

Ebola in Liberia: An Epidemic of Rumors

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In December 2013, the West African Ebola epidemic began in a village near Guéckédou, a trading town in rural Guinea, but the disease wasn't identified until February. The Guineans promptly notified health officials in neighboring countries, and in Liberia a team of researchers immediately set out for Lofa County, just over the border from Guéckédou, where a number of mysterious deaths had recently occurred. The Liberians at first assumed the deaths were caused by Lassa fever, a far less deadly disease with symptoms similar to Ebola. Liberia had no lab capable of testing for Ebola then, so the researchers sent some blood samples to France. When the results finally came back in late March showing that Ebola was spreading in Liberia too, "fear grabbed us," said Tolbert Nyenswah, who now heads the Ebola Task Force in Liberia's Ministry of Health and Social Welfare.

That first outbreak burned out quickly: there were only twelve documented cases in March and April and then none at all for six weeks. However, on May 29, the disease reappeared in Liberia's capital, Monrovia, and this time it exploded. There were cases all over the city. Nyenswah and his Liberian colleagues had never dealt with Ebola before, but doctors from the medical charity Doctors Without Borders and the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC), who had fought numerous previous Ebola outbreaks in Central Africa, were on hand to help.

Together, they warned the public through radio announcements, posters, and billboards, and sent health workers to villages throughout the country to tell people to be on the lookout for the disease. They set up a hotline so people could report cases and trained teams of investigators to visit each caller and make a tentative diagnosis based on symptoms. They also equipped a lab to do blood tests locally and built Ebola treatment



Grant Miller/George W. Bush Presidential Center

Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf; portrait by former President George W. Bush from his exhibition 'The Art of Leadership: A President's Personal Diplomacy,' at the George W. Bush Center in Dallas last spring

centers—tent camps where patients could be isolated and receive basic care. They hired over two thousand contact tracers to identify and isolate everyone—such as close relatives of victims and health workers—who might have been exposed to the virus.

This system had worked to control twenty-four previous Ebola outbreaks in sub-Saharan Africa, but it wasn't working this time. At first five, then ten, then twenty, then forty, then more than sixty cases a day were being reported to the task force. Each infected person had fifteen to twenty “contacts”—usually family members or health workers who might have touched them—and as the epidemic took off in July, half of them went on to develop the disease as well. By early August, the treatment centers were full, the streets were strewn with bodies, and the Ebola hotline was receiving thousands of calls a week. One caller was so distraught that he went straight to the cemetery and rang the hotline from there.

In September, the CDC predicted that 1.4 million people in Sierra Leone and Liberia might succumb to the disease if the epidemic continued its swift spread. This assessment was partly based on the staggering surge of cases in Monrovia. Ebola was also devastating Guinea and Sierra Leone, but the capitals of those countries hadn't exploded with disease as Monrovia had. “The Conakry [the capital of Guinea] outbreaks have been very small, and they haven't exploded in Freetown [the capital of Sierra Leone],” Armand Sprecher, an Ebola expert with Doctors Without Borders, told *New York Times* reporter Norimutsu Onishi in August. “So something is different in Monrovia.... We've never seen this kind of explosion in an urban environment before.”

The epidemic in Monrovia finally began to subside in September, and today only about twenty new cases a day are being reported throughout Liberia. But over 2,800 Liberians have died from the disease, more than twice as many as in larger Sierra Leone and Guinea, and over six thousand have been infected, ten times more than in any previous Ebola epidemic. Although the number of deaths is far from the apocalypse predicted by the CDC, it's worth asking why Liberia's epidemic has been so bad. Ebola is not transmitted through the air like flu or through food and water like cholera and typhoid. It can be contracted only by touching the vomit, feces, urine, saliva, or sweat of a sick person or corpse.

Until now, controlling it was thought to be so straightforward that when the US government was forced to cut “nonessential” programs in the aftermath of the 2012 “fiscal cliff” standoff, Defense Department research on a

promising Ebola drug was among the first things to be axed.¹ The World Health Organization was so sanguine about Ebola that it didn't declare the West African epidemic a public health emergency—a step that automatically mobilizes large-scale fund-raising from donors—until August 8, nearly six months after the first cases were discovered in Guinea, and nearly two and a half months after the explosive epidemic in Monrovia began.²

The virus is no different from those that caused previous outbreaks, and it is difficult to transmit.³ Patrick Sawyer, the Liberian lawyer who flew to Nigeria and died of Ebola there in July, was floridly ill on the plane, but the only people who caught the virus from him were health workers and one other passenger who touched him while helping him off the plane. No one in the household of Eric Duncan, the Liberian who died of Ebola in Texas on October 8, became infected, nor did the girlfriend of Craig Spencer, the New York doctor who contracted the disease in Guinea.

Some have suggested that Ebola had never broken out in a city such as Monrovia before, and this is what made the present epidemic unique. But in 1995, Ebola struck Kikwit, Zaire—a city of 400,000 people—and in 2001 it broke out in Gulu, Uganda, population 100,000. Health authorities then had far less experience coping with Ebola than they did on the eve of the West African epidemic, but in those cases only around 250 people died.

Another hypothesis is that Liberia's health care system, with only a few dozen doctors and fewer than two thousand underpaid nurses in a population of four million, was ill-equipped to cope with Ebola. However, emergency measures to deal with the disease outside of ordinary health care services rapidly contained previous outbreaks in Sudan, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which have similarly terrible health care systems.⁴

What went wrong? In October, I went to Liberia with this question in mind. I came to believe—as others have suggested—that the problem was fundamentally political.⁵ When the epidemic occurred, many ordinary Liberians were so profoundly estranged from their government that they assumed it was lying to them and actively disbelieved the warnings that Nyenswah and others were desperately broadcasting to the nation and the world.

Instead, right up until September, people continued to behave as they usually did when others became ill or died. Entire families perished because they insisted on nursing sick relatives themselves. When a Muslim dies in this part of the world, his or her relatives traditionally wash, dress, and bury the body, and groups of related families were wiped out in this way. Even trained nurses ignored the warnings, and kept administering treatment to their neighbors in order to make extra money. Scores of them died, along with their families, their other patients, and their colleagues.

By late October, the epidemic was coming under control in Monrovia, but was still throwing off sparks into the countryside as people who had contracted the virus in the capital passed it to their families in the villages. Shortly after I arrived, I learned of an outbreak that had recently killed nearly thirty people in a village called Jene Wonde, about fifty miles north of the capital in the lush countryside of palm, coconut, and banana trees near the Sierra Leone border. Ninety people had been quarantined in their homes by the village chief. What had been a lively farming community and trading center was fast becoming a ghost town. Market stalls, once stocked with food and such necessities of village life as soap, candles, matches, and plastic buckets, were empty. People from other communities shunned the villagers and wouldn't even speak to them; motorcyclists sped through, their faces covered in cloth.

The first cases in Jene Wonde occurred in late July. Earlier that month, Ebola had struck a slum on the outskirts of Monrovia, killing about seventeen people. A young Jene Wonde woman who was living there thought the cause was poison, and fled in the direction of her village. On the way, she began to feel sick and stopped in a town on the main road to consult a witch doctor. The witch doctor recognized her symptoms at once, and said there was nothing he could do. Her father, a teacher in Jene Wonde, set out to find her, but she had died by the time he reached the town. He buried her alone there that night and returned to his family the next day. Soon he and his wife and four of their other children were dead. Then a sister who brought them food and washed them died too, along with her entire family, and the families of the women who cared for them. In this way the sickness spread around the village, killing one family after another.

Throughout the summer, health officials had come repeatedly to urge the villagers to call the hotline when people became ill, but they refused. When the local nurse who runs Jene Wonde's small clinic called for an ambulance to collect a pregnant woman she suspected had the virus, the villagers practically rioted. The nurse had gone home by the time the ambulance arrived, but a crowd gathered around her house shouting insults and sent it away.

"The people from the district came and told us all the signs and symptoms, but we did not believe them," the village chief—a woman—explained when I asked her why the villagers reacted this way. "We were thinking the president"—meaning Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who has held office since 2006—"created it"—meaning Ebola—"to kill people."

"Ebola came and they blamed me," I was told by the nurse, who briefly fled the village and had only just returned. "They thought nurses had been given poison by the president to inject into people so they'd die and the UN would send

money. Everyone in all the villages around here was believing that.”

By now, the villagers had realized their error and set up their own quarantine system, overseen by a local farmer in a blue windbreaker, who carried around a sheaf of reporting forms in a battered cardboard folder. A doctor and an epidemiologist from the CDC had been posted to the area to help the villagers cope and make the quarantine as safe as possible. A special isolation center for Ebola patients opened a few days later.

Eventually Ebola will be contained in Liberia, and next time people should be ready for it so fewer will die. Maybe none will die if new medicines are developed by then. But the virus has shed light on a far tougher problem. Many Liberians don't trust their president or her government. Early on in the epidemic, versions of the rumor that Sirleaf invented the crisis so she could dupe foreign aid donors into sending her money were aired in newspapers, on radio programs, and in Liberia's ubiquitous teashops where men gather in the afternoon to talk about politics. Even a Liberian senator claimed that the epidemic was a hoax, although he did not seem to hold the more extreme belief that President Sirleaf had actually assigned nurses to poison people in order to make the ruse more convincing.⁶



Mike King

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf—Nobel Peace Prize winner, Harvard graduate, former Citibank executive and UN diplomat—is not someone you'd ordinarily suspect of plotting a dastardly scheme to poison her citizens for money. She is a remarkable and, to many, a heroic figure. In 2007, she was awarded a US Presidential Medal of Freedom for helping to end Liberia's notorious twenty-three-year cycle of civil wars.

The fighting had been extreme not only for its brutality but for its bizarre conduct. Until 1980, Liberia's ruling class had consisted almost entirely of Americo-Liberians, descendants of freed American slaves who settled there in the early 1800s. They wore three-piece suits and Edwardian dresses and took pride in what they saw as their own higher degree of civilization compared to the natives. During the civil wars, the rebels—mainly of native African descent—dressed up in Halloween costumes and wedding gowns or stormed around stark naked with Kalashnikovs, as if to dramatize the worst nightmares of the Americo-Liberians. By the time a peace deal was finally signed in 2003,

hundreds of thousands of Liberians were dead and the nation was in ruins.

In the 2005 election, and in her successful reelection campaign in 2011, Sirleaf's popularity rested on a professed commitment to clean government—she'd been denouncing Africa's twin plagues of corruption and militarism since her student days in the 1960s—and also her strong American connections, which she promised would bring in far more aid and investment than her opponents. Her first administration included a dream team of Western-educated human rights lawyers and skilled businessmen who had come back to help repair their troubled country. She also enlisted a team of lawyers to negotiate better terms on contracts with foreign oil, agriculture, and mining companies, and the economy was growing briskly until Ebola struck. Donors also generously supported her ministries, and perhaps surprisingly in view of the recent epidemic, the health care system in particular showed major signs of improvement: until Ebola derailed it, rates of malaria and maternal mortality had fallen significantly.

Despite these achievements, disenchantment with Sirleaf's regime began to set in long before Ebola broke out. Late in her first term, Liberia's lively and vociferous press began reporting a series of major corruption scandals. Millions of dollars in donor funds intended for health care, agriculture, and other projects had not been accounted for.⁷ Numerous contracts with foreign gold, diamond, iron, and agriculture companies had been signed without consulting the communities that were to be affected by the projects, and nearly all of these contracts have been found to be so flawed that they violated the country's own laws.⁸ Bribes had been paid to legislators to approve offshore oil concessions, including one involving US oil giant Chevron, but President Sirleaf allowed the contract to stand anyway.⁹

This culture of impunity is partly attributable to the breakdown in public order during the civil wars, but many people I spoke to, including President Sirleaf's supporters, felt she had not done enough to confront it. Commissions of inquiry were appointed to investigate graft and reports were issued, but wrongdoers were seldom seriously punished. Many of her original cabinet members have by now resigned in dismay at the government's tolerance of corruption or been pushed out. In their places, Sirleaf appointed less-qualified associates and even put her son Charles on the board of the Central Bank. Another son, Robert, a suave entrepreneur with a Clark Gable mustache who worked at the North Carolina office of Wachovia Bank until its demise in the 2008 financial crisis, was briefly put in charge of the national oil company. Liberian lawmakers have questioned the financial probity of both sons, as well as Fumba Sirleaf, her stepson. None of them has been indicted or convicted of a crime, however.

Meanwhile, the country's economic growth has done little to improve the lives of most Liberians, over 60 percent of whom still struggle to survive on less than a dollar a day, while battling corruption in their everyday lives. Police routinely steal goods from street vendors and judges take bribes from plaintiffs.¹⁰ University students lamented to me that they had to bribe their professors and administrators with sexual favors, money, or sometimes both. "You canna pay skoo' fees unless you slee' wi' somewah," a beautiful sociology major told me.

In the countryside near Jene Wonde, the Malaysian company Sime Darby staked out a vast palm oil plantation in 2009. Only a few hundred impoverished locals have found very low-wage employment there and many more say they've lost access to sacred burial grounds and farms. In 2011, riots broke out and Sirleaf herself traveled to the area to restore order. "You are trying to undermine your own government," she said sternly. "You can't do that. If you do so all the foreign investors coming to Liberia will close their businesses and leave, then Liberia will go back to the old days."¹¹

A confidential report from the US Agency for International Development was leaked to the press in March, warning that the volatile mixture of mass poverty and unemployment, combined with resentment about elite corruption, threatens the nation's stability.¹² After the civil wars ended in 2003, Liberia never had a real truth-and-reconciliation process. There was an investigation and a report, but no trials, no punishments, and no prison terms. An aid worker who was not involved in the USAID report told me that she sometimes asks Liberians how they see the process of reconciliation. "They tend to respond more in terms of wanting inclusive development, and less in terms of criminal justice."

In other words, it's not simply that the poor want more of what the elites have; rather they see material benefits as themselves a form of justice, and as evidence that Liberian society has changed after nearly two centuries of exclusion. The Ebola rumors suggest that many people, accurately or otherwise, feel that Sirleaf has lately been betraying her promises to them. When poor Liberians see urban elites swishing by in expensive vehicles and hear of new oil deals being signed, they naturally wonder whether all that promised foreign aid and investment isn't going into some corrupt person's pocket.

Thus, when the Health Ministry requested \$1.5 million in emergency funds from the Treasury to fight Ebola last spring, many Liberians assumed this was just another scam on the part of a secretive cartel of elites to steal more foreign aid. When the Jene Wondeans heard these speculations on FM radio stations, I was told they took them literally, believing that President Sirleaf had actually created the epidemic by getting government nurses to distribute the poison that

caused it.

On August 12, as the Ebola epidemic was reaching its peak in Liberia, Solomon George, the legislative representative for West Point, Monrovia's largest slum and an opposition stronghold, told journalists that the dead bodies of five of his constituents had been lying in the street for four days. If they were not removed the following day, he would deliver them personally to President Sirleaf's office. The next day, the Health Ministry converted a West Point school—which had been closed since July because of the epidemic—into a community care center where Ebola patients could be isolated while awaiting a slot in a treatment unit staffed by doctors and nurses.

Although the care center was constructed to get bodies off the streets, hundreds of angry demonstrators protested outside, some claiming that the epidemic was a hoax and others believing in it but angry that their community was being used as a dumping ground for patients around the city. On the night of August 16, a group of young men raided the building and stole bedding and other supplies. Seventeen Ebola patients fled into the slum.

Four days later, President Sirleaf placed the entire West Point community under quarantine. Police and soldiers in riot gear blocked off all the roads leading in. Food prices soared immediately and angry crowds filled the streets to protest. When Miatta Flowers, the government-appointed commissioner of West Point, began escorting her family out of the slum under armed guard, a riot broke out, and two young men were shot by soldiers.¹³ One later bled to death in a hospital abandoned by its staff because of the Ebola crisis; the other is permanently disabled.

The quarantine was lifted ten days later, but in this land of rumors, questions about why Sirleaf ordered it in the first place were still in the air when I arrived in October. After all, public health officials had warned her that cordoning off such a large area risked alienating the very people whose cooperation she desperately needed to control the epidemic.

It's hard to know where fantasy starts and truth ends in Liberia, but some West Pointers told me they thought the quarantine was really a move to quash an armed rebellion, and had little to do with public health. West Point is home to precisely the people most likely to feel left behind in Sirleaf's Liberia. Most are young, poorly educated, and struggling to get by as fishermen or as traders in food, alcohol, charcoal, or used clothes in the slum's vast warren-like marketplace. Many are also prostitutes, smugglers, thieves, or drug dealers.

Rumors of a coup first emerged last July, when the US suddenly revoked the visas of three senior Liberian government officials. No reason was given, but all of them are on a list of people recommended for war crimes prosecution in Liberia's Truth and Reconciliation Commission report.¹⁴ That report also implicates Sirleaf, who admitted to the TRC commissioners that early in the civil war, she had provided modest support to the notorious warlord Charles Taylor, now serving a fifty-year sentence in a British prison for war crimes committed in neighboring Sierra Leone. In May, Jucontee Thomas Woewiyu, who had been a spokesman for Taylor in the 1990s, was arrested for lying about his involvement in war crimes on a 2006 application for US citizenship, and is now awaiting trial. In the past he has claimed that Sirleaf was far more involved in Taylor's rebellion than she admitted, and some Liberian newspapers have speculated that he could turn state witness.¹⁵

Then in early August, Liberia's *National Chronicle* newspaper began publishing a ten-part series about a US-based movement to replace Sirleaf with a caretaker government overseen by the US. Part three of the series, describing a closed-door meeting in Washington between President Obama and Liberian Vice President Joseph Boakai, appeared on a Wednesday. That afternoon, police raided the *National Chronicle's* downtown office, arresting two journalists and ordering the newspaper shut. Philipbert Browne, the owner and editor in chief, gave a live radio interview during the raid and listeners could hear the police pounding on the doors and the staff running away from tear gas.

That evening, yet another rumor began circulating—that a shipment of weapons had disappeared from Liberia's Freeport, which abuts the northern boundary of West Point. When the president ordered soldiers to quarantine the slum two days later, and then the commissioner and her family began to leave, people panicked. "If the government was getting its own people out, anything could happen," Abdulaziz Kromah, a student who lives in West Point, told me.

Outside of West Point, few people I spoke to believe that Obama is seriously planning to take over Liberia and install a caretaker government, or that shipments of guns were distributed in West Point to stage a rebellion. Vice President Boakai has declined to discuss publicly what he spoke to President Obama



Daniel Berehulak/The New York Times/Redux

President Sirleaf surrounded by bodyguards wearing protective gloves during a visit to the quarantined neighborhood of West Point in Liberia's capital, Monrovia, August 2014

about when he saw him in early August, and when I called James Tarpeh, whom the *National Chronicle* named as the US-based leader of the supposed future interim government, he also refused to comment on the matter.

After the quarantine ended, things settled down for a while. Then, in September, Obama announced that he was sending four thousand US troops to Liberia to fight Ebola—more than we currently have deployed to help Iraqis and others fight ISIS in the Middle East—and rumors began swirling once again. (The number of Ebola troops has since been reduced to three thousand.)

When I arrived in Monrovia, several of these soldiers could be seen tramping around the good hotels wearing camouflage uniforms and patrol boots. Their official assignment is to build more Ebola treatment centers—and that's almost certainly what they will be doing—but the epidemic was already declining by the time they arrived, and many existing treatment center beds were empty. This led to much speculation in this rumor-prone society about what the actual mission of the soldiers might be. One rumor making the rounds was that they were there to prevent corrupt Liberians from stealing Ebola-tainted blood samples and selling them to al-Qaeda; another was that they were there to keep the peace should Sirleaf be pushed out in favor of a—no doubt imaginary—US-backed caretaker government.

The rumor of a US takeover intrigued me, because it echoes through Liberia's history, beginning with the first settlement of freed American slaves in the early nineteenth century. Liberia was never a colony, but American warships would occasionally appear offshore when its French and British colonial neighbors threatened its borders.¹⁶ After World War II, America set up a CIA communication center there as well as a station of the military's OMEGA navigation system—a forerunner of GPS. Liberia hosted Voice of America's Africa service as well as Firestone's vast rubber plantations and American iron, gold, and diamond mines.

In 1971, President William Tubman died and his left-leaning, idealistic vice-president, William Tolbert, took over. Tolbert expanded social services like health care and education and scrapped subsidies on imported rice to encourage Liberian farmers. However, he antagonized the US by renegotiating unfavorable contracts with Firestone and other companies. He also criticized Israel for its treatment of the Palestinians, offered support to the African National Congress and other revolutionary groups, and established diplomatic relations with North Korea, Libya, China, the USSR, and other countries on America's cold war enemy list. He also refused to grant the American military unlimited access to the nation's main airport, which it had been using to send weapons to cold war allies around the continent.

In 1980, Tolbert was murdered in his bed by soldiers allied to Samuel Doe, a young sergeant in the Liberian army. US foreign aid cuts and riots organized by CIA-backed opposition groups over increased rice prices had already weakened Tolbert's regime.¹⁷ Doe himself also claimed to have been recruited into the CIA in 1973,¹⁸ and according to eyewitnesses he called the US embassy the night of Tolbert's murder and received its blessing for the takeover.¹⁹ Ten days later, thirteen of Tolbert's cabinet ministers were paraded around Monrovia in their underwear and then shot dead on the beach before an audience of horrified Western journalists.

Doe promptly dismantled Tolbert's leftist policies, cut ties with Libya, the Soviets, and other enemies of America, renegotiated contracts with US companies, and allowed the US military free rein at the airport. In return, Doe received \$500 million in foreign aid from the Reagan administration, far more than any other African country at the time.

By the mid-1980s, the Americans, finally recognizing that Doe was an erratic, corrupt thug, abetted several failed coup attempts, until he was eventually overthrown by the warlord Charles Taylor in 1990. Taylor had been a member of Doe's government, but fled Liberia with \$900,000 in stolen cash in 1983. Taylor claims that while awaiting extradition in Massachusetts, he was set free by the guards and driven to New York in a US-government vehicle. From there he made his way to the Ivory Coast, where he launched his invasion of Liberia. Whether Doe or Taylor was ever really linked to the CIA is not known, but in 2006 Taylor told a journalist, "Every move we took, we consulted Washington first."

Between 1990 and 2003, Liberia was caught in a storm of insurgencies and counterinsurgencies involving Taylor's group, a splinter group headed by another warlord named Prince Johnson—who also claims to have received US support—two other American-backed factions known as MODEL and LURD, and a US-backed peacekeeping force made up of troops from Nigeria and Ghana.

In 2003, a peace deal was finally signed, and an interim government took over. Elections were held in 2005, but once again, the Americans were watching closely. A particularly warm relationship had developed between President George W. Bush and Sirleaf, who called each other "Ellen" and "George" even at high-level meetings. When Bush retired and took up oil painting, he made a portrait of her.

After Sirleaf's election, Chevron was awarded an offshore concession in a deal whose transparency has been questioned by both the Liberian General Auditing Commission and the international corruption watchdog group Global

Witness. When Sirleaf was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize just weeks before the 2011 election, even though she had been censured in 2009 by Liberia's own government-appointed Truth and Reconciliation Commission for her support of Charles Taylor, opposition groups, imagining that her mysterious American backers had somehow influenced the judges in Oslo, staged violent demonstrations and boycotted the 2011 election.²⁰ Although international observers maintain that the election was nevertheless conducted in a transparent and democratic manner, many Liberians told me that they believed the American government influenced both the 2005 and 2011 elections in Sirleaf's favor. But they could not explain how it could have done so. Now some of them were saying that the Americans were growing impatient with her, just as they had with Doe and Taylor.

On my last day in Liberia, the son of one of President Tolbert's cabinet ministers took me to the prison where his father was held before being executed on the beach by Doe's soldiers in 1980. It's derelict now, and strewn with leaves and trash. The last drops of a rainstorm were falling from the rafters of the caved-in roof. "This is where everything began to go wrong for Liberia," he said, standing in one of the cells.

Liberia's problems long predate Tolbert's murder, but it is true that during his presidency, Liberia made halting progress to extend rights and services to native Africans—progress that was destroyed by Doe's coup and the decades of countercoups that followed. Tolbert was one of a number of left-leaning post-independence leaders—including Congo's Patrice Lumumba, Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah, Uganda's Milton Obote, Burkina Faso's Thomas Sankara, and Mozambique's Samora Machel—whose death or violent overthrow has been linked to Western cold war meddling. The loss of these leaders, flawed though they were, was seen by many as disrupting the development of their countries and leaving deep psychological and cultural scars. In Liberia, when Doe killed Tolbert and the mayhem began, many Liberians may well have concluded that the world was an irrational place. In their desperation, they may have lost their grip on reality, and begun to see plots and conspiracies everywhere.

Nearly every afternoon when I was in Monrovia, US military Osprey helicopters roared across the beach transporting gear for our soldiers fighting Ebola. The receptionist at my hotel told me the helicopters were coming from a US destroyer moored just off the coast. Sometimes, he said, it moved closer to shore and you could see it.

For days, I scanned the horizon trying to catch a glimpse of this destroyer, which every Liberian I spoke to seemed to have either heard about or seen. "It's HUGE!" a waitress at a beachside hotel told me. "I've seen it twice." Finally I

stopped a navy officer on the street near the US embassy and asked him where it was.

“A destroyer? Wow, that would be exciting!” he said. The helicopters were flown in from Europe, he explained, refueling in midair. “I can assure you there is no US maritime presence in Liberia.”

Like so much else in Liberia, the destroyer was an illusion. But here, even illusions can have serious consequences.

—November 20, 2014

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- 14 “Liberia: America ‘Aware,’ But Mute Over Cancelling Liberian Officials Visa,” [AllAfrica.com](#), July 25, 2014. [↪](#)
- 15 “An Open Letter to Madame Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf,” *The Liberian Dialogue*, May 16, 2014; “Liberia: ‘Complex’ Woewiyu Case—State Witness Possibility Not Sure Bet,” [AllAfrica.com](#), October 29, 2014. [↪](#)
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