," that was not under the authority of the U.S. government, "the motives which led to it were not trade, nor of conquest; their motives were purely

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<sup>13</sup> Charles S. Johnson, *Bitter Canaan*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, Inc.): 80.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

philanthropic.”<sup>16</sup> Secretary Upshar also indicated that Liberia’s “influence in civilizing and Christianizing Africa, in suppressing the slave-trade, and in ameliorating the condition of African slaves,” would be worth little, if they were impeded by any British or French claims to Liberian territory.<sup>17</sup>

When the British government insisted that Liberia’s ambiguous status complicated its relations with Great Powers in Africa, Americo-Liberians decided to precisely define Liberia as an independent sovereign nation.<sup>18</sup> The Liberian governor J.J. Roberts negotiated his country’s political and economic independence from the American Colonization Society on July 26, 1847.<sup>19</sup> For decades, Liberians referred to their country’s foundation as a messianic event. F.E.R. Johnson, a Liberian attorney general and member of the Liberian Supreme Court, orated on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Liberian independence in 1887:

“the fathers of Liberia - like the children of Israel, had fled from the land of their captivity in order to escape the horrors of slavery and the miseries of the most grinding oppression [...] On you involves the duty of rendering Liberia an important factor, in the civilization and Christianization of this Dark Continent, and in exercising a beneficial influence on the destiny of the race.”<sup>20</sup>

Johnson’s call to arms hints at the paradox of the Liberian identity: a desire to be similar to other “civilizing powers” in Africa, yet also to overturn the history of imperialism in Africa, as a form of racial oppression. However, it must be noted that Liberia did not have the economic means to become an imperial power in Africa, even if the intention existed.<sup>21</sup>

Even after its independence, Liberia would continue to negotiate with Britain and France for sovereign recognition. In 1847, Britain became the first power to recognize

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<sup>16</sup> Upshar to Fox., Sept. 25, 1843, USNA, RG 59, 882.51, (microfilm M114).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Rosenberg, “Invisible Protectorate,” 192.

<sup>20</sup> F.E.R. Johnson, “Oration on the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Liberia’s Independence, July 26, 1887,” published by Monrovia, T.W. Howard Printer “The Constitution of Liberia: Its adaptation to our present circumstances; and the necessity of its reconstruction”:2, (microfilm, Grimes Collection).

<sup>21</sup> See “Growing Internal Problems” section.

Liberia as an independent country (the U.S. did not formally recognize Liberia until 1862, the same year it recognized Haiti). However, the planned British expansion of Sierra Leone conflicted with existing Liberian boundaries. In the aftermath of the Berlin Conference of 1884 (which Liberia did not attend), Liberia voluntarily ceded over 6,000 acres of shoreline, in order to maintain control over the hinterland territories that bordered British territories.<sup>22</sup> U.S. representatives attended the Berlin Conference for supervisory purposes, but Congress did not ratify any of the existing agreements.

On June 16, 1890, during the Brussels Conference, the U.S. representative explained Liberia's symbolic importance saying, "it deserves the sympathies of all those who are interested in the cause of humanity in Africa [...] this conference has every interest in associating it with its work, because of the mission Liberia is called upon to fulfill."<sup>23</sup> Even though the British and French governments looked eagerly at Liberian territories, the U.S. was firm in its stance that Liberia's independence was non-negotiable. According to the U.S., Liberia's existence gave credence to the humanitarian ideals that the Great Powers professed to support in Africa.

### ***Growing Internal Problems***

The international battles for recognition were not the only challenges Liberians faced in establishing sovereignty. From the country's beginning, Americo-Liberians encountered difficulties as they tried to establish political control over the existing populations in Liberian territories. Starting with a few ships of several hundred African-

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<sup>22</sup> "President Arthur Barclay's Inaugural Speech," January 1, 1906. (microfilm, Grimes collection.)

<sup>23</sup> Coolidge to Ribot, July 13 1892, USNA, RG 59, 882.51 (microfilm M114).

American immigrants, by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Americo-Liberians numbered no more than 15,000-20,000. Yet, they attempted to exercise rule over the 1.5 to 2 million people who lived in the hinterland.<sup>24</sup> The Americo-Liberian settlements were largely along the coast of Liberia, centered on the port city of Monrovia. By all accounts, Liberia mirrored other European colonial administrations in Africa, where a small Western civilization sought recognition from much larger populations of indigenous peoples. However, Charles Johnson notes that, “British and French colonists have found themselves similarly disproportionate, but behind them always has been the inflexible arm of a determined and secure mother country.”<sup>25</sup> The Liberian government represented a small weak political force, with no larger power to prop up its mission. After the 1840’s, the United States only provided symbolic and moral recognition to Liberia. It was never a mother country to the Americo-Liberian colonists.

The new country of Liberia was a forced nationality that did not resonate with the Kru and Gerbo peoples who lived in the hinterland territories. However, the Americo-Liberians, not phased by their own small numbers, readily taxed the indigenous populations for government services. In October 1860, the Liberian government enacted an ordinance requiring every male citizen over the age of 21 in Monrovia to pay a 75 cents annual poll tax. The ordinance also stipulated that every Krooman, Veyman, or any other indigenous person residing within Liberia should pay the same amount for the same benefits of political and legal protection.<sup>26</sup> Since Liberia had no navigable rivers in the hinterland, nor any established roads, there was little the government could offer in actual tangible services to indigenous peoples in return for the payment of taxes. For decades, many indigenous

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<sup>24</sup> Johnson, *Bitter Canaan*, 85.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Ordinance Related to Poll Tax, Oct. 24, 1860: 8 (microfilm, Grimes Collection).

tribes refused to pay unsubstantiated hut taxes, and resisted the violent attempts of the Liberian political “Frontier Force” to enforce tax collection. The list of hinterland uprisings is seemingly endless.<sup>27</sup> Between 1879 and 1882, these taxes were raised to \$1, and new ordinances were enacted to ensure that “natives” wore clothes. Non-compliance was to be punished with forced labor: the Kru or Gerbo person would have to work for the city of Monrovia for a period between 10 days and 1 month.<sup>28</sup> These very early acts, which codified punishments of forced labor for questionable crimes, set a precedent for the later labor abuses that were the target of international scrutiny in the 1920s.

The Americo-Liberians also encountered economic difficulties and shortly after their country’s foundation began to abuse the labor of the indigenous peoples as an economic resource. The original American émigrés to Liberia, who were mostly from agricultural regions in the Southern United States, tried to establish a successful agricultural system in Liberia, cultivating cotton, sugar cane, tobacco, rice, and vegetables.<sup>29</sup> The soil and climate of Liberia proved unsuitable. After years of disappointing harvests, Americo-Liberians struggled to find alternative means to raise revenue. One such method was contracting indigenous labor to French and Spanish colonies, making a set amount of profit on each laborer that was shipped.<sup>30</sup> Americo-Liberians also turned to American finance capital as a possible solution to their economic ills. Most historians have interpreted these loans as a great financial burden to the Liberian state, which does not give due agency to the Americo-Liberian officials who readily signed

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<sup>27</sup> For a partial list, see M.B. Akpan, *African Resistance in Liberia*, (Bremen: Liberia Working Group, 1988): 5.

<sup>28</sup> Ordinance Related to Poll Tax, 1879 (microfilm, Grimes Collection).

<sup>29</sup> Hassan B. Sissay, *Big Powers and Small Nations*, (New York: University Press of America, 1985) 23.

<sup>30</sup> An Agreement between the Governments of his Catholic Majesty The King of Spain and the Republic of Liberia for the Recruitment of Labourers, Concluded May 22 1914, USNA, RG 59, 882.504 (microfilm M113, roll 14).

these agreements.<sup>31</sup> In 1930, 85% of Liberian government budget, which was largely financed with foreign loans, went to pay the salaries of officials who were appointed on a strict party-loyalty basis.<sup>32</sup>

Besides the internal and external struggle for recognition, two substantial international developments after the First World War had resounding effects on Liberia's position vis-à-vis the United States and the international community at large. The first was a series of loans that were negotiated between the Liberian government and U.S. companies which culminated in the Firestone Company's investment in Liberia in 1926. Following the Firestone investment, the tenor of the U.S. interest in Liberia shifted from a primarily philanthropic to an economic interest. The creation of the League of Nations also had profound effects, especially because both Liberia and the U.S. government held ambiguous positions with regards to the League.

### ***The Evolving Relationship with the United States: From Philanthropic to Economic Influence***

Beginning in 1870, when Liberian agriculture failed to produce sufficient economic returns, the Liberian government approached the U.S. for economic assistance. The U.S. State Department still emphasized during this period that their relationship with Liberia was "more of a moral than a political character," and that investments could only originate from the private sector.<sup>33</sup> In 1870, President Ulysses S. Grant explained to the Liberian

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<sup>31</sup> Frank R. Chalk, "The Anatomy of an Investment: Firestone's 1927 Loan to Liberia." *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 1 (March 1967): 12-32.

<sup>32</sup> Carter to Secretary of State, Apr. 10, 1930, USNA, RG 59, 882.51/2089.

<sup>33</sup> McLane to De Freyeinet, Feb. 3, 1886, USNA, RG 59, 882.51 (microfilm M114).

government that the U.S. Constitution prohibited large-scale loans and that financial assistance would never be acceptable to Congress.<sup>34</sup> Due to the difficulties in ensuring American financial support, the Liberian government turned to Britain for a loan of over 49,000 pounds (roughly \$250,000), which Britain granted but administered with high interest rates.<sup>35</sup> For over two decades, the Liberian legislature struggled to repay the loan. At least two other series of loans with British companies were negotiated in 1906 and 1908 but proved equally unsustainable, and the Liberian government entered the twentieth century in a black hole of debt.

In 1909 and later in 1912, the Liberian government again approached the U.S. government for support, this time to rescue their failing economy from what the Liberian government claimed was an impending British takeover. The U.S. government's approach to international investments had shifted since the Civil War, and the Theodore Roosevelt administration viewed Liberia's request more favorably. In 1909, Roosevelt approached Congress to finance a Commission to make policy recommendations for a Liberian loan.<sup>36</sup> Following the model of economic loans that had been successfully applied in the Dominican Republic in 1912, the American companies J.P Morgan, Kuhn, and Loeb provided a loan to the Liberian government. In return, the American government gained receivership over Liberian customs revenue.<sup>37</sup>

Emily Rosenberg explains that the white American financiers in Liberia "like colonial agents elsewhere in Africa, spent much of their time and energy squabbling with

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<sup>34</sup> Ulysses S. Grant to Edmund Roye, May 1871, USNA, RG 59, 882.51 (microfilm M114).

<sup>35</sup> "Loan of 1870" Memorandum, USNA, RG 59, 882.51 (microfilm M114).

<sup>36</sup> USFR, 1910: 694-711, cit. in. Rosenberg, "Invisible Protectorate," 193.

<sup>37</sup> See Rosenberg, "The Invisible Protectorate," 193.

Liberian officials over issues of power and control.”<sup>38</sup> When viewing the loan within the context of other Western involvements in Africa, it should be noted that Liberia had its own national government, which was an exception. Also, the financial investments in Liberia were mutually parasitic: American financial investors sought profits, but the Americo-Liberian political elite sought overseas investments for their own economic gains. But, the 1912 loan to Liberia was a far cry from an economic success, and when the Liberian government defaulted in 1914, American financiers were reluctant to provide new economic assistance. In 1922, the U.S. Congress debated extending additional loans to Liberia, but these did not come to fruition. Senator William Borah, who was known for his isolationism, argued that the United States had no legal or moral obligation to administer a loan, and he claimed that other senators would echo this sentiment if a loan were administered.<sup>39</sup>

In the late 1920s, the American economic presence in Liberia shifted to direct investment, when the rubber magnate Harvey S. Firestone invested heavily in Liberian plantations. The impetus for Firestone had more to do with the U.S.’s position vis-à-vis other Great Powers, than the history of U.S. relations with Liberia. In 1922, Britain, the largest supplier of world rubber, had enacted the Stevenson Plan, which artificially raised the price of rubber by limiting the international supply from British colonies. In 1922, the United States was the world’s largest importer of rubber. In 1923 its imports were valued at over \$185 million dollars, or over 72% of the world’s production.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Emily S. Rosenberg, *Financial Missionaries to the World: The Politics and Culture of Dollar Diplomacy 1900-1930*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003): 226.

<sup>39</sup> Warren G. Harding to Secretary Hughes, “Borah statement in Joint Resolution for the Proposed Loan,” June 26, 1922, USNA, RG 59, 882.51/1377 (microfilm M114).

<sup>40</sup> “The Plantation Rubber Industry in the Middle East,” *Crude Rubber Section, Department of Commerce*, 1925. USNA, RG 59, 882.6176 (microfilm M113, roll 30).

The U.S. Commerce Department had grown significantly in size under the leadership of Herbert Hoover in the early 1920s, and began to take a very active stance toward encouraging American companies to search for independent rubber sources. As Hoover explained, if the British government wanted a “trade war” then “the time has arrived when we require either disarmament or defense.”<sup>41</sup> However, while Hoover waged a rhetorical battle against Britain’s rubber monopolies, he did not hold American businesses to similar scrutiny. Hoover supported the search for an exclusively “American” source of rubber, which the British government suggested was a form of monopoly in its own right, given American tire-producers’ strong hold on the market.<sup>42</sup> It is likely that Hoover believed that on a philosophical level there was something innately superior about American values and interests, as opposed to the old European empires. Vernon L. Kellogg, an officer in the American Relief Administration, understood Hoover as a man who represented a nobler America, “the personification of our impatience with the old order of circus politics.”<sup>43</sup> Even though Hoover’s ethical justifications for exclusively American raw materials were somewhat indefensible, he seemed to sincerely believe that American success and expansion were justified by the values that the country represented.

In the early 1920s, the four biggest American rubber companies –US Rubber, B.F. Goodrich, Goodyear Tire, and Firestone were eager to insure sustained American access to rubber resources, at the lowest possible cost.<sup>44</sup> Firestone was the only one of the four companies that was determined to acquire new overseas territories for American rubber

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<sup>41</sup> Hoover, *Foreign Combinations now Fixing Prices of Raw Materials Imported into the United States* (Washington, 1925), Commerce Library pamphlet (address of Oct. 21, 1925) cit. in J. Brandes, *Herbert Hoover and Economic Diplomacy*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1962): 65.

<sup>42</sup> U.S. Embassy (London) to the State Department, Jan. 21, 1926, USNA, RG 59, 841.6176/72, cit. in. Brandes, *Herbert Hoover and Economic Diplomacy*.

<sup>43</sup> Brandes, *Herbert Hoover and Economic Diplomacy*, 23.

<sup>44</sup> Chalk, “Anatomy of an Investment,” 15.

production, and he adopted the same tone Hoover had used to explain the dire need for his company to make an international investment.<sup>45</sup>

Firestone had explored South Asian rubber sources, but the possibilities that Liberia offered, in terms of its indigenous labor supply, was one of the factors that led Firestone to invest there. In a *New York Times* report, Firestone claimed the Liberian labor supply was, “practically inexhaustible,” and that he expected to easily recruit over 300,000 Liberians.<sup>46</sup> Firestone enthusiastically explained that, “the native Liberians will work for less than the Malays, who receive a shilling a day.”<sup>47</sup> Aware of the history of Liberia’s foundation, and historical importance to African-Americans, Firestone mentioned in a second *Times* report on the investment, that there would be no positions open for American blacks on the Liberian plantations, “because the rate of pay would not attract them.”<sup>48</sup> Firestone did not aim to bring working conditions in Liberia up to the higher standards of other regions. As a business owner, he was understandably motivated chiefly by profits.

Firestone’s interests in the Liberian labor supply fit into the typical discourse on African labor at the turn of the twentieth century: the racist belief that indigenous Africans were appropriately assigned as “laboring” peoples, more so than even African-Americans. In 1908, the Jamaican-born black English theorist J. Edmestone Barnes had published a book on the labor possibilities of Africa, *The Economic Value of Native Races in Africa*. Barnes noted:

It is well known that the black people of Africa possess a marked spirit of goodwill and reverence for the white man which is peculiar to themselves. They are notably the most confirmed manual

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<sup>45</sup> “Plantation Rubber Output Shows Steady Expansion,” *Wall Street Journal*, Feb. 8, 1923: 10; “U.S. Rubber Trade’s Grievance,” *Manchester Guardian* Jan. 11, 1923: 8.

<sup>46</sup> Sundiata, *Black Scandal*, 35.

<sup>47</sup> “Americans to Found Vast Rubber Empire,” *New York Times*. Oct. 15, 1925: 1.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

laborers to be found upon the earth among every race of mankind [...]They are exceedingly docile, faithful and obedient, and above all, they are human beings; they know good from bad.<sup>49</sup>

Barnes' book was cited in Britain to support imperial undertakings and was also referenced in U.S. State Department files on Liberia.<sup>50</sup> A *New York Times* article on the Firestone investment noted, "Carrying forty or fifty pounds all day long on his head is said to be nothing to a native Liberian."<sup>51</sup> Neither Firestone nor the American press took issue with the concept of exploiting the Liberians' physical capabilities. However, as the 1930 slavery investigation would go to show, there were limits of exploitation that no American business wanted to go beyond.

After funding research on the potential for investment in Liberia, Firestone approached the U.S. government for "moral support" for the project, which he received, under the condition that he would assume all possible risks.<sup>52</sup> In 1926, Congressional debates on foreign monopolies had concluded that the "governmental facilities of the United States should freely assist" in the acquisition of American raw materials, but that it would be the responsibility of American business to implement the investments.<sup>53</sup> Given the recent history of American overseas investments, Firestone must surely have realized the risks that the Liberian investment would entail and that sustained U.S. government support would not be forthcoming. Prior to the Firestone investment, the U.S. government had already failed to support American investments with military support in Mexico.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> J. Edmestone Barnes, "Economic Value of the Native Races in Africa: In relation to the Development of the resources of that continent," (London: Watts & Co., 1908): 11-12.

<sup>50</sup> State Department Memorandum, October 28, 1919, USNA, RG 59, 882.50 (microfilm M113, roll 14)

<sup>51</sup> "Americans to Found Vast Rubber Empire," *New York Times*: Oct. 15, 1925: 1.

<sup>52</sup> "Firestone Projects," 1925, USNA, RG59, 882.6176 F 51/4 (microfilm M114).

<sup>53</sup> Brandes, *Herbert Hoover and Economic Diplomacy*, 35.

<sup>54</sup> Chalk, "Anatomy of an Investment," 22.

Between 1924 and 1926, Firestone negotiated a ninety-nine year lease with the Liberian government to develop one million acres of Liberian land into American rubber plantations. The investment was a lease rather than a purchase because, according to Liberian national law, white foreigners were not allowed to purchase land, but the protracted lease was a way for the Government and Firestone to negotiate around that particular legal clause.<sup>55</sup> Firestone also worked with the U.S. Commerce Department to implement a new loan to replace the ones that had defaulted.<sup>56</sup> The terms of the new loan were strict, but the Liberian government was all too eager for the security of the Firestone investment, and signed the insidious agreement. Liberian officials including Clarence Simpson, who became the Speaker of the Liberian House of Representatives in 1931, realized the risks that were involved but described Firestone as, “the lesser evil – that of veiled economic domination by a company belonging to a traditionally friendly country,” an investment that was better than British or French domination, though exploitative in its own right.<sup>57</sup>

The Firestone investment fit snugly into the predominant model of American economic influence in the interwar period. American financial investments grew significantly up until the outbreak of the Great Depression. By 1929, direct investment in Cuba and the West Indies totaled \$1,054 million, \$913 million in Mexico, and \$1,548 million in South America.<sup>58</sup> During the early twentieth century, the increase in American overseas investments, in monetary terms, was also accompanied by an emerging philosophy that global economic investments could lead to lasting peace and security. This

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<sup>55</sup> “Americans Seek Liberia’s Rubber,” *New York Times*, Jun. 27, 1925: 13.

<sup>56</sup> See Chalk, “Anatomy of an Investment,” 16-31.

<sup>57</sup> *Memoirs of C.L. Simpson*, 141, cit. in Frank Chalk, “The Anatomy of an Investment” 13.

<sup>58</sup> Akira Iriye. “The Global Conflict.” *The Globalizing of America, 1913–1945*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 93.

was the period in which President William Howard Taft proclaimed the need for “dollars over bullets,” as a paradigm for American diplomacy.<sup>59</sup> There was an understanding that these American investments could improve the lot of the world.

Of course, the Firestone investment was primarily framed as a benefit to the United States; in Firestone’s words, “This is the first big movement that America has made to obtain her own rubber,” but it was also described as a beneficial investment to Liberia.<sup>60</sup> The *Chicago Defender*, an African-American paper, heralded the investment explaining:

[Firestone] brought work to an Africa stirred by a new spirit. Along that famous West coast – where slave traders preyed for centuries there is organized trade for many miles. Schools and churches are developing, medicine and hygiene reduce tropical diseases.<sup>61</sup>

Firestone’s investment in Liberia coincided with growing humanitarian interests in the country. In 1925, the Phelps-Stokes fund sent advisors to Liberia to design a new education plan for the country. Teams of Harvard academics worked to combat tropical diseases, while Yale scientists began to chart the different plants in the Liberian hinterland. These missions received monetary support from Firestone. Firestone certainly wished to convey his investment as a benevolent force that could provide increased opportunities to Liberia.

Although American economic investments were often accompanied by humanitarian justifications, according to social critics, the moral validation for these investments was usually a thin veneer for deleterious forms of economic influence. According to the Harvard political scientist Raymond Buell, who would later critique the Firestone investment:

True to the Puritan tradition, we refuse to be frank with ourselves. No matter how questionable our actions may be, our motives are always altruistic. Thus a government official publicly declared only a few weeks ago that the interventions of the United States brought ‘prosperity’ to the countries of the Caribbean. We entered Haiti and Nicaragua, for

<sup>59</sup> Rosenberg, *Financial Missionaries*, 61.

<sup>60</sup> “Americans to Found Vast Rubber Empire,” *New York Times*, Oct. 15, 1925: 1.

<sup>61</sup> “Americanized Liberia Wakes from Sleep,” *The Chicago Defender*, July 21 1928: A1.

the purpose of ‘doing good’ to these peoples. The American imperialist is like the old-style missionary: he has a message for the rest of the world.<sup>62</sup>

The American reformer Samuel Guy Inman saw American overseas investments as “imperialist domination and exploitation.”<sup>63</sup> In many respects, these critics were right to view the Firestone Company investment in Liberia as a form of “economic imperialism,” not dissimilar to British imperial investments. At the turn of the century, European academics such as J.A. Hobson, Vladimir Lenin, and Rosa Luxemburg had argued that such Western economic influence in the periphery was exploitative, a form of capitalist domination and monopolistic control.<sup>64</sup>

However, to borrow a well known phrase from Hobson, even during the slavery crisis Liberia never developed into a scenario in which the “flag followed trade.” In keeping with its foundation as an “independent enterprise.” Liberia never became an official American colony; if anything, it highlighted the line between imperialism and anti-imperialism. Emily Rosenberg concluded that the Firestone interests in Liberia represented a new form of “imperialism by contract.” It was legalistic in nature and beyond the direct purview of the U.S. government.<sup>65</sup> The American financial interests in Monrovia may have harbored ulterior motives (according to Rosenberg, State Department officials claimed that both Sidney de la Rue, the advisor of the 1912 loan, and Firestone wanted to “run the show”).<sup>66</sup> A tug of war existed between the projected image of the Firestone investment and the economic reality of the politically weak Liberian state. These power balances would be fully considered when Liberian slavery was investigated in 1930.

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<sup>62</sup> Raymond Leslie Buell, “Economic Imperialism,” *Forum and Century*; October 1930: 215.

<sup>63</sup> Rosenberg, *Financial Missionaries*, 1.

<sup>64</sup> See J.A. Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study* (1902), V. Lenin, *Imperialism: Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916), and R. Luxemburg *Accumulation of Capital* (1913).

<sup>65</sup> Rosenberg, “Invisible Protectorate,” 211-214.

<sup>66</sup> Rosenberg, *Financial Missionaries*, 227.

### *Liberia and the League of Nations*

Liberia's position in the new post-war international order would also affect the outcome of the Liberian slavery crisis, because the slavery investigation occurred under the watch of the League of Nations. A brief description of the League's involvement in Africa is provided here in order to contextualize the Liberian crisis. After World War I, under the newly devised League "mandate system," Britain and France received the administration of former German territories in East Africa. On a philosophical level, League involvement in Africa was something of a middle ground between a desire to encourage more enlightened self-determination in those territories, and a continuation of traditional forms of imperialism. This philosophical tension would emerge as a theme of the 1930 Liberian slavery investigation.

Only in the last two decades have historians begun to scratch the surface of the history of the League of Nations' involvement in Africa. Frank Walter's groundbreaking survey *A History of the League* focused on why its structures failed.<sup>67</sup> More recent historiography has focused on the peripheral economic and social activities of the League.<sup>68</sup> Callahan's *Sacred Trust* is the definitive monograph on the mandate system in Africa and describes how the mandate system shifted the European-African relationship, by merging humanitarian interests with traditional frameworks of colonial rule.<sup>69</sup>

The compromise between liberalism and imperialism occurred largely because of the U.S. government's role in World War I and the influence of President Woodrow

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<sup>67</sup> See Frank Walters, *History of the League of Nations*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).

<sup>68</sup> See Susan Pederson, "Back to the League of Nations," *The American Historical Review*, 112.4 (2007).

<sup>69</sup> Michael D. Callahan, *Sacred Trust: The League of Nations and Africa, 1929-1946* (Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2004): 194.

Wilson's idealistic understanding of international politics. Before the United States entered World War I in 1917, Britain and France were prepared to annex former German and Ottoman colonies, if they should win the war. When the United States entered the war, President Wilson was firm that the U.S. would not support further European imperial expansion once the war was concluded.<sup>70</sup>

The mandate system was developed by Britain, the United States, and France as a way to effectively balance Wilsonian idealism and other liberal international sentiments with the existing colonial empires of Britain and France. One of the most immediate concerns to the Great Powers was to prevent further atrocities from occurring in former German and Turkish imperial territories, given the recent horrors in Armenia.<sup>71</sup> The British government seemed to accept the mandates as a means to promote the British imperial ethos. In a speech to Parliament in 1919, Prime Minister David Lloyd George argued:

If [one looks at] the conditions of the mandates, they will find that they are the conditions which now apply in respect of British colonies throughout the world. [...] Under this mandate the responsibilities of the British Empire have been enormously increased [...] There have been constant references to British administration – its efficiency, its fairness, its gentleness to the natives, the manner in which it won its way, the confidence that it established everywhere - that was a common matter of observation throughout the whole of this great Conference in Paris.<sup>72</sup>

Wilson, however, envisioned a starker distinction between imperialism and the League mandate system. In a speech in South Dakota he exclaimed, “There is no more annexation. There is no more land grabbing. There is no more extension of sovereignty. It is an absolute revolution in the way in which international affairs are treated.”<sup>73</sup> Wilson

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<sup>70</sup> Wilson's goals were discussed in British Parliament. See *British Parliamentary Papers*, Commons, 1917 (v.93), columns 1685-1686.

<sup>71</sup> See Ernst B. Haas, “The Reconciliation of Conflicting Colonial Policy Aims: Acceptance of the League of Nations Mandate System” *International Organization*. 6.4 (1952): 521-536.

<sup>72</sup> Prime Minister David Lloyd George, Statement to Parliament, July 3 1919, *British Parliamentary Papers*, Commons, 1919 v. 117, columns 1227-29.

<sup>73</sup> “Wilson's address to the Coliseum in Souix Falls, South Dakota,” Sept 8, 1919, Link Ed., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, Vol 63: 111-112, cit in Callahan, *Sacred Trust*, 17.

articulated the ideals that would guide the League, but he neglected to outline a practicable plan to support them. His firm rhetorical commitment to “ending” oppressive forms of colonial administration would not be realized, given that the British government was responsible for mandate administration. At the Versailles Peace Conference, British and French leaders urged Wilson to accept mandates for the U.S., as a way to spin the mandate system as an altruistic construction. According to Lloyd George: “If America were to go away from the Conference with her share of guardianship [...] we would remove any prejudice against us on the ground of land-grabbing.”<sup>74</sup> The U.S. government though did not accept the mandates, due to fierce domestic backlash. Similarities between the mandate system and traditional forms of imperialism are evidenced by the fact that the British government supported the extension of the mandate system to territories not suffering from egregious imperial rule. Liberia was a notable example. At Versailles, Britain and France had suggested that because of Liberia’s history of loan defaults, the U.S. government should govern Liberia as a mandate. The U.S. government rejected the proposal:

American Peace Mission is of opinion that this subject has no bearing on other questions for consideration at conference and should be settled directly among the governments [...] Liberia is an independent nation and should not be considered in relation with captured German colonies in West Africa.

The U.S. government also insisted that although the U.S. had an American receivership over Liberian customs, “the new proposal is in no way to be regarded as indicating the slightest desire to establish a protectorate [...] but merely to maintain historic position as Liberia’s next friend.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> WM. Roger Louis, *Great Britain and Germany’s Lost Colonies 1914-1919* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967):123.

<sup>75</sup> Memorandum from Washington (Polk), January 17, 1919, 3pm, *United States Foreign Relations* (hereafter referred to as USFR), 1919, v. 2: 465, 882.51/897a.

With support from the United States, Liberia became an independent founding member of the League of Nations.<sup>76</sup> Liberia attended the Peace Conference in 1919 and was, according to the Charge in Liberia, “disposed to take no action in matters relating to Peace Conference until definitely advised so to do by the Government of the United States.”<sup>77</sup> Because of the onerous loans that Liberia held, Great Power acceptance of Liberia’s League membership depended upon American support. Liberia was paradoxically an independent state yet dependent upon the United States for its independence.

The evolving American relationship to the League throughout the 1920s also requires explanation, in so far as the U.S. State Department was instrumental in advocating for a League investigation of Liberian slavery in 1930.<sup>78</sup> It is well known, of course, that the U.S. Senate refused to ratify the League of Nations Treaty in 1919. While the United States never became an official member of the League, over the course of the 1920s it gradually became a more active participant in League proceedings. President Warren Harding often described the League of Nations as “dead,” and according to a *New York Times* report of 1921, with respect to the U.S., it was:

In the office of the Secretary of the League of Nations in Geneva, there is a filing case devoted to un-expedited business. One section contains a collection of papers which grows thicker [...] the communication of the League of Nations to the new American Government. None of them has been answered [...] Mr. Wilson used to answer the League’s notes [...] But Mr. Harding is unwilling to waste postage on the League. In that green filing case there are appeals for hungry peoples, reports for the suppression of white slavery, there are plans for the suppression of opium traffic [...] But to those communications no response has come from Washington.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Diary entry, Jan 29, 1919, Cecil Papers, BL, 51131. Also see Walters, *A History of the League of Nations*: 568-71, both cit. in Callahan, *Sacred Trust*, 55.

<sup>77</sup> Bundy to the Acting Secretary of State, Dec. 5, 1918, USFR, 1919, v. 1, 763.72119/2912.

<sup>78</sup> There is limited literature on the American relationship to the League from 1919-1930. See Warren F. Kuehl and Lynne K. Dunn, *Keeping the Covenant: American Internationalists and the League of Nations* (Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1997).

<sup>79</sup> Edwin I. James, *New York Times* July 18, 1921, cit. in Clarence A. Berdahl, “The United States and the League of Nations,” *Michigan Law Review*, Vol 27.6 (Apr. 1929): pp.607-636: 622.

The Coolidge and Hoover administrations shifted toward increased League involvement. Political scientist Clarence A. Berdahl notes that although the U.S. did not officially become a member of the League during this period, there was a series of unofficial American relationships with the League throughout the 1920s that rendered the U.S. a de facto member.<sup>80</sup> A *New York Times* report of March 1924 suggests just how far the American relationship with the League had progressed in a few short years, and shows the extent to which America's relationship with the League was steadily expanding:

It is often said that more Americans may be seen in Geneva than citizens of any other nationality except Swiss. [...] The United States has perhaps as many delegates in Geneva as any other country which is a member of the League [...] What a far cry it is from the days when Secretary Hughes would not answer letters from the League.<sup>81</sup>

With each new presidential administration, the American relationship with the League was modified, and its importance to the U.S. was on a constant upward trajectory. By the time the Liberian slavery crisis broke in 1928, the unofficial American presence in the League had grown significantly. As the 1930s began, the United States cooperated with the League even more closely on international peace and security issues; indeed, a notable example is the American participation in League proceedings on the 1931 Japanese invasion of Manchuria. There was a growing sense in the United States that international organization was becoming a formidable force in world politics.<sup>82</sup> During the Liberian crisis, the U.S. League representative, Samuel Rebar, would closely discuss League positions on Liberia with the U.S. State Department, and other League members would consult the U.S. government for advice on how to handle the Liberian situation.

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<sup>80</sup> Berdahl, "The United States and the League," 629.

<sup>81</sup> NY Times (E.L. James correspondence), March 28, 1927, quoted in Clarence A. Berdahl, "The United States and the League of Nations," *Michigan Law Review*, Vol 27.6 (Apr. 1929): pp.607-636: 635.

<sup>82</sup> See Manley O. Hudson, "America's Role in the League of Nations," *American Political Science Review*, 23.1 (Feb. 1929): 17-31.

## **Chapter 2: The Anti-Slavery Moment : The Power of World Opinion**

With the events of the early twentieth century in mind, why did Liberian slavery become the subject of a full-scale international investigation in 1930? The answer lies in the intersection of U.S. interests with a particular “anti-slavery” agenda growing in the League. It is not a coincidence that the 1930 investigation occurred when it did: just four years after the League of Nations Slavery Commission drafted the 1926 Slavery Convention and the same year in which the International Labor Organization (ILO) debated the meaning of the term “forced labor” in Geneva. By 1930, slavery was viewed as an international issue and the problem of Liberian slavery would pull the U.S. into the affairs of the League. The United States took an active interest in Liberian slavery precisely because slavery was such a potent issue, and the U.S. government wanted to avoid any association with it in world opinion.

### ***The Twentieth Century Anti-Slavery Renaissance***

The historiography on the abolition of African slavery only begins in the 1990s. Much has been written about the motivations for the abolition of the trans-Atlantic Slave trade: the impetus for the British decision to outlaw the shipment of slaves in 1807, and for the U.S. government to follow suit in 1834. Historians of nineteenth century abolitionism have debated whether abolitionism was an accomplishment of humanitarian or economic interests. Earlier historians tended to make the former argument. On the other hand, Eric Williams, in his seminal *Capitalism and Slavery*, argued that slavery was abolished because forced labor became less profitable. Williams claimed that the moral impetus to

end slavery had been “grossly exaggerated by men who have sacrificed scholarship to sentimentality.”<sup>83</sup> More recently historians including Christopher L. Brown have critiqued Williams’ case, and it is now largely accepted that nineteenth century abolitionism also had a moral component.<sup>84</sup>

But the nineteenth century wave of abolitionism did not end global slavery. In the early twentieth century, slavery still existed in Africa and Asia. A new international anti-slavery movement emerged at precisely this time to target slavery in these regions. This second wave of abolitionism benefited from the moral arguments that had been used to combat slavery in the previous century, and also from the fact that slavery was already a universally acknowledged evil in the West.

Although framed in humanitarian terms, the twentieth century anti-slavery cause was also used to consolidate European control over Africa. Martin Klein contended that “anti-slavery became the heart of the civilizing mission.”<sup>85</sup> In a sad paradox, the British administrator F.D. Lugard, who became a vocal proponent of the anti-slavery cause in the League, also provided financial support to slave-holding chiefs in Nigeria.<sup>86</sup> Yet it is more instructive to look at how imperial and moral imperatives intertwined, than to denounce anti-slavery organizing as a devious guise to carve up Africa.

In international conferences on the partition of Africa, the anti-slavery cause had been utilized to justify European imperialism on moral grounds.<sup>87</sup> The “General Act” of the Berlin Conference of 1885 was the first international anti-slavery agreement and

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<sup>83</sup> Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994): 178, cit. in A. G. Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973) 113.

<sup>84</sup> See Christopher L. Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

<sup>85</sup> Martin A. Klein Ed. *Breaking the Chains: Slavery, Bondage, and Emancipation in Modern Africa and Asia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993)18.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.* 19.

<sup>87</sup> See Miers, *Slavery in the Twentieth Century*, 19-22.

established that European powers with African territories would “watch over the preservation of native tribes [...] and to help in suppressing the slave trade.”<sup>88</sup> The Brussels Act of 1889-90 re-affirmed a Western commitment to end slavery in Africa, and in 1919 both agreements were strengthened in the Treaty of St. Germain-en-Lays, which proposed the “complete suppression of slavery in all its forms and of the slave trade by Land and Sea.”<sup>89</sup> By all accounts, these agreements contained little more than rhetoric; the Great Powers that signed them provided no economic or political mechanisms for their enforcement. However, the existence of these agreements gave humanitarian activists a valuable framework to launch critiques of imperial practices.

Even though the anti-slavery legislation in Africa was not always formed with the noblest intentions, international opinion on slavery carried enough influence to affect colonial administrations. There is no better example of this than the international campaign against Leopold II’s rubber empire in the Congo. In the late nineteenth century, Leopold II required Africans to work grueling hours without compensation. Demographic estimates suggest that as a result, between 1880 and 1920, the population in the Congo was sliced in half.<sup>90</sup> Economic and philanthropic interests on both sides of the Atlantic converged to create a masterful public relations campaign against Leopold II’s brutal administration. In the late nineteenth century, H.R. Fox Bourne, Secretary of the British-based Aborigines Protection Society, campaigned against Leopold II’s regime with great gusto believing the

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<sup>88</sup> “The Berlin Act” cit in. Raymond Leslie Buell, *Native Problem in Africa* v. II (New York: Macmillan Co., 1928) 891.

<sup>89</sup> “The Revised Act of Berlin 1919,” cit. in Buell, *Native Problem in Africa* v. II,

<sup>90</sup> Adam Hochschild, “Adventures in Public History,” *The Public Historian*, Vol. 32.4 (Fall 2010) 85-95: 92.

Congo State had broken the native administration provisions in the Berlin Act.<sup>91</sup>

Unfortunately, the Berlin Act's lack of enforcement mechanisms severely limited its application. As the Congo reformer Lord Cransborne explained, "Law officers are prone to interpret a treaty rather too literally instead of reading its provisions in the light of declarations made at the time of the conference."<sup>92</sup> That said, the ideals and rhetoric in the agreement were used to rally international opinion against Leopold II's reign of terror.

In 1902, the British Foreign officer Roger Casemont joined the humanitarian E.D. Morel in forming the Congo Reform Association, and that same year he traveled to the Congo to investigate conditions there. Casemont approached the United States for political support, where Protestant missionaries, authors, professors, politicians, businessmen, and writers rose to the cause, and attempted to pressure Theodore Roosevelt's administration into heightened action.<sup>93</sup> Due to international pressure, Leopold II allowed a Commission of Inquiry to investigate forced labor in the Congo, and the scathing report led him to hand over the colony to the Belgian government in 1908.

After Leopold II's resignation, the situation in the Congo did not completely change: the new Belgian administration used Leopold II's existing government framework, and forced labor continued to produce export crops.<sup>94</sup> There were, however, notable improvements: the Belgian government built schools, hospitals, and medical clinics.<sup>95</sup>

Although the international campaign against Leopold II had its shortcomings, it proved that it was possible to use international pressure to induce a corrupt colonial administration in

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<sup>91</sup> William Roger Louis, "Roger Casement and the Congo," *The Journal of African History*. Vol. 5.1 (1964): 99-120 (100).

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*, 100.

<sup>93</sup> Jerome L. Sternstein, "King Leopold II, Senator Nelson W. Aldrich, and the Strange Beginnings of the American Economic Penetration of the Congo," *African Historical Studies*, Vol. 2. 2 (1969) 189-204:189.

<sup>94</sup> Miers, *Slavery in the Twentieth Century*, 53.

<sup>95</sup> Adam Hochschild, "Adventures in Public History," *The Public Historian*, Vol. 32.4 (Fall 2010), pp. 85-95: 92.

Africa to resign. In 1930, Elihu Root, Roosevelt's Secretary of State, reflected, "the case of the Congo is a very conspicuous illustration of the difficulties which are created for the men handling foreign affairs in a democratic country, regarding matters of sentiment."<sup>96</sup>

The Congo was not explicitly discussed by the U.S. State Department as a direct precedent to avoid in Liberia. However, by 1930 there was an established record of humanitarian activism against colonial administrations in Africa, and it had not been forgotten.

A crucial change in the structure of anti-slavery organizing occurred between the Congo and Liberian crises. During the early 1920s, the League produced a series of new anti-slavery agreements, and the Liberian crisis would provide a testing ground. Within the League, the British government was the strongest leader of the international anti-slavery cause because it had been the first empire to abolish its own slave trade. In 1922, the League included the question of slavery on its agenda for the next year, based on the recommendation of Sir Arthur Steele-Maitland, a British representative, who was concerned about the existence of slavery in Abyssinia.<sup>97</sup> In 1922, the League circulated a survey to member nations to collect information on contemporary slavery, and the same petition was forwarded to non-members in 1923. The questionnaire was prepared by Sir F.D. Lugard who believed that the exact nature of slavery was difficult to define and thus he proposed drawing distinctions:

1. Raids Conducted with a view to procuring slaves.
2. The Slave Trade and enslaving of free persons
3. Slave-dealing, viz., sale or transfer, etc. of slaves
4. Domestic slavery. (here the French representatives suggested that word 'slavery' be replaced by the word 'serfdom')<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Sternstein, "King Leopold II," 189.

<sup>97</sup> Minutes of Temporary Slavery Commission (Hereafter referred to as TSC) First Session, First Meeting, July 9, 1924, *League of Nations* (Hereafter referred to as LON), A.18.1924.VI.

<sup>98</sup> Minutes of TSC First Session, Second Meeting, July 9, 1924, LON, A.18.1924.VI.

After this survey was collected, the League created a Temporary Slavery Commission (TSC) to investigate cases where slavery still existed. The Commission included representatives of France, Britain, Italy, Portugal, Belgium, as well as a representative of the ILO.<sup>99</sup> In 1924 League debates, members of the TSC discussed problems concerning the initial country reports, and the fact that slavery was known to still exist in countries that claimed otherwise.<sup>100</sup>

While some representatives argued that slavery was a domestic issue, Article 23 of the League Covenant, which bound members to secure “fair and humane conditions of labor,” was a compelling endorsement for international investigations of slavery.<sup>101</sup> With this existing agreement to draw upon, the TSC delegates began to coordinate a more comprehensive international response to the slavery issue. Some delegates, including Van Rees of the Netherlands, worried that if the definition of slavery was too broad, the League would not be able to enforce it.<sup>102</sup>

A TSC report was presented to the League Council on July 25, 1925 and recommended that the League negotiate a treaty to abolish slavery, with a particular emphasis on the types of slavery Lugard had outlined. Suzanne Miers has noted that the TSC was path breaking because it concluded that slavery “in all its forms” was reprehensible. Miers explains that, “in the development of the modern concept of human rights, it was a milestone on the hard-fought road from Vienna in 1815 to Helsinki in

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<sup>99</sup> League, *Report*, 6.

<sup>100</sup> Minutes of TSC, Second Session, Fifth Meeting, Wednesday July 15, 1925, LON, C.426.M.157.1925.VI.

<sup>101</sup> Miers, *Slavery in the Twentieth Century*, 107.

<sup>102</sup> Minutes of TSC, “Report to the Council,” July 12, 1924, LON, A.17.1924.VI.

1945.”<sup>103</sup> Unfortunately though, as Miers also notes, the focus on “all forms of slavery” was watered down when a Convention was presented for signatures in 1926.<sup>104</sup> The Convention provided the following definition of slavery:

- (1) Slavery is the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised.
- (2) The slave trade includes all acts involved in the capture, acquisition or disposal of a person with intent to reduce him to slavery; all acts involved in the acquisition of a slave with a view to selling or exchanging him; all acts of disposal by sale or exchange of a slave acquired with a view to being sold or exchanged and, in general, every act of trade or transport in slave.<sup>105</sup>

Also in 1926, the League TSC asked the ILO to investigate the best ways to prevent forced labor situations from developing into slavery, a question the ILO considered in 1930. The fact that “forced labor” and “slavery” were considered two different beasts would create confusion in the eventual enforcement of anti-slavery agreements. It would also hamper efforts to improve bad working conditions that were not “forced.” As Frederick Cooper has explained, “whatever was not declared coerced was therefore not analogous to slavery and would acquire the distinction of having been exonerated in terms of the only moral criteria the League and the ILO were applying to colonial labor.”<sup>106</sup> Cooper’s point is crucial, because the forced labor definitions allowed the League to narrow its focus to a small amount of egregious conditions, while allowing other questionable labor practices to continue for decades.

For its part, the British government recognized that problems would inevitably emerge if “forced labor” standards imposed on Africa were also imposed on the Western

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<sup>103</sup> Miers, *Slavery in the Twentieth Century*, 116.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid*, 122.

<sup>105</sup> “League of Nations Slavery Convention,” Geneva, Sept. 25, 1926, cit. in Buell, *Native Problem in Africa v. II*, 955.

<sup>106</sup> Frederick Cooper, “Conditions Analogous to Slavery: Imperialism and Free Labor Ideology in Africa,” in Frederick Cooper Ed. *Beyond Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000): 132.

world. In the 1930 *League Journal*, British representatives noted, “the term ‘forced labor’ has of course, to be considered rationally. Forced labor exists in Great Britain. A visit to Princetown or Portland Prison will leave no doubt about that.”<sup>107</sup> While the British government realized that the definition of “slavery” and “forced labor” would have to be carefully constructed to allow for the continuation of forced labor practices in the West, the British acknowledgment of the issue displayed a more humanitarian stance than other countries. Portugal and France did not believe any international forced labor conventions were necessary. Portuguese representatives argued that “voluntary” labor was too difficult to define, and that the proposed conventions would “not be in harmony with the dignity and rights of the state.”<sup>108</sup> French delegates wanted to preserve “military conscription” in West Africa, especially because in France all citizens, regardless of whether they lived in Normandy or the Ivory Coast, were required to provide labor dues to the French government.<sup>109</sup> Thus, the discussions on abolishing slavery were qualified by the desire of certain nations to preserve some forms of forced labor for public use. While the history of nineteenth century abolitionism had condemned slavery as an unambiguous evil, other forms of forced labor remained open for debate. The resulting ILO “forced labor” convention provided for a transitional period of five years, during which existing forced labor practices would be surveyed and all forced labor for private use would end.<sup>110</sup> Perplexing challenges remained with regard to how these stipulations would be enforced, especially in light of the continued importance of “forced labor” to colonial governments.

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<sup>107</sup>“Black Labourers – Should They be Compelled to Work,” June 1930, *League Official Journal*, Vol. 1930-1931.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> Cooper, 133.

The U.S. government response to this initial flood of League anti-slavery activity was supportive, but not expressly involved. In 1926, the League Slavery Commission sent a copy of the Slavery Convention to Washington, asking for the American perspective. A *New York Times* report on the Convention explained why the League desired American input:

[The Slavery Convention] is intended to be world-wide in its application and not limited to the continent of Africa; that the United States is responsible for the government of the Philippine Islands, Puerto Rico and other places where it may be found that conditions analogous to slavery still exist; that this country should unite with other powers to abolish such conditions anywhere under the American flag; that the influence of the United States in Liberia is such as to make its cooperation desirable in dealing with conditions there.<sup>111</sup>

It is interesting to note that in terms of the larger topic at hand, Liberia was just one location with “American influence” that condoned slavery, and yet it was Liberia that became the major focus of a slavery investigation in 1930. Despite the worldwide scope of the 1926 Convention, Africa was still the main focus. It seems safe to conclude that because the Atlantic slave trade originated in Africa, slavery was still conceived largely as an African issue, even though slavery existed in other parts of the globe.

In May 1926, the U.S. State Department sent a memorandum to the League, emphasizing, “The Government of the United States is in accord with its traditional policy, deeply interested in any movement which looks toward the abolishment of all forms of involuntary servitude.”<sup>112</sup> Within the United States, there was humanitarian pressure for American involvement. Nicholas Murray Butler of the Carnegie Endowment issued the following statement on the 1926 Convention:

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<sup>111</sup> “Want America’s Aid in War on Slavery,” *New York Times*, May 10, 1926.

<sup>112</sup> “Reply from Government of US to League Re: Draft Convention on Slavery” May 17, 1926, LON, A.10.1926.VI.

The international effort to abolish the slave trade [...] is a striking case of the interdependence of the nations in combating a social evil. This evil could not be dealt with by the action of individual states; joint action of the powers [...] had to be negotiated to bring the more backwards into line [...] The sense of justice of the American people expressed itself two generations ago in the Thirteenth Amendment, abolishing slavery and involuntary servitude. The Convention of 1926 internationalizes a principle already accepted by this country.<sup>113</sup>

It is important to note that Butler believed the Slavery Convention involved a universalizing of American ideals. The U.S. government would employ similar rhetoric when, in 1928, the U.S. State Department recommended that the Convention be considered. As Calvin Coolidge's Secretary of State Frank B. Kellogg explained:

Considering that the purposes sought to be attained by the Slavery Convention are in accord with modern thought and humane measures taken by civilized peoples, it is believed that the United States should cooperate with other powers in the effort to eradicate these evils throughout the world.<sup>114</sup>

The Convention was subsequently passed to the U.S. Senate for ratification.

Despite disagreements among the Great Powers on the definition of slavery, and the challenges to effective enforcement of the agreements, by the time the slavery crisis broke in Liberia in 1930, fruitful discussions on the abolition of African slavery had already occurred. According to the *League Journal*:

First one dark corner of the world, then another is being opened to the civilizing and humanizing light of the League of Nations. It is too often overlooked that, prior to the creation of the League, there was no official international organization in existence for dealing with such subjects as slavery.<sup>115</sup>

The anti-slavery agreements that originated in the League between 1922-1926 were an important step toward creating a mechanism for coordinated international action.

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<sup>113</sup> Nicholas Muray Butler, *International Consiliation*, January 1928: 5.

<sup>114</sup> Secretary of State Kellogg to President Coolidge, May 22, 1928, USFR, 1928 v. 1 (1942), 550.48 B1/110a.

<sup>115</sup> John H. Harris, "Slavery in Liberia – What the League Might Do About it," November 1930 *League Official Journal*, LON, Vol. 1930 – 1931.

### *Unraveling Optimism in Liberia*

By 1930, the evidence of Liberian slavery had been growing for almost two decades, long before the Firestone investment was negotiated in 1926. There were two predominant types of Liberian slavery that were investigated by the League, addressing, in the words of the 1899 Brussels Act, slavery on both “land and sea”. The first was called “pawning.” This entailed Liberian political elites inducing indigenous chiefs to sell their own children as domestic workers to pay off their debts to the State. The second was a formalized system of slave trading that involved shipping indigenous labor abroad for use in foreign territories. In the late nineteenth century the Liberian government had negotiated with foreign governments to provide such shipments. During World War I, Liberian labor was shipped to Allied territories in Africa to unload supplies from ships. As early as November 1912, the American Charge D’Affairs in Liberia, Richard Bundy, described the shipment of Liberian laborers to Spanish colonies, and while he noted that contracts were in place to protect the rights of laborers, he also had the prescience to remark that there was a potential for great abuse since records on shipped individuals were prepared haphazardly:

Practically the acts have been frequently violated, and their provisions evaded. In general it may be said that violations and evasions have existed because of the incompetence of the governmental agents charged with the administration of the laws [...] If these abuses are allowed to continue unchecked, only a moderate degree of foresight is necessary to predict in the near future a most unfortunate state of affairs in the labor market of the country.<sup>116</sup>

At the same time, Bundy noted that European colonies were profiting from the shipment of labor, and that American investors might be interested in entering the business. It appears then, that Bundy was not overly concerned about the humanitarian issues at stake.

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<sup>116</sup> Bundy to State Department, “Shipping of Labor from Liberia,” Nov. 20, 1912, USNA, RG 59, unnumbered (microfilm M113, Roll 14).

In 1919, Liberian “pawning” received increased attention. The U.S. State Department files include a record of a “human trafficking” case that occurred in Liberia in 1919, when the Liberian District Commissioner B.Y. Sandimannie sold indigenous girls across the borders of different regions in Liberia.<sup>117</sup> The following year, the British Consul-General at Monrovia, R.C.F. Maugham, published a survey on Liberia that addressed the issue of slavery. Maugham indicated that slavery was a widespread practice, but because he did not witness any instances of violence against slaves, he did not think slavery was a pressing issue:

Among the aboriginal tribes of Liberia, slavery, if by that term we seek to convey the meaning of a condition of bondage wherein the victim is in complete subjection to the will of another, is a widespread and well-recognized custom [...] but it is no longer accompanied by the fiendish brutalities and cruelties which were practiced when the traffic was at its height [...] in marches to the coast which might afterwards be traced by the trail of human skeletons left on the way.<sup>118</sup>

Maugham also added, “although unquestionably human beings are being bought and sold [...] their treatment is not, on the whole, either cruel or indeed bad.”<sup>119</sup>

Maugham’s descriptions suggest that slavery was not considered repugnant if it was just a system of ownership, and would only become truly egregious when accompanied by excessive violence. In this respect, his report foreshadowed League discussions on slavery, in particular the question of whether all degrees of slavery deserved international attention. In 1923, Henry Reeve published a social and cultural survey on Liberia, based on his first-hand experience of traveling there in the first decade of the twentieth century. This was the first widely published report to explicitly describe the forms of slavery in Liberia. In the

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<sup>117</sup> T.C. Mitchell, Commissioner General Monrovia to H A Sawyer, District Commissioner RL, September 6, 1920, USNA, RG 59, 882.50243 (microfilm M113, Roll 14).

<sup>118</sup> R.C.F. Maugham, *Republic of Liberia* (New York: Negro University Press, 1969) 247-8.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid*, 251.

Introduction to Reeve's book, Sir Alfred Sharpe explained one of the systems of labor he had witnessed while traveling in the country:

The purchase of young people is quite common in Liberia: The price ranges from about three pounds to four pounds. The person pawned becomes the property of the purchaser, but is supposed to be redeemable by payment of the price originally paid. Children thus obtained by Liberians are almost invariably well treated; many of them are given some education. Probably their lives are just as happy as they would have been in their own environs.<sup>120</sup>

Reeve aptly described an interaction with a Liberian queen. When he complimented her on her sons, she responded, "dem dey not my picking, dey my boys. Dey bought by me; I pay ten dollars each."<sup>121</sup> Like Maugham, Reeve indicated that the fact that slaves were generally well treated made the practice less abhorrent than the word "slavery" would suggest.

Given the existence of these reports, Liberian slavery was discussed in the League when the Slavery Convention was formulated. Liberia was included in the countries that were asked to prepare reports for the League on the slavery issue in 1923. The Liberian government admitted that some "aboriginal tribes [...] base their economic life on a form of domestic servitude which approximates what is usually described by the term of slavery."<sup>122</sup> However, the Liberian government insisted that slavery was a purely indigenous crime and one that was dying out. Some members of the League TSC, including The French Representative, Delafosse, advocated that the Commission accept the Liberian government's account. Other TSC members cited Reeve's book as possible evidence that slavery still existed in Liberia, and was actually supported by the Americo-Liberian elite.<sup>123</sup>

However, The Dutch representative, Van Reese, mentioned that in order to prepare a

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<sup>120</sup> Sir Alfred Sharpe, Introduction, Henry F. Reeve, C.M.G, *The Black Republic*, (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969) 25.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid*, 137.

<sup>122</sup> "Reply from the Government of Liberia," April 12, 1924, LON, A.25.1924.VI.

<sup>123</sup> Minutes of the TSC, Second Session, Fifth Meeting, July 15, 1925, 10am, LON, C.426.M.157.1925.VI.

Convention by 1926, it was impossible to draw firm conclusions that would otherwise require years of methodological and scientific research.<sup>124</sup> During the TSC meetings, Liberia was not singled out for an investigation because it was just one of many countries discussed as a possible slave nation. The emphasis of the Commission was on creating the framework for new anti-slavery action, not immediately prosecuting alleged instances of slavery. Although the existence of slavery in Liberia was acknowledged, there was nothing at this point in time to compel the League into action.

### ***U.S. Government Response to Slavery Allegations***

It was the new context of American financial investments in Liberia that catapulted the issue of Liberian slavery back into the League, creating the stimulus for an investigation. After the negotiation of the 1926 Firestone investment, the U.S. State Department was increasingly sensitive toward Liberian internal affairs. When reports on Liberian slavery re-surfaced, the United States took an active interest. Given the recent League anti-slavery activity, the State Department was worried about the possible repercussions on Firestone in world opinion if the U.S. government ignored the issue. Despite the shortcomings of the 1926 Convention, the threat of a League investigation was still enough of a headache to compel the United States into a more vigorous observation of Liberian slavery.

When Firestone first entered Liberia, the State Department sincerely believed the company offered a positive development for Liberian labor. The American Charges D' Affairs in Liberia, Reed Paige Clark, sent a memorandum to the State Department in May 1926 describing Firestone's labor practices. Reed noted that the company had

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<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

originally recruited labor through the Liberian government, but was interested in recruiting its own labor pool:

The company hopes to make the conditions of employment so attractive that laborers [...] will return voluntarily for further service, bringing with them an increasing number of recruits [...] I am informed that the Company will not attempt to hold a native laborer to a fixed term of service. He will be free to go at any time, if he so desires [...] Few laborers will be paid less than one shilling a day [...] Food will not be furnished by the company, but it is understood the company will maintain stores at which rice and other staples may be purchased by laborers practically at cost [...] as regards housing, each laborer following his arrival will be allowed three days at full pay during which to construct a shelter.<sup>125</sup>

In 1928, this optimistic view began to unravel. That year, the American Minister at Monrovia, William Francis, sent a letter to Castle explaining that it was likely that top Liberian officials, including the Liberian President Charles King, had sponsored slave-trading, and that the situation might reflect badly on Firestone. Francis mentioned that:

Naturally news got to Monrovia about the affair and I fear that the British Charge d'Affairs, F. Gordon-Rule, has informed the British Foreign Office [...] The Liberian question has been before the League of Nations, as you remember, and now that Firestone is in I should hate to see the question reopened.<sup>126</sup>

The mention of the British interest is important, because the British government was leading the international campaign against slavery.

Also in 1928, Harvard political scientist Raymond Buell wrote a two-volume report on colonial administration in Africa, and he devoted a section to Liberia.<sup>127</sup> Buell argued that the Firestone Company and the U.S. State Department had coerced the Liberian government into accepting onerous loans.<sup>128</sup> Buell had doubts about the Firestone Company's current use of indigenous labor for pawning and for shipment at Fernando Po, but he suggested that they were headed in that direction:

<sup>125</sup> "Handling of Native Labor by the Firestone Plantations Company," May 18, 1926, USNA, RG 59, 882.504/7, (microfilm M113, Roll 14).

<sup>126</sup> Francis to Castle, January 16, 1928, USNA, RG 59, 882.5048, (microfilm M113, Roll 14).

<sup>127</sup> Buell later became the head of the Foreign Policy Association.

<sup>128</sup> Buell, *Native Problem in Africa*, 833-836.

The experience in other parts of Africa shows that the development of large-scale European industry inevitably outruns the local labor supply. [Buell cited the example of the Congo. He then turned to Liberia.] For the time being, the effect on the native population of this territory may therefore be beneficial. But this effect cannot long remain if Mr. Firestone undertakes the development of a million acres.<sup>129</sup>

In fact, Firestone was only cultivating 30,000 acres of rubber plantations by 1928, and State Department memoranda suggest that his rubber sources were not under strain.<sup>130</sup>

Nevertheless, historians have cited Buell's book as the decisive trigger that led to U.S. involvement in the crisis. Sundiata cites a June 1928 letter from Castle to the U.S. Legation in Monrovia:

I agree with you thoroughly that it would be unfortunate from many points of view if the question were to be *aired at this time in the League of Nations* [emphasis mine], particularly in view of the critical attitude taken by Professor Buell in his recent book on the Native Problem in Africa [...] It is far from unlikely that any attempt may be made to shoulder Firestone and even the Department with the responsibility for undesirable conditions now existing in Liberia.<sup>131</sup>

The same memorandum included a long description of the 1926 Slavery Convention and explained how they related to Liberia. What Sundiata missed is that Buell's book only sparked the interest of the U.S. State Department due to the timing of its publication. It was the specific threat of a *League investigation* that the State Department and Firestone feared could tarnish the image of the United States, because of the link between League anti-slavery agreements and world opinion. The State Department initiated a public relations campaign to mute Buell's claims about Firestone, but the additional issue of Liberian slavery was a more ominous threat that had to be dealt with on an international level. Unlike earlier international negotiations on Liberia, which had occurred directly between the United States, Britain, France, and the Liberian government, the new context

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<sup>129</sup> *Ibid*, 835.

<sup>130</sup> State Department Memorandum, Jan. 12, 1930, USNA, RG 59, 882.5048/202.

<sup>131</sup> Castle to Francis, June 21, 1928, USNA, RG 59 (microfilm M113, roll 14) 882.5048/1 cit. in Sundiata, *Black Scandal*, 45.

of the League and its anti-slavery legislation brought the Liberia issue within the scope of international organization. Another State Department memoranda from 1929 includes a list of topics the department planned to discuss with Firestone and illustrates this point. Buell's book was mentioned, but a topical distinction was made between Firestone's labor practices and slavery. The State Department believed that it was still possible to deal with Buell's assertions through this domestic public relations campaign, but that the separate issue of slavery was an international problem:

LABOR: Buell's book and articles might perhaps best be answered if Firestone would engage a competent investigator to go to Liberia and to publish in the Saturday Evening Post or some other widely read publication an article on Liberia.

SLAVERY: In view of missionary and world opinion particularly as evidenced by League activities this problem will call for close attention.<sup>132</sup>

The U.S. State Department turned to the Liberian President Charles King and asked him to prepare a statement on the labor charges for the American press, confirming that the Firestone contracts had been negotiated willingly. King did so enthusiastically, and explained that the Firestone investment was a positive economic development in Liberia. He also indicated, "Nothing in the Firestone agreement obligates the government of Liberia to impress labor for the company. [...] On this point the Government of Liberia would welcome an investigation on the spot."<sup>133</sup> In August, Castle held a press conference to combat allegations that the Firestone investment was a closed-door monopoly. He emphasized that Firestone's one million acre lease only amounted to 4% of Liberian land.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> State Department Memorandum, May 22, 1929, USNA, RG 59, 782.00/1 (microfilm M114).

<sup>133</sup> Charles King to U.S. Secretary of State, August 30, 1928, USNA, RG 59, 882.5048, (microfilm M113, roll 14).

<sup>134</sup> "Firestone Declares Door is Open in Liberia," *New York Times*: Sep. 2, 1928: 5.

In *New York Times* reports of Buell's book, the historical situation in Leopold II's Congo was referenced as a touchstone for colonial abuse in Africa. One report described Phelps-Stokes administrator Dr. Thomas Jones' response to Buell's book:

Dr. Jones painted a picture of Liberian conditions calculated to reassure those Americans who fear that the search for raw materials for their industries may lead the United States into a policy of economic imperialism all over the world, with its implications of crushing the natives in the "red rubber" days of the Belgian Congo.<sup>135</sup>

It is reasonable to conclude that by 1928, the recent events in the Congo had become part of the American public memory of African colonialism. Leopold II's administrative abuses were discussed as a precedent of European cruelty, and how international organization could effectively stop the worst forms of oppression. *New York Times* reports were skeptical that Firestone represented a negative force on Liberia, or would lead to another "red rubber" situation:

The American people would never countenance this sort of exploitation of backward peoples. But it is regrettable that such accusations as those originally imputed to Dr. Buell are bandied about without verification. They serve to discredit legitimate American enterprise and to play into the hands of foreign interests anxious to discourage American efforts to obtain rubber supplies from sources controlled by American capital.<sup>136</sup>

Following the publication of Buell's book, foreign governments began to look more closely at the issue of Liberian slavery. In 1929, Lady Simon, the wife of a British League official, published a survey on world slavery and devoted a chapter to Liberia. Henri de Junod, President of the International Society for the Protection of Natives, presented a petition to the League Mandates Commission that condemned Firestone, "based upon the conclusions drawn in Buell's book [...] Firestone's concession and loan [...] will lead to

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<sup>135</sup> Russell B. Porter, "Defends Firestone on Liberia Project." *New York Times*, Aug 29, 1928: 12.

<sup>136</sup> "Developing Liberia," *New York Times*; Aug 30, 1928: 20.

confiscation of native lands and forced labor.”<sup>137</sup> The growing international interest in Liberia, along with the prospect of increased League involvement, compelled the U.S. to cooperate with the League and not just negotiate the issue unilaterally with the Liberian government.

In 1929, the Liberian government firmly denied the existence of slavery.<sup>138</sup> The U.S. State Department coordinated with the Liberian government, and suggested that Liberian delegates ratify the 1926 Slavery Convention through the Liberian legislature, even if slavery did exist.<sup>139</sup> Secretary of State Henry Stimson explained that this would preserve the image of Liberia, to the other Great Powers and to the American public.<sup>140</sup> On U.S. recommendation in 1929, the Liberian government approached the League and asked them to prepare a report on Liberian labor practices.

When the State Department received notice that labor shipments to Fernando Po were continuing, even in the beginning phases of the League investigation, officials immediately called for their cessation. A State Department memorandum to Monrovia explained:

The United States has been disturbed to learn that although the question of the ‘export of laborer’ has been the subject of earnest representations on the part of the United States [...] shipments of labor for Fernando Po have been common throughout the past several months. In the estimation of the Government of the United States, there would appear to be some ground for apprehension lest the continuation of such shipments [...] have a prejudicial effect upon the proceedings of the International Commission.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Memorandum to American Consul, July 28, 1928, USNA, RG 59, 882.5048/1a (microfilm M113, Roll 14).

<sup>138</sup> Kathleen Simon, *Slavery* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1929) 82.

<sup>139</sup> Francis to the Secretary of State, June 13, 1929, USFR, 1919 v. III, 882.5048/34.

<sup>140</sup> Secretary of State to Minister in Liberia (Francis), Letter for Liberian Government, June 5, 1929, USFR, 1919 v. III, 882.5048/20.

<sup>141</sup> American Legation in Monrovia to Secretary of State, January 14, 1930, USNA, RG 59, 882.5048/202.

The American desire to avoid any discoveries by the League of incriminating evidence in Liberia is clear. Throughout 1929, the U.S. State Department continued to discuss the potency of international opinion on the anti-slavery issue.<sup>142</sup>

In the discussions of world opinion on slavery, it is noteworthy that the State Department did not linger on exactly how world opinion might impact the United States. What the State Department hoped to avoid, in specific political or economic terms, by investigating Liberian slavery is unclear. American participation in the Liberian slavery crisis focused entirely on aligning with the League as a pre-emptive action, to eliminate any potential association of U.S. interests with slavery.

The threat of a League investigation worried Firestone as well, because although his enterprise depended on cheap African labor, he certainly did not want to be linked to slavery. An internal U.S. State Department memorandum mentions:

Firestone agrees that Liberia's future depends on its acceptance of the terms as outlined above [the Slavery Convention] and states that he would prefer to abandon any further interest in Liberia rather than become involved in any way in the alleged forced labor and slavery situation.<sup>143</sup>

It is highly unlikely that Firestone would have actually walked away from his multi-million dollar investment, but the hyperbole gives an indication of how intimidating the threat of an international anti-slavery investigation was in 1930.

It is also worth noting that pressure to investigate Liberian slavery also came from within Liberia itself. In October 1928, the Liberian politician Representative Dihdwo Twe introduced a bill in the Liberian legislature to abolish the practice of shipping Liberian indigenous peoples to foreign colonies. While the bill passed the House, Liberian

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<sup>142</sup> Henry Stimson to American Legation at Monrovia, June 5, 1929, USNA, RG 59, 882.5048.20 (microfilm M113, Roll 14).

<sup>143</sup> State Department to American Legation in Monrovia, August 3, 1929, USNA, RG 59, 882.5048/53 (microfilm M113, Roll 14).

Postmaster Samuel S. Ross helped defeat the bill in the Senate, allegedly by bribing politicians.<sup>144</sup> In 1929, the Liberian politician Thomas J. R. Faulkner leaked reports to the African-American press that the Liberian government had been selling indigenous labor in Fernando Po, and that they had used slave labor on development projects. Faulkner's allegations were printed in the *Afro-American*, and a follow-up column on the situation noted that, "[readers should be] inclined to take Faulkner's allegations with a grain of salt, because King defeated him for the presidency." The same report noted that:

It is strange that Liberia, founded as an asylum for slaves freed from their chains in America should permit the nefarious system to continue, even though the League of Nation's report shows slavery exists also in Abyssinia, Algeria, the Philippines, Kufra, East Sahara, West Sudan, China, British, French and Italian Somaliland, the Sudan and Tripoli.<sup>145</sup>

These reports suggest that although the African-American press thought Liberian slavery was a problem, Liberia was not singled out on the humanitarian issue. However, the fact that Faulkner approached the American press suggests that Liberians believed that American input on the issue was crucial, if an international investigation were to occur.

### ***The League Commission of Inquiry and Report***

It is surprising that the Liberian government called for an investigation, when government officials knew that slavery existed and Liberian politicians owned domestic slaves of their own. However, it is difficult to decipher Liberian motives because the King administration was uniformly corrupt and unaccountable; King claimed to have won the 1927 presidential election by over 200,000 votes, even though there were only 15,000

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<sup>144</sup> W.T. Francis to Secretary of State Stimson, November 13, 1928, USNA, RG 59, 882.504/9, (microfilm M113 Roll, 14).

<sup>145</sup> "Slavery in Liberia," *The Afro-American*, Baltimore, Aug 17, 1929.

registered voters in Liberia.<sup>146</sup> The Postmaster General of Liberia Samuel Ross, who would be heavily implicated in the eventual League report on slavery, had a criminal record in the U.S. before he emigrated permanently to Liberia.<sup>147</sup> Suzanne Miers, without citing a source, argued, “The Liberians believing that the United States had designs on their independence, asked the League to mount an investigation.”<sup>148</sup> Considering that King was emphatic about his support for the United States in press statements and in his addresses to the Liberian legislature, Miers’ claim is not accurate.<sup>149</sup> It is more likely that this was a “boy who cried wolf” scenario, and that because the League did not investigate Liberian slavery in 1925, the King administration believed the League would again have difficulties assembling a team of experts. The League of Nations did have trouble finding an acceptable League representative, who would not be accused of catering to British or French interests. Cuthbert Christy, who was eventually chosen to chair the Slavery Commission, was an Englishman and many League delegates believed that despite his strong credentials as an African explorer, his nationality rendered him an unacceptable candidate for the job.<sup>150</sup>

Charles S. Johnson, who was then selected as the American representative, entered Liberia as a scholar and also as a man who possessed a humanitarian urge to expose wrongdoings.<sup>151</sup> In this sense, he can be compared to Casement, the British foreign officer who had traveled to the Congo in 1903, to investigate the atrocities of Leopold’s government (the crucial difference being that while Johnson was an “American

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<sup>146</sup> M. T. Wulah, *Back to Africa – A Liberian Tragedy* (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2009) 428.

<sup>147</sup> Francis to Castle, January 16, 1928, USNA, RG 59, 882.5048 (microfilm M113, roll 14).

<sup>148</sup> Miers, *Slavery in the Twentieth Century*, 141.

<sup>149</sup> Charles King, “Annual Message of 1928,” NYPL Schomburg Center, *Lester A. Walton Papers* (hereafter referred to as LAW), Box 13, Folder 8.

<sup>150</sup> State Department to Gilbert & Shaw, Jan. 31, 1930, USNA, RG 59, 882.5048/239.

<sup>151</sup> Carter to Secretary of State, Mar. 15 1930, USNA, RG 59, 882.5048/262.

representative” he was not an agent of the U.S. government). Interestingly, after he investigated slavery in Liberia in 1930, Johnson did not further involve himself in the follow-up League debates on Liberia from 1932-1934. The impact of Johnson’s absence from this phase of the slavery crisis is discussed in Chapter III.

U.S. State Department memoranda indicate that the Liberian government initially tried to limit the Commission’s access to laborers who were not vetted by the government. However, Johnson in particular seemed determined to crack the surface of the official Liberian government narrative on the slavery issue, and he braved yellow fever outbreaks in order to travel to the Liberian hinterland and interview a larger number of indigenous peoples.<sup>152</sup> Nevertheless, the content of the Commission of Inquiry report was not very different from internal U.S. State Department memoranda on Liberian slavery that had been compiled years earlier. However, the purpose of the Commission report was to create a legal case against Liberian slavery.<sup>153</sup> The U.S. State Department asked the existing American Legation at Monrovia to remove itself from any involvement in the investigation, so that it would be completely impartial.<sup>154</sup>

The completed League Report appeared in the fall of 1930. The report began with the question of what constituted slavery because, as the report explained, “the definition of slavery as formulated by the Anti-Slavery Convention admittedly avoids detailed description for a comprehensive formula.”<sup>155</sup> The report also described the difference between domestic, permanent and temporary labor practices. In terms of pawning, or domestic slavery, the Commission found that hinterland chiefs sold their own children to

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<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>153</sup> Memorandum to Castle, December 17, 1929, USNA, RG 59, 882.5048/181 (microfilm M113, roll 14).

<sup>154</sup> Telegram to American Legation in Monrovia, April 3, 1930, USNA, RG 59, 882.5048/255.

<sup>155</sup> League, *Report*, 11.

pay off hut taxes. In terms of slave trading, the commission found that the Fernando Po labor was often forced, and that the Liberian government supported the labor shipments. The Commission produced one letter from a Liberian District Commissioner to his deputy, which was particularly damning:

You are hereby ordered to proceed immediately with these soldiers, upon the receipt of this letter, by the instruction of the Honorable Commissioner General John W. Cooper of the Liberian hinterland, with as many men laborers as you possibly can, not exceeding 250, and there deliver them to Samuel A Ross for the purpose of being shipped to Fernando Po, per orders of his Excellency, the President.<sup>156</sup>

Liberian officials denied that labor was forced. In one report, Secretary Morris explained that because Liberian laborers enjoyed the work, the fact that they were sometimes unpaid was not a great concern:

You would be surprised to see how readily and cheerily they sing when working. One would hardly believe they were unpaid. There is in general no flogging or punishing, but for the chiefs fining these very people of theirs for not furnishing the laborers. In fact, the Liberian has very great feeling for flogging on his body. So if their own men happen to take a stick and strike one of them they consider that as flogging. When I was Secretary of the Interior there was no order for flogging. The people would sing all day.<sup>157</sup>

Although Maugham had made a similar argument about the treatment of Liberian labor in 1920, the 1930 League Report did not agree that even purportedly humane treatment of laborers compensated for the fact that the labor was forced.

Throughout the investigations, the Commission could not substantiate that Firestone participated in forced labor or slavery practices, even though the company received labor from government recruiters. It is arguable that since the Firestone Company was one of the few reliable sources of wage labor in Liberia, it did not have to resort to forced labor. None of the indigenous laborers who were interviewed admitted to being forced to work for

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<sup>156</sup> League, *Report*, 16.

<sup>157</sup> League, *Report*, 81.

Firestone. However, many explained that it was difficult to prevent Liberian government officials from confiscating their wages. One chief explained:

We like to work for Firestone and any man who pays us for our labor. The reason we do not like to go to Firestone is if Mr. ----(An official) hears you are on the Firestone he goes there and get the money you worked for.<sup>158</sup>

After presenting the results of interviews, the League Report provided a list of recommendations for the Liberian government and League to follow, in order to eliminate slavery. The Report recommended an “open door” trade policy, the extension of education, and the radical reconstruction of policy between “civilized” and “uncivilized” Liberians. It also recommended that existing Liberian District Commissioners be removed and replaced with American officials and that American immigration to Liberia be encouraged.<sup>159</sup>

From all existing evidence, the League Report was a sincere attempt to investigate labor practices in Liberia. After finishing the report, Johnson wrote several notes to the U.S. State Department, saying that he feared for the lives of the natives who were honest in the report.<sup>160</sup> Indeed, American news reports indicated that many of the indigenous people who had cooperated with the League Commission had been killed in retaliation.<sup>161</sup>

After the report was completed and legalistic evidence of Liberian slavery had been compiled, the League was presented with a larger challenge: how to fix the failing state of Liberia and end the slave trade.

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<sup>158</sup> League, *Report*, 81.

<sup>159</sup> League, *Report*, 89.

<sup>160</sup> American Legation in Monrovia to U.S. State Department, Aug 20, 1930, USNA, RG 59 882.5048/302.

<sup>161</sup> “Liberians Burned Tribesmen Alive,” *New York Times* May 19, 1932: 10.

### **Chapter 3: The End of Liberian Slavery?**

Just months after the League Report was completed, the Liberian government was insistent that they had taken the appropriate measures to abolish slavery. In October 1930, King issued executive orders to outlaw pawning and the overseas shipment of labor. After being implicated in the slavery investigation, two members of the Liberian House of Representatives, P.F. Simpson and M.J. McBorrough, resigned. In November 1929, Postmaster Samuel Ross, who had been accused of orchestrating the Fernando Po slave trade, died of unknown causes, but would otherwise have faced pressure to resign.<sup>162</sup> Vice President Allen Yancy and President King, who had also been implicated in the Commission Report, both resigned in December 1930. By the end of 1930, Antoine Sottile, the Liberian Delegate to the League, sent a statement to the League that declared all forms of slavery in Liberia to be “definitely abolished”<sup>163</sup>

In 1931, the League of Nations appointed three experts to return to Liberia and prepare a follow-up report on economic and political conditions in the country: Charles Brunot, a French administrative expert, Theodorus Lighthart, a Dutch financial expert, and Melville Mackenzie, a British medic. After six weeks, they produced a report that recommended that the League introduce sanitary and medical improvements, an improved educational system, and also that six administrative experts be appointed to help the country implement sustained reforms.<sup>164</sup> The Brunot Report indicated that the recent actions the Liberian government had taken to abolish slavery were effective. The records of the League explain, “The experts found that the Liberian Government had already passed

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<sup>162</sup> I.K. Sundiata, *Brothers and Strangers: Black Zion, Black Slavery, 1914-1920* (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 2004) 134.

<sup>163</sup> Sottile Statement to the League of Nations Committee, 1930, USNA, RG 59, 882.5/ 320

<sup>164</sup> “Problem Raised by the Liberian Government’s Request for Assistance,” Feb. 8, 1932, USNA, RG 59. 882.01/219

laws forbidding slavery and forced labor, and actually the experts found that the exportation of forced labor had been suppressed.”<sup>165</sup> This conclusion was based on limited evidence, because as an American Legation memorandum noted, “the experts did not visit any of the Interior District where the pawning system was hitherto in vogue and, therefore, have no firsthand information on the subject.”<sup>166</sup>

Despite the optimism of the Brunot Report, slavery continued to flourish in Liberia after 1930, even though the government had taken official steps to abolish it. The efforts to abolish slavery were more superficial than substantive, for several reasons. First, the new Liberian legislation was more specific in outlawing pawning, but given the lack of infrastructure in the Liberian hinterland, it was difficult to enforce. As Sotille even acknowledged, “I do not deny that in Liberia, as elsewhere, there still may be occasional infractions of the law that escape the control of the Government, especially as there are no railways in Liberia”<sup>167</sup> In addition, many paramount chiefs in the Liberian hinterland had profited greatly from providing slaves to labor recruiters, and it is therefore unlikely that the system was completely abolished in a matter of months. A U.S. State Department memorandum explained, “one of the complaints sought to be brought before the [Brunot Commission] was to the effect that the Government had abolished the system and thereby adversely affected the tribal economy.”<sup>168</sup>

Also, the 1930 League Report had indicated that tribal chiefs had been forced to sell their children to Americo-Liberian elites, when they were unable to pay hut taxes. If wage labor did not expand after 1930, did the Liberian government simply become more lenient

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<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>166</sup> American Legation in Monrovia to State Department, Jan. 23, 1931, USNA, RG 59, 882.01/220.

<sup>167</sup> Sotille to Liberia Committee, April 26, 1932, USNA, RG 59, 882.01/234.

<sup>168</sup> American Legation in Monrovia to State Department, Jan. 23, 1931, USNA, RG 59, 882.01/221.

in regard to tax enforcement? The fact that Liberian officials would retaliate against indigenous peoples who had been forthcoming with League investigators suggests that it would not be a stretch to assume that slavery also continued. Unfortunately, because no follow-up report was produced, we can only speculate how many indigenous Liberians were still enslaved, or subject to forced labor, after 1930. In 1931, the journalist George Schuyler published a four-part series on Liberian slavery in the *New York Evening Post*, which concluded that the slavery investigation had not ended slavery in Liberia.<sup>169</sup> However, by and large, international interest in the issue of slavery was lost, and questionable labor practices quietly continued.

Why, before international interest in slavery faded, did the League not ensure that Liberian slavery was eradicated? Sundiata argues that:

“The labor investigation of 1930 did not change the condition of workers within Liberia, nor was it meant to. The crisis period of 1929 – 1936 was one of testing, after which the Liberian elite settled into a symbiotic relationship with Firestone and other large-scale foreign interests.”<sup>170</sup>

While the events in Liberia certainly devolved into testing by 1932, Sundiata’s claim that the 1929 Commission Report was not meant to change the condition of Liberian workers is not well founded. In actuality, ending slavery was a moral issue that resonated in the Western world in 1930, but the work required to develop enforcement mechanisms lagged behind moral sentiment. In this respect, it is possible compare the 1930 Liberian slavery investigation to the American Colonization Society philanthropy that had created Liberia a century earlier. In 1817, the creation of Liberia was inspired by the anti-slavery cause, but it was a simplistic answer to the slavery question: American philanthropists did not provide enough economic or political support to ensure that the Liberian experiment was

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<sup>169</sup> “Schuyler Exposes Liberia,” *New York Amsterdam News*, July 15, 1931: 8.

<sup>170</sup> Sundiata, *Black Scandal*, 158.

successful. Similarly, the 1930 slavery investigation did not sustain anti-slavery action in Liberia. In 1932, the slavery issue was effectively dropped, and the League of Nations began to more broadly focus on the politically contentious economic and social issues that plagued Liberia.

### ***The League Plan of Assistance***

After President King resigned, American officials feared that due to the scathing 1930 League Report, the new President Edwin Barclay would be fiercely nationalistic and suspicious of foreigners.<sup>171</sup> Nevertheless, in January 1931, Barclay approached the League for financial, judicial, sanitation, and native administrative assistance in Liberia.<sup>172</sup> Using the recommendations of the 1930 Christy Commission and the 1931 Brunot Commission, in 1932, the League discussed plans to appoint League advisors to monitor reforms, and to work towards development in the Liberian hinterland.

The U.S. government seemed committed to working within the infrastructure of the League on the assistance plans, a decision that the British government appreciated.<sup>173</sup> Given the growing domestic concerns at the onset of the Great Depression, it was much easier for the U.S. to collaborate with the League on assistance reforms, than to take full responsibility. However, the State Department was also firm that it reserved the right to act unilaterally if American interests were directly at stake.<sup>174</sup> These reservations were certainly due to Firestone, who was still an important player after 1930, even if he did not dictate U.S. policy. Both the U.S. government and the League of Nations wanted Firestone

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<sup>171</sup> American Legation in Monrovia to Secretary of State, Aug 20, 1930, USNA, RG 59, 882.00/842.

<sup>172</sup> "The Reconstruction of Liberia," *Foreign Policy Report*, August 3, 1931, USNA, RG 59, 882.01/356.

<sup>173</sup> "The League: De Native Scum..." *Time*, Feb 2, 1931.

<sup>174</sup> State Department to Rebar, May 17, 1932, USNA, RG 59, 882.01/257A

to attend League proceedings on the Liberian case, but he did not attend the meetings that preceded the 1932 assistance plans. After 1932, Firestone routinely requested that an American naval ship be sent to Liberia to secure his company's investment. The State Department explained that it would not intervene "unless Liberians went mad and started killing American nationals," because they still only desired a limited involvement.<sup>175</sup> Thus, the State Department stayed true to its earlier indications that it would not support the investment with force.

The assistance plans that the League began to draw up for Liberia in 1932 can be loosely described as economic development reforms. By 1930, the international discourse on development was slowly moving away from a Western-centered focus on productivity in peripheral regions, to securing and promoting the well being of individuals who lived in these territories. During the period of European colonialism in Africa, economic stimulation had served the home countries and did little to raise the living standards of the local populations. Classical economists such as Adam Smith typically explained how imperialism affected the economies of the West, rather than the colonies.<sup>176</sup> During the interwar period, there was a subtle shift in economic thinking to focus more directly on the periphery. In 1929, the British Parliament passed its first Colonial Development Act, which historian George C. Abott has described as "an entirely new concept of development in which the provision of annual grants and loans would prove mutually advantageous."<sup>177</sup> In the 1930s, the League of Nations pioneered a series of health and education reforms that

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<sup>175</sup> Memorandum of Conversation with the British Ambassador, Jan. 27, 1933, USNA, RG 59, 882.01/502.

<sup>176</sup> Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations* (New York: Modern Library, 2000): 599-600. Smith is mentioned in the context of development in H.W. Arndt, *Economic Development: The History of an Idea* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

<sup>177</sup> See George C. Abbott "Re-Examination of the 1929 Colonial Development Act" *Economic History Review*, 70.

were meant to benefit indigenous peoples in Africa and Latin America. Economic development would not meaningfully focus on the issues that directly affected indigenous populations, including widespread poverty, until after the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development was created in 1944.<sup>178</sup> However, it is important not to overlook the precedent the League set for later development work. The Liberian crisis came at a critical crossroads in development thinking.

The health and sanitation reforms in Liberia were an indirect approach to economic reform, but were viewed as concrete steps to improving the social conditions in Liberia. The health reforms were also meant to benefit Western interests in the country. William Francis, the American Minister in Liberia, had died of yellow fever in Liberia as soon as the slavery crisis began to receive international attention. The historian Gregg Mitman has also suggested that the emphasis on curbing disease was linked to the Firestone Company's labor concerns, because it needed to maintain an "able bodied population."<sup>179</sup>

In terms of financial assistance, under Firestone's initial 1926 loan contract, any plan to modify, refund, or terminate the loan structure between Liberia and the U.S., had to be approved by Firestone.<sup>180</sup> Firestone indicated that he would be willing to negotiate on his original loan agreement to ease Liberia's financial burdens, but as previously mentioned, he desired a strong protection on his investment. The U.S. and Britain both supported enhanced administrative oversight in Liberia, even if the U.S. government firmly rejected a military response. The U.S. State Department explained that:

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<sup>178</sup> For example, the IBDR 1963 Nigerian development plans – the organization's first involvement in Sub-Saharan Africa.

<sup>179</sup> Greg Mitman, "Latex and Blood: Science, Markets, and American Empire," *Radical History Review*, 2010 (107): 45-73, 57.

<sup>180</sup> Raymond Leslie Buell, "The Reconstruction of Liberia," *Foreign Policy Bulletin*, May 27, 1932, USNA, RG 59, 882.01/277

We believe that the Americo-Liberian administration has brought the present difficulties upon itself by its own ineptitude [...] We have been led inescapably to the conclusion that no improvement can be anticipated unless a plan of assistance is predicated upon the delegation by Liberia over a period of years of ample and adequate authority both administrative and executive to function without interference. No argument about 'sovereignty' or independence can obscure this basic requisite.<sup>181</sup>

While the British government believed that Liberia should become a mandate, administrated either internationally or by the United States, the U.S. government did not want this level of responsibility.<sup>182</sup> Through negotiations, Rebar and Cecil agreed, however, that they should appoint an administrative advisor, if possible a "white man with sufficient qualifications."<sup>183</sup> Neither the U.S. nor Britain believed that League procedure was a roadblock to more rigorous international involvement in Liberia. In a memorandum to the U.S. State Department, Rebar explained:

The underlying difficulties in working through this committee are to bring about a realization on its part that it cannot treat with Liberia on the same basis as it would with any other sovereign state member of the League. This appears to be the primary consideration in the eyes of most members with the possible exception of the British, French, and ourselves.<sup>184</sup>

Acknowledging the British and American positions, in 1932 Sotille sent several memoranda to the League Liberian Committee, reminding the members that the League had limited authority:

"Except in matters of international peace, the Covenant does not confer on the League [...] either the right or the obligation to interfere or intervene in the internal affairs of other members, even when the case is one of so-called humanitarian intervention."<sup>185</sup>

Debates about the jurisdiction of the League, in regard to Liberia, would continue throughout the League's efforts to create development plans.

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<sup>181</sup> Department of State to American Legation at Monrovia, June 18, 1932, USNA, RG 59, 882.01/288A.

<sup>182</sup> Wilson to Secretary of State, Sept. 22, 1932, USNA, RG 59, 882.01/639.

<sup>183</sup> Samuel Rebar to State Department, May 18, 1933, USNA, RG 59, 882.01/273.

<sup>184</sup> Rebar to State Department, May 18, 1932, USNA, RG 59, 882.01/261.

<sup>185</sup> Sotille to Liberia Committee, April 26, 1932, USNA, RG 59, 882.01/234.

While the Liberian situation was discussed in Geneva, dangerous Liberian administration policies were allowed to continue unchecked. In 1932, the Liberian Frontier Force committed “atrocities” against indigenous people, setting over forty-four villages in the Kru Coast on fire, and allegedly burning indigenous people alive.<sup>186</sup> The Liberian government denied that these events had occurred, and claimed they had only taken “necessary and legitimate action.”<sup>187</sup> These new humanitarian concerns did not alter the course of the League assistance plans. In 1932, the Liberian government sent a statement to the League rejecting a League administrator, refusing to modify the 1926 Firestone agreements, and refusing to allow any further investigations of native administration policies in the hinterland, because it was a purely “internal affair.”<sup>188</sup> From 1932-1934, the League and Liberian Government were engaged in a tug of war, as each side claimed the necessity of gaining more concessions in the financial agreements.

### ***Limits of Public Pressure***

The lack of sustained public pressure to end slavery in Liberia was also an obstacle to the successful resolution of the crisis. Throughout history, the abolitionist cause has benefited from the dedication of tenacious individuals. In the nineteenth century, William Wilberforce tirelessly advocated for anti-slavery legislation. E.D. Morel was a vocal critic of Leopold II in the Congo. The Liberian slavery crisis did not have its gadfly. Charles Johnson returned to academia and did not participate in the League assistance plans. George Schuyler, who investigated slavery in Liberia after 1930, did not spearhead a

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<sup>186</sup> The term ‘atrocities’ was used in 1932. See “Natives Held Burned Alive,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 19, 1932: 3.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>188</sup> American Legation at Monrovia to State Department, Transmission of Liberian Government note, May 24, 1932, USNA, RG 59, 882.01/276.

grassroots movement. One might have expected Buell to push for sustained anti-slavery reforms. Although Buell suggested improvements to the League plans, he ultimately opposed them because he thought they would give more financial power to Firestone, and he did not rally public opinion around the continued fight to end slavery.<sup>189</sup> It should be noted that despite Buell's criticism of Firestone, he was optimistic about the potential to reform imperial relationships in Africa, and he had described the post-Leopold II government in the Congo as one of the best administrative systems on the continent.<sup>190</sup> The Liberian slavery crisis also occurred at the beginning of the Great Depression, when one quarter of the American public was un-employed, so it is not surprising that Liberian slavery did not have great resonance outside of the State Department.

According to many observers, after 1930, due to the tenor of British and American discussions in the League, imperialism became a larger problem in Liberia than slavery. Sotille argued, "Liberia was in the most precarious financial situation she had ever known. Liberia was *financially speaking a slave*."<sup>191</sup> This choice of rhetoric could indicate that as early as 1931, the attention was not going to be on slaves in Liberia, but on the larger financial situation of the country. The same rhetoric appeared in the communist George Padmore's 1931 treatise "American Imperialism Enslaves Liberia," which was based on news reports and published in Moscow. The interpretation of Liberia as a financial slave also appeared in the liberal American press. Mauritz A. Hallgren wrote a scathing article in the *Nation*, "Liberia, having already been reduced to helplessness through the financial dictatorship of the Firestone rubber interests is now [...] about to be placed in complete

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<sup>189</sup> Raymond Leslie Buell, "The New Deal and Liberia," *The New Republic*, Aug. 16, 1933, 17.

<sup>190</sup> "A Masterly Survey," *The Nation*, Vol. 127.3288:, 44.

<sup>191</sup> "The Reconstruction of Liberia," Foreign Policy Report, August 3, 1931, USNA, RG 59, 882.01/356.

servitude.”<sup>192</sup> For many, the slavery crisis had been swallowed up by the issue of macroeconomic exploitation.

Although the Liberian government emphasized the symbolic meaning of its sovereignty, outside of their own boundaries, African self-governance was not something in which Liberian leaders actually had a great interest. During the expansion of African nationalism after World War II, the Liberian government was not sympathetic to the cause of pan-African nationalism. Liberia was one of the only black Sub-Saharan nations invited to attend the founding conference of the United Nations in 1945, and Liberian representatives made little effort to advocate for limits to imperialism in Africa.<sup>193</sup>

The fact that African-Americans did not support a further investigation of the slavery crisis in Liberia was also one of the reasons why the U.S. government was not pressured to take further action in Liberia. Although African-Americans responded en masse to Marcus Garvey’s cry for Liberian emigration in 1920, and expressed outrage at Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, strangely there was not a great popular response to the 1930 Liberian slavery crisis.<sup>194</sup> W.E.B. Dubois and the NAACP were against European or American intervention in Liberia, because they believed it was paternalistic.<sup>195</sup> Despite the fact that the indigenous people in Liberia were the clear victims of this story, African-Americans tended to place greater sympathy with the Liberian government rather than with the slaves.

Given the potency of Liberia’s historic symbolism, it is likely that many African-Americans in the United States were not adequately informed of how dire the situation was

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<sup>192</sup> Mauritz A. Hallgreen, “Liberia in Shackles,” *Nation*, Aug 7, 1933: 185.

<sup>193</sup> Marika Sherwood, “There is No New Deal for the Blackman in San Francisco” *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 29.1 (1996): 83.

<sup>194</sup> Sundiata, *Black Scandal*, 82.

<sup>195</sup> Memorandum for the Undersecretary of State, July 26, 1933, USNA, RG 59, 882.01/6101/2..

in Liberia. Support for this conclusion can be found in the many letters that the U.S. State Department received in the early 1930s from African-Americans who wanted to emigrate from the U.S. to Liberia. Considering that Marcus Garvey, who had orchestrated the “Back to Africa” movement to Liberia in the 1920s, had never been to Africa, it is not surprising that African-Americans were unaware of the true conditions in Liberia, and thought it would be an improvement over life in the United States. One heartbreaking letter explained:

I feel that [Liberia] would welcome us to the land of our fathers. Then lynching, humiliation and Jim Crowism would cease and your nation could return to prosperity in this machine age.<sup>196</sup>

In another case, an African-American mechanical dentist moved his wife and six children to Liberia, and found to his great surprise that the majority of the Liberian population did not wear shoes and the health conditions were “intolerable.”<sup>197</sup> He repatriated to New York. The U.S. Legation in Monrovia sent a memorandum to the U.S. State Department, explaining how to deal with these situations:

Discreetly discourag[e] American citizens from proceeding to Liberia on account of the possibility of their later finding themselves in destitute circumstances with resulting embarrassment to the Legation in connection with repatriation problems.<sup>198</sup>

The State Department recognized the gap between the image and reality of Liberia, even if many African-Americans still believed in the redemptive power of the historic land of liberty.

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<sup>196</sup>Robert Jordan to President Herbert Hoover, Feb 10, 1931, USNA, RG 59, 882.551/27.

<sup>197</sup>Department of State “For the Press,” Aug. 24, 1932, USNA, RG 59, 882.5511/43.

<sup>198</sup>American Legation in Monrovia to State Department, Jan. 8, 1931, USNA, RG 59, 882.551/27.

A recurring problem in Liberian historiography is that slavery is often taken out of context, or compared to other contemporaneous atrocities that affected more people.

Sundiata has argued that:

Divorced of its context, the Black Republic's labor traffic seems particularly repellent. It *was* to its victims. However, when compared with the tremendous abuses perpetuated throughout Africa by the colonial powers, the operations of Yancy and Ross appear puny.<sup>199</sup>

In the aftermath of the slavery investigation, the League of Nations and the American public were both distracted by other problems that suddenly seemed more important than slavery. Historians have an obligation not lose sight of the slavery issue as well.

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<sup>199</sup> I.K. Sundiata, *Brothers and Strangers: Black Zion, Black Slavery, 1914-1920* (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 2004) 93.

## **Conclusion**

To claim that Firestone's economic concerns and the publication of Buell's book sparked American involvement in the 1930 slavery crisis in Liberia is as simple as attributing the 2011 revolutions in North Africa to the self-immolation of the Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi. Bouazizi's tragic death was the trigger for the original wave of protests in Tunisia, but the protests only occurred because there was also a perfect storm of incentives - economic, political, and social - that coincided at that particular moment. Similarly, in Liberian historiography, scholars have often missed the full range of pressures that led to the American involvement, and notably, the weight of the League anti-slavery work and its effect on international opinion. The League anti-slavery action induced the United States to fully engage in the humanitarian cause. Both Firestone and the State Department planned for an ethical investment in Liberia, if not for Liberia's sake, for the sake of the image that, during the interwar period, the U.S. had crafted to show American capital as a liberalizing force. The existence of slavery was an obvious blow to that image. After 1930 though, the momentum behind the humanitarian action dissipated; the slavery issue was sidetracked by broader socio-economic concerns and by anti-colonial rhetoric.

Today, we are still grappling with the failures of early twentieth century abolitionism. Kevin Bales, the leading expert on modern slavery, has estimated that there are presently over 30 million slaves (more than the 13 million slaves that were alive at any single moment during the Atlantic slave trade).<sup>200</sup> Slavery is now illegal everywhere, finally outlawed in Mauritania in 1981, but it flourishes, and not only in the places where

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<sup>200</sup> Author's Personal Interview with Kevin Bales, Feb. 11, 2011.

it was recently abolished.<sup>201</sup> In Liberia, slavery still exists, and recently the Firestone Company has been directly implicated in it. In 2005, the International Labor Rights Forum (ILRF) filed a case against the present day Firestone operations, alleging that “Forced labor, the modern equivalent of slavery” currently exists on company plantations.<sup>202</sup> Realizing the moral potency of these charges, Firestone spent \$10 million on super-bowl advertisements, to remind consumers about the “American-ness” of their tires. In 2008, Firestone commercials also featured a whole range of American tropes: a “man named Bob with a wife and a job,” who uses his Firestone tires to travel to work in his minivan, and a soccer mom who bakes pies and uses her Firestone tires to pick up her children. Business ethics and international law have expanded since the 1930s, and these hokey attempts to boost Firestone’s image did not change minds: the Company is currently being prosecuted for forced labor and child labor practices, and is in the midst of legal proceedings.

The 1930 Liberian crisis was the first instance where the U.S. took an active interest in enforcing the League’s 1926 Slavery Convention. Today, according to Bales, the United States has surpassed Britain as the world leader on the anti-slavery issue.<sup>203</sup> Recent pieces of U.S. legislation, including the 2000 Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TPVA), have been instrumental in convincing developing nations to collaborate in a moral crusade against slavery. Nevertheless, the conflict between humanitarian, political, and economic interests will always exist. The great challenge will be keeping the focus on the devastating problem of slavery, and translating that focus into action and lasting change. If anything, the League of Nations proved in 1930 that ending slavery is an elusive task,

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<sup>201</sup> John R. Miller, “Call it Slavery,” *The Wilson Quarterly*, Aug 1 2008.

<sup>202</sup> Saeed Shabazz, “Firestone Challenged on Labor practices in Liberia,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 99:9: 2.

<sup>203</sup> Interview with Kevin Bales, February 11, 2011.

fraught with distractions, and bearing a resemblance to Penelope's loom. It is forever unraveling - the threads of too many human frailties and opposing interests continually woven into the pattern. Still, as history reveals, the threads can be gathered up, the lessons learned.

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**A Brief Note on Sources:** I have drawn from the same primary sources as other historians. There is a Firestone Company archive at the University of Akron, which Harvey Firestone donated in 1943. The archive is now closed to researchers (most likely because of Firestone's present-day 'forced labor' legal battles in Liberia).

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