

AN ORATION*
ON WEDNESDAY 26 JULY 2017
ON THE OCCASION OF THE 170TH INDEPENDENCE DAY
OF THE REPUBLIC OF LIBERIA
'SUSTAINING THE PEACE'
BY HERMAN BROWNE

Your Excellency, Madam Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, President of the Republic of Liberia

Honorable Vice President

Mr. Speaker, and members of the House of Representatives

Your Honour, Chief Justice and Associate Justices of the Supreme Court

Mr. President Pro-Tempore and members of the Liberian Senate

Officials of Government

Your Excellency the Doyen and members of the diplomatic corps, and residents with this Republic

The Special Representative of the Secretary General of the United Nations and heads of International Organizations

Members of the Clergy and Religious Communities

Traditional Chiefs and Elders

My fellow citizens

Good morning.

Today we celebrate a special chapter in the life of our nation, 170 years of existence as a free and sovereign nation. It represents an extraordinary moment for my family for me to have been selected by you, Madam President, from among many eminently suitable for the task. We are deeply grateful. Thank you. Today presents, in this year of national

elections and amid an already raucous political contest, a most public and rare opportunity for us all to pause and express our appreciation deep and sincere for the work of this government, led by your excellency Madam Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, whilst looking forward to that of the next. This is an occasion that we should seize to thank the familiar, the known and tried; whilst in good faith anxiously await to welcome the unfamiliar, the unknown, and the untested.

Today is also primarily a day we set aside in our national life to look beyond government and her leaders, beyond politics and tribe, beyond the arrogance of creed or gender, beyond the bread and butter issues of the day and the pathology of our daily lives to something bigger, greater, and higher than our individual lives: in our country's cause.

'with hearts and hands, our country's cause defending, we meet the foe with valour unpretending'.

When we sing, truly sing, not just with our lips, but from within our souls the stirring words of our national anthem do we not commit ourselves to lay aside every distracting loyalty, every vow or bond and work together, even in the face of clear and present danger, to defend without pretense our Country's cause? So, without pretense, let me lay bare some fundamentals before I endeavor to reflect on what sustaining the peace might entail.

It is in our country's cause, our national interest to secure the peace we now enjoy. And peace, not just for its own sake, but so that we might preserve our fundamental civil liberties where our freedoms of democracy can flourish, where our entitlement to justice can be more real than virtual; where our pursuit of happiness can be more easily realized; and where a wholesome, functioning, diverse society in which all of us feel we belong can be more realistically brought within our grasp. We need to see and understand that, to this, we are closer now than we have ever been.

Don't get me wrong. It certainly may not *feel* so, but it appears so. We have moved a long way from fighting each other to working with each other. We have moved from physically attacking each other to attacking the political interests of the other; undoing

what matters most to the other. When we shift from the person to the person's (political, social or economic) interest, we shift the terms of the engagement one notch towards civility.

For many years we have avoided public discussions about our inequalities and social antipathies (gender, class, ethnicity, literacy) altogether. Now, we are talking about them; they have entered the mainstream of public discourse, and often finding ways to address them. We no longer pretend that these are minor issues facing our society. Neither are we particularly quiet about them. This is healthy; and I believe that only in maintaining this peace can solutions with any chance of permanence be found. The sustainable nature of the peace will rest in the way we live, talk, walk and treat each other; and so forge the bonds of unity, that the interests of one will lie squarely and indistinguishably within the interest of the other. In this way, my self-interest is redefined less digitally, and made so connected with yours, that peace is more likely sustained.

SAVORING THE DIVIDENDS OF (THE) PEACE (WE SUSTAIN)

Now, I am aware that I run the risk of being likened to one who will miss an opportunity to scold the government and exalt the opposition bloc; I run the risk of being likened to yet another pastor missing an opportunity (on one hand) to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, as the only way to save this country; (and on the other) missing the chance to lambast religious leaders for not being as forthright or as clear as we would like them to be in their stance against social maladies. I am mindful that I run the risk of being likened to one whose interests are so tied to the educated elite, that I fail to describe in miserable detail the frustrations of the young, or the anxieties of the struggling. I may even be accused of failing at this moment to highlight issues affecting the cause of women, and instead squandering it in pursuit of the dense business of seeking analytical clarity on issues affecting our common life. I take responsibility for all of this, and say that far from attempting to sum up the sentiments of my fellow citizens on this day and regurgitate

them for the arousal of my audience, I stand here to speak my mind. My mind, on what this country needs to move (not timidly, but) boldly into a glorious future; a future that awaits the good the bad, and the ugly in each of us.

What must we do to embrace this future? What path must we take in order to enjoy the dividends we yield from the peace we have so far sustained. What must we place in the foreground to enter this future, conscious of the background of a conflictual past, and mindful of the playground of a turbulent present? Question: which foot must we place forward; and what baggage must we leave behind if we must win the race of national progress, and drink from the fountain of economic opportunities, national prosperity, and a wholesome public life?

Answer: I do not know. But what I *do* know is that any reasonably good answer will need to address three clusters of concerns that may not now seem important to us, but will weigh upon us heavily in the near future, if ignored.

If we must live out in private and public, teach and preach the basic values we wish to see in our children, then we ourselves, as adults must return to basic values of respect (for ourselves, for women, and for constituted authority), fairness(in our dealings with others), integrity (when no one is looking) and duty(as a self-imposed obligation to serve the public good).

The second cluster of issues is bluntly this: we must elevate the terms and tenor of our public discourse. We should be less about seat and salary in the Senate, and more about service and sacrifice (to Country); less about reputation and prestige and more about responsibility and impact; and we must learn all over again a respect for the truth in the public space.

The third cluster is equally straightforward. We must prepare better our best minds and hands in this country for a brighter future, a future bright with competition and

desperately needful of the best acumen and skill this country can ever muster. We need more attention to the form and character of our system of education, yes; but more precisely, to the *way* we learn, and per force the *way* we educate.

In Gratitude to this administration

The peace we enjoy, it is not one that came easily; not without tears and agony, our own blood and those of strangers. With gratitude, we must, all of us who struggle to sustain this peace in our places of life and work, now vow to enhance this precious gift; forged by the efforts of men and women, and established by the will of God. We must keep it not just for the good of our children, but for our neighbours also, many of whom sacrificed their peace for ours. This administration presided over this peace for more than a decade, and for this we are thankful.

How many of us will ever forget the enormous threat that the Ebola Virus posed to this country and its inhabitants. There were always two big questions. How bad is it going to get? And When will it end?; and at the height of that epidemic the official prediction of the World Health Organization that with the existent trends Ebola cases could rise to nearly 1.3 million in the region; and even in the wake of interventions, at least 21,000 cases would emerge in Liberia alone before January 2015.

This government studied the numbers and then looked at her people. The WHO saw the circumstances that were facing us; but you, Madam President, you and your government saw the resolve that God had placed in us. And you took the position that the resilience of your people was the only statistic that mattered; and announced publicly that the WHO's calculation was wrong and that their prediction would not come to pass. Madam President, this was an occasion when the courage of your government was met with collective commitment of your people(to defeat the virus); and inspired by your leadership, we succeeded. We salute you.

Madam President, I want to commend you not just for the freedom of the press,(for that is a constitutional liberty guaranteed to any republic); but for the level of press freedom that you have allowed under this regime. Not only is it recent and unusual, but I have observed over the years that even the most impertinent, vociferous, guttural, and bellicose criticism by the (print, audio, and social) media of both this government and yourself are greeted with an institutional restraint and personal tolerance befitting a leadership determined to give back to the people their voice. I can only hope that the next administration does not discover it a trojan horse! Thank you.

There is much more to be grateful for, and principal in my view are: the ethnic neutrality in the administration of our judicial system, our enhancement of our international standing and influence on the world stage, our Roads, the mainstreaming of gender issues, the emergence of integrity institutions, especially the little known Board of Tax Appeal signaling Government's commitment to fairer taxation, and the restoration of our credit worthiness in the waiver of our entire national debt.

To the incoming leaders

It will be important for whosoever takes on the baton from this administration to be conscious that 'some done, some not done'. Do I think we have fought well the fight against corruption? Probably. But I also think that we can do more about the perception that it is on the rise!

Is our health system adequate? Probably not. But we grow confident daily that this is so not for lack of knowledge or skill, but resources, and the allocation thereof. I urge more attention be given to those most vulnerable, whose very survival (the yet unborn) depend almost entirely on the availability and quality of maternity services we offer women within our borders.

Do we still see the seasonal inaccessibility of our roads, especially in the Southeast? Yes, a huge challenge, but who can not be heartened by news of negotiations on the way and

nearing completion to bring much needed relief particularly to this region? We should not relent in our efforts here with our international partners.

Are our eyes open enough to see the level of unemployment and the simmering frustration among the youth? And the need for reconciliation, political, economic and social? Yes! And this is why, we believe, it will be important for whosoever wins the national elections to make the clear connection between our employment and reconciliation needs and the case for incorporating more constructively the Liberian diaspora into our national body politic.

So, what should help us to sustain the peace?

My fellow Liberians, we must first return to the fundamentals of family values that nurture our personal character and forms our basic disposition towards each other : LET'S GO BACK TO BASICS.

Respect, justice, honesty and duty are values (whether divinely commanded or socially approved) that any citizenry should possess and cultivate if their society is to function wholesomely. In every home or family, in every school or playground, in every church or mosque, in every institution or workplace, these should be demonstrated and demanded of us all.

Respect for authority begins at home with parents and guardians (father, mother, aunties, uncles, grandpa and grandma, cousins). In life, we are all, all under authority. Law and order should be the rhythm of family life that enables relationships and trust to be built; where boundaries are establish and the common good was indistinguishable from the upholding of this order. Just in case no one has ever told us, my fellow Liberians, we suffer a great deal from the lack of self-restraint. On many occasions we seek to be an exception to laid down procedures, an exception to rules, an exception to law and officers of the law.

By the time we became teenagers, treating others fairly was something that came by instinct and no longer by instruction. It was something that would shock us if we didn't see it happening elsewhere; and likely to draw comment. I distinctly remember my mother retorting to my insinuation that she was taking sides with a stranger in settling a quarrel between us, "No, Herman. She said, " I'm not taking her side, I'm on justice side". I'll never forget that. You see, fairness was not just a celebrated virtue in my family, it was more of a cause. One went out of his way, simply to show himself or herself to be fair. And the parents were always quick to acknowledge that.

Minding your own business and taking your hands off other people's property were basic expectations. Sharing, helping and giving back something of yourself to others for the benefit of someone other than yourself was fundamental to our home training. So what is my point? Discipline. I believe that we should teach this to our children diligently, and expect these from ourselves.

Today, the level of dishonesty, duplicity and double standards we now see in our society doesn't allow anyone to believe anyone anymore about anything. One's word can no longer be trusted. Promises are rarely kept. Debts are never paid. Our 'seh-pay' attitude has simply spiraled out of control. And why? Because 'da ha deh country lookin'. This is a slide away from civility when our sense of 'honor' or 'shame' has little or no bearing on our commitments or social interactions. Perhaps this is why many of us have so little regard for our country's honor; so little regard for our country's laws; and officers of the public peace. We must return to the point where one's sense of 'shame' is strong enough to set boundaries to his or her behavior, I would even say to make one's behavior predictable. We must return to saying what one means and meaning what one says; we must return to the notion that it is okay not to be liked, to reward sacrifice, to celebrate humility, to live with little and give much; to be poor in things, but rich in soul; to seek to live a quiet and serviceable life.

Second: we must watch how we discuss issues of national concern in the public space.

ELEVATE THE DISCOURSE ON PUBLIC LIFE

In our world today, we rely often on the media to interpret what is going on around us in relation to the public institutions we fund and to which we rightly look for a leadership accountable to us for the services they render. In this regard I commend media practitioners for their tenacity, for the commitment they demonstrate to public scrutiny and exposure of matters that should rightly concern the public (and only those!). I believe the media have come of age, so I am confident that practitioners will appreciate what I have to say.

I find it deeply concerning how propagandist we can easily become; and how, except for a couple of printed media, we are entirely tabloid. Ill-informed assumptions far too often form the basis for public discussion that are transmitted directly into our homes. For example, one can not go up and down this country and take the view that ‘nothing has changed’. And mean it. And expect thinking people to take you seriously. Worst still, a talk show host might likely to take this proposition for an hour discussion: “nothing has changed. Are you for or against?” and then open the phone lines. We must do better than this if the media is to take their educational role seriously.

Our analyses of public issues and events are often far too thin. Our perspectives are not diverse, and often oversimplified, our interlocutors too few, and often grasp of various historical, economic or political trends unhelpfully minimal. I apologize if this seems hard on this sector of our civil life, but the media’s role in sustaining the peace is serious business, and far too important for us not to understand that when we read the papers, tune in to our radios, watch television, or endure talk shows, much more is expected from it than what we now receive.

My fellow citizens, we must elevate the discourse especially during this election season. There are about 20 Presidential candidates. I encourage you to ask not what your candidate will do for this country if he wins. Ask instead, what he plans to do if he fails

(in his bid)! Is it not obvious, in fact statistically absolute, that there will be more in the latter category than in the former. Should the hope that one will be part of the victorious 5% preclude a discussion of what the defeated 95% plans for our country?

My fellow citizens, when I was growing up, I was taught that politics was about seeking the common good through the aligning of mutual interests. Our personal interests must be aligned to the "common good" or else your personal interest will eventually become our national liability. Far too often, and I will say this slowly, we allow our personal interest in getting elected to supersede our common interest or goal of keeping our country united. Let me be clearer. I do not vote for you because you are my father's kin. I do not vote for you because you come from my mother's clan. Do you know why? Because I know many of my father's kin that are downright dishonest, some irresponsible and others incompetent. I know many from my mother's clan who are disloyal, some inexperienced and show no regard for the principles of transparency and accountability. So you know what, your ethnic connection to me lays no greater claim to my support than someone with no ethnic affiliation with me, but in whom I find the ethical standards, competence and commitment to public service that I wish to see in a leader of this country.

My fellow citizens, this rhetoric by politicians of ethnicizing their support base in order to gain your support and leverage over their opponents, is a well known short sighted tactic that undermines our unity as a people; the very oneness on which they will depend once they are elected. Don't fall for it. My fellow countryman, this must stop. It does not further our country's cause, our search for a united, peaceful and reconciled people.

We should not constantly speak of wanting reconciliation, and at such moments, for personal gains, take concrete steps to undermine it. When we do not elevate the discourse during this electioneering period and allow it to degenerate into exclusionary, tribalist rhetoric, we engage unwittingly in a deliberate practice of forgetting; forgetting that the person who is not one of us is part of us; that the one that the word 'vai' excludes is

included in a Liberia that includes us. This deep social practice of organized forgetting has such egregious political consequences, that it must rightly be met with an 'organized remembering' in the writing of our common history.

We have had a bitter past. Made past mistakes and reapt bitter consequences for them. A friend 2 days ago, conveyed to me what dangers we are in of repeating those past mistakes. Our mistaken lives 'once lived cannot be lived again, but, with caution, need not be lived at all'.

My fellow Liberians, if we are not careful, the language we use will mis-shape our reality. I do not accept that I am a citizen of Maryland, Sinoe or Grand kru. Neither must we accept that there are Nimba citizens or Bomi citizens. We are citizens of a *republic*, and only *residents* of counties. The force of this distinction should remind us that wherever we reside in Liberia (and some of us for our entire lives) we are one people, of one nation. My destiny depends on your success; for the intention of our forefathers was that on the Deed of this Republic should be written the name of every child born of a Liberian; and know this: no resident in any part of this country or anywhere else, whether in high office or low comes anywhere near the right to strike out the name of our sons and daughters!

We must elevate the discourse. Change the disc, or flip the script if you must, but we must talk and walk as one into this future of ours, if we are to enjoy the dividends of peace.

And for this our Country's cause we plead with our leaders of faith and religion to take a much clearer stand to 'Never be mere spectators of unfairness or cruelty...for the grave will supply plenty of time for silence' (Christopher Hitchens).

My fellow citizens, my concern with the way we discuss issues affecting our common life is illustrated in the way we have treated the Code of Conduct; an exemplary instrument which ensures that a wide range of public values are upheld and ethical standards maintained in public service. Section V has attracted a great deal of attention because it relates to political participation. This section has as its explicit purpose the prevention

of the abuse or diversion of state resources for personal gain by those with access and influence over public funds, goods and services. In some quarters it is being treated as the 'boogoo man'. Yet another example of the politically charged context in which the fight against corruption must be waged.

Unless I am not reading the same Act (only 22 pages long), the explicit stipulated penalty (in Section 5:9) for not resigning as required(in Section 5:2a &b) fails to include, does *not* include, any disbarment from election to public office. Yet, in listening to ourselves in public space, you would be forgiven for thinking otherwise.

In this regard, we commend our Judiciary for distinguishing itself in bringing a measure of clarity to this matter, specifically in the most recent cases. Having said that, I'm aware that in other quarters it is far from clear that the Code of Conduct has been uniformly enforced, a matter admittedly, for the executive branch. Nevertheless, I am sure you will agree that the nation's confidence in the independence of the judiciary is crucial to sustaining the peace we need to move forward as One people.

I have heard over many months interesting discussions (for and against), including predictions of dire consequences, in the event that efforts were pursued to establish Liberia as a Christian State. I have also heard Christians propounding this prospect with fiery enthusiasm, some loudly and some quietly. As a theologian, I have learned that it is better to be intellectually honest than theologically right. So, I ask you...would you like to know my position? I find, apart from the feasibility of the enterprise, the term Christian State and the very concept it attempts to capture, conceptually difficult to the point of an oxymoron.

When Jesus said, in a classic text that sums up his mission on earth, that he had come to bring good news to the poor: the lame, the sick, the prisoners, etc.... He was describing whatever group of people that were marginalized and victimized by the social political, economic ordering of society. Every political system or ordering of society (be it democracy, communism, or monarchy) marginalizes some group or the other. This is

inevitable. It is this configuration of individuals who inevitably least benefit from any and all political systems that Jesus refers to when he says elsewhere that ‘the poor will always be amongst you’. For one to seek to absolutize any one socio-political system, on the grounds that the system is more godly than others, this commits them to justifying the marginalization of whatever configuration of individuals that would inevitably emerge. And more precisely, commits one to defend a re-ordering of society of the kind that Jesus himself would have clearly condemned...a system that undervalues the dignity of each human being. In my mind, this conceptual contradiction should make any well meaning Christian in support of this fast declining idea, to think again. And I commend the Liberia Council of Churches, for its long awaited, and definitive stance on the matter.

Third: EDUCATE FOR OUR FUTURE

Madam president, esteemed members of the Executive, legislature, the Judiciary, faith leaders, members of the diplomatic corps, my fellow Liberians, our peace will falter if our people remain uninformed and poorly groomed. A more informed society is less likely to repeat the mistakes of the past. The prosperity I see coming, kickstarted by this government, will require all hands on deck. On the back of general literary and analytical skills, we need training centers for specialized skills.

It may interest you to know that out of the more than 1000 universities in Africa, none is among the top 100 worldwide. Only 8 African universities are in the top 300 worldwide, 4 in Egypt and 4 in South Africa.

Particularly at the secondary level, and I dare say even at the tertiary level, our students still require a good deal of attention to be given to their reading and writing skills, their analytical and lateral thinking skills. Our graduate programs still need a lot of work to be truly competitive. If quality is what we seek, then, resources are what we need; not just to attract quality staff, but to produce them. As you may know we happen to preside over

the only private institution providing three levels of tertiary education in this country, and it is not cheap.

However, if adequate support is not forthcoming from sources other than student fees, than fees are not likely to remain the same year after year. When recently I was requested to appear before the House for 'clarification' as why fees at Cuttington were being increased, I had the unfortunate privilege of sharing with the Speaker and members of the Legislature that not only was this mandated by my Board of Trustees, but that in my view, the Board had not gone far enough. Education is a 'service' commodity, and not a 'goods' commodity. We should not haggle, or bargain the cost of education as we would do for goods in the market, and think that what we end up with is a fair deal (for the students), simply because it is fair on the pocket. Too often they end up getting what they pay for.

Are we really not putting our best foot forward in this area? When we populate the workforce with people who are similarly trained, is it any wonder why productivity is as low as it is? I hope I am not stating the obvious to say that although we recognize the extent of the problem we are in, that we appear less serious when someone tries to do something about it. An assessment of the way students learn; the way they are taught; the educational outcomes; and the way students are assessed all need a radical re-evaluation.

I worry that we so desperately need a national accrediting agency in this country to outline clear criteria for institutional and academic standards in tertiary institutions operating in Liberia. Institutions should not be left to police the standards they set for themselves. For all who wish to see things change in this country, change, when it comes should come to this sector, and quickly.

My fellow Liberians, this peace we have kept for 11 years; if we must enjoy its dividends, we must preserve it with what we say and do. No peace, no development. It is as simple as that. To prepare ourselves for the development we deserve; the quality of life we deserve, we must develop a greater respect for the law; for rules, for constituted authority. Honesty, justice and commitment to public service, should become second nature to us.

We must use our public space to inform better our citizenry and inspire others to work in the cause of peace, by changing the negative character of our public discourse. And we should invest more deliberately in our future through education; and I dare say partnering more constructively with those who are happy to assist in this area.

Indeed, we are in this together, as one people. Let me end with a story my father once told me about a carpenter, in his attempt to get me to understand something about human beings. One day this carpenter left his work station after a long day's work. It happened that there was intense disagreement amongst the materials and tools in the shop. So, the **wood** which was in the majority got up and said, my people, I perceive we are not working well together; and we cannot continue like this. There's far too much bickering and strife, without much progress. And since we, the wood, are in the majority, I think the sandpaper must leave our group. Why? Asked the sandpaper. Because you are too rough, the wood said. Too abrasive, uncultured...you lack tact and finesse, too crude and rude, and we can't have you upsetting everyone around us.

Okay, said the **sandpaper**. But if I must go so must the **tapeline**. Why? Asked the **tapeline**. What did I do? Well, that's my point, said the **sandpaper**. You do nothing. You lay around pretending not to be involved in any carpentry, but don't think that I don't know who you are. You are a silent dictator. You think you are the boss over everyone. It has reached the point where, as soon as the master comes in, you are the first person he looks for. Before he cuts anything, he consults you, and wherever you tell him to stop, that's where he begins to cut. We can not have anybody among us who feel that they are better than us, so you must go.

Okay....said the **tapeline**, I will go, but if I go the screws must go, too. The **tapeline** continued, let me tell you why, before you can even ask. You too are lazy. No initiative, no push. No drive....before you do anything the screwdriver must push, and twist, and turn....working with you is too energy intensive and you are just too exhausting. So sorry, you got to go.

Okay, said the screws, we will go....they were all very polite and civilized about this....but if we do, so must the saw. Why? Said the Saw. I'll tell you Why, said the screws. Because you are spineless. You have no mind of your own. Anything the tapeline tells you to do, you comply. You will not move unless the tapeline moves. Sycophantic you are, an eye servant.

Okay, the Saw said. But do you really think I'm leaving from here if the **hammer** stays? “What's that? My name oh!” shouted the hammer. ‘Listen’, the Saw interrupted, ‘Everybody here knows, but nobody wants to tell you. You are too loud. When you are present everybody outside the workshop can hear you. Everybody knows when the hammer is speaking, but know one knows what he's saying. You full up space too much... too boisterous and overbearing....’

This went on all through the night. When the carpenter returned the next morning, he took the wood, tapeline, the saw, the hammer the nail, the sandpaper and made for himself a throne.

In this carpenter shop that is Liberia, the master is working his purpose out, his purpose that will outlive us all. But what are we to make of ourselves, his tools.....for we have some sandpapers among us, there's a saw sitting next to you, a hammer behind you, there are tapelines around you. When all we see is the weakness of the other, we miss the strength that God has deposited in the other. When all we see is the ‘evil’ in us, we miss the ‘good’ that God uses in us...in you and you, and me. Indeed, we are in this together, the good, the bad and the ugly. Together for peace, that peace which is in our Country's cause!

‘with hearts and hands, our country's cause defending, we meet the foe with valour unpretending. Long live Liberia happy land, A home of glorious liberty by God's Command’.

Thank you!