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Seasons in hell: Charles S. Johnson and the 1930 Liberian Labor Crisis

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SEASONS IN HELL: CHARLES S. JOHNSON
AND THE 1930 LIBERIAN LABOR CRISIS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
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Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of History

by
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ABSTRACT

In 1930, African American sociologist Charles S. Johnson of Fisk University traveled to the Republic of Liberia as the American member of a League of Nations commission to investigate allegations of slavery and forced labor in that West African nation. In the previous five years, the face of Liberia had changed after the large-scale development of rubber plantations on land leased by the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company, with headquarters in Akron, Ohio. Political turmoil greeted Johnson in Liberia, an underdeveloped nation teetering on the brink of economic collapse. This dissertation focuses on Johnson's role as the key member of the League of Nations Commission of Inquiry, and examines events leading up to the investigation. Also touched upon are the life and career of Harvey S. Firestone, the history of the rubber and automobile industries, and Liberia's relationship with the U. S. Department of State.

Central to this dissertation, however, is Charles Johnson, an important and underappreciated figure in African American history. Johnson's diplomatic approach to race relations in the United States earned him respect from philanthropic foundations that funded his research projects, but also led to criticism and jealousy from his black colleagues and peers. Because Johnson guarded his privacy so closely and left behind little in the way of personal information, the journal that he kept for six months in Liberia becomes all the more important as a clue to his inner thoughts and feelings, as well as a guide to his personality and character. Furthermore, Liberia shaped Johnson's thinking as a scholar in important ways, particularly in regard to the economic foundations of exploitation, caste and class, and political disfranchisement.

Johnson's mission to Liberia and his spirited defense of that nation's tribal citizens, as this study shows, suggests a more complicated and assertive individual that contrasts with the largely one dimensional image of him that has metastasized over the years. Indeed, Johnson was one of the few African Americans who showed any interest in the welfare of Liberia's indigenous tribes. In that regard, he was a maverick, overlooked and underestimated.

INTRODUCTION

Several years after Harvey S. Firestone, president of the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company of Akron, Ohio, announced plans to establish the largest rubber plantations in the world in the Republic of Liberia, Harvard political scientist Raymond Leslie Buell leveled charges of “economic imperialism” against the tire magnate and the U. S. Department of State, and warned of the probability of wholesale exploitation of native labor.¹ In 1929, the international community focused its attention on Liberia after allegations that high officials in the black republic used forced labor for private purposes, and that others profited from coerced shipments of native workers to the Spanish-owned island of Fernando Po, a condition analogous to slavery. An international commission under the aegis of the League of Nations in 1930 investigated the allegations of impropriety, and produced a report that led to changes at the highest levels of government in the black republic as well as a protracted battle for Liberian sovereignty in the years that followed.

While numerous studies have analyzed the activities of Firestone and the State Department in Liberia, the role of Charles S. Johnson, the black sociologist from Fisk University and key member of the League of Nations commission of inquiry, has never been explained in any detail even as some scholars have cast doubt on his qualifications, character, and motives.² Nor has the 1930 League investigation itself been treated

¹ Raymond Leslie Buell, “Mr. Firestone’s Liberia,” *The Nation*, 126, 3278 (May 1928), 521-24.

² R. Earle Anderson wrote in 1952: “The inquiry lasted only about four months It is hard to believe that these inexperienced investigators, under the conditions that actually existed, could have been able even to approximate the careful obtaining and weighing of testimony without which their findings would at best be of questionable validity.” Anderson continued: “Surely this was a situation calling for the utmost skill of experienced investigators. Yet there appears to have been no formal examination of witnesses, no competent questioning, no cross-examination.” R. Earle Anderson, *Liberia: America’s African Friend*

comprehensively. In addition to serving as a firsthand, critical analysis of the behind-the-scenes work of the commission, the journal that Johnson kept of his experiences during six months in Liberia provides an unexpurgated view of the very private sociologist, and contradicts uninformed portrayals of him by others as timid and manipulative. Yet, Johnson's African diary has been left all but untouched by historians. Furthermore, important sources pertaining to Firestone and the U. S. State Department have been overlooked or neglected. As a consequence, Johnson's participation in the inquiry has been understated to the point of obscurity; Harvey Firestone reduced to little more than a symbol of corporate greed; and the State Department equally credited and blamed for formulating and carrying out an elaborate plan of action that was, in reality, jerrybuilt and sure to either fail entirely or produce unintended consequences.

From a professional standpoint, Johnson's odyssey in West Africa is essential to understanding the intellectual growth of the author of such classic sociological studies as *Shadow of the Plantation* (1934), and *Growing Up in the Black Belt* (1941). In Liberia, Johnson developed more completely a distinctly humanistic approach to sociology that sought to understand the world through the eyes of its subjects, hallmarks of his best-known works in later years. His crash course in international diplomacy, and immersion in a severely underdeveloped society that had only begun to modernize with the coming

(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1952), 104 (first quotation), 105 (second quotation). Following Anderson's lead, Charles Morrow Wilson wrote in 1971: "The requested commission was chosen with appalling ineptness. Its American member, Dr. Charles S. Johnson of Fisk University, then one of the better-known Negro colleges, accepted with forthright protest, explaining that he had no firsthand acquaintance with Africa, knew extremely little about Liberia, and nothing about the Fernando Po controversy. Dr. Johnson also stated that he had no appropriate experience in investigatory procedures, and was accepting only from a sense of devotion to a cause and with the hope that God and competent colleagues would help him through." Charles Morrow Wilson, *Liberia: Black Africa in Microcosm* (New York, Evanston, and London: Harper and Row Publishers, 1971), 122 (quotation). There is no evidence that Johnson said any of the things attributed to him by Wilson, and the author did not cite his sources. The idea that Johnson had "no appropriate experience in investigatory procedures" is, of course, nonsense.

of Firestone in 1924, went far in shaping his economically based understanding of race relations. In Liberia, where caste and class ruled the day and Johnson was considered by many to be “white” because of his education, the idea that “racial prejudice is least of all racial” took on added meaning; it formed the foundation of his thinking on black and white relations that he built on for the rest of his life. Indeed, the economic, social, and political importance of education in the black republic made a lasting impact on Johnson; his ideas on education and race relations would later influence Gunnar Myrdal’s monumental *An American Dilemma* (1944), the study in social engineering that Thurgood Marshall used with powerful effect in arguing *Brown v. Board of Education* before the U. S. Supreme Court.

From a personal standpoint, Johnson’s extraordinary patience and self-control, reliance on facts, and measured, diplomatic approach—elements of his style that so confounded black intellectuals like E. Franklin Frazier and Ralph Bunche—made him a perfect candidate for the Liberia mission. But his six-month stay in the black republic not only challenged his skills as a sociologist and statesman but also tested his physical and mental will. Johnson’s observations during his extended interlude in Liberia, where local political leaders relied on natural as well as supernatural forces to hinder his progress if not make him disappear altogether, become especially important because of the deeply felt humanity and compassion for society’s underdogs that they reveal, and suggest a more complicated, assertive, and vulnerable human being who came to guard his private views more closely as the 1930s progressed and his public role at Fisk University became more prominent.

In Chapter 1 of this dissertation, Johnson's life and work up to 1930 are analyzed in some detail in order to better understand who it was, precisely, that the U. S. State Department chose as American commissioner to investigate conditions in Liberia. Marcus Garvey also played an important role in African American thought in the 1920s, and his attempt to initiate widespread immigration to Liberia—a key forerunner to Firestone's entry into the black republic—receives close attention as well in the first chapter. For similar reasons, Chapters 2 and 3 are devoted to a thorough study of the main players involved in the buildup to the investigation; namely, Harvey Firestone, Liberia, and the U. S. State Department. The investigation itself and Johnson's role in it are studied in Chapters 4 and 5, which utilize the sociologist's personal journal supplemented by other primary sources.

Charles S. Johnson's mission to Liberia as a League of Nations representative holds a unique place in African American history and merits closer attention than it has received. Coming as it did during a transitional period in his career, Johnson's role in the 1930 League investigation went far in shaping his views on race relations for the next quarter of a century. Observations made in the black republic are indispensable not only for understanding the sociologist on a professional as well as a personal level, but also for the insights that they offer into native life and Americo-Liberian political leadership. As this dissertation shows, Johnson's mission to Liberia, where tribal citizens viewed his arrival as a matter of life or death, must be considered a central, rather than a peripheral, event in the career of an important but often underestimated twentieth-century African American scholar and thinker.

CHAPTER 1

THE EDUCATION OF CHARLES S. JOHNSON, 1893-1929

. . . Negroes live and think in a state of isolation which is almost complete; no white group understands it, or can fully understand it.

Charles S. Johnson, from *The Negro in Chicago* (1922)

In December 1929 Fisk University sociologist Charles Spurgeon Johnson accepted an invitation from President Herbert Hoover to serve as the American member of a tripartite League of Nations commission to investigate slavery and forced labor in the Republic of Liberia. By then, he had experienced firsthand virtually every major event or movement that had shaped African American history in the previous fifteen years. In 1916 Johnson moved from his native Virginia to Chicago, where he quickly became the foremost student of the Great Migration. In 1918 he saw combat in World War I, a defining moment for African Americans who believed that patriotic military service abroad would earn them new measures of respect and equality at home. Shortly after his return to Chicago in the summer of 1919, Johnson was nearly killed when he found himself caught in one of the worst race riots in American history. In the early 1920s he moved to New York at the height of Marcus Garvey's appeal to the black masses, and later in the decade he became a leading promoter of the Harlem Renaissance. Johnson's personal journey resulted in an acute sense of what another traveler to Liberia a few years later referred to

as “one’s place in time, based on a knowledge not only of one’s present but of the past from which one has emerged.”¹

The international crisis created by charges of slavery and forced labor in Liberia again placed Johnson at the center of events. Favoring militancy as their chief criterion for gauging the significance of twentieth-century African American leaders, some historians have brushed aside the Fisk sociologist as too willing to compromise with white elites to be taken seriously; his experience in Liberia has received scant attention. Yet, Johnson’s lodestar was education, not propaganda and protest. In a capitalistic society driven by new and constantly changing technology, he rejected the idea of separatism—economic or otherwise—and emphasized the urgent need for African Americans to gain the educational skills necessary to compete with whites, or risk being left behind as a permanent underclass. Agitation for civil rights, as Johnson saw it, could carry the African American cause only so far without an economic base of power. Johnson’s critics, however, have failed to come to terms with the depth of his understanding of African American life and race relations. Nor have they recognized his compassion for society’s powerless and dispossessed, nowhere more apparent than in his defense of Liberia’s oppressed tribal majority in 1930. Whereas the militant editor of *The Crisis*, W. E. B. Du Bois, lauded Americo-Liberian leaders and took for granted their mistreatment of tribal citizens for the sake of law and order, Johnson sided with the natives.²

¹ On Johnson’s life and career, see Richard Robbins, *Sidelines Activist: Charles S. Johnson and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), and Patrick J. Gilpin, “Charles S. Johnson: An Intellectual Biography” (Ph.D. dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 1973). Graham Greene, *Journey Without Maps* (New York: Doubleday, 1936), 19-20 (quotation).

² David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919-1963* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000), 124-125. Lewis mentions the League of Nations commission to investigate slavery and forced labor in Liberia but fails to note that Johnson was a member. See also Lewis, *When*

An unwavering advocate of black equality, Johnson never categorized himself as a “race man,” one who jumped to the defense of other African Americans “good or bad, right or wrong.”³ Objectivity characterized Johnson’s work, whether during his early days compiling and writing much of *The Negro in Chicago: A Study of Race Relations and a Race Riot*, the official study of the five days of racial violence that struck that city in the summer of 1919, or as editor of *Opportunity*, the journal of the National Urban League. Yet from the vantage point of *Opportunity*’s comfortable Manhattan offices, Johnson’s views on the Republic of Liberia in the mid-1920s largely paralleled those of other black intellectuals, many of them dedicated “race men.” Founded by free people of color and former slaves in 1822, Liberia had long served as a symbol of black freedom and as an important example of black capability and self-determination. In the 1920s, when black scholars spent considerable time and energy refuting the idea of black inferiority, favorable articles in newspapers like the Baltimore *Afro-American*, and glowing reports by W. E. B. Du Bois in *The Crisis*, offered an overwhelmingly positive image of Liberia.⁴

Harlem Was in Vogue (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 46-47, 90; Jonathan Scott Holloway, *Confronting the Veil: Abram Harris, Jr., E. Franklin Frazier, and Ralph Bunche, 1919-1941* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 114, 124-25, 142-43, 168-69; Anthony M. Platt, *E. Franklin Frazier Reconsidered* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 97-101; James O. Young, *Black Writers of the Thirties* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), 83-84; and August Meier, *A White Scholar in the Black Community, 1945-1965* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 14-18, 73-87.

³ Horace, R. Cayton, *Long Old Road: An Autobiography* (New York: Trident Press, NY, 1965), 250 (quotation); Young, *Black Writers of the Thirties*, 76.

⁴ On the founding of the Republic of Liberia see, for instance, Tom W. Shick, *Behold the Promised Land: A History of Afro-American Settler Society in Nineteenth-Century Liberia* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980); and Amos J. Beyan, *The American Colonization Society and the Creation of the Liberian State: A Historical Perspective, 1822-1900* (Lanham, New York, and London: University Press of America, 1991). Baltimore *Afro-American*, April 5 and May 14, 1924; Pittsburgh *Courier*, April 5, 1924; W. E. B. Du Bois, “Africa,” *The Crisis* (April 1924), 247-54; and Du Bois, “Little Portraits of Africa,” *The Crisis* (April 1924), 273-74; J. R. Hooker, “The Negro American Press and Africa in the Nineteen Twenties,” *The Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 1 (March 1967), 45-46. Although Du Bois favored Firestone’s investment in Liberia, he wrote: “Everything really depends upon the attitude of white capital in America. If they want to do a fine and unusual job in imperialism they have the opportunity here

In November 1925, as Liberian president Charles D. B. King negotiated with the Firestone Plantations Company to lease a million acres of land and establish the largest rubber plantations in the world, Charles Johnson, without objective reports or firsthand observations to draw on, expressed concern not for the well-being of the black republic's tribal majority, but for the possible loss of national sovereignty that might result from unchecked external forces. Several years before allegations of slavery and forced labor in America's "moral protectorate" reached the public, Johnson suggested in an editorial in *Opportunity* that while American interests may have been completely innocent in Liberia, "imperialism becomes a temptation difficult to withstand, once large stakes have been planted."⁵ Johnson's parochial understanding of imperialism as something less than the "maintenance and expansion of unchallenged power," as one writer has defined it, led him to focus his thoughts only on the implications posed by powerful outside forces in Liberia, an entirely mainstream point of view unencumbered by conflicting evidence.⁶

Governed since its founding by a handful of families connected through politics and intermarriage, the Republic of Liberia had survived over the years through the granting of concessions to European colonial powers like Great Britain and Germany, a process that steadily eroded Liberian sovereignty. Troubled in the past by native uprisings, and by European encroachments on its territory that led to periodic U. S. military interventions, Liberia showed few signs of progress toward self-sufficiency in the first three decades of the twentieth century. The republic's official "closed door" policy that limited foreign investment, and lack of production that crippled its export trade, helped to perpetuate a

in Liberia On the other hand if the Firestone Plantations Company wishes it can repeat in Liberia all the hell that white imperialism has perpetrated heretofore in Africa and Asia." See Du Bois, "Liberia and Rubber," *The New Republic* (November 18, 1925), 325-29 (quotation on 329).

⁵ "Liberia's Future in Rubber," *Opportunity*, 3 (November 1925), 324 (quotation).

⁶ David Remnick, "Comment: After the Battle," *The New Yorker* (March 31, 2003), 30 (quotation).

severely underdeveloped condition that contrasted sharply with its prosperous northern neighbor Sierra Leone, a British colony. In Liberia's politically charged atmosphere, always rife with rumor and superstition, chronic financial instability only added to perceptions in some circles, particularly in Europe, of the hopelessness of black self-government.⁷ Yet even at one of Charles Johnson's lowest points during his 1930 mission to Liberia, when in a moment of exasperation he confessed that he knew little about international politics and cared even less, he never questioned the efficacy of the black republic's form of government.⁸

Although marginalized in the United States because of his race, Johnson cared passionately about the ideals and promise of democracy. Born in 1893 in Bristol, Virginia, the son of a respected and successful Baptist minister, Johnson's career path followed what one writer has characterized as the "displacement of personnel from clergy to academy."⁹ As a youngster his "strange reading fare" included many books on theology, and fatherly advice generally came to him in the form of Biblical quotations.¹⁰

Race consciousness imprinted itself on Johnson's childhood when he noticed the

⁷ Martin Lowenkopf, *Politics in Liberia: The Conservative Road to Development* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1976), 13, 47-48; George W. Brown, *The Economic History of Liberia* (Washington, D. C.: Associated Publishers, 1941), 147-187; Yekutiel Gershoni, *The Americo-Liberian Scramble for the Hinterland* (Boulder and London: Westview Press, 1985), 47-65; Raymond Leslie Buell, *The Native Problem in Africa* (2 vols.; New York: The MacMillan Company, 1928) II, 727, 763-73, 890.

⁸ Charles S. Johnson, "African Diary," June 14, 1930, 176, Folder 15, Box 88, Charles S. Johnson Papers (microfilm) (Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, Louisiana). Hereafter cited as CSJP. While Johnson may not have considered himself an expert on international politics, he nevertheless showed a deep interest in Africa and the Caribbean in the 1920s. See, for instance, "A Caribbean Issue," *Opportunity*, 4 (November 1926); "Our Caribbean," *Opportunity*, 3 (April 1925), 98; "American Investments in Latin America," *Opportunity*, 6 (April 1928), 99-100; "Hayti," *Opportunity*, 3 (July 1925), 195; "King Cotton in Africa," *Opportunity*, 3 (July 1925), 196; "Abyssinia," *Opportunity*, 4 (September 1926), 271-73.

⁹ Charles S. Johnson, "A Spiritual Autobiography," in Louis Finkelstein, ed., *American Spiritual Autobiographies: Fifteen Self-Portraits*, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1948), 191-206; Edwin R. Embree, *13 Against the Odds* (New York, Viking Press, 1944), 48; Fred H. Matthews, *Quest for an American Sociology: Robert E. Park and the Chicago School* (Montreal and London: McGill-Queens University Press, 1977), 90 (quotation). See also Donald Cunnigen, "Myrdal, Park, and Second-Generation African American Sociologists," in Bruce R. Hare, ed., *2001 Race Odyssey: African Americans and Sociology* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 51-53.

¹⁰ Johnson, "A Spiritual Autobiography," 191-93;

disparity between the local white elementary school, located only a block away from his family's house, and the black school that he attended a mile across town. Also, with only a few exceptions, residents in his otherwise all-white neighborhood "made it apparent that there was a difference." Even though his mother resisted being addressed by whites "in the obnoxiously familiar fashion," it was not until years later that Charles actually learned her Christian name.¹¹

A story that Johnson heard many times throughout his youth—a discussion always accompanied by an "atmosphere of awe"—only reinforced for him what it meant to be a black southerner at the turn of the century. In the year of Charles' birth, as the story went, a mob lynched an African American and dragged his corpse down the street and past the Johnson house. Reverend Johnson, diminutive but determined, confronted the mob and warned it that eternal fire and brimstone awaited as punishment for its sins, but received only laughter for a reply. Afterward, the town held a mass meeting, which Johnson recalled as "a memorable incident frequently told in my hearing, because the Negroes in the town were afraid to attend." He described the story as one of his "earliest heritages."¹²

Johnson's middle-class Victorian upbringing, by his own estimate rigid yet never harsh, and his education grounded in the Christian values of charity and piety, led him to identify closely with society's underdogs during the height of the reform-minded Progressive Era. To be sure, Johnson's scholarly pursuits always led in the direction of social welfare rather than social theory. The appearance of Jim Crow segregation, the cost for the successful passage of Progressive legislation, left an indelible mark on

¹¹ Charles S. Johnson to Walter White, October 31, 1929 (quotations), NAACP Papers, Administrative File, Personal Correspondence, C-98 (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.)

¹² Johnson to White, October 31, 1929, (quotations), NAACP Papers, Library of Congress.

Johnson. Before *de jure* segregation in Bristol, Virginia, relationships between black and white citizens generally ranged from cordial to indifferent. The appearance of new and odious Jim Crow laws, however, produced what seemed like a sudden overnight change in white attitudes. The sensitive Johnson never forgot the shock that he felt when white citizens suddenly conveyed a sense of menacing hostility towards him and his family without any apparent rational basis for doing so. White citizens, as Johnson recalled many years later, came to know “less about Negroes and the Negroes appeared to care less and less about their opinions.” While naturally concerned with segregation’s “differential” form of justice and the damage that it inflicted on defenseless minorities, Johnson grew to feel even more concerned with how “the process, and tolerance of it” undermined the morals of the entire nation.¹³

At fourteen Johnson attended Wayland Academy in Richmond, and stayed on in Virginia’s capital city to earn a bachelor’s degree at Virginia Union University in 1916. Supporting himself during his undergraduate years with summer jobs at hotels and resorts led to new experiences and contacts, including “three outstanding instances of racial disrespect, tinged with animosity.” Friendships developed, however, after Johnson resolved the “difficulties,” his “first indication . . . of the malleability of human nature.” Temporary jobs also revealed, as Johnson recalled, “modes of white behavior so shockingly at variance with my bringing up that what I lost in respect for the white race was not wholly compensated for in observations of their prestige in other respects.” In regard to white opinions of African Americans, Johnson learned that there “is practically

¹³ On the “progressive impulse,” see for instance John Whiteclay Chambers II, *The Tyranny of Change: America in the Progressive Era, 1890-1920*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 132-71; Johnson, “A Spiritual Autobiography,” 193 (quotations); Daryl Michael Scott, *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880-1996* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 63.

always a difference between things as they are and things as they are imagined to be.”

The rather startling discovery that “there exist classes of Negroes who actually fit the description applied indiscriminately to Negroes as a whole” rounded out Johnson’s youthful thoughts on race.¹⁴

In the autumn of 1916 Johnson enrolled at the University of Chicago to begin graduate work in the still relatively new and amorphous field of sociology.¹⁵ While he followed a path different from others who took part in the Great Migration, and chose his destination for different reasons, he nevertheless arrived in Chicago as merely one more jobless and destitute young black man looking for work when he stepped off the train in the teeming and corrupt city. For Johnson, Chicago may not have been the “land of hope” envisioned by the thousands of black Mississippians and Louisianians who traveled north on the Illinois Central Railroad in search of jobs and equal rights, but it served the purposes of a young man eager to pursue a career outside of the church and beyond his father’s shadow.¹⁶

Johnson’s potential as a first-rate scholar quickly became apparent to one of his professors at the University of Chicago, Robert E. Park, a pioneer in the study of race relations. While Park’s theory of a race relations cycle—conflict, competition, accommodation, and assimilation—inspired much scholarly debate over the years, his insistence on taking his students out of the classroom to study their subjects firsthand in the urban streets made an immediate and long-lasting impact on young scholars like

¹⁴ Johnson to White, October 31, 1929, NAACP Papers, LC.

¹⁵ Matthews, *Quest for an American Sociology*, 89-93; Stow Persons, *Ethnic Studies at Chicago, 1905-45* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 28-32;

¹⁶ Johnson reportedly arrived in Chicago with less than two dollars. See Embree, *13 Against the Odds*, 54. James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners and the Great Migration* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 13-119; Thomas Lee Philpott, *The Slum and the Ghetto: Immigrants, Blacks, and Reformers in Chicago, 1880-1930* (Belmont, Cal.: Wadsworth Publishing, 1991), 163-200.

Johnson. The study of urban conditions became the hallmark of the “Chicago school” of sociology, and the idea of “ecological succession,” whereby various groups and activities influenced and replaced each other to produce new forms of accommodation, became its chief doctrine. Johnson had never heard of Park or his theories when he arrived at the university, but his enrollment in Park’s popular course, “The Crowd and the Public,” led to his forming a close bond with the foremost leader of the Chicago school, a relationship that paid large dividends for a black scholar with limited opportunities in the racially restrictive world of academia in the first decades of the twentieth century.¹⁷

With its vast ethnic neighborhoods Chicago provided an ideal laboratory for Park and his graduate students to explore the city’s racial frontier during a period of transition accelerated by the arrival of thousands of black southerners lured by wartime labor shortages, many of whom settled in the Black Belt, a tightly confined stretch of thirty blocks running along State Street on the South Side. Residential segregation, while not imposed by law, was nonetheless pervasive, a point of contention and conflict that persisted for decades. Wentworth Avenue formed the western boundary of the Black Belt beyond which lurked predatory Irish-American youth gangs that would play a pivotal role in igniting and sustaining the 1919 race riot. Black migrants might have escaped the oppression of the Jim Crow South but discovered in Chicago new forms of racial hostility and segregation that appeared no less intractable.¹⁸

¹⁷ Robbins, *Sidelines Activist*, 31-32; Winifred Raushenbush, *Robert E. Park: Biography of a Sociologist* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1979), 94-95, 100; Persons, *Ethnic Studies at Chicago*, 33, 60-95; Butler A. Jones, “The Tradition of Sociology Teaching in Black Colleges: The Unheralded Professionals,” in James E. Blackwell and Morris Janowitz, *The Black Sociologists: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 124-36.

¹⁸ Matthews, *Quest for an American Sociology*, 126-28; Philpott, *The Slum and the Ghetto*, 118-27, 183-200; Stephen Grant Meyer, *As Long as They Don’t Move Next Door: Segregation and Racial Conflict in American Neighborhoods* (Lanham, Boulder, New York, and Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 35-36; Allan H. Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920* (Chicago and London:

Johnson found in Park a mentor who brought a wealth of life experience to his position at the University of Chicago, including most significantly a long-term and close working relationship with preeminent African American spokesman Booker T. Washington. As an undergraduate at the University of Michigan Park studied under John Dewey, one of the most influential scholars and thinkers of the time whose ideas on “self-realization” would later have a major impact on the thinking of Charles Johnson.¹⁹ After graduating with a degree in philosophy in 1887, Park wrote for various newspapers for the next eleven years, and for a time in the early 1890s worked as a police reporter in New York. Park’s “beat” in Manhattan, the Essex Market Police Court, led him to cross paths many times with muckraking journalist Jacob Riis, who a few years earlier shocked middle-class readers with *How the Other Half Lives*, his exposé of immigrant life in the tenements. Riis, originally from Ribe, Denmark, earned the nickname “the pious Dane” because of a moralizing and overly sentimental style disliked by hardboiled New York reporters, and he often scooped Park on many important stories. In New York Park grew fascinated with the idea of studying city life as a process undergoing constant change; he also came to despise reformers like Jacob Riis and their “civilizing” mission of spreading the Social Gospel.²⁰ Park believed that urban ethnic groups needed to be left alone to work out their problems on their own terms, and that they should be studied without the

University of Chicago Press, 1967), 129-222; Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (Cambridge and other cities: Cambridge University Press, 1983); The Chicago Commission on Race Relations, *The Negro in Chicago: A Study of Race Relations and a Race Riot* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1922), 79-105, 108-111, 436.

¹⁹ Alessandra Lorini, *Rituals of Race: American Public Culture and the Search for Racial Democracy* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 1999), 95-99; Raushenbush, *Robert E. Park*, 12-13, 15, 18-19, 43-63; Matthews, *Quest for an American Sociology*, 20-30. On John Dewey, see in particular Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000), 237. Johnson, “A Spiritual Autobiography,” 194; S. P. Fullinwider, *The Mind and Mood of Black America: 20th Century Thought* (Homewood, Ill: Dorsey Press, 1969), 114.

²⁰ Rolf Lindner, *The Reportage of Urban Culture: Robert Park and the Chicago School*, translated by Adrian Morris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 3-4 (quotation), 16-18, 40. Raushenbush, *Robert E. Park*, 15-21.

self-serving biases inherent in Progressive reform. Most troubling of all to Park, Progressives had used state intervention to achieve reforms that he found entirely repugnant: immigration restriction and segregation. On the other hand, more militant leaders like those of the NAACP in later years, had little respect for Park's conservative approach, believing that he moved far too slow to accomplish needed changes.²¹

Although Robert E. Park despised “do-gooders” and advised his students to steer clear of them and their ideas, following graduate work at Harvard and the completion of a Ph.D. in philosophy at the University of Heidelberg, his own muckraking instincts led him to collaborate in the founding of the American Congo Reform Association in 1903. For the next two years, until he grew disgusted with the political wrangling among the missionary groups that funded the association, Park wrote articles and organized activities aimed at arousing public indignation over King Leopold II of Belgium's abusive policies in the Congo Free State, which included the use of forced labor to harvest crude rubber. Through his study of the Belgian Congo, Park concluded that what colonized Africa needed most was a system of education; he felt that the establishment of industrial schools offered the best chance to meet the immediate needs of natives. Park even toyed with the idea of traveling to Africa for more intensive study, in his forties still unsure what direction he wanted his life to take.²²

²¹ Matthews, *Quest for an American Sociology*, 120-29, 176; Raushenbush, *Robert E. Park*, 22-23, 96-97.

²² Stanford M. Lyman, *Militarism, Imperialism, and Racial Accommodation: An Analysis and Interpretation of the Early Writings of Robert E. Park* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1992), 41-76. Reprinted in Lyman's book are four articles that Park wrote on the Belgian Congo. See “Recent Atrocities in the Congo State,” 205-09; “A King in Business: Leopold II of Belgium, Autocrat of the Congo and International Broker,” 210-20; “The Terrible Story of the Congo,” 221-33 (ghostwritten for Booker T. Washington); “The Blood-Money of the Congo,” 234-245. Raushenbush, *Robert E. Park*, 36-39. On African American responses to King Leopold II's depredations in the Congo, see Elliott P. Skinner, *African Americans and U. S. Policy Toward Africa, 1850-1924: In Defense of Black Nationality* (Washington, D. C.: Howard University Press, 1992), 215-230, 233-37.

Even if Park's affiliation with the Congo Reform Association ended badly and with much bitterness on his part, it nonetheless led to his meeting Booker T. Washington, who served as the group's vice-president, and who came to redirect Park's life toward the study of race relations. In 1905 Washington invited Park to visit his famous Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama. Park accepted, eventually assuming the job of publicist for Tuskegee Institute, a position that he held for the next seven years. Under the guidance of Washington, Park studied black life in the South, an endeavor that convinced him that prejudice resulted not from inherited or received perceptions, but from intergroup competition.²³ Park carried this idea to the University of Chicago, where he expanded and refined it to form his theory of a race relations cycle based on a belief that state intervention always did more harm than good, an approach that offered few solutions during the darkest days of Jim Crow and mob violence against black southerners. Unlike John Dewey, who believed that academicians needed to combine ideas with action, a view that carried great weight at the University of Chicago in the early years of sociological study, Park resolved that scientific solutions to social problems required the complete detachment of the observer from his subject of study.²⁴

Park's tenure at Tuskegee Institute came at the apex of Booker T. Washington's considerable influence in American domestic and international affairs. The "political machine" that Washington built at Tuskegee gathered momentum after his famous Atlanta Compromise speech in 1895 when he called for black accommodation as the best

²³ Matthews, *Quest for an American Sociology*, 58-61; Gilpin, "Charles S. Johnson," 76-110; Lindner, *Reportage of Urban Culture*, 44-48.

²⁴ Persons, *Ethnic Studies at Chicago*, 30; James B. McKee, *Sociology and the Race Problem, The Failure of a Perspective* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 109-11; John H. Stanfield, *Philanthropy and Jim Crow in American Social Science* (Westport, Conn. and London: Greenwood Press, 1985), 31, 38-56. On Dewey and the University of Chicago, see Menand, *Metaphysical Club*, 285-333.

approach for dealing with the new Jim Crow South.²⁵ Robert Park's work at Tuskegee promoted the soundness of Washington's edict of black self-help and uplift, appealing especially to the coalition of black and white moderates that formed the Institute's economic base. Park performed his public relations duties so well that black author Ralph Ellison later referred to him disparagingly as the person most "responsible for inflating Tuskegee into a national symbol."²⁶

Tuskegee's powerful national image and Washington's political influence brought Robert Park into close contact with political affairs in the Republic of Liberia, a development that later played a significant role in Charles Johnson's decision to accept his appointment to investigate allegations of slavery and forced labor in that West African nation. Booker T. Washington took an active interest in African affairs and became intimately involved in Liberian politics, particularly through his recommendations to the U. S. State Department for ministerial positions, and by acting as an intermediary for Americo-Liberian leaders seeking economic assistance from the U. S. Congress.²⁷ In 1909 President William Howard Taft offered Washington an appointment to serve on a commission charged with investigating boundary disputes between European colonial powers and Liberia, and to make recommendations for stabilizing the Liberian economy. Emmett J. Scott, Washington's secretary, eventually served on the Taft commission. Scott's report informed both Washington and Park, above all, that Liberia's reliance on imports could only lead to further loss of national sovereignty and

²⁵ On Booker T. Washington and his development of Tuskegee Institute, see in particular Louis R. Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Making of a Black Leader, 1865-1901* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972).

²⁶ Lorini, *Rituals of Race*, 94 (quotation); Stanfield, *Philanthropy and Jim Crow*, 41.

²⁷ Louis R. Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee, 1901-1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 271-73. Matthews, *Quest for an American Sociology*, 62-63; Lyman, *Militarism, Imperialism, and Racial Accommodation*, 77, 79-80; Skinner, *African Americans and U. S. Policy Toward Africa*, 296-321.

economic disaster, and that the republic needed an American-trained militia to guard its frontier. Washington later concluded that Liberia's lack of self-sufficiency resulted most of all from a failure to adopt the values of "self-denial and enterprise" that he preached at Tuskegee. The United States could provide important financial and technical assistance, Washington believed, but it was up to Liberians to develop their own resources and to guard their own independence.²⁸ The same problems that Park learned of in 1909 remained a generation later in Liberia and, in fact, had grown considerably worse because of new forms of violence and terror directed at natives after the reorganization and retraining of the Frontier Force recommended by the Taft commission.

In addition to his role as Charles Johnson's mentor, Robert Park provided important contacts that propelled the young sociologist's career toward early success. Park served as the first president of Chicago's branch of the National Urban League, an organization that assisted newly arrived black southerners in their transition to city life, and he created a position within the League for Johnson as director of research and investigations. Through his work with the League, Johnson met and impressed important black leaders like Robert Russa Moton, Booker T. Washington's successor as president of Tuskegee Institute, and Emmett J. Scott, both of whom were active in Republican politics. Johnson's position with the Chicago Urban League and his relationship with Robert Park gave him a unique perspective on the Great Migration, at once participant and student.²⁹

Founded in January 1917, the Chicago Urban League depended upon funding from corporations like International Harvester, and from Julius Rosenwald of Sears, Roebuck;

²⁸ Brown, *Economic History of Liberia*, 167-69; Skinner, *African Americans and U. S. Policy Toward Africa*, 324-333, 342 (quotation).

²⁹ Arvarh E. Strickland, *History of the Chicago Urban League* (Urbana and London: University of Illinois Press, 1966), 25-55; Robbins, *Sidelines Activist*, 32; Matthews, *Quest for an American Sociology*, 176-77.

the League acted as agent for both employee and employer as it attempted first to convince corporate leaders to hire black newcomers, and then insure that black workers performed their jobs satisfactorily. With an annual budget of less than \$20,000 during the initial years of the Great Migration, the League struggled to keep up with the demands placed on it by the daily arrival of black migrants from the South in need of jobs and housing. For example, on a single day in 1917 the League received housing applications from six hundred and sixty four black newcomers, but had “only fifty-five dwellings actually available for use by Negroes.” Accompanying the black housing crunch came an increase in rent for African Americans as much as fifty percent as well as an increase in racial hostility from white residents on the boundaries of the Black Belt who feared a decline in property value that they believed followed black encroachment on formerly all-white neighborhoods. Easing racial tensions became one of the Urban League’s chief missions, though its conservative approach has received much criticism from historians. But Chicago’s NAACP during the years of the Great Migration was all but moribund, and the League proved indispensable in the assistance it offered to black migrants. During the peak years of the migration black Chicagoans in need of help turned to the Urban League, not the NAACP.³⁰

In his role as chief researcher for the Chicago Urban League, Charles Johnson gained immediate recognition after directing a survey on the African American community in

³⁰ Spear, *Black Chicago*, 169-75; Strickland, *History of the Chicago Urban League*, 46-47; Nancy J. Weiss, *A History of the National Urban League, 1910-1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 114-15; Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 141-43, 203; CCRR, *Negro in Chicago*, 93, 196-213, 604 (quotation); Charles S. Johnson, “The National Urban League,” *Opportunity*, 6 (March 1928), 66. Ralph L. Pearson, in particular, condemned the Urban League movement as a conservative failure. See Ralph L. Pearson, “Charles S. Johnson: The Urban League Years, A Study of Race Leadership” (Ph.D. Diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1970), 10-20. Christopher Robert Reed, *The Chicago NAACP and the Rise of Black Professional Leadership, 1910-1966* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), 15, 45-47.

Milwaukee. He also had the foresight to begin collecting letters written by black southerners and recent arrivals seeking advice and help from the Urban League, some three thousand in all. Johnson's work caught the attention of Emmett J. Scott who, after Booker T. Washington's death in 1915, left Tuskegee to become treasurer of Howard University. Scott's interest in the Great Migration led him, with Johnson's assistance, to secure a grant from the Carnegie International Peace Foundation to study the exodus of African Americans from the South. Scott "borrowed" Johnson's services, and in the fall of 1917 sent the young sociologist on his first trip into the Deep South.

In Mississippi Johnson studied local conditions and interviewed African Americans on their way North in order to gain a clearer picture of attitudes and events surrounding the Great Migration. Johnson's immersion in his subject led him to determine that while racial oppression definitely played a part in black flight from the South, hopes of economic opportunity in the North acted as the main stimulus to migration. Indeed, he felt that the best thing that any black southerner could do to escape economic death was to relocate to a northern city and begin earning an income as quickly as possible. No one studied the Great Migration as closely as Johnson; he remains the leading expert on the subject by which all of his contemporaries are measured.³¹ In many ways Johnson's trip into the heart of the Mississippi Delta in late 1917 served as a starting point to his professional career as a sociologist. Conducting research in the Delta forced Johnson to

³¹ Strickland, *History of the Chicago Urban League*, 43; Robbins, *Sidelines Activist*, 30; Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 15-16, 30, 43, 54, 66-97; William Cohen, "The Great Migration as a Lever for Social Change," in Alferdeen Harrison, ed., *Black Exodus: The Great Migration from the American South* (Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), 78-79. For a sampling of the black migrant letters, see "Documents: Letters of the Negro Migrants of 1916-1918," collected under the direction of Emmett J. Scott, *Journal of Negro History*, 3 (July 1919), 290-340; and "Additional Letters of Negro Migrants of 1916-1918," collected under the direction of Emmett J. Scott, *Journal of Negro History*, 4 (October 1919), 412-65. Charles S. Johnson, "How Much is the Migration a Flight From Persecution?" *Opportunity*, 1 (September 1923): 272-74.

sharpen his survival skills in a new and hostile environment, an experience that helped prepare him for the harsh trials that he would face in the course of the next few years, and that he would rely on in 1930 to overcome the dangers of an extended stay in Liberia.

In 1918 Johnson enlisted in the army and joined 1,800 of his fellow African Americans to form the 803rd Pioneer Infantry Division. His work in Chicago, while it may have seemed far away and all but forgotten during basic training at Camp Grant in Rockford, Illinois, actually benefited his brief military career. At Camp Grant he received a letter from Emmett J. Scott, the new Special Assistant to the Secretary of War assigned to oversee the treatment of black troops. Scott thanked Johnson for his help on the Carnegie project, commending him not only for his “energy and enthusiasm” but also for his “accuracy and dependableness.” Indeed, the migrant letters that Johnson had collected and other research that he conducted formed the foundation of Scott’s *Negro Migration During the War*, published in 1920. As a sign of his gratitude, Scott gave Johnson “full permission” to pass the letter to his company commander, a gesture that lent a certain amount of prestige to a young black enlisted man whose organizing skills may otherwise have gone unnoticed.³²

Johnson detested his time in the army, a fractured period in his life that wrenched him away from his work and burgeoning career. From the point of his enlistment, through basic training, and combat in France, Johnson professed no particular hatred toward his German enemy. Worst of all for a headstrong individual confident in his own decision-making abilities, military conformity demanded a “hopelessly subordinate caste role . . . with suspended judgment on the ultimates.” Sent to Europe with “uncertain duties” as a

³² William M. Tuttle, *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919* (New York: Atheneum, 1974), 241; Emmett J. Scott to Charles S. Johnson, August 3, 1918, in Folder 6, Box 61, Charles S. Johnson Papers (microfilm), (Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, Louisiana).

sergeant major in an infantry division, Johnson came under fire every day for three consecutive weeks, though without suffering an injury. He later recalled that he spent much of his time in France retrieving books from the rubble of libraries, and “spiriting” food to German prisoners of war. Johnson’s systematic mind recoiled at the “wildly destructive and inconclusive” nature of “his” war, World War I, a chaotic year that he hoped to put behind him quickly as he resumed his scholarly pursuits.³³

But instead of finding peace and any new sense of respect or equality at home, racial turmoil greeted Johnson on his return to Chicago in the summer of 1919. On July 25th Johnson and the rest of his army unit paraded down Michigan Avenue to the cheers of black Chicagoans, who then met with the troops for a celebration in Grant Park on the lakefront. Only two days later an incident that occurred on a sweltering Sunday afternoon between black and white beachgoers on Lake Michigan sparked five days of racial violence that left thirty-eight dead and over one thousand homeless. The riot followed by only one week another racially motivated outburst in Washington, D. C. In the months before the Chicago riot white workers engaged in labor strikes in the Stock Yards district, and lashed out at black workers for their refusal to join unions as well as for their role in the past as strikebreakers. Amid many rumors and anti-black newspaper reports and other propaganda, housing competition and a wave of bombings in black neighborhoods created a powder keg atmosphere ready to be touched off at any moment.³⁴

³³ Johnson, “A Spiritual Autobiography,” 197 (first, fourth and fifth quotations), 197-98 (second quotation), 198 (third quotation); Embree, *13 Against the Odds*, 69.

³⁴ Mark Robert Schneider, “We Return Fighting:” *The Civil Rights Movement in the Jazz Age* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2002), 7-35; Tuttle *Race Riot*, 3-31, 108-56, 241; *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 25, 1919; On the Washington, D. C., race riot see, for instance, Arthur I. Waskow, *From Race Riot to Sit-In, 1919 and the 1960s* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966), 21-37. Elizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago* (Cambridge and other cities: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 11-38.

An eyewitness to the mayhem in Chicago, Johnson never spoke publicly or published anything about his experience. Years later, however, he recounted his ordeal in private to his friend Edwin Embree, the president of the Julius Rosenwald Fund. In Embree's retelling of events, Johnson encountered "milling mobs" between the offices of the Urban League on Wabash Avenue and his rooms near the University of Chicago. As violence erupted from block to block, the young sociologist and returning war veteran narrowly missed being struck by gunfire more than once while dragging injured victims to safety, and watched in horror as a man standing only a few feet away from him was stabbed to death. After finally reaching home and still in his bloodstained clothing, Johnson sat down and typed an outline for studying the causes of the riot.³⁵

Even before the Illinois state militia and a heavy rain brought an end to the rioting in the first week of August, Governor Frank O. Lowden, at the behest of local business leaders who feared the prospect of further racial disruptions and property loss, announced that he would appoint a commission of experts to examine the events leading up to the riot, and to make recommendations for reform.³⁶ The Chicago Commission on Race Relations, a privately funded, biracial group composed primarily of prominent

Discussions of the incident that sparked the riot—the drowning of black teenager Eugene Williams—generally ignore the official account of his death and the events surrounding it. Historians more often than not suggest that Williams was hit by a stone thrown by whites angry that he had crossed the *de facto* boundary into waters traditionally off limits to African Americans. The official report, however, suggests that four African Americans walked through a large group of white beachgoers to enter the water and were ordered away. The African Americans left but returned shortly in larger numbers and began throwing rocks at the white beachgoers, who responded in kind. As the fight went back and forth, Williams clung to a railroad tie in the water, afraid to come in to shore. When a white swimmer approached him, Williams let go of the tie and drowned. No injuries as the result of stone-throwing were found on his body. Instead of arresting a white man who black witnesses believed threw the stone that allegedly killed Williams, a white police officer "arrested a Negro on a white man's complaint. Negroes mobbed the white officer, and the riot was under way." See CCRR, *Negro in Chicago*, 4 (quotation); and "Report of the Coroner's Jury on the Race Riots," 1, Roll 30-78, Folder 13, Chicago Commission on Race Relations Papers, 1919-1920 (microfilm), (Illinois State Archives, Springfield, Illinois). Hereafter cited as CCRRP.

³⁵ Embree, *13 Against the Odds*, 56-57.

³⁶ Waskow, *From Race Riot to Sit-In*, 60-2.

businessmen—most notably Julius Rosenwald—began its work in October 1919. On the official recommendation of Robert R. Moton, and because of the influence of Robert Park, the commission selected Charles Johnson as its associate executive secretary. The twenty-six-year-old Johnson became responsible for most of the research behind the commission's study, work that would earn him considerable praise in the next few years.³⁷ Johnson's role in researching and writing much of *The Negro in Chicago* also marked the very thing that brought him the most personal criticism from detractors in later years; namely, telling wealthy white men exactly what they wanted to hear, a supposition that ignores the limitations placed on black scholars throughout the first half of the twentieth century.³⁸

From the beginning of its work the commission believed “we are going to have a report which will be an important document in American history.” Johnson's outline and the data that he collected soon after the riot gave the commission good reason for optimism. Had the commission followed Johnson's original outline, *The Negro in Chicago* may well have provided a framework for any number of fundamental changes. But Johnson's proposed section on Chicago politics and race was dropped, eliminating any chance for substantive recommendations for reform in a city plagued by violent crime, corruption, and racial antagonism. Not without good reason did black Chicagoans, as Johnson learned in conversation with them, find it difficult “to divorce the purposes of the Commission from suspected connections with politics.” A close examination of the

³⁷ Pearson, “Charles S. Johnson: The Urban League Years,” 54-62; Philpott, *Slum and the Ghetto*, 222-23; Waskow, *From Race Riot to Sit-In*, 80-81; Minutes of the Chicago Commission on Race Relations, October 9, 1919, 7, Folder 13, CCRRP.

³⁸ Roi Ottley, *New World A-Coming* (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1969; originally published 1943), 238; Jonathan Scott Holloway, *Confronting the Veil*, 140-42; Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, 47.

relationship between Chicago's political bosses, vice districts bordering the Black Belt, and corruption in the police department, proved too prickly for the practical-minded business leaders who directed the commission. Johnson no doubt chafed under restrictions that thwarted his desire to get to the root causes of the riot, suffering in silence his only option other than being replaced. Even so, the young sociologist, a particularly effective speaker in front of small groups, exerted a strong influence on the commission. Johnson educated white commissioners by underscoring the damage that discrimination in jobs and housing had on race relations, and he urged black members to be bold in their demands for substantive concessions.³⁹

While it is true that *The Negro in Chicago* failed in the monumental tasks of transforming the city's race relations and restructuring its politics, the fears of some African Americans that the commission would use its final report to propose "a scheme of compulsory segregation" proved unfounded. Johnson won that battle; the commission denounced compulsory segregation. But Johnson lost out on the incendiary issue of integration. In its argument for peaceful accommodation, the commission stressed the need for more equality in the workplace, believing that an increase in capital would allow black Chicagoans to solve housing problems on their own with a minimum of racial

³⁹ Charles S. Johnson to Francis W. Shepardson, September 10, 1920 (quotation), Folder 9, CRRP; Waskow, *From Race Riot to Sit-In*, 73, 97-102; Philpott, *Slum and the Ghetto*, 228. On black suspicion, see in particular W. E. B. Du Bois's response to a questionnaire prepared by Johnson and included in *The Negro in Chicago*. In response to Du Bois's answers published in *The Crisis*, Johnson wrote in *The Negro in Chicago*: "At the time of this article the Commission had made no report of its findings whatever, and there was no possible basis for the accusation of bias. When a Negro living in Chicago explained that the questionnaire was prepared by a Negro member of the commission's staff, the editor of the *Crisis* replied that 'whoever framed the questionnaire of which I speak in the *Crisis* or advised its framing had a bias against Negroes. Of that I have not the slightest doubt, and what I was doing was simply to warn the public of this.'" CRRP, *Negro in Chicago*, 518-519 (quotation on p. 519). Chicago's new Republican mayor, Bill Thompson, forged an alliance with African Americans that posed a threat to the livelihoods of Irish ward politicians whose Democratic domains bordered the Black Belt. Douglas Bukowski, *Big Bill Thompson, Chicago, and the Politics of Image* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 41-42.

friction, even if it meant extending the boundaries of “voluntary” segregation without attempting to eliminate them.⁴⁰

Above all, the commission rejected the idea of black inferiority or “instinctual” racial hostility; it sought to change public opinion and improve race relations by combating negative stereotypes and misperceptions. It suggested that inflammatory newspaper articles, activities of anti-black neighborhood associations that led to numerous bombings, and unsubstantiated rumors in the weeks before the riot set the stage for more widespread racial violence. The final report indicted the police department for official misconduct; in many instances they ignored white lawbreakers while brutalizing African Americans, which allowed the riot to spread in the early stages when it could easily have been contained. Gangs of white teen-agers and young men from the Stock Yards district bordering the Black Belt, viewed by police as “too dangerous to be interfered with,” took the lead and incited others to riot.⁴¹

The commission determined that while job discrimination and equality in labor union representation were serious issues that needed to be corrected, housing competition and the anti-black exhortations of groups like the Kenwood and Hyde Park Property Owners’ Association caused racial tension on the South Side to reach the boiling point. Following a line of reasoning similar to that of Herbert Hoover, who believed that American

⁴⁰ Johnson to Shepardson, September 10, 1920 (quotation), CCRRP; CCRR, *Negro in Chicago*, 644; Philpott, *Slum and Ghetto*, 226.

⁴¹ CCRR, *Negro in Chicago*, 3, 12, 26-40, 114-33, 436-594; Minutes of the Meeting At the City Club of Chicago, Wednesday, February 25, 1920, 2-3 (quotation on p. 3), Folder 3, CCRRP. Dominic A. Pacyga notes: “In many ways the riot was not a working-class confrontation, as implied by various studies, but rather a middle- and lower-middle-class conflict . . . The Irish, and their allied older immigrant groups, thought that they might slip downward on the economic ladder as black neighbors brought perceived economic devaluation of their investments in real estate and helped to dismantle their political and organized labor machines. The Irish middle-class goal was the removal of African Americans from their neighborhood.” Dominic A. Pacyga, “Chicago’s 1919 Race Riot: Ethnicity, Class, and Urban Violence,” in Raymond A. Mohl, ed., *The Making of Urban America*, 2nd ed. (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1997), 205 (quotations).

economic expansion would continue only by avoiding war and revolution, representatives of Chicago's business community, alarmed by the disruption and uncertainty caused by riots, labor strikes, and the Red Scare of 1919 and 1920, sought peace and stability in race relations mostly for self-serving purposes. With the destruction in Europe and on Chicago's South Side still fresh in his mind, Charles S. Johnson also preferred a peaceful environment, albeit for reasons different from the commission's powerful white businessmen. Yet he understood that black advancement and progress in race relations had traditionally grown out of tension and conflict. The results of riots like the one that took place in Chicago were not entirely negative from Johnson's point of view; the riot illustrated in dramatic terms that African Americans in no way accepted their inferior status and were restless to change it, thereby rejecting the idea of a permanent caste system.⁴²

Johnson wrote seven of the report's eleven chapters, which provided the bulk of the background material on the Great Migration, black housing, racial contacts, and the vital role of public opinion. His work highlighted the extent of industrial exploitation and housing discrimination faced by black Chicagoans, fundamental problems that demanded immediate attention for any hope of progress.⁴³ Guided by cold-blooded realism rather than "calm acceptance" in his understanding that white racial hostility might persist for generations to come, Johnson never intended for *The Negro in Chicago* to gloss over

⁴² Waskow, *From Race Riot to Sit-In*, 66-70; Philpott, *Slum and the Ghetto*, 225-26; William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (Cleveland and New York: World Publishing, 1959), 91-92; Joseph Brandes, *Herbert Hoover and Economic Diplomacy* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1962), 22-39; Gilpin, "Charles S. Johnson," 156-58.

⁴³ John H. Stanfield notes that Johnson gave a copy of *The Negro in Chicago* to his father "with this dedication and confession: 'Here is contained the work of 2 years. In transmitting the volume to you, I waive anonymity customary in publications of this nature and command to your special attention, Chapters III, IV, V, VI IX, X, XI which are my contributions exclusively.'" Stanfield, *Philanthropy and Jim Crow*, 120.

“evidence of intractable white racism as residue of a passing sociological age of conflict,” as critics of the report have argued.⁴⁴ Finding a way around the limits set by the commission, Johnson used an abundance of personal interviews to great effect, at once both humanizing the victims of racial discrimination and violence, and as a clever way of addressing the misconceptions and negative stereotypes of African Americans that he believed, like Robert E. Park, fed racial tension.

Through the use of personal testimony, or the “human document,” Johnson examined both the mentality that fostered white racial hostility, and the emergence of the more assertive attitude that characterized the “New Negro” after World War I. For example, Johnson quoted a white Chicagoan who claimed, “I know I don’t want niggers living next door to me, but I can’t tell you why.” The owner of a woman’s clothing store drew an even harder line when he stated, “The more I know of niggers, the more I am convinced that there is no good nigger but a dead one.” What the storeowner actually knew about African Americans was not revealed, the implication being that his knowledge was at best limited and probably based on newspaper stories or other negative publicity. On the other hand, a black war veteran warned, “I can shoot as good as the next one. I ain’t looking for trouble, but if it comes my way, I ain’t dodging.”⁴⁵ Johnson’s effective use of personal testimony, by far the most powerful element of *The Negro in Chicago*, helped to define his humanistic approach to sociology, and became a hallmark of studies that he directed for years to come.

⁴⁴ Johnson could not have both downplayed “intractable white racism” and at the same time, as David Levering Lewis also noted, “gauged more accurately than perhaps any other Afro-American intellectual the scope and depth of the national drive to “put the nigger in his place” after the war, to keep him out of the officer corps, out of labor unions and skilled jobs, out of the North and quaking for his very existence in the South—and out of politics everywhere.” Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, 47-48 (quotations).

⁴⁵ CCR, *Negro in Chicago*, 438-493, 457 (first quotation), 457-58 (second quotation), 481 (third quotation).

Although Charles Johnson enrolled for graduate courses in 1917 in order to complete his Ph.D., his work for the Urban League that took him to the Deep South, the war, and then his role in the Chicago Commission on Race Relations, derailed his plans. Johnson never earned a Ph.D. but could easily have written a first-rate doctoral dissertation on the 1919 riot. In many respects *The Negro in Chicago*, while in no way the document that Johnson would have preferred, served as an informal substitute for a dissertation; it established his reputation as a serious scholar and, most importantly for the philanthropic foundations that funded his projects for the next few decades, highlighted his ability to work particularly well in an interracial setting.⁴⁶

In 1921, a year before publication of the commission's final report, Johnson left Chicago for New York, where he became director of the Urban League's Department of Research and Investigation, and later the editor of *Opportunity*. Charles and his wife, Marie, a young socialite from Milwaukee with a flair for organizing that complemented her husband's career, took up residence in the hinterlands of Flushing, Queens. Many blocks uptown from *Opportunity's* offices in Manhattan lay Harlem, the center of African American life in the United States. In Harlem, where overcrowding, poverty, and neglect had fast transformed the neighborhood's six square miles into an urban ghetto, Johnson's measured, scholarly approach to improving race relations collided with the powerful new force of Marcus Garvey's emotional appeal to the black masses to rise up and return Africa to the control of Africans. Garvey's rhetoric and radicalism challenged traditional black leaders, even those who had rejected most vehemently Booker T. Washington's old style of conciliation in exchange for the idea of the uncompromising New Negro. Black

⁴⁶ Gilpin, "Charles S. Johnson," 10; Raushenbush, *Robert E. Park*, 95; Charles S. Johnson, *Bitter Canaan: The Story of the Negro Republic* (New Brunswick, N. J.: and Oxford: Transaction Books, 1987), 227-28.

professionals like Charles Johnson and W. E. B. Du Bois abhorred Garvey's bombastic style and empty promises, but they understood the desperation that attracted lower-class African Americans to his message in the explosive racial environment of the postwar era.⁴⁷

The Great Migration and World War I resulted in a heightened race consciousness among African Americans impatient for change and disillusioned by the wave of white hostility directed at them in the United States after the armistice. Afro-Caribbean immigrants brought with them to New York a tradition of political radicalism and anti-colonialism that President Woodrow Wilson's idea of "self-determination" only strengthened. W. E. B. Du Bois intended his militant phrase, "We return from the fighting, we return fighting," to inspire African Americans but it could just as easily have applied to white Americans fearful of socialism, Bolshevism, feminism, and dark-skinned immigrants. For every black action came a white response. Whereas African Americans in northern cities, now in much larger numbers, redefined the meaning of blackness with the New Negro movement, white Americans tried to reshape their own identities, as exemplified by the astounding national growth of the Ku Klux Klan as well as a host of anti-immigrant, anti-black publications by writers such as Lothrop Stoddard, Madison Grant, and others. In the era of superpatriotism that followed the war, the National Origins Act of 1924, which all but eliminated the flow of immigrants into the U. S.,

⁴⁷ Arna Bontemps, "The Awakening: A Memoir," in Arna Bontemps, ed., *The Harlem Renaissance Remembered: Essays Edited With a Memoir* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1972), 20. Johnson met Marie Antoinette Burgette in Milwaukee in 1917 while directing his Urban League study. Robbins, *Sidelines Activist*, 37, 40-43, 59. Cary D. Wintz, *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance* (Houston: Rice University Press, 1988), 6-29; Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 17-34, 105-23, 127-49; Gilpin, "Charles S. Johnson," 25-26; Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois*, 50-51; "Interview with W. E. B. Du Bois by Charles Mowbray White, August 22, 1920," in Robert A. Hill, ed., *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers* (9 vols.; Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1983-2000), II, 620-21.

allowed white Americans to focus more intently on their differences with black Americans. By underscoring and promoting their belief in black inferiority, whites better defined themselves in relation to the popular slogan “one-hundred percent Americanism.” Ideas on black and white in the 1920s became increasingly polarized, particularly in New York, the financial, intellectual, and cultural center of the United States, which exported those ideas around the world. New York City in the post-World War I years, the very symbol of the age of mass culture, provided a perfect environment for Marcus Garvey to advertise, sell, and export worldwide his radical ideas on the New Negro.⁴⁸

Garvey founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association in his native Jamaica in 1915 in the hopes of bringing economic development and opportunity to the poorest of that poverty-stricken British colony. Influenced by Booker T. Washington’s success at Tuskegee, the small and rotund Garvey preached the need for education as the most important means for achieving black uplift. He repeated the same message when he immigrated to Harlem in 1916, where in a few years he established new headquarters of the UNIA. After failing to attract much support for his cause, however, the man who would soon declare himself “Provisional President of Africa” took a more militant stance, claiming that the problems of race relations would be solved through struggle and conflict rather than accommodation. At the Paris Peace Conference in January 1919, the capitalist-minded Garvey joined briefly with socialist A. Philip Randolph to create a new Pan-African organization that petitioned for native control of former German colonies. In the postwar atmosphere of disruption and revolution, Garvey declared his astounding intention of uniting “the four hundred million Negroes of the world into a vast

⁴⁸ On the politics of Afro-Caribbean immigrants in the United States, see Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Verso Press, 1998), 134-55; Matthew Pratt Guterl, *The Color of Race in America*, 131-35.

organization to plant the banner of freedom on the great continent of Africa.” The development of black-owned businesses, Garvey believed, would provide the necessary capital to realize his dreams of a black empire in Africa.⁴⁹

Garvey’s message of black pride and his promises of vast economic success resonated most strongly in the United States with lower-class African Americans in search of hope and inspiration in the wake of postwar lynchings and race riots. The *Negro World*, a weekly newspaper published in Harlem, and the *African World*, published in South Africa, kept Garvey’s growing international following informed of his exploits. The launching of his steamship company, the Black Star Line (in contrast with the famous White Star Line), among many other business ventures, added substance to the UNIA’s program and thrilled Garvey loyalists throughout the Caribbean and the United States. For sheer spectacle no one could match Garvey, whose use of military regalia and bestowment of grandiose titles captured the imagination of the masses.⁵⁰ The UNIA, modeling itself now on other dues-paying fraternal organizations, even tried to recruit the conservative Emmett J. Scott by giving him the title of Knight Commander of the Sublime Order of the Nile for his service to African Americans during World War I.⁵¹

In the summer of 1920, as the world focused its attention on Geneva, Switzerland, and the formation of the League of Nations, black Americans fixed their gaze on an

⁴⁹ Rupert Lewis, *Marcus Garvey: Anti-Colonial Champion* (Trenton, N. J.: Africa World Press, 1988), 57-65; Judith Stein, *The World of Marcus Garvey: Race and Class in Modern Society* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 24-60. Marcus Garvey quoted in E. David Cronon, *Black Moses: The Story of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Madison, Milwaukee, and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1955), 65. Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia*, 134-55; Skinner, *African Americans and U. S. Policy Toward Africa*, 394-95.

⁵⁰ Tony Martin, *Race First: The Ideological and Organizational Struggles of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1976), 151-67; Stein, *World of Marcus Garvey*, 89-107; “Report of the UNIA Meeting, Newport News, Va., Oct. 25, 1919,” in Hill, ed., *Marcus Garvey Papers*, II, 119.

⁵¹ Emmett J. Scott denied ever being interested in Garveyism or being present when the title was bestowed. See Emmett J. Scott to W. E. Mollison, September 12, 1922, Hill, ed., *Marcus Garvey Papers*, V, 12.

international UNIA convention that drew delegates from twenty-five nations for the purpose of drafting a Negro Declaration of Rights. Garvey's announcement in a speech before a crowd of 25,000 at Madison Square Garden of his intention of retaking "every square inch of the twelve million square miles of African territory belonging to us by right Divine," sent shock waves through even the most complacent white reporters in attendance. Lavish parades of UNIA members in full military dress accompanied the convention, and were the talk of Harlem for months to come.⁵²

The growth of the UNIA's international membership, and the founding of the Black Star Line that could transport large numbers of followers to distant lands, led Garvey in the months before the 1920 convention to search for a new, permanent headquarters for his organization. The Republic of Liberia's history and constitutional exclusion of whites from immigrating, owning land, or participating in government, made it Garvey's choice as the best site for achieving his Pan-African dreams. The publicity surrounding the Black Star Line gave added weight to Garvey's promise to create industrial and agricultural projects that would "free Liberia of any debt that she owes to any white government," a reference to the million dollars that the republic still owed on a loan from 1912. Liberia's need for capital encouraged Garvey to send a spokesman to Monrovia to pitch his idea and scout the political terrain a few months before the UNIA's convention in August 1920.⁵³

Elie Garcia, a Haitian immigrant with ties to the Black Star Line, arrived in the capital of Monrovia in June 1920. Monrovia's mayor, Gabriel Johnson, a Garvey enthusiast who

⁵² Marcus Garvey quoted in Cronon, *Black Moses*, 66; "Report of the UNIA Parade, August 3, 1920," in Hill, ed., *Marcus Garvey Papers*, II, 490-94.

⁵³ Cronon, *Black Moses*, 124-25; Stein, *World of Marcus Garvey*, 116, 117 (quotation), 118; Skinner, *African Americans and U. S. Policy Toward Africa*, 427-28.

would receive the title of Supreme Potentate of the UNIA at the August convention, gave Garcia a warm welcome. Impressed with the nation's rich natural resources, Garcia soon grew confident that the UNIA's colonization program could work, particularly after Liberia's Secretary of State Edwin Barclay informed him that the republic would grant "every facility legally possible" to effectuate Garvey's ambitious plans. When it came to assessing Liberian politics, however, Garcia had little faith in present conditions and leadership. Americo-Liberians, according to Garcia, exhibited neither energy nor initiative while harboring deep suspicions of anyone who did, particularly "American or West Indian Negroes." Based on what Garcia viewed as the weak moral character of the Americo-Liberians, he advised Garvey not to let them handle any UNIA funds. Worst of all, Garcia charged the Americo-Liberians with using natives for slave labor, a subject that the U. S. State Department had received information about as early as 1912. Rather than exposing the slavery issue or any hint of Garvey's plan to emancipate Liberia's tribal majority, Garcia advised a stealthy course to achieve the required political changes. Even though racial unity stood as the UNIA's primary goal, the organization adopted the same secretive investment methods practiced by other foreigners in the black republic and refined by Americo-Liberians themselves.⁵⁴

Marcus Garvey's UNIA, much like the Republic of Liberia, suffered from internal strife, mismanagement, and a chronic shortage of funds. Over the course of the next few years as Garvey tried to raise money for his colonization program, his most ambitious and important business enterprise, the Black Star Line, began to fail. As the U. S.

⁵⁴ Lewis, *Marcus Garvey*, 71-75; Cronon, *Black Moses*, 124; Stein, *World of Marcus Garvey*, 119 (second quotation) 120. See also the following in Hill, ed., *Marcus Garvey Papers*: Elie Garcia to President C. D. B. King, June 8, 1920, II, 345-46; Edwin Barclay to Elie Garcia, June 14, 1920," II, 347 (first quotation); "Address by Gabriel Johnson, Mayor of Monrovia, Liberia, August 3, 1920," II, 526-29; and "Elie Garcia, UNIA Commissioner to Liberia, to Marcus Garvey and the UNIA," II, 660-72.

government took an active interest in investigating the shipping company's problematic business dealings, criticism of the Garvey movement increased in the black press.

Garvey's disastrous decision to defend himself at his trial on mail fraud charges in 1923 made him an easy target for his most vocal critics. Indeed, his conviction and five-year prison term brought joy and relief to the black press, who viewed the UNIA movement with as much, if not more, alarm than did the federal government.⁵⁵

In August 1923 Charles Johnson joined in the chorus of black voices that denounced Garveyism. Johnson's normal style of controlled writing, an effective blend of elegance and bluntness, took an unusually aggressive turn in the pages of *Opportunity* not long after the UNIA leader's trial and conviction. More concerned with the psychological causes and effects of the movement rather than with Garvey himself, Johnson deemed the "grand result" of the UNIA's program to be "the fleecing of hundreds of thousands of poor and ignorant Negroes." He found the public outpouring of both sympathy and condemnation an interesting contradiction in that it paralleled the "psychology of the white world," itself "a mixture of contradictions and paradoxes." The danger of Garveyism, as Johnson saw it, rested with its unrealizable goals, and how it played on the increased postwar hopes and aspirations of African Americans. The "balked desires" and "repressed longings" of lower-class African Americans demanded an outlet that Garveyism readily afforded. Johnson suggested that the dreams of Garvey's followers fostered a "mental relaxation" that was actually nothing more than "a black version of that same 100 per cent mania that now afflicts white America . . .," manifested most

⁵⁵ Stein, *World of Marcus Garvey*, 186-204. On criticism in the black press see, for instance, the following articles in Hill, ed., *Marcus Garvey Papers*: "Editorial by Robert L. Vann, Pittsburgh *Courier*, November, 10, 1923," V, 498; "James Weldon Johnson to John Mitchell, Jr., Editor, Richmond *Planet*, April 3, 1924," V, 578; and "Article by W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Crisis*, may 1924," V, 583-84.

clearly in the resurgence in the early 1920s of the Ku Klux Klan. In the absence of the UNIA's leader, Johnson warned that the sources of the discontent among lower-class African Americans that galvanized their allegiance to Garveyism "must be remedied effectively and now, or this accumulating energy and unrest, blocked off from its dreams, will take another direction." Johnson and other black professionals considered with some concern exactly what "direction" that would be in the future, particularly in the hands of a leader more dangerous than the blustering and essentially "harmless" Marcus Garvey.⁵⁶

Although the imprisonment of its leader dealt a serious blow to the UNIA, it did not spell a quick end to Garveyism. Even with his troubles of 1923, and as he appealed his case in 1924, Garvey proceeded with plans to begin sending colonists to Liberia, the first African state to join the League of Nations, for what he hoped would be "the brightest chapter in the history of the Universal Negro Improvement Association." The contempt that Garvey felt for Americo-Liberians only made him more determined to succeed in West Africa. In private he blamed Liberian political leaders for deliberately under-developing their country in order to preserve their own power, and for weakening the hopes of Pan-Africanism through their shameless exploitation of Liberia's native population. Garvey's plans to plant independent UNIA settlements in Liberia, develop the republic's resources, and to recognize the rights of natives, went far beyond the idea of fundamental reform. If successful, Garveyism in Liberia meant nothing less than revolution.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Charles S. Johnson, "After Garvey—What?" *Opportunity*, 1 (August 1923), 130-34 (quotations). See also E. Franklin Frazier, "The Garvey Movement," *Opportunity*, 4 (November 1926), 346-48.

⁵⁷ See the following in Hill, ed., *Marcus Garvey Papers*: "Marcus Garvey to President C. D. B. King of Liberia, December 5, 1923," V, 507-10; "Speech by Marcus Garvey, June 4, 1924," V, 586-90 (quotation on p. 586); "Articles in the *Negro World*, June 7, 1924, V, 595-99. Frank Chalk, "Du Bois and Garvey Confront Liberia: Two Incidents of the Coolidge Years," *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, I, 2 (November 1967), 135-42; Cronon, *Black Moses*, 126-27; Stein, *World of Marcus Garvey*, 124-25, 210.

Garvey finally raised enough money from UNIA donations by 1924 to begin preparations for the transport of settlers to Liberia. The rejection by the U. S. Congress of an American loan in 1922 left Liberia destitute, but in no way diminished Americo-Liberian tenacity for guarding its political domain. Forewarned by the Americo-Liberian elite that it would require the UNIA to accept only a severely restricted influence in the nation's internal affairs, Garvey shipped the first installment of materials for building a group of camps in Cape Palmas, located in Maryland County at the southernmost point of Liberia. A group of UNIA technical experts who arrived in Liberia before the shipment of building supplies, however, were seized by customs officials and faced immediate deportation. After viewing a copy of the Garcia report with its radical agenda, President Charles King and other Americo-Liberian leaders had a sudden change of heart toward the idea of organized settlements of Garvey loyalists in their country. Shortly after the seizure of the UNIA experts, the Liberian consul general in Baltimore, Ernest Lyon, issued a formal statement in July 1924 that banned any Garveyite from immigrating to Liberia. Believing that France or Great Britain would use any pretext to annex Liberian territory, President King, already in negotiations with Harvey Firestone, Sr., declared in January 1925 that the republic had no intention of aligning itself with any movement like Garvey's that intensified "racial feelings of hatred and ill will."⁵⁸

The UNIA's reversal of fortune in Liberia signaled an end to Marcus Garvey's dreams of a Back to Africa movement. Garvey claimed that President King changed his mind only after the Firestone Plantations Company showed interest in acquiring some of the same land promised to the UNIA. At the UNIA's August 1924 convention in New York

⁵⁸ Cronon, *Black Moses*, 128-30 (Charles King quoted on p. 130); Stein, *World of Marcus Garvey*, 212-18; I. K. Sundiata, *Black Scandal: America and the Liberian Labor Crisis, 1929-1936* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1980), 112-15.

delegates from the Liberia mission characterized President King as a race traitor, and blamed him for succumbing to pressure exerted by “powerful bullies” France and Great Britain to head off the threat that Garvey’s brand of black nationalism posed to their own African colonies. Most of all, Garvey accused his long-time opponent, W. E. B. Du Bois, for spoiling his plans in Liberia. Convention delegates decried Du Bois as “the greatest enemy of his race that God Almighty has ever made.”⁵⁹

More than any other African American in the first decades of the century, Du Bois articulated the interconnectedness of race, war, prosperity, and imperialism. For Du Bois, competition between colonial powers France, Great Britain, and Germany for imperial influence in Africa and elsewhere served as the main cause of World War I. After struggling for years to advance his own Pan-African movement, Du Bois became enthralled with Americo-Liberian leadership when he attended President King’s second inauguration in January 1924, a moment that he considered the greatest in his life up to that time. Du Bois felt wildly optimistic over what he perceived as the possibility of a black utopia in Liberia, and later counseled President King on the benefits of reaching an agreement with Firestone. Liberia could trust neither the French nor British, Du Bois surmised in his primer to King, because “colored people of the British Empire have no influence on imperial policies,” and “[c]olored people in France occupy positions of influence but they have not yet learned to use their positions for the benefit of the colored race.” On the other hand, investment by white Americans posed the “least danger” because with it came a promise of fair treatment. Should any problems develop, the

⁵⁹ Robert G. Weisbord, *Ebony Kinship: Africa, Africans, and Afro-Americans* (Westport, Conn. and London: Greenwood Press, 1973), 69; Cronon, *Black Moses*, 130; “Report of the UNIA Delegation to Liberia, August 27, 1924,” in Hill, ed., *Marcus Garvey Papers*, V, 787 (first quotation), 796 (second quotation); Skinner, *African Americans and U. S. Policy Toward Africa*, 506.

editor of *The Crisis* claimed without any basis in fact that “the Negroes of America,” just then “beginning to understand and sympathize with Liberia,” had “enough political power to make the government go slowly.”⁶⁰

To be sure, all concerned parties—France, Great Britain, the U. S. State Department, Firestone, and middle-class African Americans like Du Bois and Johnson—breathed a sigh of relief at the UNIA’s failure in Liberia. Garvey, still clinging to the slim hope that more negotiations might materialize in the future, chose not to go public with charges that the Americo-Liberians subjected their tribal citizens to forced labor and slavery.⁶¹ If he did so later, no one was listening.

Even as Marcus Garvey appealed his conviction on mail fraud charges and reacted to his failure in Liberia in 1924, Charles S. Johnson and other members of the Talented Tenth began charting a course altogether different from radical movements like the UNIA with its black-nationalist agenda. Johnson’s duties with the Urban League multiplied when he became the editor of *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*, which made its debut in January 1923. The sleek monthly magazine, never a threat to equal or surpass the circulation of the NAACP’s *The Crisis*, followed the traditional Urban League approach of educating the public through scientific surveys aimed at improving life for African Americans and fostering better race relations; before the American racial problem could

⁶⁰ Guterl, *Color of Race in America*, 120; W. E. B. Du Bois, “World War and the Color Line,” *The Crisis*, 9 (November 1914), 28; W. E. B. Du Bois, “The African Roots of the War,” in David Levering Lewis, ed., *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Reader* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), 650. Du Bois lobbied hard for the appointment as President Coolidge’s Special Representative and Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to Liberia. Du Bois first enlisted James Weldon Johnson to appeal to Coolidge on his behalf, an attempt that failed. He then persuaded William H. Lewis, a lifelong Republican, to ask Coolidge for the favor. See Skinner, *African Americans and U. S. Policy Toward Africa*, 492-97. David Levering Lewis claims that in Liberia, Du Bois “came perilously close to imagining himself a pan-African proconsul empowered to redirect the political course of the continent. No longer the result of a cynical White House favor arranged at his own request by a powerful GOP stalwart, the mission to Monrovia took on unprecedented historic and political valence as Du Bois moved among the Liberians.” Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois*, 120 (quotations), 121. Chalk, “Du Bois and Garvey Confront Liberia,” 135-42.

⁶¹ Cronon, *Black Moses*, 135; Stein, *World of Marcus Garvey*, 218.

be solved, Urban Leaguers reasoned, it must first be understood, even at the cost of avoiding the type of propaganda and protest that might attract a larger readership. Throughout the 1920s the need to combat negative stereotypes of African Americans stood out as a major concern in the pages of *Opportunity*.⁶² For his part, Johnson directed surveys and reported his findings and recommendations in the new journal, albeit to a much smaller number of readers than he would have wished. While Johnson never believed that “interracial elitism” could solve every problem, a charge leveled by one critic at the journal’s limited biracial audience, his decision to introduce black artists and writers to the white world of New York publishing in 1924 nevertheless pushed *Opportunity* in a more literary direction, and in the process helped launch the Harlem Renaissance.⁶³

The upsurge of public interest in black-themed novels and plays by white authors in the early 1920s led Johnson to perceive that the time was ripe for maneuvering New York’s white-dominated publishing firms into finally recognizing that African Americans had literary abilities of their own. Claude McKay’s book of poetry, *Harlem Shadows* (1922), and Jean Toomer’s experimental novel, *Cane* (1923), set precedents that Johnson hoped to build on.⁶⁴ By early 1924, after having lived in Manhattan for three years, he felt confident enough in his networking skills to reach across racial lines in an attempt to elevate the status of African Americans through the promotion of their own creative

⁶² Nancy J. Weiss criticized *Opportunity* for, in her estimation, never offering a realistic perspective of black life and for being far too optimistic. Weiss, *History of the National Urban League*, 223-33. Fullinwider, *Mind and Mood of Black America*, 111-12; Gilpin, “Charles S. Johnson,” 25-30; Robbins, *Sidelines Activist*, 40-47. Virtually every issue of *Opportunity* in the first few years of publication addressed, in some fashion, racial misperceptions and stereotypes.

⁶³ Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, 115 (quotation).

⁶⁴ Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, 50-58, 91-92; Fullinwider, *Mind and Mood of Black America*, 133-43; Patrick J. Gilpin, “Charles S. Johnson, Entrepreneur of the Harlem Renaissance,” in Bontemps, ed., *Harlem Renaissance Remembered*, 215-46.

enterprises. In the process he and other black leaders hoped to deal a serious blow to the myth of black inferiority. The arts, as perceived by Johnson, stood out as perhaps the one avenue to success still relatively unrestricted by race in the technology-driven American system of capitalism.⁶⁵ Johnson encouraged black writers to transcend propaganda and protest, and to work on their own terms based on their own experiences and understanding of the human condition. Native New Yorker or southern sharecropper, it made no difference to Johnson: the record of African American struggle and survival in the United States held important individual meaning out of which truth and beauty could be extracted. He conveyed the same message in later years, aiming it specifically at young black Americans to ward off the curse of low self-esteem imposed by a society that systematically belittled and excluded them.⁶⁶

Johnson organized the now famous Civic Club dinner on March 21, 1924, as an evening to celebrate the publication of *There is Confusion*, the new novel by Jessie Fauset, literary editor of *The Crisis*. With a much more ambitious program in mind, however, he exploited the event by inviting a number of black writers and white publishers for introductory purposes, both to each other, and to the idea of the New Negro as proclaimed in a speech by the literary-minded Howard University philosophy professor Alain Locke. Nearly ten years earlier Locke presaged his concept of the New Negro when he introduced the term “cultural pluralism.” In a modern society, Locke

⁶⁵ Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1995), 323; Charles S. Johnson, “The New Frontage on American Life,” in Alain Locke, ed., *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1968; originally published 1925), 278-98; Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, 48, 90-91.

⁶⁶ Fullinwider, *Mind and Mood of Black America*, 11-15, 119; Charles S. Johnson, “To Negro Youth,” *Opportunity*, 6 (September 1928), 258; Charles S. Johnson, “The Problem and Needs of the Negro Adolescent in View of His Minority Status: A Critical Summary,” *Journal of Negro Education*, 9 (July 1940), 344-53; Charles S. Johnson, “An Opportunity for Negro Writers,” *Opportunity*, 2 (September 1924), 199.

believed that cultural separateness could lead only to obsolescence. Cultural pluralism, as both Locke and Charles Johnson envisioned, allowed African Americans to identify themselves as a separate group yet be absorbed and accepted like everyone else in the American system by taking pride in their own particular contributions and customs. As the evening that marked the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance wound to a close, Paul Kellogg, editor of *Survey Graphic*, informed Johnson that he wanted to highlight the new black mecca of Harlem in an upcoming issue of his journal featuring the work of black artists and writers. If the Civic Club dinner left invited guests like the NAACP's James Weldon Johnson and W. E. B. Du Bois in an upbeat mood, it left the normally reserved and unflappable Charles Johnson on the verge of euphoria.⁶⁷

The vibrancy of Harlem, particularly its artistic and intellectual milieu of the mid-1920s, mesmerized Johnson and countless others, both black and white. A rooftop photograph taken at a party for poet Langston Hughes in 1924 captured the camaraderie and exuberance of the time and place. The closely aligned, smiling subjects of the group photo included Hughes, Charles Johnson, sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, novelist and physician Rudolph Fisher, and legalist Hubert Delany, young and confident black professionals with enthusiasm to burn.⁶⁸ While Harlem grew increasingly congested with growing numbers of poverty-stricken African Americans far less appealing to photographers than members of the Talented Tenth, it also offered a never-ending supply of bootleg liquor and an unparalleled nightlife that defined the spirit of the Jazz Age. The

⁶⁷ "The Debut of the Younger School of Writers," *Opportunity*, 2 (May 1924), 143-44; Douglas, *Terrible Honesty*, 304-06; Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois*, 157-60. On Locke, see in particular Menand, *Metaphysical Club*, 388-90, 398-99.

⁶⁸ The group photograph was taken at the home of Regina Andrews and Ethel Kay Nance on St. Nicholas Avenue in Harlem, and has been reproduced many times. See, for instance, *Freedom: A Photographic History of the African American Freedom Struggle*, Text by Manning Marable and Leith Mullings (London and New York: Phaidon Press, 2002), 119.

neighborhood's rollicking after-hours rent parties, though frowned upon and never spoken of in polite society, often brought together the struggling and the successful, as the likes of Duke Ellington or Fats Waller might drop in at three a. m. to liven things up to a fever pitch.⁶⁹

Out of sociological curiosity Johnson may well have attended a rent party or two, but he in fact preferred to listen to traditional Negro spirituals, feeling that they best exemplified the pain and hope of the slaves. As host or guest, he spent many formal and sedate evenings at gatherings that included performances by black gospel singers.⁷⁰ Yet, Johnson liked his whiskey and soda; when an evening's formalities proved too taxing, the improvisation of the nearby clubs and cabarets occasionally lured him into the night along with friends like Langston Hughes and others in his social orbit. Even if they valued their health too much to attend many rent parties, Johnson and Hughes could still swing by a club or cabaret and listen to the music of a young Louis Armstrong, newly arrived from Chicago, or stagger down the street to hear Sidney Bechet belt out the chorus of "House Rent Blues (The Stomp)" on his soprano saxophone. Most middle-class black leaders in Harlem never found jazz and blues genteel enough to warrant an embrace, but the new musical forms—as independent as the age of modernity that they helped usher in—hardly needed their promotion or stamp of approval.⁷¹

⁶⁹ James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1930), 231-59, 260-84; Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto*, 127-49; Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, 106-7; Jeff Kisselof, *You Must Remember This: An Oral History of Manhattan From the 1890s to World War II* (New York: Schocken Books, 1989), 253-333; Wintz, *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance*, 91-92.

⁷⁰ Fullinwider, *Mind and Mood of Black America*, 119; Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, 126. If Johnson never actually attended a rent party, he received plenty of firsthand information from his friend and colleague, Ira De A. Reid, who studied the phenomenon. See Ira De A. Reid, "Mrs. Bailey Pays the Rent," 144-48, in Charles S. Johnson, ed., *Ebony and Topaz: A Collectanea* (New York: National Urban League, 1927), 144-48.

⁷¹ Langston Hughes wrote: "I remember one night at [Jessie Fauset's] home there was a gathering in honor of Salvador de Madaniga, the Spanish diplomat and savant, which somehow became a rather self-conscious

In addition to the scientific surveys that he continued to direct for the Urban League and publish in *Opportunity*, Johnson poured his energy into seeking out black literary and artistic talent. As one who never wavered in his understanding of the staying power or dictates of competitive capitalism, he beat *The Crisis* and Du Bois to the punch in 1925 when he used Carnegie funds to sponsor a literary contest in *Opportunity*. The excitement generated by the contest placed Johnson in the spotlight, a position probably as enjoyable for him as it was brief. There is no doubt that Johnson the competitor had a healthy ego, but just as he neither expected nor received any special credit for his central role in drafting *The Negro in Chicago*, he never sought the title of “entrepreneur” of the Harlem Renaissance. Instead he remained quite content to defer to the brilliant Alain Locke, the “press agent” for the New Negro, and to acknowledge his indebtedness to his friend, bibliophile Arthur Schomburg, for keeping him abreast of comings and goings in Harlem society.⁷²

Many negative misconceptions have arisen over Johnson’s tactics and personality during this period and, with little bearing in fact, have colored subsequent interpretations of his character and leadership. To be sure, descriptions of Johnson as “manipulative” and “ruthless” seem more applicable to the Americo-Liberians who would wish him dead in 1930, and imply an underhandedness that conflicts with the moral and ethical code that

gathering But afterward, Charles S. Johnson and I invited Mr. Madaniga to Small’s Paradise where we had a ‘ball’ until the dawn came up and forced us from the club.” Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea: An Autobiography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993; originally published 1940), 247 (quotation); Embree, *13 Against the Odds*, 68. Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 9-11.

⁷² Gilpin, “Charles S. Johnson, Entrepreneur of the Harlem Renaissance,” 215-46; Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, 125; Charles S. Johnson, “The Negro Renaissance and Its Significance,” *Opportunity*, 3 (June 1925), 176-77. Arturo Schomburg, born in Puerto Rico, made it his life’s work to find and catalog documents dealing with Africa and early African writing “for the vindication of the Negro race.” Schomburg was “far less interested in persuading white people of black people’s humanity and accomplishment than in convincing black people themselves of their own worth and historical stature as members of the human family.” See James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia*, 198 (first quotation), 209 (second quotation).

he lived by, a product of his strict religious upbringing.⁷³ Johnson undoubtedly reveled in the excitement and competition of Harlem's literary and intellectual atmosphere, and he could be overzealous at times when it came to guarding talent that he had a hand in discovering and nurturing. One of the visual artists promoted in *Opportunity*, Aaron Douglas, whose work incorporated and celebrated African culture, recalled being summoned to a meeting with Johnson. In an uncharacteristic tirade that shocked Douglas, Johnson lashed out at the "patronizing attitude" of the NAACP's Walter White. Johnson was "furious" because he had intended to introduce Douglas to Mexican illustrator Miguel Covarrubias at the Urban League's annual party. Covarrubias had expressed "mad" enthusiasm over one of Douglas's *Opportunity* covers and wanted to meet him. Johnson flew off the handle when he heard that White had a few days before tried to arrange his own meeting between the two artists. Douglas, who moved to New York because of Johnson's encouragement and quickly rose to prominence, also recalled that "many people . . . took credit for the things that [Johnson] had done," and that "his influence was so broad that it was hard to do anything that he hadn't created, thought out and . . . engineered."⁷⁴ Outspoken black author Zora Neale Hurston, who because of Johnson's intervention received a scholarship to Barnard, agreed with Douglas. Hurston claimed that the Harlem Renaissance was the result of Johnson's work, and that "only his hushmouth nature has caused it to be attributed to many others."⁷⁵

⁷³ Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, 126 (quotations). Arnold Rampersad introduces Johnson in his biography of Langston Hughes as "farsighted and manipulative." Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes: I, Too, Sing America, I, 1902-1941* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 96 (quotation).

⁷⁴ Aaron Douglas quoted in Amy Helene Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas: Art, Race, and the Harlem Renaissance* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 56-59 (quotation p. 58).

⁷⁵ Zora Neale Hurston wrote: "The Charles Johnsons befriended me as best they could. I could always find something to eat out at their house. Mrs. Johnson would give me carfare and encouragement. I came to worship them really." Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography* (Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1971; originally published 1942), 168 (quotations). Lewis, W. E. B. Du

Behind the scenes is where Johnson always felt most comfortable and operated most effectively. Typical of his approach was the way in which he dealt with a situation that arose in the pages of *Opportunity* in 1925. This time, it was Walter White who was angry over black writer Frank Horne's negative review in *Opportunity* of *The Fire in the Flint*, his novel about black "passing." White protested privately to Johnson, claiming that the criticism of his novel did not bother him nearly as much as the "inexperience and lack of comprehension of the reviewer." To pacify the NAACP leader, Johnson asked White's friend and protégée, black author Nella Larsen, to write a rebuttal, an arrangement that led to a happy ending not always possible among egos in Harlem in the 1920s.⁷⁶

One of the most damning, and wrongheaded, personal indictments of Johnson is the assertion that his style was "more the pose of modesty than modesty itself."⁷⁷ In reality, Harlem's abundance of black talent in the 1920s humbled the social scientist. The literary knowledge and intellect of Alain Locke, a Harvard Ph.D. and the first African American Rhodes Scholar, certainly commanded Johnson's respect. For many years Johnson had revered the writing skills of NAACP stalwarts like Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson, and as a fledgling poet himself he could only marvel at the work of his friend Countee Cullen, who he hired as a staff member at *Opportunity*, and that of

Bois, 168. Hurston grew to have an intense dislike for Alain Locke, one of the most difficult personalities of the Renaissance. Wintz, *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance*, 116-17.

⁷⁶ Walter White quoted in Carole Marks and Diana Edkins, *The Power of Pride: Stylemakers and Rulebreakers of the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1999), 47 (quotation). Although criticized for *Opportunity*'s conservative approach, Johnson never shied away from publishing more controversial work. Arnold Rampersad noted that when "the sedate" Johnson received the highly critical "Our Wonderful Society: Washington," by Langston Hughes in 1926, he was "flabbergasted." Johnson wrote to Hughes: "It's a, . . . you will pardon me if I say—Wow! . . . You may be sure that you cannot live there again after it's published." Rampersad, *Life of Langston Hughes*, 158 (quotations).

⁷⁷ Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, 90. Nearly thirty years later, Lewis' personal disdain for Johnson's scholarship, personality, and style was still evident. See Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois*, especially 155-56, 166, 168.

Langston Hughes and others. Moreover, the rarefied air occupied by African American celebrities like singer Roland Hayes and the titanic Paul Robeson, who thrilled theatergoers in a revival of Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* in 1925, and then went on to perform his powerful renditions of Negro spirituals before international audiences, left Johnson and other mere mortals breathless. Robeson in particular embodied everything that Johnson could have wished secretly for himself. His own very modest college football career cut short by a kidney injury, Johnson came to idolize the larger-than-life Robeson—Phi Beta Kappa, All-American running back, lawyer, singer, actor, and political radical.⁷⁸ Charles Johnson kept a low profile by choice during his years in Harlem in the 1920s, painfully aware of his own limitations but proud of the recognition of African American cultural achievement that swirled about a movement that he had helped to create.

Whatever the extent of his personal role in the Harlem Renaissance, by 1927 Johnson believed that the recent outpouring of creative work by African Americans had established once and for all an independent black voice free of any hint of the need to mimic whites; Renaissance work gave meaning to the African American experience and made it intelligible to white Americans. In his introduction to *Ebony and Topaz*, an anthology of black art, poetry, and prose, Johnson asserted with confidence that nothing

⁷⁸ Charles S. Johnson to Mr. and Mrs. James Weldon Johnson, January 8, 1926, Folder 237, Box 11, James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection (Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut). Johnson often made light of his own attempts at poetry in his letters to Countee Cullen. See, for instance, Johnson to Cullen, April 4, 1930, Folder 9, Box 3, Countee Cullen Papers (Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, Louisiana). Johnson kept a portrait of Robeson in his office at Fisk. Gilpin, "Charles S. Johnson," 634; Martin Duberman, *Paul Robeson, A Biography* (New York: New Press, 1989).

could reverse the momentum that began two years earlier when Alain Locke's anthology *The New Negro* signaled the beginning of the movement.⁷⁹

Within the next year, however, the Urban League's diminished economic prospects led Johnson to consider offers to leave New York and return to academia. When officers of the Carnegie Corporation voted in 1928 to cut off funding that the Urban League depended on to publish *Opportunity* and award cash prizes in its annual literary contests, Johnson soon decided to accept an offer to direct the Department of Social Sciences at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee.⁸⁰ While the artistic merits of the Harlem Renaissance have been a source of ongoing debate—critics have viewed the movement as too traditional and optimistic as well as too beholden to voyeuristic white interests and funding—the spirit of black creativity and the new appreciation of African art and culture that it sparked left a distinct life-affirming imprint on the otherwise vacuous and reactionary American landscape of the 1920s that white writers like Sinclair Lewis and H. L. Mencken skewered so mercilessly.⁸¹

Indeed, the Harlem Renaissance helped to reverse the traditional way that African Americans had viewed Africa. Influenced by long-standing negative stereotypes of

⁷⁹ Charles S. Johnson, "Introduction," in Johnson, ed., *Ebony and Topaz*, 11-13. Johnson's selections for *Ebony and Topaz* hardly suggest an unbending conservatism. As editor, he included a bitterly sarcastic piece by the irascible George S. Schuyler, a critical article by economist Abram Harris, and an essay on "racial self-expression" by E. Franklin Frazier. Locke, *The New Negro*, ix-xi.

⁸⁰ Gilpin, "Charles S. Johnson," 59-63; Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, 199.

⁸¹ Young, *Black Writers of the Thirties*, 79-84; Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, 90-136. Matthew Pratt Guterl writes: "This New Negro Renaissance, directed by Walter White, James Weldon Johnson, Jessie Fauset, and Charles S. Johnson—all highly educated officials in the NAACP or the National Urban League—put 'Negro art' in the service of the civil rights struggle, and in the process catered to those fragile postwar white bodies hungry for the presumed freedom and vitality of 'the Negro' White consumption of the New Negro was every bit as important as black production." For Jean Toomer, never willing to identify wholly either with black or white as the new postwar race consciousness demanded, "the new Negro is much more Negro and much less American than was the old Negro of fifty years ago." Guterl, *The Color of Race in America*, 162, 163 (first quotation), 182 (Toomer quotation). Houston Baker, Jr., refuted the idea that the Harlem Renaissance was neither "vital, original, effective, nor modern" Houston Baker, Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), xviii (quotation).

backwardness and savagery, black Americans often felt embarrassed by contemporary Africa. Through Protestant missionary organizations especially, many considered it their moral duty to “civilize” and uplift their African brothers and sisters. The Harlem Renaissance, however, offered a different perspective: black Americans, instead of trying to remake Africans into a mirror image of themselves, could actually improve their own lives through a new understanding and appreciation of African art and culture.⁸²

The Renaissance did not automatically wither and die without Johnson’s organizational and strategic skills; it endured in fits and starts for several years until finally giving in to the crushing weight of the Great Depression.⁸³ When Johnson left New York for his new position at Fisk University in the fall of 1928, he carried with him the same optimism that critics of the Renaissance have found so shortsighted. In fact, he felt as much impatience for racial progress as any black American. Johnson understood, like Park, Locke, Du Bois, and others, that racial inequality had no scientific basis. He also understood that, irrational or not, racial discrimination affected virtually every aspect of black life in the United States, rural or urban, southern or northern. His optimism sprang from his sense of the “malleability of human nature” first recognized in his undergraduate days at Virginia Union. Breaking down barriers that isolated African Americans from mainstream society, as he tried to do in the Harlem Renaissance, was his goal. Johnson believed that black isolation bred white contempt, and vice versa, the problem manifesting itself most acutely in the area of economic competition. Although

⁸² James H. Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be Africans: Black Americans and Africa, 1935-1961* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 1-2, 10-14, 56; Michael McCarthy, *Dark Continent: Africa As Seen By Americans* (Westport, Conn. and London: Greenwood Press, 1983), 145-53; Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas*, 25-26.

⁸³ Douglas, *Terrible Honesty*, 473-74; Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, 282-307; Wintz, *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance*, 217-32.

Johnson came to appreciate African art and culture during the 1920s, he felt that any carryover of African influence in America was negligible; African Americans would either sink or swim in the system of competitive capitalism.⁸⁴

Instead of escaping into the mythical world that W. E. B. Du Bois created with his idea of a racial soul, or into the equally nonproductive realm of Garveyism—both of which led to militancy and separatism—Johnson felt, much like Booker T. Washington had previously, that African Americans first had to accept the reality of their position before they could change it. He applied specifically to African Americans what Harold Stearns had suggested earlier in the decade to Americans in general: maturation as a society required as a first step a “self-conscious and deliberate critical examination of ourselves without sentimentality and without fear.” He also urged a new approach to education grounded in real-life experiences that would allow African Americans to master any sense of inferiority and compete with whites in a society undergoing constant technological change and adaptation. For their part, whites needed to be educated about black life; white ignorance led to stereotypical views, racial discrimination, and injustice that damaged the very foundation of democracy.⁸⁵

From the time that Johnson left Virginia in 1916 until he landed in Nashville in 1928, experience had taught him that change was inevitable and adaptation to it paramount. Having studied the impact of the Great Migration in the North, Johnson now prepared to examine its effects on black southerners left behind in its wake. His departure from New

⁸⁴ Gilpin, “Charles S. Johnson,” 30, 32, 99-100, 128-30, 134-35; Johnson, “New Frontage on American Life,” 291; Charles S. Johnson, “Race Relations and Social Change,” in Edgar T. Thompson, ed., *Race Relations and the Race Problem: A Definition and an Analysis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1939), 272, 285-91, 299-3.

⁸⁵ Fullinwider, *Mind and Mood of Black America*, 25, 111-14; Johnson, “Problems and Needs of the Negro Adolescent,” 344-53; Charles S. Johnson, “The Social Philosophy of Booker T. Washington,” *Opportunity*, 6 (April 1928), 102-5, 115; Harold Stearns quoted in Susman, *Culture as History*, 115 (quotation).

York was a difficult one. In October 1928 he wrote from Nashville to Countee Cullen, who had received a Guggenheim Fellowship for study in France and left *Opportunity* at about the same time as Johnson, that “[p]ositively no worse days have been experienced in my whole life than those last weeks” in New York. In addition to “a string of conscious or unconscious difficulties” came so many “apparently sincere regrets” at his and Cullen’s leaving that he “almost regretted the decision.” Then, shortly after arriving “barehanded” in segregated Nashville, Charles, his wife Marie, and their three children, had to overcome the “shock and utter depression” of having their Hudson automobile stolen. The sociologist found it “strange” that Cullen had “left this dark murky scene to wield a free pen” in Paris while he had stuck his head “deeper into it.” Hardly the idealist, Johnson felt that much of the “business” that he had gone to the South “to see and feel you could scarcely write lovely poems about.”⁸⁶

In the 1920s, as Charles Johnson came of age both personally and as a scholar, black and white Americans wrestled with changes in their society that disrupted the old order of things. New definitions of blackness and whiteness, conflicting ideas on progress and civilization manifested in the clash between Victorianism and modernity, and new technologies that spearheaded the transformation to a mass consumer culture, caused anxiety among many Americans. Those who took a positive view of the future, like Johnson, embraced modernity and found hope for liberation in the new order.⁸⁷

Although restricted from full participation in American society in the twenties because of his skin color, Johnson was nevertheless a man of his times. He found new inventions like the radio fascinating and he relished the freedom of movement that the automobile

⁸⁶ Charles S. Johnson to Countee Cullen, January 16, 1929 (quotations), Folder 9, Box 3, Cullen Papers. Johnson began his letter to Cullen in October 1928 but did not complete and send it until January 1929.

⁸⁷ Guterl, *Color of Race in America*, 184-90; Susman, *Culture as History*, 105-21.

age provided. A voracious reader and promoter of the arts, he also liked photography, motion pictures, and listening to phonograph recordings. Johnson took exercise seriously—his addiction to nicotine notwithstanding—and played a fairly competitive game of tennis. Middle-class and well educated, Johnson was exactly the type of African American that political leaders in Liberia claimed that they most wanted to immigrate to their country, but in fact scorned if they proved too ambitious once they had arrived.⁸⁸

In Nashville, Johnson discovered much to his surprise that neither he nor Marie missed New York as much as they had expected. Social life around the Fisk campus, according to the cosmopolitan Johnson, was “rather congenial though lacking diversity, except where this is created.” Although Johnson’s work restructuring the social sciences department at Fisk, and his commitment to write the report for the National Interracial Conference, which met in December 1928 in Washington, kept him extraordinarily busy, he no doubt stayed abreast of developments in Liberia.⁸⁹ But when he accepted President Herbert Hoover’s invitation in December 1929 to serve on the League of Nations commission to investigate allegations of slavery and forced labor in Liberia, he did so without a firm grasp of the political or physical perils that awaited him. Before 1930, the nearest that Johnson ever came to Africa was by way of an Aaron Douglas drawing or a visit to Arthur Schomburg’s vast personal library of Africa-related books and manuscripts.

⁸⁸ John Hope Franklin, “Keynote Address,” The 32nd Race Relations Institute, July 7, 1998 (audiotape), (Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee); Stein, *World of Marcus Garvey Society*, 124. For a litany of the fabulous opportunities awaiting the right type of ambitious African American in Liberia, see C. C. Boone, *Liberia As I Know It* (Westport, Conn.: Negro Universities Press, 1970; originally published 1929), 145-47.

⁸⁹ Johnson to Cullen, January 16, 1929 (quotation), Folder 9, Box 3, Cullen Papers; Charles S. Johnson and Mary van Kleeck to Members of the National Interracial Conference, November 28, 1928, Folder 7, Box 61, CSJP.

From a personal as well as a professional standpoint, no one in 1929 knew more about the complexities of race relations in the United States than Johnson. But as to the inner workings of American corporations or the federal government, he had no firsthand experience. While Harvey S. Firestone and U. S. State Department officials involved themselves deeply in Liberian affairs during the mid-twenties, Johnson was busy conducting sociological surveys and promoting the Harlem Renaissance. Like a blind cavefish swimming in the darkness, Johnson would have to rely on his instincts to negotiate the labyrinthine world of Liberian politics. In that regard, however, he placed himself on the same path already in use by Firestone and the State Department.

CHAPTER 2

THE GENTLEMEN OF AKRON

Take away from us the motor vehicle, and I do not know what would happen. The damage would be more serious and lasting than if our land were laid waste by an invader. We could recover from the blowing up of New York City and all the big cities on the Atlantic seaboard more quickly than we could recover from the loss of our rubber. That is how important rubber is to us.

Harvey S. Firestone, *Men and Rubber* (1926)

Charles S. Johnson's 1930 mission to Liberia, like so many aspects of his career from the time that he left his native Virginia until he arrived at Fisk University, grew out of circumstances shaped by the political, demographic, and economic sea changes of World War I. For countless black Americans the Great Migration and the war sparked a heightened sense of race consciousness that took form and direction in the New Negro movement and the Harlem Renaissance. The prominence of Afro-Caribbean radicalism in the rhetoric of Marcus Garvey and the growth of his UNIA made anti-colonialism an integral part of black protest in the 1920s. Yet, after the war, many black Americans felt that the idea of self-determination applied as much to their fight against second-class citizenship at home as to any developments in international affairs.¹

¹ Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth Century America* (London and New York: Verso Press, 1998), 1-2, 40; Robert A. Bone, "The Negro Renaissance," in Joan Hoff Wilson, ed., *The Twenties: The Critical Issues* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1972), 118-28; Ernest Allen, Jr., "The New Negro: Explorations in Identity and Social Consciousness, 1910-1922," in Adele Heller and Lois Rudnick, eds., *1915, The Cultural Moment: The New Politics, the New Woman, the New Psychology, the New Art & the New Theatre In America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 48-64; Matthew Pratt Guterl, *The Color of Race in America, 1900-1940* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2001), 122-23.

The new, more assertive black attitude, highlighted by militant self-defense during the 1919 race riots, posed a threat to many white Americans. The resumption of immigration after the war and the severe economic recession of 1920-21 raised white fears of outsiders and Bolshevik-style revolution. Anxious white Americans responded with a revamped version of the Ku Klux Klan that sought to protect Victorian values against the rising tide of modernity. The new Klan cast its hatred not only toward African Americans but also Jews, Catholics, and immigrants. Congress responded in 1924 with the National Origins Act, which effectively cut off immigration from Africa, Asia, and southern and eastern Europe.² To be sure, American progress and prosperity in the 1920s meant different things to black and white Americans, the only certainty being that change in any direction would come in tension and in conflict.

At the international level, however, the United States emerged from the war as the world's foremost creditor nation, with unprecedented political prestige, economic power, and cultural influence. Defeating the threat of Bolshevism in Europe and guaranteeing the continued economic expansion of American business developed into interlocking goals for a new group of Republican leaders who rose to power after the armistice.³ As

² Ellis W. Hawley, *The Great War and the Search for a Modern Order, A History of the American People and Their Institutions, 1917-1933* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), 71-73; Geoffrey Perrett, *America in the Twenties: A History* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 80-83; John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1955), 300-01, 308-11, 329-30.

³ Akira Iriye, *Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations*, vol. III, *The Globalizing of America, 1913-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 73-102. Robert H. Van Meter, Jr., "Herbert Hoover and the Economic Reconstruction of Europe," in Lawrence E. Gelfand, ed., *Herbert Hoover: The Great War and its Aftermath, 1914-1923* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1979), 143-72; Lloyd C. Gardner, *Safe for Democracy: The Anglo-American Response to Revolution, 1913-1923* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984). On the Republican rise to power after the war see, for instance, John D. Hicks, *Republican Ascendancy, 1921-1933* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1960); Karen A. J. Miller, *Populist Nationalism: Republican Insurgency and American Foreign Policy Making, 1918-1925* (Westport, Conn. and London: Greenwood Press, 1999); and Warren F. Kuehl and Lynne K. Dunn, *Keeping the Covenant: American Internationalists and the League of Nations, 1920-1939* (Kent, Ohio, and London: Kent State University Press, 1997), 1-47.

Secretary of Commerce from 1921 to 1928, Herbert Hoover in particular charted the course of American economic foreign policy in the 1920s. During and after World War I, as chief architect of relief efforts in Europe, Hoover earned praise from every quarter for his organizing genius and humanitarianism. European recovery and the vital issues of war debts and repayment of American loans, Hoover and Republican allies like Charles Evans Hughes and Henry Stimson believed, required peaceful change and international cooperation, ideas that could best be implemented through Progressive reforms aimed at enhancing productivity and efficiency. A soft-spoken Quaker and internationalist who supported the creation of a League of Nations, Hoover urged private investment, technical assistance, and the opening of new markets for American exports to insure stability in the new postwar order that he hoped would depend more on bankers and world trade than political and military might.⁴

Long before his work in European relief efforts brought him international fame, Hoover had earned millions in mining and engineering; his business expertise made him a top choice of President Warren G. Harding's for a cabinet position in 1921. Many Old Guard Republicans viewed Hoover as too much of a Progressive, and insisted that they would accept him as commerce secretary only if Harding named Andrew Mellon as treasury secretary. Hoover's own conditions for accepting the job at Commerce required that President Harding give him a voice in business, agriculture, labor, finance, and

⁴ Frank Costigliola, *Awkward Dominion: American Political, Economic, and Cultural Relations with Europe, 1919-1933* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1984), 39-61; L. Ethan Ellis, *Republican Foreign Policy, 1921-1933* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1968), 48-49; William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (Cleveland and New York: World Publishing, 1959), 91-118; David Burner, *Herbert Hoover: A Public Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 156-57; George H. Nash, *The Life of Herbert Hoover: Master of Emergencies, 1917-1918* (New York: Norton, 1996). Joseph Brandes, *Herbert Hoover and Economic Diplomacy: Department of Commerce Policy, 1921-1928* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1962), 27-39.

foreign affairs.⁵ Efficiency and expertise served as the new secretary's guiding principles in his corporate vision for the Department of Commerce. He believed that in the best interests of American prosperity and international stability the function and goal of the Department of Commerce should be to assist business leaders and expand American trade. Secretary Hoover quickly transformed one of the department's three organizing bureaus, Foreign and Domestic Commerce, after lobbying for and winning additional funding, both from Congress and from private citizens. Having established a worldwide network of fifty Bureau offices to gather and disperse trade and tariff information between importers and exporters, Hoover borrowed an idea from American corporations that traded on the international market. He created specialized divisions within the Bureau based on various commodities like steel, oil, and rubber, and nominated experts from those fields to head them. As the 1920s progressed, the theory and practice of cooperative capitalism that Hoover initiated at the Department of Commerce often blurred the line between public and private in the new age of mass marketing and mass consumerism.⁶

Hoover's single-mindedness of purpose brought him into contact with a number of kindred souls among American businessmen who shared his ideas on progress, patriotism, and prosperity. One of them, Harvey S. Firestone, Sr., president of the

⁵ George H. Nash, *The Life of Herbert Hoover: The Engineer, 1874-1914* (New York: Norton, 1983); Perrett, *America in the Twenties*, 127-29; John Milton Cooper, Jr., *Breaking the Heart of the World: Woodrow Wilson and the Fight for the League of Nations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 50-51, 392-93; Joan Hoff Wilson, *Herbert Hoover: Forgotten Progressive* (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown, 1975), 79; William J. Barber, *From New Era to New Deal: Herbert Hoover, the Economists, and American Economic Policy, 1921-1933* (Cambridge and other cities: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 1-64.

⁶ Kendrick A. Clements, *Hoover, Conservation, and Consumerism: Engineering the Good Life* (Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 9-40; Burner, *Herbert Hoover*, 161-84; Iriye, *Globalizing of America*, 97. Foreign and Domestic Commerce was one of three organizing bureaus within the Department of Commerce, the other two being Standards and Census. Brandes, *Herbert Hoover and Economic Diplomacy*, 3-21.

Firestone Tire & Rubber Company based in Akron, Ohio, connected on many levels with the commerce secretary, but most especially when it came to the need for efficiency and for the United States to produce its own raw materials. If World War I made Herbert Hoover famous, it also increased the public visibility of Harvey S. Firestone, and made him anxious about possible future shortages of raw materials, especially crude rubber.⁷ In the new postwar era of economic globalization, Hoover and Firestone formed a close working relationship founded on the unshakable belief that patriotic duty compelled them to search out American “opportunities” abroad. Indeed, adherence to the creed of economic nationalism eventually led Firestone to the jungles of Liberia, with the full support of Secretary Hoover.

“This world, it seems, is full of trouble . . . ,” Harvey Firestone wrote in a letter to his father during a difficult period early in his career.⁸ While Firestone certainly faced his share of trouble in the form of patent disputes, labor strikes, and cutthroat competition, his story was mostly one of success that paralleled and helped to shape American economic growth in the twentieth century. Abrupt, obsessive, innovative, and sometimes wildly erratic, Firestone established his own tire company in 1900, certain that his fortune would come not from the clumsy, experimental automobiles of the age but from the irreplaceable horse and buggy.

Born in 1868 on a farm in Columbiana, Ohio, Harvey Firestone considered his father, Benjamin, as the best businessman he had ever known because, regardless of crop failures or difficult economic times, he always made a profit at the end of the year. As a

⁷ Alfred Lief, *The Firestone Story: A History of the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company* (New York, Toronto, and London: Whittlesey House, 1951), 249-338.

⁸ Brandes, *Herbert Hoover and Economic Diplomacy*, 5, 35, 95-96; Harvey S. Firestone quoted in Alfred Lief, *Harvey Firestone, Free Man of Enterprise* (New York, Toronto, and London: McGraw-Hill, 1951), 61.

teenager, Harvey found buying and selling livestock more agreeable than farming, eventually coming to view himself as an expert on horses. After high school, he traveled to Cleveland for a three-month course at Spencerian Business College, and then became a bookkeeper at a coal company, a job he quickly grew to hate. After rejecting another bookkeeping job offered to him by his cousin, Clinton, who owned the prosperous Columbus Buggy Company, Firestone set out as a traveling salesman. On the road his products included vanilla extract, “Wild Rose Lotion” for chapped hands, and various patent medicines that sold poorly and that he had no faith in from the beginning. “[Q]uite unconsciously,” Firestone wrote, “I turned up the first principle of salesmanship—which is, that you must thoroughly believe in what you have to sell.” After the rest of the company’s salesmen quit and his boss went broke, Firestone swallowed his pride and took the job as bookkeeper previously offered to him by cousin Clinton.⁹

Before long Clinton transferred Harvey to his buggy company’s Detroit branch, where in the early 1890s the young bookkeeper showed more interest in sales than in tracking debits and credits. Finally given a chance on the showroom floor to sell the luxury carriages, Firestone thrived. The art of the deal became his *raison d’être*; it would remain so for the rest of his life. With his savings he invested in horses and was soon selling them in combination with Columbus carriages. Buyers who wanted a softer ride could spend an extra \$40 and have a set of solid rubber tires attached to the steel-rimmed carriage wheels. But in the depression of 1893-94, fewer farmers could afford either new rubber tires or a luxury carriage priced at three times that of competitors like Durant or Nash, and sales slumped. In 1895 Harvey married Idabelle Smith, the daughter of “half

⁹ Harvey S. Firestone and Samuel Crowther, *Men and Rubber: The Story of Business* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Page, 1926), 14-30, 31 (quotation); Lief, *Harvey Firestone*, 1-47.

patent” flour inventor George T. Smith. A year later the Columbus Buggy Company went into receivership, leaving Firestone with nothing in the way of savings but filled with a strong desire to start his own company in the belief that Americans would ride into the future on rubber tires.¹⁰

For the first fifty years after Charles Goodyear invented the vulcanization process in 1839, whereby crude rubber could be toughened by being cut into small pieces, adding sulfur, and then baking in an oven, items such as medical supplies and waterproof clothing and shoes comprised most of the rubber goods manufactured in the United States. Before Goodyear’s invention rubber goods had to be imported from South America, where they were manufactured from latex tapped in the Amazon River basin. By 1870 more than fifty rubber factories operated in the United States, all of them in New England and New York. In that year, however, Dr. Benjamin F. Goodrich chose Akron, Ohio, an important junction in the old canal system and later in rail traffic, as the site to build the first rubber factory west of the Alleghenies. Within a year Goodrich, Tew & Company began making fire hose, and in 1880, reorganized as the B. F. Goodrich Company, a host of mechanical rubber goods, footwear, druggists’ supplies, and most prominently, bicycle tires began flowing out of Akron.¹¹

The bicycle craze of the 1890s reinvigorated the rubber industry even in the midst of the worst depression that the United States had ever faced. Bicycle sales exceeded the million mark by 1896 and demands for the recently developed single-tube pneumatic tire

¹⁰ Firestone and Crowther, *Men and Rubber*, 34-37; Lief, *Harvey Firestone*, 47-50.

¹¹ Howard Wolf and Ralph Wolf, *Rubber: A Story of Glory and Greed* (New York: Covici-Friede, 1936), 33-54, 402; Jones, *Life, Liberty, and Property*, 30-33. In the Civil War, Benjamin F. Goodrich served as a surgeon in the Army of the Potomac. Unable to make a living practicing medicine after the war, Goodrich became involved in real estate in New York City. With business partner John P. Morris, he began trading real estate for shares in the struggling Hudson River Rubber Company, which they eventually came to own. Mansel G. Blackford and K Austin Kerr, *BFGoodrich: Tradition and Transformation, 1870-1995* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1996), 9-35.

soared. Rubber tires for carriage wheels, the market that most concerned Harvey Firestone, continued as a small part of the overall industry. Few of those involved in making pneumatic tires for bicycles gave much thought to the carriage business. Tires for carriages came in the form of long rubber strips with two internal wires running throughout the entire length that attached to a specially made wheel rim, a system prone to slippage, cutting, and other problems. Even fewer manufacturers recognized the connection between pneumatic tires and the many experimental models for self-propelled vehicles being designed in the mid-1890s. Early examples of automobiles, whether powered by steam engines or electric storage batteries, were far too heavy to be supported by single-tube bicycle tires. The popularity of bicycles notwithstanding, for dependable transportation most Americans in the mid-1890s could envision nothing that would ever replace the horse-drawn carriage.¹²

Convinced that any sensible American would prefer the softer carriage ride that rubber tires promised, a jobless Harvey Firestone in 1896 persuaded a mortgage broker friend in Detroit to consider going into business with him. The broker knew of a tire shop in Chicago that had recently shut down operations, and the two men caught the first train there in hopes of moving in for a quick kill. After a few days they brought in another partner and, after agreeing to let Firestone borrow to pay for his share, bought the shop, a former branch of the Victor Rubber Tire Company, of Springfield, Ohio, a major player in the bicycle business. The new Firestone-Victor Rubber Tire Company was located

¹² Daniel Nelson, *American Rubber Workers & Organized Labor, 1900-1941* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1988), 15-16; Blackford and Kerr, *BFGoodrich*, 30-32; Lief, *Harvey Firestone*, 51-52. John Boyd Dunlop of Scotland “reinvented” the pneumatic bicycle tire in 1888. Wolf and Wolf, *Rubber*, 405-08. On pneumatics, early automobiles, and bicycles, see especially Vincent Curcio, *Chrysler: The Life and Times of an Automotive Genius* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 128-177, 189-91. James J. Flink, *The Automobile Age* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1988), 1-14.

only a few doors away from a rival, the Imperial Rubber Tire Company, an agent that sold Kelly-Springfield tires. In the period of mergers and consolidation that followed the inauguration of William McKinley as president in 1897 and the return of national prosperity, Firestone and his partners jumped at an offer from Imperial to buy it out for \$15,000. News of President McKinley's recent purchase of three new rubber-tired carriages for the White House stables signaled American eagerness for a less bone-jarring ride on cobblestone streets, and filled Firestone with optimism.¹³

As business boomed Firestone and his partners decided that the opportune moment had arrived to merge with the powerful Rubber Tire Wheel Company, owned by Edwin S. Kelly of Kelly-Springfield. With his internal wire patent and introduction of a new and improved steel rim, Kelly had nearly monopolized the carriage tire business. Firestone received an offer of \$125,000 from Kelly to sell out his share of the two companies, a sum that seemed fantastic at the time and that he quickly accepted. Had he waited Firestone could have increased his profits, because Kelly had made another offer of \$250,000 without his knowledge. When Firestone demanded his share of the larger sum his partners informed him that he had agreed to the lesser amount and could expect nothing more, a harsh introductory lesson on the unforgiving nature of the business world. Without legal recourse and fearing that he would be left penniless again, Firestone accepted a settlement of a little less than \$42,000 with the vow that never again would he allow anyone else to control his fate. Still employed as a salaried manager,

¹³ Firestone and Crowther, *Men and Rubber*, 38-45; Lief, *Harvey Firestone*, 53-58; Bryan D. Palmer, *Goodyear Invades the Backcountry: The Corporate Takeover of a Rural Town* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1994), 19-20.

Firestone resigned while on vacation in Cleveland in 1899, determined to found his own company.¹⁴

By the turn of the century Akron, Ohio, had emerged as the rubber manufacturing capital of the United States. In the 1890s B. F. Goodrich faced its first serious local competition after the founding of the Diamond Rubber Company. By 1900 both companies were making limited quantities of solid rubber tires for automobiles, still viewing with suspicion the pneumatic model introduced in France by Michelin in 1895. Soon a total of eight rubber factories operated in Akron, including the Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company, formed by John F. Seiberling and his brother, Charles, in 1898. Pursuing his dream of founding his own company, Firestone understood that his future lay in Akron and, with his wife and new son, Harvey, Jr., moved there in January 1900.¹⁵

Before selling out and leaving Chicago, Firestone had acquired a patent for a surer method of fixing tires to the flared, standardized rims developed by Edwin Kelly. In Akron, Firestone approached the Whitman & Barnes Manufacturing Company, makers of “Easy” tires, with a business proposition. Because the “Easy” tire did not fit standardized rims and Firestone’s did, he suggested that they offer him leases on their New York, Chicago, and Boston stores, for exclusive manufacture of his tires. Although interested, Whitman & Barnes hedged, preferring to concentrate on the promotion of their rubber shoe pads for fire truck and ambulance horses. They instead offered Firestone a management position and the promise to make tires under his patent and pay him on a

¹⁴ Lief, *Harvey Firestone*, 60-62. On early Akron, see Alfred Winslow Jones, *Life, Liberty and Property: A Story of Conflict and a Measurement of Conflicting Rights* (New York: Octagon Books, 1964), 24-43. In his own account of this period, Firestone makes no mention of having been bested by his partners. See Firestone and Crowther, *Men and Rubber*, 45.

¹⁵ Blackford and Kerr, *BFGoodrich*, 24-34; Firestone and Crowther, *Men and Rubber*, 51-52; Lief, *Harvey Firestone*, 62-67; Wolf and Wolf, *Rubber*, 419-423; Hugh Allen, *The House of Goodyear: Fifty Years of Men and Industry* (Cleveland: Corday and Gross, 1949), 7-31.

royalty basis. Firestone accepted the offer and within months closed a deal on an option for Whitman & Barnes' tire department. A short time later, in the summer of 1900, a group of Akron businessmen sought out Firestone to demonstrate their patented sidewire device for a more secure tire fit that would work even on heavy commercial vehicles. Firestone recognized immediately the new market possibilities, and soon the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company was incorporated.¹⁶

Firestone's promotion of the Perfect Side-Wire Tire went well enough the first year to exceed the ability of his small work crew to fill orders, and he soon granted B. F. Goodrich a license to manufacture and sell his product. Securing short-term loans and selling stock occupied most of Firestone's time until he acquired enough second-hand machinery to begin manufacturing on a larger scale. Early in 1903 the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company began turning out forty tires a day for both light and heavy vehicles. The constant supply of rubber used by the company came from Brazil, still considered the best available, and by necessity Firestone taught himself to determine the quality of the various grades. In 1904 Firestone showed its first profits at about the same time that other companies began making larger quantities of pneumatic tires for automobiles. The number of registered automobiles in the U. S. had grown dramatically over the past few years. Local automobile clubs also flourished, and prompted the Firestone Company to advertise the advantages of its solid rubber tires, especially for carrying heavy loads. Firestone ads reminded buyers that pneumatics were not the only tires that offered a more comfortable ride, an idea already falling out of step with the times.¹⁷

¹⁶ Wolf and Wolf, *Rubber*, 423; Lief, *Firestone Story*, 3-12; Firestone and Crowther, *Men and Rubber*, 51-55.

¹⁷ Lief, *Harvey Firestone*, 71, 84; Lief, *Firestone Story*, 26-27; Wolf and Wolf, *Rubber*, 425; Flink, *Automobile Age*, 15-39.

At the 1904 auto show Firestone viewed tire exhibitions that featured pneumatics, and he soon realized that he would have to begin manufacturing them if he wanted to capture his share of the new “pleasure-car” market. The development of a new mechanically fastened tire, called the “straight-side,” provided Firestone with the opportunity that he needed. The “straight-side” was an improvement over the old standardized “clincher” type, a patent owned and guarded fiercely by the Rubber Goods Manufacturing combine. To make “clincher” tires required a license, but when Firestone applied for one he learned that suddenly none were available. In order to test the “straight-side” Firestone bought a Maxwell automobile in New York, had it shipped to Akron, and then traveled in it for seventy miles to his family’s homestead in Columbiana. In front of a gathering of family and friends, many of whom had never seen an automobile before, Firestone and his mechanic gave a demonstration of pneumatic tires that he recalled could have “been taken as conclusive proof that we did not know anything about them.” A year of experimentation, however, taught Firestone engineers quite a lot about pneumatics, and in 1905 the company prepared to market its new tires and rims.¹⁸

But as Firestone soon discovered, because of the clincher license, no market existed for his product. In 1905 news circulated throughout the Akron rubber industry that Henry Ford planned to build two thousand cars at his Dearborn, Michigan, factory and sell them for the low price of \$500 per unit. Ford, like Firestone, was an industry outsider. Barred from joining the Association of Licensed Automobile Manufacturers, a group that established a fixed rate for car sales to exclude any fly-by-night hucksters, Ford identified with fellow maverick Firestone, one of the few businessmen with whom he stayed on friendly terms. The two struck a deal and in 1906 the Ford Motor Company

¹⁸ Firestone and Crowther, *Men and Rubber*, 79-81 (quotation p. 80); Lief, *Harvey Firestone*, 85-86.

began rolling out four-cylinder Model N runabouts on two-and-a-half-inch Firestone tires. By 1908, with orders for twenty thousand sets of tires to fit the new Ford Model T as well as sales to other automakers like Maxwell and Peerless, Firestone had established itself as one of the big four of the rubber industry, along with Goodyear, Goodrich, and United States Rubber.¹⁹

The days when Harvey Firestone could walk through his small plant and celebrate with workers by showing them the first check received as payment from Ford passed quickly as the company grew. The profound growth of the auto industry in the following years propelled Goodyear and Firestone, two firms that from the beginning specialized in tire making, past rivals Goodrich and U. S. Rubber in production and market share. As an entrepreneur Harvey Firestone matched the most successful of his competitors in tenacity, risk taking, and ruthless cost-cutting methods. In 1910 Firestone bought twenty-three acres of farmland in South Akron as the site of his company's first major expansion effort, an enormous four-story factory of steel and glass modeled on Henry Ford's imposing Highland Park auto plant. Now operating the most modern factory in the tire industry, Firestone automated his production facilities with new machinery, continued experimentation with new rims and tire designs, which included the introduction of the innovative cross-tread system, and prevailed in legal suits over patent violations, cases fought with a personal savagery that surprised other business leaders. In 1912 Harvey and Idabelle Firestone, along with their four sons, moved into a new brick home constructed in the middle of a sixty-acre estate. The Georgian-style home, modest by the

¹⁹ Lief, *Firestone*, 86-90; Allan Nevins and Frank Ernest Hill, *Ford*, vol. 1, *The Times, the Man, the Company* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954), 323-53, 398-99; Douglas Brinkley, *Wheels for the World: Henry Ford, His Company, and a Century of Progress, 1903-2003* (New York: Viking, 2003), 87-89; Glenn D. Babcock, *History of the United States Rubber Company: A Case Study in Corporation Management* (Bloomington, Ind.: Graduate School of Business, Indiana University, 1966).

standards of Akron millionaires, was christened Harbel Manor by the Firestone's, a contraction of the couple's first names. Now joined inextricably with the auto industry in general and Ford Motor Company in particular, the Firestone Tire & Rubber Company underbid Goodyear for the largest original-equipment order of its day, and entered an era of unprecedented growth, competition, and conflict.²⁰

For Firestone, like other corporate leaders, time and its relation to productivity took on added importance in the era of automation. Inspired by Frederick W. Taylor's time and motion studies—the kind of scientific management distrusted by more traditional engineers—Firestone hired his own man with a stopwatch and sent him into the factory to study workers as they built and finished tires. Already suspecting that the time studies offered them nothing but trouble, machine operators and finishers responded angrily when management limited their daily wages to \$3.50. During the transition period from handmade to machine-made tires, faster workers had become used to making as much as \$5.00 to \$6.00 per day because of the company's hasty and poorly thought out piece rates. In February 1913 about one hundred and fifty unorganized workers walked out in protest, initiating a seven-week strike that spread to other companies in Akron as well as other cities in Ohio.²¹

The strike surprised Harvey Firestone, who at first showed a degree of sympathy toward workers and their grievances. In his early days as a business owner Firestone had prided himself on knowing the names of each of his employees; he still believed that his factory offered the best working conditions in the tire industry. Within a few days of the

²⁰ Lief, *Harvey Firestone*, 102-03, 108-09, 112 ; Allen, *House of Goodyear*, 333; Brinkley, *Wheels for the World*, 134-41; Firestone and Crowther, *Men and Rubber*, 110-11.

²¹ Robert Kanigel, *The One Best Way: Frederick Winslow Taylor and the Enigma of Efficiency* (New York: Viking, 1997); Nelson, *American Rubber Workers*, 23-24; Lief, *Harvey Firestone*, 117; Lief, *Firestone Story*, 67.

walkout, however, Socialist representatives and organizers from the International Workers of the World (IWW) rushed in to stake their claims, immediately alarming business leaders fearful of the introduction of radical ideas into their ranks of workers. Firestone and other executives in the rubber industry who flatly opposed union organization hoped to quell the unrest by offering incentives to workers who stayed on the job, and allowing those who had left to return without sanctions. But as the number of striking workers grew and the IWW and Socialists grappled for control while failing to articulate a set of demands, Firestone and other leaders coalesced into a united front that refused to grant concessions.²²

The stalemate between labor and management eventually led Ohio governor James M. Cox to search for a compromise through the use of the state board of arbitration. State senate hearings went badly for workers unable to mount convincing arguments against their current working conditions and wage scales. Testimony by local business leaders, including Harvey Firestone, swayed public opinion over to management's side and against the strikers. Representatives from the American Federation of Labor and the newly formed Citizens' Welfare League also worked to undermine the influence of the IWW. After incendiary speeches by IWW organizers, a series of defeats in violent clashes with police broke the spirit of the strikers, who before long began drifting back to work.²³

The labor strike cost Firestone very little in the way of financial loss or negative publicity; his personal standing in the community could not have been higher. Nor did the strike cause leaders in the Akron tire business to soften their views on organized

²² Firestone and Crowther, *Men and Rubber*, 136-37; Lief, *Firestone Story*, 66; Nelson, *American Rubber Workers*, 24-31; Wolf and Wolf, *Rubber*, 497-504; Jones, *Life, Liberty, and Property*, 72-77.

²³ Nelson, *American Rubber Workers*, 31-43; Lief, *Firestone Story*, 68-70; Wolf and Wolf, *Rubber*, 506-8.

labor. To be sure, Harvey Firestone's need to stay in complete control only deepened as his company grew. While some executives addressed high employee turnover rates and the perceived threat of organized labor by discussing the idea of company unions, Firestone followed the lead of Goodyear and took steps to ameliorate management's relationship with workers through the use of corporate welfare. With more than two thousand employees by 1913, Firestone increased wages, improved medical care, offered free life insurance, and encouraged worker investment in company stock. Recreation facilities that included a large clubhouse, a park, and a baseball diamond were created to boost morale, and workers were urged to air their grievances through a new personnel, or "Industrial Service," department. Not to be outdone by Goodyear Heights, the attractive planned community across town, Firestone bought a thousand-acre tract of land and designated it for future low-cost employee housing. By 1916 more than six hundred workers had made a small down payment and moved into houses in spacious Firestone Park, its winding streets arranged in the shape of the company logo.²⁴

The struggle between labor and management served as only one of many day-to-day problems that Harvey Firestone faced in the fast-growing and intensely competitive Akron rubber industry. The demands for innovation, expansion, and filling orders for Ford Motor Company at ever lower costs kept Firestone in a constant state of anxiety. More than anything else, Firestone and other Akron rubber manufacturers worried about the fluctuating price of rubber which, in 1910 for example, averaged over a dollar a pound and reached a high of three dollars. Left at the mercy of a syndicate that controlled the limited supply of high quality latex tapped mainly in the Para province of

²⁴ Firestone and Crowther *Men and Rubber*, 140-41, 147-48; Lief, *Firestone Story*, 71-73; Lief, *Harvey Firestone*, 121-23; Nelson, *American Rubber Workers*, 42, 49, 56, 60; Allen, *House of Goodyear*, 32-33.

Brazil, tire makers felt an acute sense of helplessness and stress. Having to place orders for crude rubber six months in advance caused financial headaches for Firestone; the pressure of buying a year ahead of time was almost unbearable.²⁵

With the successful development of synthetic rubber still decades away, the need to integrate backwards toward the source of raw materials spurred Firestone and others in the rubber manufacturing business to begin exploring the possibility of establishing their own plantations of *Hevea brasiliensis*, the tree that yielded the highest quality industrial-grade latex. Hevea grew wild in the Amazon River basin, where labor and transport problems made investment impracticable for American manufacturers, as Henry Ford learned in his ill-fated attempt to establish plantations there in 1927. Rubber trees, which include more than three hundred and fifty species that yield latex of lesser quality than Hevea, need a warm, moist climate year-round in order to thrive. The ideal amount of sun and heavy rainfall for Hevea cultivation occurs within a belt extending around the world at latitudes of ten degrees north and ten degrees south of the equator. In South America, parts of Brazil, Peru, Bolivia, and Venezuela fall within the rubber belt, and in Africa a number of countries began exporting rubber of inferior quality in the 1800s. King Leopold II forced natives to gather latex from wild rubber trees in the Belgian Congo, while the first attempt at planting in Liberia began in 1910. In that year only nine percent of the world's latex came from the Far East, where Sumatra, Java, Malaya, and Borneo had become home to transplanted Hevea. By the beginning of World War I,

²⁵ Lief, *Firestone Story*, 49-50; Lief, *Harvey Firestone*, 80, 105-06; Wolf and Wolf, *Rubber*, 33-54; Nevins and Hill, *The Times, the Man, the Company*, 387-413.

however, the Far East produced more than sixty percent of the world's crude rubber output, a dramatic shift that had its beginnings in India in the 1870s.²⁶

In 1872 “loyal servants” of the Government of India commissioned a report that called for Hevea and other rubber tree species to be introduced as a possible replacement crop on blighted coffee plantations. The India Office dispatched Robert Cross and Sir Henry Wickham to Central and South America to collect specimens and issue a report on the necessary climatic and soil conditions. Hevea seeds smuggled out of Brazil by Cross and Wickham eventually found their way in 1876 to the Botanical Gardens at Kew near London. After experiments in cultivation, botanists at Kew shipped seedlings to Ceylon, where planters had forsaken any hope of ever again making a profit from coffee, a market that soon shifted to Brazil and weakened that country's stranglehold on natural rubber production. Successful tapping of mature rubber trees on plantations in Ceylon led to the transplanting of Hevea to the Netherlands East Indies, where in 1910 the U. S. Rubber Company became the first Akron-based manufacturer to establish its own plantation when it purchased eighty thousand acres of land in Sumatra for the cultivation of five million trees. But by 1913 most rubber plantations, including those in the Netherlands

²⁶ William D. Woodruff, *The Rise of the British Rubber Industry During the Nineteenth Century* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1958), 1, 36-40; Allan Nevins and Frank Ernest Hill, *Ford*, vol. 2, *Expansion and Challenge, 1915-1933* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957), 232-38; Lief, *Harvey Firestone*, 96-98, 146-47; John Martin, ed., *The Romance of Rubber* (New York, United States Rubber Company, 1932), 7-9. In the introduction to their cynical, sarcastic, and often hilarious *Rubber: The Glory and the Greed*, Howard Wolf and Ralph Wolf noted in 1936 that the research pamphlets they used “mostly are exercised over the Romance of Rubber, a catch phrase apparently tracing to the belief that since caoutchouc (latex) comes from the globe's far corners, the business must be romantic as hell We ourselves have been increasingly impressed with the Tragedy of Rubber.” Indeed, calloused exploitation at every turn in the history of the rubber business is the main theme of their book. Yet, with a sense of fairness, the Wolf's also pointed out that they were indebted to Firestone and Goodyear for “free access to their libraries. Considering our past criticisms of them and their certainty that there was more to come, this expresses an attitude unusual, we believe, in industry.” Wolf and Wolf, *Rubber*, x-xii, 55-148, 254.

East Indies, were British-owned, and London emerged as the world's central buying market.²⁷

The establishment of rubber plantations required huge capital investments in land, labor, and research; allowing adequate time for rubber trees to develop eliminated any possibility of turning a quick profit. When full grown, Hevea trees reach a height of more than sixty feet with a trunk circumference of eight to ten feet. Growing tall straight as much as six feet in the first year the trees bloom with pale flowers each August. A few months later pods appear with three speckled seeds that resemble nutmegs. When ready the outer coverings of the pods burst loudly and spray the seeds in all directions. Rubber planters found that trees needed about five years of growth before measuring the necessary eighteen inches around at a point eighteen inches from the ground to be ready for tapping. Planters also understood that tapping demanded a certain degree of skill on the part of workers in order to avoid the kind of damage done in the Amazon, where careless latex collectors damaged or killed many trees by cutting too deeply into the cambium. Tapping began in the early morning hours when latex, the milky liquid secreted to heal wounds in the tree's outer bark, flowed most freely. After cutting a narrow strip of bark diagonally halfway around the tree deep enough to activate the flow of latex but shallow enough not to reach the sap in the cambium, workers would insert a small spout at the lowest point of the incision and place a cup underneath for collection that took place later in the morning. Each successive day workers would slice away another strip of bark one-twentieth of an inch wide. Processing, storing, and transporting crude rubber involved a costly network of laborers and equipment on a scale that few

²⁷ Barbara Weinstein, *The Amazon Rubber Boom, 1850-1920* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983), 99-136; Woodruff, *Rise of the British Rubber Industry*, 41-42; Martin, ed., *Romance of Rubber*, 10-13; Wolf and Wolf, *Rubber*, 151-68, 173-76.

manufacturers in Akron had the wherewithal to consider realistically before World War I.²⁸

By 1914 the United States imported more than half of the world's crude rubber. When war broke out in Europe in August of that year, Harvey Firestone's company had a three-month supply of raw materials. Already nervous because of price fluctuations, Firestone hurriedly cabled his buyer in Singapore, contacted London, and tried to make connections in the Dutch East Indies. In a two-week period crude rubber prices rose from seventy-two cents a pound to \$1.15. Then, in November 1914, the British imposed an embargo to keep rubber imports out of the hands of its enemies. Firestone found the resulting haphazard increases and decreases in tire prices maddening. Still, his company did \$19 million in business in 1914, with profits of more than \$3 million.²⁹

Shortly after Great Britain lifted its embargo in January 1915 contingent on an American promise not to allow any re-exports to Germany, Firestone signed a contract with Ford to produce at least forty percent of its tires. By the end of the year the value of motor vehicles in the war effort, especially trucks, became abundantly clear. Trucks moved large numbers of Allied troops to the front with an ease unmatched by horse-drawn wagons or clogged railways. The German military attempted to use trucks for troop and supply transport as well but had a more difficult time, owing to a lack of replacement tires. In the United States the price of horses shot up as the Allies bought them to replace battlefield losses. As a consequence American farmers, reluctant to purchase automobiles before the war because of the high initial cost, became more

²⁸ Martin, ed., *Romance of Rubber*, 7-8, 14-17; Wolf and Wolf, *Rubber*, 15-18, 33-74

²⁹ Lief, *Harvey Firestone*, 144-45; Lief, *Firestone Story*, 89-90; David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 300-06. By far the most dependable vehicle on European battlefields was the Ford Model T. Flink, *Automobile Age*, 73-74.

willing to invest in a new Model T. Now with almost four thousand employees under his command, Firestone looked ahead to another profitable year.³⁰

In 1916, as the new president of the Rubber Club of America, it fell to Firestone to uphold the U. S. guarantee to guard against crude rubber falling into the hands of the Germans, a responsibility carried out with only one notable exception. The wartime dearth of available ships caused a decline in imports, and Firestone called for investment in an expanded merchant marine. He also began his first serious exploration of investing in his own rubber plantation after Goodyear purchased twenty thousand acres of land in Sumatra. Reports indicated the desirability of a river valley in Mindanao, the southernmost island in the Philippines, where Firestone wanted to plant Hevea on fifty thousand square miles of land. After a public speech in which he cited rubber as the most important commodity in the world, Firestone learned that during the administration of Theodore Roosevelt, Congress had limited land acquisition in the Philippines to only twenty-five hundred acres. Defeated for the moment on that front, Firestone profits nevertheless increased in 1916, as did his labor force, climbing to a total of eight thousand. With the opening of Firestone Park and the new clubhouse, as well as generous stock sales to workers, the company president viewed his “employee happiness” program as a successful alternative to union organization, one ready to meet any future demands in a seller’s labor market.³¹

³⁰ Lief, *Harvey Firestone*, 145; Lief, *Firestone Story*, 76; Harvey Firestone, Jr., “Rubber at the Battle of the Marne,” “Did Germany Forget Rubber in 1914?” and “Motor Transport in the War,” in Harvey Firestone, Jr., *The Romance and Drama of the Rubber Industry* (Akron: Firestone Tire and Rubber Company, 1932), 55-56, 57-58, 65-66.

³¹ Lief, *Firestone Story*, 79-85. In 1916 the German submarine *Deutschland* managed to make off with a shipment of crude rubber in the waters around Baltimore. Lief, *Harvey Firestone*, 145-48. Firestone and Crowther, *Men and Rubber*, 147-52; Harvey Firestone, Jr., “Policing Rubber in the War,” and “Running the Rubber Blockade,” in Firestone, *Romance and Drama of the Rubber Industry*, 61-62, 63-64.

The migration of workers to Akron during the war swelled that city's population and resulted in a housing shortage that manufacturers met with temporary "villages" that resembled the "tent cities" of a military base. The number of rubber workers, which numbered about 15,000 in 1914, grew to an estimated 73,000 by 1920. The city's population of 69,000 in 1910 mushroomed to 208,000 ten years later. Italians, Russians, Greeks, and Austrians displaced central Europeans as the dominant immigrant groups, while Akron's black population grew from one to three percent, the largest black increase in any Ohio city. Still, only a few hundred African Americans found something other than janitorial jobs in rubber factories. Roman Catholic and other churches grew in number during the war boom, as did saloons, gambling halls, and brothels. In the frenzy of war production and full employment, labor unions failed to make any headway in Akron, where the influence of Socialist organizers waned during the peak years of 1917-1920.³²

When the United States entered the war on the side of the Allies in the spring of 1917, Harvey Firestone offered President Woodrow Wilson the use of his "factory organization" for government service, and proclaimed confidently that the rubber industry stood ready to respond to any demands that might be placed on it. Government contracts soon poured in, covering everything from wheels for artillery pieces, solid rubber truck tires, boots, gas mask parts, observation balloons, and a host of other military necessities. Two-thirds of a record crop of crude rubber found its way to the United States, where the government soon placed it on its list of licensed commodities with a price fixed at sixty-eight cents a pound. Re-elected as president of the newly

³² Nelson, *American Rubber Workers*, 45, 53, 72-75; Jones, *Life, Liberty, and Property*, 54-71; Kennedy, *Over Here*, 258-59.

renamed Rubber Association of America, Firestone was asked by the War Industries Board to oversee its crude rubber division, a position that only enhanced the tire executive's public image. In the role of superpatriot he led "Preparedness" programs and promoted Liberty Loan drives. Unused Firestone property was plowed and hundreds of war gardens planted. Illustrated pamphlets outlining the war garden idea were then distributed to manufacturers across the United States, a move that brought praise from Federal Food Administrator Herbert Hoover. The widespread and effective use of propaganda during the war made a strong impression on Harvey Firestone, who became a master of such tactics in the 1920s in his fight against Britain's rubber restriction scheme, and in his efforts to deflect criticism against his foray into Liberia.³³

In order to benefit fully from the economies of scale accessed by construction of his first factory, Firestone built a second plant in 1917 devoted solely to the manufacture of tires for Ford. Now on an eight- rather than a ten-hour workday, the company also employed large numbers of women for the first time. By the end of 1917 Firestone made the switch to the production of the new and better-wearing cord tires to replace the old square-woven fabric type, prevailed in a tire-machinery lawsuit initiated by rival Frank A. Seiberling of Goodyear, and saw his company's sales increase by a remarkable seventy-one percent to more than \$61 million. Bothered by high employee turnover rates and absenteeism, Firestone borrowed a sociological technique that Charles S. Johnson, then in Mississippi studying the dynamics of the Great Migration, might have advised. He asked his most trusted subordinate, chemist and future company vice president John

³³ Firestone was also a leading promoter of "Americanization" programs. The company offered classes to help immigrants learn to speak English and pledged that Akron would become a "One Language" city. See Nelson, *American Rubber Workers*, 60; and Frederick M. Davenport, "Treating Men White in Akron Town," *The Outlook*, 126 (1920), 408-411. Firestone and Crowther, *Men and Rubber*, 147. Lief, *Firestone Story*, 96-97; Lief, *Harvey Firestone*, 149.

W. Thomas, to form a group of investigators to gather life histories from new employees. Many of the recent arrivals had left their one-mule farmsteads in Kentucky or West Virginia only to pay high rents to live in attics or storage sheds, or be evicted from rented homes in Akron that owners had decided to convert into rooming houses. After the investigators established a clear link between overcrowding and absenteeism, Firestone persuaded Goodyear and Goodrich to invest with him and create the Akron Home Owners Investment Company, a group that met with modest success in building new low-cost houses. Labor and housing problems notwithstanding, company profits increased considerably over the next few years, reaching a high point in 1919. Neither the upsurge of race riots in the United States in that fateful year nor the threat of Bolshevism in Europe kept sales from totaling more than \$91million, with profits of over \$9 million.³⁴

The reciprocal relationship between government and business fostered by American entry into World War I not only elevated the Firestone Tire & Rubber Company to new heights in sales and profits but also magnified the public visibility of its chief executive, something that he welcomed and nurtured. Already with a million dollar advertising budget, Firestone went to great lengths to showcase the dependability of his products, whether it meant spending extra funds to develop tires that would perform better in time trials at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, or going on a nationwide tour to promote shipping by truck, a tire market that his company dominated.³⁵ In the heady years of 1918-19 Firestone found that even his attempts to escape the pressures of business for a few weeks with a vacation generated news that helped his company's public relations. His camping trips with Henry Ford and Thomas A. Edison became legendary. Annual

³⁴ Firestone and Crowther, *Men and Rubber*, 245-46; Lief, *Firestone Story*, 95-96, 114; Lief, *Harvey Firestone*, 148, 154-56; Kennedy, *Over Here*, 278-91.

³⁵ Lief, *Firestone Story*, 117-24; Lief, *Harvey Firestone*, 128-29, 186-90.

events that began in 1918 and continued until 1924 when throngs of photographers and cameramen finally ruined the experience, the camping trips served to connect Firestone both to the average American and to those who had transformed the world that they lived in.³⁶

News of the camping trips fascinated the American public. After meeting at a predetermined location, the group of campers—often including wives and others—would take off in a small caravan of chauffeured automobiles on backcountry routes selected and kept secret by Edison. Firestone was put in charge of the commissary, a task that he carried out with the help of a chef who presented his creations on fine linen and china at campsites lighted with electricity from a storage battery, one of Edison’s many inventions. Henry Ford, described by Firestone as a “beneficent human force,” served as chief mechanic. Firestone especially valued his private conversations with Edison, who liked “roughing it” and ordered all the men in the group not to shave for the entire trip. During one such conversation a casual allusion to rubber led Edison to deliver an impromptu discourse that revealed he knew more about the subject than either Firestone or his company’s team of chemists. Henry Ford, in moments when he was not scouting streams and rivers and explaining how they could be dammed for waterpower, enjoyed climbing trees and challenging the others to footraces. After dinner he would occasionally launch into anti-Semitic tirades that placed blame for all of the world’s financial, economic, and social problems on Jews. When Ford repaired a luxury car

³⁶ From his early years Henry Ford idolized Edison. In 1917 he began work at the Edison Illuminating Company in Detroit and eventually rose to chief engineer. Henry Ford and Samuel Crowther, *Edison as I Know Him* (New York: Cosmopolitan Books, 1930), 1-13; Nevins and Hill, *The Times, the Man, the Company*, 117-18, 135. As David L. Lewis notes, Henry Ford in particular viewed the trips as good public relations opportunities. David L. Lewis, *The Public Image of Henry Ford* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 223. Firestone and Crowther, *Men and Rubber*, 188; Lief, *Harvey Firestone*, 164.

belonging to an obviously wealthy—but apparently non-Jewish—businessman at a public campsite, the man insisted that the industrial giant accept payment of a few dollars because he appeared needy. For a salesman with little technological or mechanical knowledge, being on a first name basis with the iconic Ford and Edison gave Firestone a stature that others in the Akron rubber industry could not boast.³⁷

In the first months of 1920 business continued much as it had throughout 1919, giving Firestone little cause to worry. Even if company inventories overflowed with rubber purchased months before at more than three times its early 1920 market value of fifteen cents a pound, the government had lifted wartime constraints on production and automakers predicted their biggest year ever. The number of Firestone employees peaked at nearly twenty thousand. But long-staple cotton from Egypt, used to make cord tires, came into short supply and jumped from \$1 to \$2.50 a pound, causing tire prices to rise and sales to stall. By midyear sales declined further, yet not enough to make Firestone change his plans for a three-month family vacation in England beginning in July. While the tire business picked up a bit in August, farm prices dropped, industrial buying slowed to a crawl, and retailers cancelled orders at an alarming rate. As the

³⁷ Firestone and Crowther, *Men and Rubber*, 188-219; John Burroughs, *Under the Maples* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1921); Lief, *Harvey Firestone*, 165-85; James D. Newton, *Uncommon Friends: Life with Thomas Edison, Henry Ford, Harvey Firestone, Alexander Carrel, and Charles Lindbergh* (San Diego, New York, and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987). Henry Ford published his anti-Semitic views in a long series of early 1920s articles in the *Dearborn Independent*. While there is no evidence of Firestone harboring anti-Semitic feelings, Thomas Edison criticized Jews but felt less threatened by them than Ford. See Neil Baldwin, *Henry Ford and the Jews: The Mass Production of Hate* (New York: Public Affairs, 2001), 88-90, 321-22; See also Brinkley, *Wheels for the World*, 259-64; Nevins and Hill, *Expansion and Challenge*, 312; and Charles Merz, *And Then Came Ford* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1929), 171-89.

national economy sputtered and then sank into a severe recession, urgent cables from Akron persuaded Firestone to sail for home.³⁸

Upon his return from England Firestone's company faced indebtedness of more than \$43 million. In New York Firestone met with his executives and assured them that he would find a way out of the present trouble even if it meant offering his personal fortune—all in company stock—to stave off bankruptcy. After a weekend of doing chores and thinking at the family farmstead in Columbiana, Firestone reached a decision on how to combat the recession. He realized that he lacked the creative genius of a Ford or Edison but that he did one thing extraordinarily well: sell tires. He summoned his branch managers to Akron and announced his plan of action. In conjunction with a massive advertising campaign the price of Firestone tires would be cut by twenty-five percent, a move that inflicted even more financial harm on Akron competitors, who languished for another month before also slashing prices. Firestone sales, however, showed an immediate upsurge.³⁹

The next step toward stabilization included thousands of job cuts, and Firestone stressed the need to save additional money by curbing expenditures across the board. Henry Ford, after a meeting with Firestone, decided to follow suit and lower the price of his cars. He later promised Firestone sixty-five percent of Ford Motor Company business orders. During the financial crisis Firestone preached efficiency with a religious zeal, a message that failed to sway some nonbelievers in his company. He wrote in a letter to

³⁸ Lief, *Harvey Firestone*, 156-58; Lief, *Firestone Story*, 127-28; Firestone and Crowther, *Men and Rubber*, 246-48; Nevins and Hill, *Expansion and Challenge*, 150-52; Nelson, *American Rubber Workers*, 78-79; Brinkley, *Wheels for the World*, 264.

³⁹ Lief, *Harvey Firestone*, 158-59; Lief, *Firestone Story*, 128-29; Firestone and Crowther, *Men and Rubber*, 249-52; Nelson, *American Rubber Workers*, 79. In the decade that followed Firestone became a leader in cost cutting. See, for instance, Jones, *Life, Liberty, and Property*, 38-39.

Ford: “Just yesterday I let my superintendent go I have reached the point where there is no man around our place, no matter how big, that we cannot get along without if he does not get into line with our policy.” Although Firestone tried to intervene with bankers on behalf of rival Frank Seiberling, Goodyear went into receivership in 1921, and Goodrich and U. S. Rubber struggled to meet high interest rates on short-term loans. The Firestone company, especially because of its strong market share of the fast-growing truck tire business, rebounded quicker and avoided the loan problems of its competitors. In fact, by 1924 Harvey Firestone owed the banks nothing. The company showed no profits at the close of 1921, but when the recession ended Firestone had taken over first place in Akron tire production.⁴⁰

No sooner had business rallied and started to return to normal than another economic demon confronted Firestone. In 1922 Great Britain adopted the Stevenson Rubber Restriction Act, understood by Harvey Firestone and Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover as an inchoate evil that threatened the long-term health and well being of the United States. In Firestone’s mind, the very idea of limiting supplies and manipulating prices represented a conspiracy of the worst sort that the American public would reject once they understood its harmful effects. Indeed, over the next few years, his opposition to the Stevenson Act turned into a personal crusade.⁴¹

The recession and drastic decline in rubber prices in 1920 left British planters with enormous stockpiles of raw materials unwanted by financially strapped Akron tire manufacturers. With millions of acres of Hevea trees now mature and producing record

⁴⁰ Brinkley, *Wheels for the World*, 265; Nevins and Hill, *Expansion and Challenge*, 159-70; Lief, *Firestone Story*, 132-35; Harvey Firestone to Henry Ford quoted in Lief, *Harvey Firestone*, 162.

⁴¹ Lief, *Firestone Story*, 144-45; Firestone and Crowther, *Men and Rubber*, 258; Wolf and Wolf, *Rubber*, 219-25; Hassan B. Sisay, *Big Powers and Small Nations: A Case Study of United States-Liberian Relations* (Lanham, N. Y. and London: University Press of America, 1985), 51-52.

crops, some of the largest planters—and leaders on the London Stock Exchange—had paid cash dividends of nearly one hundred percent over the previous nine years without saving any of the surplus. By the end of 1920 their costs per pound exceeded the market price of crude rubber. Around the same time that Harvey Firestone decided to unload his overstocked tires by lowering prices, British planters agreed voluntarily to reduce their production of latex for a year in hopes that limited supplies would result in a jump in prices.⁴²

The voluntary agreement, however, had only a marginal effect on the cost of rubber. With its expiration late in 1921, the British Rubber Growers Association turned for help to Winston Churchill, Secretary of State for the Colonies. Churchill appointed his financial adviser, Sir James Stevenson, to chair a parliamentary committee of inquiry composed primarily of association members worried about the future of their plantations. The committee's recommendation, not surprisingly, called for stabilizing the price of crude rubber by regulating and limiting the tonnage exported. Churchill, soon to vacate his position after a Liberal Party defeat by the Tories, urged Parliament to accept the Stevenson Act not only because of its salutary effect on the British colonies and the rate of exchange but also as an important means for paying the nation's war debt to the United States. Understanding the need for solidarity to make Stevenson's plan succeed in the long run, Churchill lobbied Dutch planters in the Netherlands East Indies to join in but they recoiled at the idea of any form of restriction. Still, when the Stevenson Act went into effect in November 1922, crude rubber prices rose immediately from fourteen to

⁴² Charles R. Whittlesey, *Governmental Control of Crude Rubber: The Stevenson Plan* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1931), 6-25; Brandes, *Herbert Hoover and Economic Diplomacy*, 84-85.

thirty-seven cents a pound, a development that alarmed and angered Harvey Firestone and Secretary Hoover.⁴³

By 1923 American manufacturers consumed seventy percent of the world's crude rubber production, an amount so large that even a one-cent increase per pound translated into extra yearly costs in the millions. The Firestone Tire & Rubber Company alone used more than ten million pounds of latex every month. Harvey Firestone, unlike other members of the Rubber Association of America who welcomed the idea of stabilization, worried most that the Stevenson Act would become permanent, forcing prices to ever-higher levels. Artificial constraints on exports, Firestone believed, ran afoul of market demands, and could undermine the security of the United States in case of a national emergency. Moreover, he felt that an increase in the price of rubber was in reality a tax that could only end up penalizing American consumers. Firestone declared that no government had the "moral right" to authorize such a "monopoly," and that the time to break it up was "now."⁴⁴

Initially, Firestone considered asking the U. S. Government to issue a protest to Great Britain over the Stevenson Act, a plan that the Rubber Association of America discounted. Instead, the association asked for and received assurances from British rubber growers that they would abide by the rules of fair play, an anemic response that outraged Firestone. He next toyed with the idea of forming a \$100 million plantation investment company, and urged British rubber manufacturers—ignored by Stevenson and

⁴³ In order to keep crude rubber prices from falling below thirty cents a pound, the Stevenson Act restricted output, beginning on November 1, 1922, to sixty percent of 1920 production. The act's complex sliding scale permitted an increase of five percent if the market averaged thirty cents a pound, or a decrease of five percent if the average dipped. The adjustments took place every three months. Whittlesey, *Governmental Control of Crude Rubber*, 25-29; Sisay, *Big Powers and Small Nations*, 48-50; Harvey Firestone, Jr., "The British Rubber Restriction Plan," in Firestone, *Romance and Drama of the Rubber Industry*, 69-70.

⁴⁴ Harvey Firestone quoted in Lief, *Harvey Firestone*, 228-29; Firestone and Crowther, *Men and Rubber*, 258; Wolf and Wolf, *Rubber*, 224-25.

less than enthusiastic about his scheme—to demand repeal of the act. By this time, however, Firestone had friends in high places and enlisted their help in his fight. Firestone had known President Warren G. Harding since his days as lieutenant governor of Ohio, and his acquaintance with Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover dated from World War I. With their help and that of Senator Medill McCormick of Illinois, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, Firestone called on Congress to appropriate funds for a scientific survey to identify new areas where Americans could produce their own supplies of crude rubber.⁴⁵

As soon as Secretary Hoover announced his support for the survey, Firestone launched into a national campaign with the slogan “America Should Produce Its Own Rubber.” To anyone who would listen he denounced foreign restraint on trade and trumpeted the benefits of American-owned rubber plantations. But his target audience, the growing number of American automobile owners, showed little interest as long as the price of tires continued to drop. So Firestone invited leaders from the automobile and rubber industries to a conference in Washington, D. C., in February 1923 to get his message out. The Rubber Association of America, increasingly irritated with Firestone, advised its members not to attend. On the second day of the conference, after speeches by Senator McCormick and Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace, word came that Congress had appropriated \$500,000 for the survey. As Firestone continued his speaking tour in the weeks that followed, the Rubber Association began its own publicity campaign to stifle

⁴⁵ Lief, *Harvey Firestone*, 229-31; Lief, *Firestone Story*, 146-47; Iriye, *Globalizing of America*, 88-89, 96-101; Brandes, *Herbert Hoover and Economic Diplomacy*, 87-88; Harvey Firestone, Jr., “The Fight Against the British Rubber Monopoly,” in Firestone, *Romance and Drama of the Rubber Industry*, 71-72. Frank Robert Chalk, “The United States and the International Struggle for Rubber, 1914 -1941,” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1970), 39-42.

his alarmist cries, described as bordering on “hysteria.” Indignant at the insult, Firestone resigned from the association.⁴⁶

Important technological developments continued in Akron even as Firestone fought his pitched battle against the Stevenson Act. A major breakthrough came in 1922 when Firestone introduced new “gum-dipped” cords, which more than doubled tire mileage. More significantly, gum-dipping provided the additional strength that allowed engineers to next create the “balloon” tire, which revolutionized the industry. The balloon, marketed in 1923, replaced the narrower and much less forgiving high-pressure tire; it offered a more comfortable automobile ride because of the addition of an air chamber that required lower pressure. The larger width of balloon tires also required the use of one and a half more pounds of rubber per unit, an important development in light of the Stevenson Act’s restriction quotas. Double-page color ads in *The Saturday Evening Post* announced the new tires and Firestone lecturers advised dealers on how to make the necessary changeovers to wider rims, a service offered free to the public. In the new era of improved roads automobile sales continued to climb and the balloon tire became the industry standard.⁴⁷

Before completion of the federal survey on new rubber lands, Firestone initiated his own series of investigations. Early in 1923 he persuaded his friends Ford and Edison to begin exploring possibilities for creating American sources of rubber. At his winter home in Fort Myers, Florida, Edison undertook experiments with various plants that he

⁴⁶ Wolf and Wolf, *Rubber*, 225-26; Lief, *Firestone Story*, 147-51; Lief, *Harvey Firestone*, 233; Harvey Firestone, Jr., “Americans Should Produce Their Own Rubber,” in Firestone, *Romance and Drama of the Rubber Industry*, 74-76.

⁴⁷ Lief, *Harvey Firestone*, 193-200; Lief, *Firestone Story*, 137-43; Babcock, *History of the United States Rubber Company*, 175-76; Nevins and Hill, *Expansion and Challenge*, 396-97; Allen, *House of Goodyear*, 76-77. Emblazoned across the top of Firestone’s double-page ad for balloon gum-dipped cords was his motto “America Should Produce Its Own Rubber,” and a reproduction of his distinctive signature. *The Saturday Evening Post* (April 12, 1924), 108-9.

hoped might produce latex on the North American continent, and Ford began eyeing the Tapajóz Plateau in Brazil. Firestone, still desirous of gaining a foothold in the Philippines, sent his manager from Singapore, along with a small staff, to report on conditions there in May 1923. The group found climatic and soil conditions excellent, but the independence movement had destabilized the political situation and undermined any chance of reforming land laws. Firestone insisted that “capital must have assurance that it will be properly protected,” at best a shaky proposition in the Philippines. Surveys of Mexico, Guatemala, and Panama indicated either similar degrees of political unrest or problems with fielding an adequate labor supply. For all of his expenditures and sense of urgency, Firestone came away empty-handed in his first efforts to locate a suitable area for new plantations.⁴⁸

In October 1923 Firestone turned his attention to Liberia after receiving some intriguing information from Mark Felber, his public relations representative in Washington with an office in the Munsey Building. Felber informed Firestone that he had met with Walter F. Walker, who had lived in Liberia for sixteen years and served there as Secretary of the Treasury from 1917 to 1920. “He is a man of dark complexion,” Felber wrote, “a native of Alabama and very brilliant, especially considering the fact he is

⁴⁸ Nevins and Hill, *Expansion and Challenge*, 233-37. In 1925 Firestone went so far as to sign a lease for land in Chiapas, Mexico. The land included 350 acres of Hevea and 5,000 acres of native *Castilloa elastica* trees. Climate limited the output of the Heveas, and the Castilloas produced far too little latex to be profitable. Lief, *Harvey Firestone*, 235-37; Lief, *Firestone Story*, 159-60. The original planting of Hevea took place in Chiapas between 1898 and 1910, when many small American investors tried to break into the rubber business. Wolf and Wolf, *Rubber*, 170-71, 245-49. In addition to labor problems and political unrest, another major problem that delayed rubber cultivation in Latin America was *dothidella ulei*, a leaf blight that attacked Hevea trees there but not in Africa or Asia. D. M. Phelps, *Rubber Developments in Latin America* (Ann Arbor: School of Business Administration, University of Michigan, 1957), 1-4. Matthew Pratt Guterl mangles the history of the rubber industry when he notes, “Had it simply been a matter of securing large quantities of rubber, Latin America would have been a logical place to start. After all, before the war, no less an authority than Harvey Firestone had proclaimed the superiority of South American rubber to all other types.” Firestone, of course, was commenting on Brazilian rubber before the shift of the industry to the Far East. Guterl, *Color of Race in America*, 58.

of the negro race.” Walker had already consulted with State and Commerce department officials and spoke highly of agricultural conditions in Liberia, where “you could get practically anything you desired” and “the first big concern could have a monopoly.” President King, according to Walker, “has for some time leaned to British interests but now seems to have had a change of heart and is perfectly willing to cooperate with American interests in an endeavor to put Liberia on the map again.” Walker reminded Felber that the Colgate Company, the only corporation then actively engaged in Liberia, dealt in palm oil and had no stake in the crude rubber business.⁴⁹

Firestone, his curiosity aroused by Walter Walker’s salesmanship, soon cabled Solomon Porter Hood, the American Chargé d’affaires in Liberia. Hood’s favorable report prompted Firestone to begin assembling a survey team for a trip to the black republic. He summoned Donald A. Ross, a Scotsman with experience in Malayan rubber cultivation, and placed him in charge of the expedition. Next, Firestone selected his trusted personal secretary, William D. Hines, a former newspaperman then running the company’s public relations office, to assist Ross.⁵⁰ In December 1923 Ross and Hines, with letters of introduction from Walter Walker, arrived in the seaside capital of Monrovia, a town with a population of no more than seven or eight thousand—the Liberian government had never conducted a census. Because of a formidable sandbar that blocked Monrovia’s natural harbor, ships docked a mile or so offshore and

⁴⁹ Mark Felber to Harvey S. Firestone, October 19, 1923, W. D. Overman Files on Liberia, Firestone Archives, Set 1, Holsoe Collection (Archives of Traditional Music, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana). Hereafter cited as HC.

⁵⁰ Sisay, *Big Powers and Small Nations*, 54-55; Lief, *Harvey Firestone*, 242-42; Wayne Chatfield Taylor, *The Firestone Operations in Liberia* (Washington, D.C.: National Planning Association, 1956), 47. Traditionally, the United States appointed African Americans to ministerial posts in Liberia. Reverend Solomon Porter Hood, born in 1856 in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, graduated from Lincoln University and served as a missionary to Haiti before President Warren G. Harding appointed him chargé d’affaires and then Minister Consul to the American legation in Monrovia in October 1921. James Padgett, “Ministers to Liberia and Their Diplomacy,” *Journal of Negro History*, 1 (July 1916), 87-88.

disembarking passengers had to be lowered into surfboats. Kru oarsmen, renowned for their maritime skills, would then row the new arrivals through punishing ocean waves to the waterfront, or Waterside, a native community of shacks at the foot of Cape Mesurado, the high bluff upon which settlers founded Monrovia. A climb along a winding path led up to government offices on Ashmun Street, one of the black republic's two paved roads. Among the rundown houses with rusted rooftops of galvanized iron, visitors often noted that the architectural use of columns and wide verandas gave Monrovia the appearance of a small town in the American South. Only one automobile, a Ford Model T owned by President King, could be found in the entire country.⁵¹

In addition to Liberia's ideal weather conditions for crude rubber cultivation—hot, dry seasons interspersed with months that produced an annual rainfall of more than two hundred inches along the coast—a fifteen-mile trip inland from Monrovia gave Ross and Hines even more cause for optimism. There they inspected the Mount Barclay plantation with its two thousand acres of mature Hevea trees overgrown with bush but ready for tapping. A company owned by British colonial author and entrepreneur, Sir Harry Johnston, began developing the Mount Barclay plantation in 1910 but abandoned it during World War I, whereupon the Liberian government took control of it. Ross saw immediately that leasing Mount Barclay would provide Firestone with an ideal laboratory for experimentation with Hevea.⁵² In a country without motor vehicles and nothing more

⁵¹ Felber to Firestone, October 19, 1923, HC; James C. Young, *Liberia Rediscovered* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1934), 37-39; Lief, *Harvey Firestone*, 247-48; Harvey Firestone, Jr., "Firestone Enters Liberia," in Firestone, *Romance and Drama of the Rubber Industry*, 112-13. The Model T was delivered by mistake to Liberia in 1919, where the American Financial Adviser, Harry A. McBride, acquired it before King. R. Earle Anderson, *Liberia: America's African Friend* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1952), 155-56 (on Model T), 190-95.

⁵² Lief, *Harvey Firestone*, 237; Arthur J. Knoll, "Firestone's Labor Policy," *Liberian Studies Journal*, XVI, 2 (1991), 50; Taylor, *Firestone Operations in Liberia*, 58, 60-61; Sir Harry Johnston, *Liberia* (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1906).

than footpaths for roads, Ross and Hines next searched for sites close to navigable waterways. They determined that land near the Du River, in thick jungle about forty miles from Monrovia, could be cleared and brought into plantation use. Another site on the Cavalla River in Maryland County, two hundred and forty miles southeast of Monrovia, also appeared promising. The surveyors took it for granted that Liberia's native population, estimated anywhere between 500,000 and one million, could easily provide more than enough laborers for plantation work. Shipping to and from Liberia, at only half the distance of the Far East, would save Firestone time and money. Ross' report to the company president could not have been received more positively.⁵³

In the spring of 1924, as Harvey Firestone began making plans for what he hoped would be his company's first major overseas development, Americo-Liberian leaders found themselves at a crossroads. During World War I, Liberia's already weak economy suffered a serious blow when German and British shipping companies curtailed their import and export trade with Monrovia. Liberia's decision to side with the Allies in 1917 led to the expulsion of German traders who for several decades had been responsible for much of the nation's commerce. Crippled by the loss of customs revenues, the republic defaulted on a 1912 loan that had its roots in the recommendations made by Emmett J. Scott and the Taft commission.⁵⁴

In 1912 France, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States formed an international receivership to administer a private loan of \$1.7 million, and to provide oversight for its

⁵³ Young, *Liberia Rediscovered*, 40-41; Lief, *Harvey Firestone*, 242-43; Lief, *Firestone Story*, 153; Knoll, "Firestone's Labor Policy," 49-50.

⁵⁴ Elliot P. Skinner, *African Americans and U. S. Policy Toward Africa, 1850-1924: In Defense of Black Nationality* (Washington, D. C.: Howard University Press, 1992), 385-87; George W. Brown, *The Economic History of Liberia* (Washington, D. C.: Associated Publishers, 1941), 167-70, 172-74; Raymond Leslie Buell, *The Native Problem in Africa* (2 vols.; New York: The MacMillan Company, 1928), II, 766-67, 802-11.

repayment with interest, scheduled for completion in 1952. An American General Receiver along with a group of financial advisers—positions designated by the President of the United States and submitted to the Liberians for approval—were placed in charge of the collection of customs revenues in the black republic. Also, three African American military officers, led by Colonel Charles Young, were designated to reform the Liberian Frontier Force, the poorly trained militia created a few years earlier by President Arthur Barclay to guard against boundary encroachments and to bring law and order to unruly natives in the hinterland. Colonel Young discovered that the Frontier Force, placed in 1911 under the command of district commissioners with almost unlimited power and very little supervision, had been unpaid and unfed for months. As a consequence, soldiers wreaked havoc on natives, stealing their food, taking women and children as “pawns,” and forcing men to flee from their villages into the bush. In 1915, an uprising in Maryland County by the Kru—from the beginning the most rebellious of Liberia’s native tribes—had to be put down with the help of an American gunship. The Kru revolt led the U. S. State Department to scold the Liberians and to issue demands for a host of reforms, in particular the adoption of an “open door” policy.⁵⁵

In 1921 President King traveled to the United States and lobbied for a \$5 million loan to bail out his government from bankruptcy. After prolonged negotiations, the State Department offered to back the loan if Liberia accepted a “Finance Commission” composed of twenty-two Americans with extraordinary powers to oversee the republic’s

⁵⁵ Yekutieli Gershoni, *The Americo-Liberian Scramble for the Hinterland* (Boulder and London: Westview Press, 1985), 44-52; Bixler, *Foreign Policy of the United States in Liberia*, 24-32; Brown, *Economic History of Liberia*, 171-74; Buell, *Native Problem in Africa*, II, 802-08; Skinner, *African Americans and U. S. Policy Toward Africa*, 387-89, 865-80. In Liberia a man could pawn wives or children as security for a loan. Government regulations stipulated that the person to be pawned had to give his or her consent, a provision often disregarded. The Liberian legislature passed a law in 1923 that allowed pawns to redeem themselves by payment of the original sum without interest. Charles Henry Huberich, *The Political and Legislative History of Liberia* (2 vols.; New York: Central Book Company, 1947), II, 895-908.

administration of native and military affairs, and to take control of nearly all government expenditures. President King accepted the stringent conditions but the U. S. Congress voted against the loan in 1922. Afterward, King attempted to institute a number of reforms and flirted with Marcus Garvey's UNIA as a quick fix to his country's economic woes. Finally understanding that Garvey's plans called for empowering Liberia's tribal citizens, a course most harmful to Americo-Liberian self-preservation, King turned his back on the UNIA in 1924 and agreed to pursue an "open door" policy toward foreign trade and investment, one of the reforms that the U. S. State Department had insisted on in 1915 and again in 1921 as Liberia sought its American loan. Most urgently, French encroachment on disputed territory along the border with Ivory Coast had created a crisis that Liberian leaders believed could only be ended by American intervention. Welcoming a large American corporation, King felt, could only enhance his position vis-à-vis the State Department in his protests over French boundary violations. The choice that King had to make between Garvey's UNIA and Firestone, especially when comparing financial bona fides, came as a relatively easy one.⁵⁶

Harvey Firestone probably became aware of Marcus Garvey's plans in Liberia in early 1924 when W. E. B. Du Bois, in Monrovia for President King's second inauguration, met with Donald Ross. He may well have become acquainted with the UNIA, however, as early as 1922. In the previous year, the Ku Klux Klan made its first appearance in Akron, where it quickly became a force in local politics and served as a powerful voice for Anglo-Protestant rubber workers. When the Klan attempted to hold its first mass rallies

⁵⁶ Buell, *Native Problem in Africa*, II, 810-16; Skinner, *African Americans and U. S. Policy Toward Africa*, 469-81, 497-504; Judith Stein, *The World of Marcus Garvey: Race and Class in Modern Society* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 116-25, 209-16; Brown, *Economic History of Liberia*, 175-79.

in 1922, a representative from the UNIA arrived in Akron to issue a protest. Yet, throughout the Klan's reign in Akron—it won its first local elections in 1923, reached its zenith in 1925, and collapsed abruptly in 1928—Firestone and other rubber manufacturers, fearful of labor stoppages or worse, honored a strict vow of silence.⁵⁷

Still at war with the Stevenson Act and frustrated by needed reforms in the Philippines, Firestone was buoyed by Ross' upbeat report on Liberia. Additional reports from Ross, who stayed on in Liberia at Firestone's request, depicted a setting rife with both risk and potential. In a February 1924 letter to Firestone, Ross noted that Sidney De la Rue, the American Financial Adviser in Liberia, was "particularly definite on the point that if financial assistance is given to the (Liberian) Government the spending of the money must be in the hands of men appointed by the lenders."⁵⁸ A few weeks later, in early March, Ross spoke with a State Department official who said "if Harvey S. Firestone could arrange for a loan of \$2.5 to \$5 million to wipe out Liberia's outstanding indebtedness and promote needed improvements (docking facilities, wagon roads, sanitation programs), Mr. Firestone would virtually *be* the Government." The State Department official added, "Liberia looks to America for assistance, and if someone in America grasps the opportunity now the move will result in rich returns to the someone taking the step."⁵⁹

The thought of crowning himself emperor and declaring "L'état c'est moi" in Liberia, a nation with an annual operating budget of less than \$2 million, held little appeal for the

⁵⁷ Frank Chalk, "Du Bois and Garvey Confront Liberia: Two Incidents of the Coolidge Years," *The Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 1, 2 (November 1967) 141. Sidney De la Rue, born in 1888 in New Jersey, served as general receiver of customs in Liberia from 1922 to 1928. Frank Chalk, "Anatomy of an Investment: Firestone's 1927 Loan to Liberia," *The Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 1, 2 (November 1967), 17; Nelson, *American Rubber Workers*, 99-102.

⁵⁸ Donald A. Ross to Harvey Firestone, February 25, 1924 (quotations), HC.

⁵⁹ G. H. Miller to William R. Castle, March 6, 1924 (quotations; emphasis added), HC.

major stockholder of the Firestone Tire & Rubber Company. In reality, the republic's constitution barred white immigration and landowning. Still, what Firestone had heard sounded promising enough. Business involved risk taking, something he had never shied from, and he proceeded in Liberia against the advice of Amos C. Miller, his longtime friend and legal counsel. Miller quoted Firestone when he reminded him "capital must have assurance it will be properly protected." The economic and political environment in Liberia, as Miller understood it, offered many things but protection was not one of them. Perhaps the company could make a small investment in Central or South America, but never in Liberia. Miller also pointed out how the image of natives working on rubber plantations in Africa conflicted with Firestone's idea of Americans producing their own rubber. But no matter how thick the irony, in April 1924 Firestone gave the go ahead to Donald Ross to begin negotiations with the Liberian government for the lease of the Mount Barclay plantation plus a million acres of additional land, and the promise of at least three hundred thousand laborers to work them.⁶⁰

In May, as Firestone negotiations proceeded in Liberia forty-two hundred miles away, a Commerce Department conference on "the present crude rubber situation" convened at the Lotus Club in New York. Secretary Hoover attended the conference, as did Firestone and representatives of most of the major rubber manufacturers. With the department's crude rubber survey nearly completed, Hoover felt it necessary to lay "certain facts" before the industry. A discussion of the Philippines outlined the political difficulties of investment there, particularly because of the Moro Province independence movement that

⁶⁰ Lief, *Harvey Firestone*, 244. "The great object of forming these Colonies being to provide a home for the dispersed and oppressed Children of Africa, and to regenerate and enlighten this benighted continent, none but Negroes, person or persons of Negro descent, shall be admitted to citizenship in this Republic." Section 13, Article V of the *Constitution of the Republic of Liberia*, reprinted in Buell, *Native Problem in Africa*, II, 863.

had arisen in Mindanao. Frank Seiberling, who founded a company under his own name after his unpleasant departure from Goodyear during the 1921 recession, and Firestone, “asked detailed questions regarding labor, etc.” in the Philippines. Hoover then told the group of the probability that, because of the Stevenson Act, a difference of one hundred thousand tons between production and consumption of crude rubber might occur in 1930, and that “the lines of production and consumption would cross in 1928.” He cautioned the conferees that “the shortage would undoubtedly be felt before that time,” and urged them to start buying and storing rubber as soon as possible, thus bringing the price down to a level “which would stimulate new planting.”⁶¹

When the group returned after adjourning for lunch, Firestone declared, as if no one had heard it before, that “he had been for America producing her own rubber.” Firestone explained, apparently with Amos Miller’s words ringing in his ear, that his motto did not necessarily mean in the United States or even on American territory, but considering that Americans consumed so much of the world’s rubber “we ought to control a larger percentage, even under foreign governments.” He “was willing to do his part, but felt the industry, backed by the Government, should aid.” Fully aware by now of developments in Liberia, Hoover asked how the Government could help. Firestone replied that the United States might sign a treaty with the Philippines to develop its southern islands, or that similar arrangements could be made in Central or South America. Frank Seiberling

⁶¹ Memorandum on Conference at Lotus Club, New York, May 20, 1924, 1-2 (quotations), Commerce Papers—Foreign Combinations; Rubber, Box 209 (Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, Iowa). Hereafter cited as HHPL.

then spoke up and easily crushed Firestone's idea when he noted, "that the whole trend of political thought in this country was not to interfere in any way with foreign relations."⁶²

As the discussion probed deeper into how to prepare for future cost and supply problems, Firestone suggested a manufacturers buying pool that would purchase the entire output of crude rubber from the Far East or "a fixed portion of the output of new plantations" at thirty-five cents a pound for the years 1930-35. A Commerce Department official then suggested the advantages of acquiring land in areas already under cultivation and providing for the future with "extensions on reserve land, which could be done at approximately half the cost of large new openings." With an ace up his sleeve and a straight face, Firestone "then reversed his former statement, when he said that America should produce her own rubber, even under foreign governments, and he now said that he favored solely new planting in the Philippines or on the American continent." Asked if the different approaches could be dovetailed, Firestone claimed that "he couldn't dissipate his energies; when he had a thing to do, he was obliged to concentrate on it to be successful."⁶³

Although no one in New York that day discussed Liberia, within weeks of the Lotus Club meeting Firestone reached a tentative settlement with leaders in Monrovia. On June 19, 1924, after wrangling over the cost of leasing the Mount Barclay plantation, the Liberian government finally agreed to fix its rent at \$6000 after the first year with an option of a ninety-nine year lease. Firestone would be charged a rubber export tax of two

⁶² Memorandum on Conference at Lotus Club, 2-3 (quotations), HHPL. As early as April, 1924 Firestone informed the U. S. State Department that he planned "to draw up a suggestion for a substantial loan [and] to make a proposition to the Liberian Government." The Chief of the Division of Western European Affairs (Castle) to the Secretary of State, April 8, 1924, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1925* (2 vols.; Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1940), II, 367. Hereafter cited as *Foreign Relations, 1925*. The State Department had caught wind of Firestone's plans in Liberia, however, two months earlier. Chalk, "The United States and the International Struggle for Rubber," 45.

⁶³ Memorandum on Conference at Lotus Club, 4-5 (quotations), HHPL.

and half percent, and allowed to select one million acres of land at five cents an acre for the first six years with the understanding that the Liberian Government would assist in securing and maintaining an adequate supply of labor, about fifty thousand workers per year. Another agreement called for Firestone to make harbor improvements at a cost to the company of no more than \$300,000. The Firestone planting agreements, after review and signing in Akron, would then be submitted for approval to the Liberian legislature, scheduled to meet in December. The idea of a loan, although uppermost in Firestone's mind, received no mention during the negotiations.⁶⁴

The loan question came up, however, when Amos Miller paid a visit to the U. S. State Department in July. Miller, accompanied by two other members of the company's legal team, discussed the recent planting agreements, and informed Assistant Secretary of State Leland Harrison, that Firestone might be willing to arrange a private loan of \$5 million through one of its fiscal agents, perhaps the National City Bank of New York, provided that "all the revenues of Liberia were assigned to the service of the loan," and if the Liberians would agree to allow the President of the United States to designate "Americans to collect and disburse these revenues." Miller wanted to know if the State Department would "appoint the officials in question, and . . . assume the obligations and duties set forth in the 1921 loan agreement." The Assistant Secretary of State replied that the Department would consider the matter, and pressed the Firestone legal team on some details of their plans in Liberia. Miller told him of the need to build roads, improve the harbor, and of the possible need for thirty thousand workers the first year. Sanitation and

⁶⁴ Lief, *Firestone Story*, 153; Chalk, "Anatomy of an Investment," 17-18; Buell, *Native Problem in Africa*, II, 820-21; I. K. Sundiata, *Black Scandal: America and the Liberian Labor Crisis, 1929-1936* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1980), 37-38. On the original agreements, see "The Liberian Secretary of State (Barclay) to Mr. W. D. Hines, June 19, 1924," *Foreign Relations, 1925*, II, 369-73.

health programs would be necessary, “as all forms of tropical diseases are rampant, and the average life of the white man in that territory was very short.”⁶⁵

Harrison then wanted to know why Firestone chose not “to secure the necessary safeguards” through provisions in the planting agreements, to which Miller replied that “they had in mind the failure of this government to accord what they considered adequate protection of American interests in Mexico.” Firestone would not even have “the protection of the Monroe Doctrine in Liberia.” As a result, Firestone needed to obtain “some definite control over the administrations of the Republic of Liberia.” The company already had “rubber men” in Liberia who had issued “favorable” reports, and the belief in Akron was that if “they were not interfered with” success was almost guaranteed.⁶⁶ In his recommendations to Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes, Harrison noted that if the Department had no objection after reviewing the proposed contracts and loan agreement, it “would lend appropriate support” so that Firestone “might have a fair and equal opportunity to carry out his project in Liberia,” but that “the Department could not, of course, actually participate in the negotiation of the contracts in question.”⁶⁷

Without waiting for an official decision by the Liberians, the Firestone Company launched a land clearance program along the Du and Cavalla Rivers and began its

⁶⁵ Memorandum by the Assistant Secretary of State (Harrison), July 8, 1924, *Foreign Relations, 1925*, II, 379-81 (first, second and third quotations, p. 380), (fourth quotation, p. 381). Firestone took the health and sanitation situation seriously enough to help fund a team of Harvard scientists and physicians who specialized in tropical medicine to make a survey of Liberia in 1926-27. The survey also served as a means for enhancing Firestone’s image. The team dedicated their published study to “Harvey S. Firestone, who has done so much for the development of the country of Liberia and for the welfare of its inhabitants.” Richard P. Strong, ed., *The African Republic of Liberia and the Belgian Congo: Based on the Observations Made and Material Collected During the Harvard African Expedition, 1926-1927*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1930).

⁶⁶ Memorandum (Harrison), July 8, 1924, *Foreign Relations, 1925*, II, 381 (quotations).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 382 (quotations).

rehabilitation of the Mount Barclay plantation.⁶⁸ In August the Universal Negro Improvement Association sent a petition to Liberia that warned against acceptance of the Firestone concessions. The UNIA viewed Harvey Firestone as nothing less than a dictator waiting for the right moment to administer a coup d'état in Liberia. Garvey's organization suggested that Firestone would ultimately "seek the usurpation of the government, even as has been done with the black Republic of Haiti," and that Liberians should reject the concessions and "guard most jealously the freedom and integrity" of their "dear country."⁶⁹ Ironically, Americo-Liberian leaders believed that their rejection of Garveyism served as a step toward that very goal.

Still bothered by the fleecing that he had received at the hands of his Chicago partners at the beginning of his business career, Harvey Firestone obsessed over protecting his investments. As early as April 1924 he informed the U. S. State Department that he considered a loan by the United States to Liberia as his best form of security in West Africa. "There is no question in my mind," Firestone wrote later, "that for the long pull the best interest of Liberia, America and ourselves will be served by the U. S. having a substantial interest."⁷⁰ When a State Department official asked William Hines in early November "if the Firestone concession was contingent on an American loan to the Government of Liberia," he learned that although "it had been the original hope of Mr. Firestone to make sure of American financial support for the semi-bankrupt Liberian Government prior to investing heavily in Liberia, he had now decided to go ahead with his concession and take up the loan question subsequently." Firestone, according to

⁶⁸ Taylor, *Firestone Operations in Liberia*, 58; Lief, *Firestone Story*, 153-54.

⁶⁹ Buell, *Native Problem in Africa*, II, 822-23 (quotations p. 823)

⁷⁰ William R. Castle to the Secretary of State, April 8, 1924, *Foreign Relations*, 1925, II, 367. Harvey S. Firestone to Samuel Wierman, November 1, 1924 (quotation), HC.

Hines, wanted to wait until after the upcoming U. S. Presidential election of 1924 before trying to interest members of Congress in “reviving” the loan plan of 1921. Hines reminded the State Department official that it would take at least five years before any proceeds would begin to appear in Liberia. Until then, “Mr. Firestone would be gambling with a heavy capital investment in case he had no assurance that the Liberian government might not go to pieces in the next few years.”⁷¹

In December, as the date drew near for the Liberian legislature to convene, Firestone personally lobbied Secretary of State Hughes for the Government’s “moral support and approval” of his undertaking in Liberia.⁷² At a meeting in Washington, Hughes expressed his appreciation for an independent American supply of rubber, but informed Firestone not to have any “misapprehension” about the relationship between the U. S. and Liberia. Although Hughes had urged Congress to approve the 1921 loan, he felt troubled when he noticed the new provision that Firestone had inserted in the “proposed arrangements” submitted to the State Department that called for obtaining a loan either from the Government or from private parties. Hughes feared that it might be construed by the Liberians as a chance to reopen the question of a United States loan and told Firestone that he should make it clear that “the proposed provision involved no committal on the part of this Government.” Furthermore, the U. S. had “no special relationship or

⁷¹ Memorandum by the Assistant Chief of the Division of Western European Affairs (Richardson), November 13, 1924, *Foreign Relations, 1925*, II, 382 (first quotation), 383 (second and third quotations). In July 1924 a Byzantine subplot began to develop around the loan idea when Sidney De la Rue concocted a plan to channel complete financial control to himself in Liberia. De la Rue, resident busybody in Liberia, wanted Solomon Porter Hood removed from his ministerial position and returned to the U. S. to rally support of the black press for Firestone’s investment. De la Rue’s grandiose scheme irritated Firestone, who asked William Castle if he could be recalled from Liberia. Castle told Firestone that De la Rue was an employee of the National City Bank of New York, and did not work for the State Department. Chalk, “Anatomy of an Investment,” 18-28.

⁷² Mr. Harvey S. Firestone to the Secretary of State, December 19, 1924, *Foreign Relations, 1925*, II, 384 (quotation).

obligation to Liberia,” and “could not assume more extensive responsibilities” in connection to a private loan.⁷³

Even more problematic for Hughes, Firestone wanted “protection and support in the future” from the State Department. Hughes, while sharing the economic vision that Herbert Hoover and Firestone had for the United States, “would not and could not commit his successors in office in such a matter.” Although the historic policy of the State Department had been to lend “proper support of a diplomatic character to the just claims of its citizens,” Hughes underscored the fact “that there was no question of a resort to force.” Firestone thanked Hughes for the meeting and once again suggested the importance of “a free source of supply of rubber to American interests.” Furthermore, he “pointed out the great advantages which would undoubtedly accrue to Liberia if his proposition went through,” and claimed that he had no intention “to pirate or promote that country for purely selfish ends.” On that note, Hughes had some advice for Firestone. News of the “attitude of certain of the Company’s representatives” in Liberia had reached Hughes through William R. Castle, chief of the State Department’s Western European Division. In “a personal way,” Hughes alluded to the need of using “great tact and judgment” with the Liberians. “A kindly and understanding attitude,” Hughes offered, “would have an important responsive effect, and would also avoid the possibility of unfortunate backfires in this country.”⁷⁴ Indeed, as Charles S. Johnson discovered in 1930, Liberians placed unusual importance on ceremony and graciousness—the act of saying “Good morning” or “Good evening” in Liberia held a significance that few Americans could imagine.

⁷³ Memorandum by the Assistant Secretary of State (Harrison), December 12, 1924, *Foreign Relations*, 1925, II, 385 (first and second quotations), 386 (third and fourth quotations).

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 386 (first through seventh quotations), 387 (eighth through twelfth quotations).

Before the meeting ended, Firestone, despite what he had just been told and against all odds, indicated that he still hoped for a U. S. loan to Liberia. The provisions of the 1921 loan, he believed, would give his interests the protection that they needed. A private loan, as Firestone learned earlier, would “include refunding the 1912 loan.” Therefore, it was his “understanding” that “this Government would not object to assuming a similar relationship to that now existing in the 1912 loan.” Hughes “referred to his previous remarks in that connection, and again emphasized the importance of the agreement being fair and equitable to the Liberian Government.” In other words—and contrary to much of the criticism over the years directed at the company’s enterprise in Liberia—the State Department, although sympathetic, was not about to “modify” its policies for the sake of Firestone.⁷⁵

Although important in relations with the buying public, experience had taught Firestone that the use of “great tact and judgment”—common elements in international diplomacy—was not all that essential when it came to dealing with competitors. His Chicago partners had shown little diplomacy when they swindled him out of what he felt was rightfully his, and he had made the decision to slash prices during the 1920 recession without regard to the well being or sensitivity of others in Akron. For Firestone, entry into Liberia represented more than just another business deal; establishing rubber plantations in the black republic signified progress and civilization, broad-ranging subjects that merited unusual attention in the United States throughout the 1920s.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Memorandum by the Assistant Secretary of State (Harrison), December 12, 1924, *Foreign Relations, 1925*, II, 387 (first through fourth quotations). David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: The Fight For Equality and the American Century, 1919-1963* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2000), 125 (fifth quotation); Sundiata, *Black Scandal*, 37-39.

⁷⁶ Warren Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 114-15.

Moreover, wages paid to native workers and the building of new roads could help modernize Liberia by opening a new market for Ford automobiles and Firestone tires. If the Americo-Liberians could not understand the benefits to their country that Firestone's capital investment would bring, then he would move on and find a better situation elsewhere. His means for introducing the idea of a loan to the Liberians contained nothing that even resembled diplomacy.

Within a few weeks after convening in late December 1924, the Liberian legislature voted in favor of the three planting agreements with Firestone and authorized President King to enter into final negotiations. When word reached Akron of the decision, Firestone cabled King and asked him not to adjourn the legislative session until William Hines could return to Liberia for ratification of the agreements. Firestone offered to pay the salaries of legislators forced to work overtime but King ignored his request. The president told the legislators to go home and then left on a trip to the hinterland. In the meantime, Hines returned to Liberia and found President King's Cabinet running the government. Much to the surprise of Cabinet members, on closer inspection of Article IV of Agreement Number Three, the million-acre concession, they found that a new clause had been inserted. Clause "k" stipulated that, for the agreements to go into effect, the Liberian Government had to accept a loan "of not less than two million dollars and not more than five million dollars" based on the same conditions of the 1921 loan rejected by the U. S. Congress. Most Liberian political leaders had not wanted the 1921 loan to begin with, and the mistaken thought that Harvey Firestone would appoint officials to administer the country's internal affairs caused an uproar in Monrovia.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ The act passed the Liberian legislature on January 13, 1925. Buell, *Native Problem in Africa*, II, 822.

On January 14, 1925, the day after the Liberian legislature agreed to the planting agreements without the knowledge of clause “k,” Firestone had told Hines in a letter that Liberia would be better off if it accepted the loan because, as he saw it, “The country cannot become prosperous without money and the only way you can get the money into Liberia is to send it there.” Later in January, Firestone received word through his man at the Bank of Manhattan that the British Government had shown interest in his plans in Liberia and wanted to know more. Firestone instructed his banker to tell the British that he “is going in for the production of crude rubber.” His skimpy reply said nothing about the loan.⁷⁸

Tense months of negotiations followed as Liberians debated clause “k.” In April 1925 Liberian Secretary of State Edwin Barclay informed Hines in a letter that, as “a matter of fundamental policy,” his government “in no circumstances will place itself under financial obligation to your Company.”⁷⁹ Eventually, considering their financial needs and desire for American help in deflecting the French menace on their border with Ivory Coast, President King and his Cabinet agreed that, with some changes, they could stomach accepting the loan. In order for the loan to be administered through an institution separate from his company, Firestone created the Finance Corporation of America (“Harvey under a more sonorous name”), which operated through its fiscal agent, the National City Bank of New York. In June, a few months before Secretary of

⁷⁸ Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes showed concern about clause “k” before Firestone submitted the new agreements to the Liberians. The Secretary of State to Mr. Harvey S. Firestone, December 22, 1924, *Foreign Relations, 1925*, II, 403. Harvey S. Firestone to William D. Hines, January 14, 1925 (first quotation), HC. Harry T. Hall to Harvey S. Firestone, January 22, 1925 (second quotation), HC.

⁷⁹ The Liberian Secretary of State (Barclay) to Mr. W. D. Hines, April 27, 1925,” *Foreign Relations, 1925*, II, 421-24 (quotation p. 422); and The Liberian Secretary of State (Barclay) to the American Minister (Hood), April 28, 1925, *Foreign Relations, 1925*, II, 424-26.

State Barclay's trip to the United States to finalize the loan agreement, Firestone wrote to Thomas Edison: "I now have the matter practically closed in Liberia."⁸⁰

In August 1925, Secretary of State Barclay, a "man of deep color" according to Firestone, arrived in the United States and one month later signed the Loan Agreement in New York. In October, Firestone boasted to his son, Elmer: "I closed a concession with (Barclay) for a million acres of land for 6¢ an acre" The "banker's loan" was "made through our State Department, which gives us full control over Liberia, that is, all their finances So you can see we are well protected from a Government standpoint on going into Liberia."⁸¹

A rift developed, however, in January 1926, after President King objected to "giving over both the customs and internal revenues" of his country to outsiders. The Liberian legislature then added an amendment to the agreement that allowed it to negotiate a refunding loan for retirement of the present loan. Firestone fought the amendment, fearing that the Liberians in a few years might try to refund the loan with the French or British, who would then dismiss American financial advisers and replace them with their own.⁸² In February 1926, as the price of rubber continued to rise under the Stevenson Act, Firestone wrote to William Castle: "I am not in humor to negotiate as we did before. They must accept agreements without a single change . . . our only alternative is to

⁸⁰ Buell, *Native Problem in Africa*, II, 822-24, 837-38; Lief, *Firestone Story*, 163-63; Chalk, "Anatomy of an Investment," 28-29. The Wolf brothers took great joy in poking fun at Harvey Firestone's megalomaniacal tendencies. They referred to Harvey Firestone as "the eminent Akron Anglophobe" and Harvey, Jr. as "the Crown Prince from Akron." Writers favorable to Firestone were "Harvey laureates" and potential rubber-growing sites became "Harvey plantations." Wolf and Wolf, *Rubber*, 251 (quotations). Harvey S. Firestone to Thomas A. Edison, June 13, 1925 (quotation), Overman Files, Holsoe Collection.

⁸¹ Buell, *Native Problem in Africa*, II, 823, 837-38. Harvey S. Firestone to Elmer S. Firestone, October 11, 1925 (quotations), HC.

⁸² The Chargé in Liberia (Wharton) to the Secretary of State, January 23, 1926, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1926* (2 vols.; Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1941), II, 505 (quotation). Hereafter cited as *Foreign Relations, 1926*. The Secretary of State to the Chargé in Liberia (Wharton), February 7, 1926, *Foreign Relations, 1926*, II, 518-19; Buell, *Native Problem in Africa*, II, 838.

withdraw with the exception of agreement number 1, Mount Barclay, with as little embarrassment and expense as possible.” A white American educator making a survey in Liberia, James L. Sibley, suggested to philanthropist Anson Phelps-Stokes, that Firestone “needs to employ some diplomacy.” He also noted that while the loan agreement had never been finalized, Firestone went ahead with developments in Liberia, paying a thousand natives a month in cash, “a new experience for them.” In the fall of 1926, an irate Firestone suspended operations in Liberia and called home his son, Harvey, Jr., only a few years out of Princeton and president of the newly formed Firestone Plantations Company. The deal was off.⁸³

Yet, only weeks later, after a State Department official in Liberia suggested to President King that the defeat of his country’s main chance for solvency would fall on his shoulders alone, the legislature approved the loan in an act of December 8, 1926. More months of haggling took place over a number of issues that required amendments to the original agreement, mostly concerning salaries of financial advisers designated by President Calvin Coolidge. In the end, the loan agreement called for the Finance Corporation of America to issue forty-year bonds at seven percent, and Liberia agreed that it would not refund the loan for a period of twenty years or make any other loan unless given approval by the American Financial Adviser. Firestone later reduced the interest to four and a half percent, a diplomatic move that pleased the Liberians.

Company vice-president and legal counsel Amos Miller, however, objected so violently

⁸³ Mr. Harvey S. Firestone to the Chief of the Division of Western European Affairs (Castle), February 18, 1926, *Foreign Relations, 1926*, II, 530 (first quotation); James L. Sibley to Anson Phelps-Stokes, May 26, 1926 (second and third quotations), HC. Another delicate diplomatic point emerged over arbitration terms in the loan agreement. Firestone wanted disputes submitted to a three-person panel composed of a Liberian, an American, and an appointee of the U. S. Secretary of State, an untenable arrangement for President King. In November 1926 it was finally agreed that if two arbitrators—one American, one Liberian—could not reach a settlement, the U. S. Secretary of State would appoint someone from another country to make a binding decision. Chalk, “Anatomy of an Investment,” 29-30.

to the whole scheme that Firestone personally bought out his hefty share of stockholdings. In July 1927 the loan went into effect and the Firestone Plantations Company was officially up and running.⁸⁴

Now involved in earnest in the crude rubber growing business, Firestone believed that in Liberia he had secured the ironclad agreements necessary to achieve the kind of order, efficiency, and financial protection for the future that both he and Herbert Hoover so coveted. Firestone's anger at the British for their 1914 crude rubber embargo turned into seething hatred after passage of the Stevenson Act; establishing his own plantations in Liberia allowed him to thumb his nose not only at the British but also at his rivals in the Rubber Association of America. Propaganda techniques that worked during the war proved effective once again in deflecting criticism at home against his demands for concessions in Liberia, or so he thought in 1927. Firestone's autobiographical *Men and Rubber: The Story of Business*, written in collaboration with Samuel Crowther and published in 1926, served as a treatise on his personal philosophy as well as a justification for searching out raw materials in foreign lands. Even an African American leader as anti-colonial as W. E. B. Du Bois preferred Firestone over Marcus Garvey in Liberia.⁸⁵

From the mid-1920s until his death in 1937, the decision to establish ties with the Republic of Liberia would be both a blessing and a curse for Firestone. Like Herbert Hoover, who had few dealings with African Americans until the Mississippi River flood

⁸⁴ Lief, *Firestone Story*, 164; Buell, *Native Problem in Africa*, II, 839-52.

⁸⁵ Raymond Leslie Buell noted that the entire December 1925 issue of the Firestone *Non-Skid* trade journal was devoted to publicizing the company's move into Liberia. Buell, *Native Problem in Africa*, 823. See also, for instance, Harvey S. Firestone, "We Must Grow Our Own Rubber," *Country Gentleman* (April 1926), 123; and Herbert Hoover, "America Solemnly Warns Against Foreign Monopolies of Raw Materials," *Current History* (December 1925), 307.

of 1927, Firestone paid little attention to people of color; he allowed them to sweep the floors of his factories in Akron but higher-paying, skilled positions remained closed. Apparently referring to Liberia, Firestone noted in *Men and Rubber*, “We have found the Negro particularly adapted to handling our raw materials.” Yet, for all that Firestone probably knew or cared, the Harlem Renaissance might have taken place in sixteenth-century Holland. While his company made efforts over the years to understand and accommodate native culture in the black republic, Firestone viewed Americo-Liberians as adolescents in need of adult supervision. By 1930 officials at the U. S. State Department had similar feelings about Firestone and his representatives in Liberia.⁸⁶

Before the explosive issue of forced shipments of native Liberian workers to cacao plantations on the Spanish-owned island of Fernando Po surfaced in the late 1920s, America’s racial divide rendered a personal visit by Charles S. Johnson to the Firestone offices in Akron highly unlikely. With the exception of their individual pursuits of order and efficiency, the multimillionaire and the black sociologist had almost nothing in common in the new age of economic globalization. But Firestone’s search for “opportunities” abroad in the new post-World War I order inadvertently brought to light the issue of forced labor and slavery in Liberia, and led him to cross paths with Johnson. When Firestone wrote to his father in the 1890s that the world seemed “full of trouble,”

⁸⁶ Matthew Pratt Guterl argues that “postwar rubber production was not just about rubber, or about corporate profits, or about the growth of the national economy: it was also tied to the racial dynamic in America. And so American mining and rubber corporations began investing in Africa and investing in color prejudice.” The idea of Firestone’s investing “in color prejudice” is unconvincing, given the route that he took in deciding on Liberia. Guterl, *Color of Race in America*, 58 (quotations), 59, 62. Donald J. Lisio, *Hoover, Blacks, and Lily-Whites: A Study of Southern Strategies* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), xviii; John M. Barry, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 318-23. Bixler, *Foreign Policy of the United States in Liberia*, 93; Charles Morrow Wilson, *Liberia: Black Africa in Microcosm* (New York, Evanston, and London: Harper and Row, 1971), 132-34.

he had no idea that long after achieving success in the tire business, his own actions in the 1920s would help touch off an international crisis and only add to those troubles.

CHAPTER 3

“THE PERSISTENT WEAKNESSES WITHIN”: LIBERIA, THE U. S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, AND THE ROAD TO INVESTIGATION

The love of liberty brought us here—
the want of cash keeps us.

Anonymous Americo-Liberian, 1930

The stressful negotiations with Firestone in the mid-1920s marked the end of one chapter of tension and conflict and the beginning of another in the history of the Republic of Liberia, a nation born out of the calamity of American slavery. Harvey Firestone’s haste to establish his first large-scale overseas operations, fueled as much by his antipathy toward the British and the Rubber Association of America as by his very real fear of being left without raw materials in the event of another international crisis like World War I, led him to focus only on Liberia’s fiscal shortcomings without understanding any of the underlying, fundamental problems that had existed there from the 1820s onward, and that threatened to tear the country apart in 1930. The political and social chasm separating the dominant Americo-Liberian minority that settled in Monrovia and towns along the coast from the disenfranchised but assertive African majority that lived upcountry only widened in the 1920s, a dilemma that few outside of the black republic cared much about until the coming of Firestone. The republic’s failure to subdue its tribal majority in a manner as thorough as that of its neighbors—the British in Sierra

Leone and the French in Ivory Coast—left it vulnerable to allegations in the late 1920s as grave as they were ironic; namely, that a member of the League of Nations founded in the name of liberty by former slaves and free people of color not only condoned but also took an active role in subjecting its own citizens to forced labor and slavery.¹

The genesis of the American Colonization Society (ACS), the agency responsible for creating Liberia, grew out of an environment filled with tension and conflict. Two groups with opposing views founded the ACS, originally known as The American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Color of the United States, in 1816. Split between those who wished to rid the U. S. of the growing number of manumitted slaves, and those who wanted to abolish slavery altogether, the ACS followed a cautious path in formulating its objectives. Pressured by slave owners the ACS eventually chose not to address the slavery question or even mention it again, but to involve itself with the removal from the United States of free blacks only.²

In 1787 black immigrants from Great Britain, under the direction of anti-slavery advocate Granville Sharp, set up a colony in Sierra Leone on the coast of West Africa. After buying land from native chiefs, the immigrants, along with slaves recaptured from ships in the Atlantic Ocean intercepted by the British Navy, established the capital of Freetown. Using Sierra Leone as its model, the ACS sent two representatives to the coast of West Africa in 1817 to find a suitable location for a new colony. The ACS agents visited Freetown, and then spoke with African chiefs on Sherbro Island, about 170 miles

¹ Yekutieli Gershoni, *Black Colonialism: The Americo-Liberian Scramble for the Hinterland* (Boulder and London: Westview Press, 1985), 101-2; Raymond Leslie Buell, *The Native Problem in Africa* (2 vols.; New York: The MacMillan Company, 1928), II, 746-47.

² Tom W. Shick, *Behold the Promised Land: A History of Afro-American Settler Society in Nineteenth-Century Liberia* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 3-20; “The First Annual Report,” in *The Annual Reports of the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Colour of the United States* (10 vols.; New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969; originally published 1818-1827), 1-13.

northwest of Cape Mesurado, the future location of the Liberian capital of Monrovia. A favorable report on the possibilities for settlement on Sherbro Island led to widespread publicity in the U. S. and the founding of new branches of the ACS. The U. S. Congress gave the ACS added power in 1819 when it appropriated funds for transporting slaves recaptured on the high seas directly to West Africa. Many free people of color and abolitionists criticized the ACS for doing nothing about slavery, and for catering only to slaveholders worried about the growing number of manumissions. Indeed, over the course of the next few decades, some six thousand immigrants to Liberia arrived as a result of promising their masters that if manumitted or allowed to purchase their own freedom they would leave the United States for West Africa.³

The area chosen by the ACS for resettlement offered a political and social setting free from European influence and ripe for colonization. But the same reasons that made the land for two hundred and forty miles between Sierra Leone and Ivory Coast so politically attractive also spelled economic trouble from the beginning. Europeans had bypassed the Grain Coast because of its lack of natural resources like rubber, ivory, and palm oil, and because trade routes and junctions were located elsewhere, mainly along rivers in Sierra Leone and the Sene-Gambia region. After the arrival of Portuguese sailors in 1461 until the demand for slaves grew in the eighteenth century, some trade between the coast and the interior took place but it was limited mainly to rice, from which the area received its

³ J. Gus Liebnow, *Liberia: The Quest for Democracy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 11-13; Charles Morrow Wilson, *Liberia: Black Africa in Microcosm* (New York, Evanston, and London: Harper and Row, 1971), 3-18; Floyd J. Miller, *The Search for a Black Nationality: Black Colonization and Emigration, 1787-1863* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 54-74; Archibald Alexander, *A History of Colonization on the Western Coast of Africa* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969): originally published 1846), 37-40. Congress appropriated \$100,000 in the Act of 1819. Katherine Harris, *African and American Values: Liberia and West Africa* (Lanham, New York, and London: University Press of America, 1985), 22; George W. Brown, *The Economic History of Liberia* (Washington, D. C.: Associated Publishers, 1941), 14-16.

name, and African, or Malaguetta, pepper. Although European interest waned again after curtailment of the British and American slave trade, the intertribal rivalries and hostilities fostered by involvement in the business of human chattel remained for many years.⁴

Rather than any hint of centralized organization that might cause political headaches in the future, ACS agents discovered at their chosen site in West Africa only loose confederations of native tribes too factionalized to mount serious resistance to colonization. In the previous three centuries the migration of more highly developed natives from the savanna led to whatever political and military alliances existed among tribes encountered by Americo-Liberian settlers in the 1820s. Divided into three major language groups—the Kru, Mande, and West Atlantic—native tribes in nineteenth-century Liberia had developed from at least sixteen and as many as twenty-eight different ethnic backgrounds. The Kru inhabited the coastal region in southeastern Liberia and adjoining areas in Ivory Coast, where they shipped out with European traders and earned acclaim for their sailing skills. Tribes in their language group included the Grebo, Dey, and Bassa, among others. In northern Liberia, Mande-speaking tribes like the Vai, Kpelle, and Gio settled among descendants of the area's original inhabitants, the Kissi and Gola of the West Atlantic linguistic group. The Dyula, nomadic traders from the savanna, brought Islam to northeastern Liberia and converted the Vai to its teachings. Yet, for all of its ethnic diversity and the fact that no dominant political structure like that imposed elsewhere by the more advanced Ashanti or Yoruba ever developed, a strong

⁴ Amos Sawyer, *The Emergence of Autocracy in Liberia: Tragedy and Challenge* (San Francisco: Institute for Contemporary Studies, 1992), 44-48; Harris, *African and American Values*, 12-13; Nnamdi Azikiwe, *Liberia in World Politics* (Westport, Conn.: Negro Universities Press, 1970; originally published 1934), 32-46; Merran Fraenkel, *Tribe and Class in Monrovia* (London, Ibadan, and Accra: Oxford University Press, 1964), 1-5; Nathaniel R. Richardson, *Liberia's Past and Present* (London: Diplomatic Press, 1959), 13-16; Scott R. Pearson, J. Dirck Stryker, and Charles P. Humphreys, *Rice in West Africa: Policy and Economics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1981).

degree of shared cultural traditions emerged among the different tribes, the result of migration, intermarriage, warfare, and slave raiding.⁵

In addition to establishing a refuge for former slaves the ACS had larger, more ambitious goals. Influenced by the considerable financial donations of Protestant religious groups, the Methodists in particular, the ACS determined to use its own agents and black immigrants as instruments for converting Africans to Christianity. The ACS therefore selected its first group of settlers based on their moral integrity and religious convictions. Few of the immigrants were literate and none had any political or organizational skills. Moreover, the ACS had never actually settled immigrants anywhere and provided the first group with no training or plan on what to do once they reached Sherbro Island. Questions about the land, climate, and native culture went unasked. From a legal standpoint, it also remained unclear exactly what type of governing relationship would exist between the new settlement, the ACS, and the United States.⁶

In February 1820 eighty-six black immigrants and two ACS agents boarded the frigate *Elizabeth* and docked near Sherbro Island the following month. Greeted by the rainy season, disease and death soon followed, forcing survivors to retreat to the safety of

⁵ Gershoni, *Black Colonialism*, 1-5; I. K. Sundiata, *Black Scandal: America and the Liberian Labor Crisis, 1929-1936* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1980), 14-15, 166-69. In the nineteenth century, the area designated as Liberia was part of the Western Sudan. Between the eleventh and sixteenth centuries, the empires of Mali, Ghana, and Songhai originated in the Western Sudan. The Grain Coast is a subregion of the Lower Guinea Coast. Sawyer, *Emergence of Autocracy in Liberia*, 43. On Islam, see Augustine Konneh, *Religion, Commerce, and the Integration of the Mandingo in Liberia* (Lanham, New York, and London: University Press of America, 1996), 4-11, 31-38. Of all the tribes in Liberia, only the Vai had invented an alphabet and a written language. See George W. Ellis, *Negro Culture in West Africa* (New York: Neale Publishing, 1914).

⁶ Harold D. Nelson, ed., *Liberia: A Country Study* (Washington, D. C.: American University Press, 1985), 22-23; Gershoni, *Black Colonialism*, 9-10; Sawyer, *Emergence of Autocracy in Liberia*, 38.

Fourah Bay in Sierra Leone.⁷ Another expedition in December 1821 led by physician Eli Ayres and U. S. naval lieutenant Robert F. Stockton succeeded, quite by accident, in acquiring two islands in the Mesurado lagoon, and a narrow, sixty-mile long strip of coastland christened as Liberia in the following year.

Appointed by the ACS to take control of the urgent situation that faced survivors at Fourah Bay, Ayres enlisted the help of Stockman, the commander of a gunboat escorting a ship carrying another group of settlers to Freetown. Intent on finding suitable land for a new colony, Ayres and Stockman sailed south along the coast to Cape Mesurado, where they encountered the native leader of the local slave trade, an unpleasant Dey chieftain known as King Peter. After days of tense “palaver,” or parley, the Americans finally reached an agreement with Peter when Ayres pointed a pistol at the chief’s head and then made a loud denunciation of slavery. In return for nails, gunpowder, iron bars, rum, umbrellas, and walking sticks—whatever items could be scavenged from Stockton’s ship—and a promise that the newcomers would not interfere with the slave trade, Peter allowed the ACS to settle colonists on the islands near Cape Mesurado, and for sixty miles along the coast. Viewing providence at work, Ayres immediately began assembling settlers for the move to Cape Mesurado.⁸

King Peter, because he had no authority to sell the land or any understanding that he had done so, soon drew the ire of other native chiefs who learned of his foolishness. When Stockton and Ayres attempted to go ashore with the new colonists, Peter’s men interfered and forced the group to take refuge on a tiny island controlled by John Mills, a

⁷ Alexander, *History of Colonization on the Western Coast of Africa*, 167-70; Richardson, *Liberia’s Past and Present*, 17; Shick, *Behold the Promised Land*, 20-22.

⁸ Alexander, *History of Colonization on the Western Coast of Africa*, 171; Charles S. Johnson, *Bitter Canaan: The Story of the Negro Republic* (New Brunswick, N. J. and Oxford: Transaction Books, 1987), 43; Harris, *African and American Values*, 14-15.

mulatto slave trader. As another rainy season began, Peter ordered the colonists to leave. Ayres, however, learned that an older Dey chieftain, King Bristol, felt less hostile toward the Americans and had long-term grievances against Peter. When Bristol understood what Peter had done, he declared that a binding deal had been made and that the colonists should have their land without delay. Dissent against Bristol's order carried a guaranteed punishment of a severed head attached to the end of a sharpened pole. Anyone unconvinced could view the body of another Dey chieftain then lying in state along the coast, the most recent protester against a Bristol decree. Allowed to remain for the time being, the colonists suffered on what came to be known as Providence Island for another eight months before help arrived.⁹

In August 1822 another group of settlers, led by Protestant missionary Jehudi Ashmun, landed at Cape Mesurado. In the meantime Peter had formed an alliance with a host of other chieftains and prepared to attack the colonists. Totalling one hundred and thirty, of which only twenty-five or thirty could bear arms, the colonists endured bouts of yellow fever and withstood numerous assaults by native warriors in the weeks that followed. Starving and weak from fever, they survived until supplies and new colonists sent by the ACS reached them in 1823 and again in 1824. Amid more battles with natives, slave traders, and each other, the colonists managed to construct a few buildings and finally received long-awaited legislative guidance from the ACS. Slaveholder and leader in the ACS, Robert Harper, decided to call the Cape Mesurado settlement Liberia, from the Latin *liber* for "freeman." Monrovia, the capital, was named in honor of

⁹ Richardson, *Liberia's Past and Present*, 17-18; Amos J. Beyan, *The American Colonization Society and the Creation of the Liberian State: A Historical Perspective, 1822-1900* (Lanham, New York, and London: University Press of America, 1991), 66-68; Johnson, *Bitter Canaan*, 46.

President James Monroe. As the ACS envisioned it, Liberia would become a thriving agricultural experiment as well a force for bringing Christianity and civilization to Africa.¹⁰

Until 1841, a Board of Managers of the Society, headquartered in Washington, had final say when it came to laws governing the new colony of Liberia. The ACS placed the colony under the rule of white American governors and a council elected by settlers. Adult male settlers who purchased a plot of public land gained the franchise in Liberia. In 1832 the ACS faced a crisis when it sent more than a thousand new immigrants to Liberia after the passage of stringent laws against free people of color in the American South. Within a year of arriving in Liberia, miserable conditions led to the deaths of 262 of the new settlers, a development that brought harsh criticism aimed at the ACS and the colonists. As a result, several state chapters withdrew from the ACS and established independent societies that founded separate colonies in Liberia. The Maryland Colonization Society, founded by Robert Harper, acted first when it established the Maryland in Liberia colony in Cape Palmas in 1833. Additional independent colonies were created by societies from New York, Pennsylvania, Louisiana, Mississippi, and other states. Each of the separate colonies, with the exception of Maryland in Liberia, was eventually absorbed into the newly created Commonwealth of Liberia in 1839.¹¹

¹⁰ Nelson, ed., *Liberia: A Country Study*, 11-12; Wilson, *Liberia: Black Africa in Mircrocosm*, 26-30; Brown, *Economic History of Liberia*, 18-19; Beyan, *American Colonization Society*, 81-87; P. J. Staudenraus, *The African Colonization Movement, 1816-1865* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 65.

¹¹ Sawyer, *Emergence of Autocracy in Liberia*, 35-38; Staudenraus, *African Colonization Movement*, 224-40; Penelope Campbell, *Maryland in Africa: The Maryland State Colonization Society* (Urbana, Chicago and London: University of Illinois Press, 1971), 15-29; Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Belknap Press, 2003), 320-21, 329-30, 336-38.

With the death of Thomas Buchanan in 1841, Liberia saw the last of its white governors appointed by the ACS. Until declaring independence in 1847, the colonists more or less ruled themselves. Between 1839 and 1847, the commonwealth period, a legal system was created and colonists filled positions modeled on the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the U. S. Government. Assailed by abolitionists and facing financial difficulties, the ACS drifted away from active involvement in the colony's internal affairs in the 1840s. Colonists were left to fend off territorial encroachment by the French in 1842 and again in 1845 as best they could, and to initiate their own treaties with native tribes that eventually stretched the Liberian coastland from the mouth of the Mano River in the west to the Cavalla River two hundred and forty miles to the east.¹²

Attempts at collecting customs duties grew into one of the most serious economic issues facing the Liberian governor, Joseph J. Roberts, a settler appointed to his position by the ACS after the death of Thomas Buchanan. In 1845, the captain of a British merchant ship refused to pay customs duties on the grounds that Liberia was not a sovereign state. Governor Roberts ordered the confiscation of the British ship, which in turn led England to send a gunboat and haul away one of the colonists' ships to Sierra Leone. Roberts then appealed to the ACS for help, but Great Britain rejected the argument that humanitarian concerns and historical bonds with the United States held any significance in international law. Because the United States had no intention of claiming Liberia as a colony, the ACS had little choice but to urge the commonwealth to declare

¹² M. B. Akpan, "Black Imperialism: Americo-Liberian Rule Over the African People of Liberia, 1841-1964," *The Canadian Journal of African Studies*, VII, 2 (May 1973), 218; Shick, *Behold the Promised Land*, 39-41; Gershoni, *Black Colonialism*, 12-13; Brown, *Economic History of Liberia*, 121-30.

its independence. With a constitution that virtually duplicated the U. S. Constitution, the Republic of Liberia joined the sovereign nations of the world on July 23, 1847, and finally gained recognition by the United States in 1862.¹³

By 1867, when immigration dropped off after the American Civil War and emancipation, nearly 19,000 colonists—free people of color, manumitted slaves, and recaptive Africans—had made the transatlantic voyage from the United States to Liberia. From the often unskilled and illiterate “settler elite” emerged a handful of no more than about twenty families that assumed prominence in all of the important administrative positions along the coastal strip. With roots in the United States rather than in Africa, the Americo-Liberians consciously set themselves apart from the tribal majority that surrounded them. Monogamous, English-speaking Christians, the Americo-Liberians wore Western-style clothing, owned land individually instead of communally, and built houses that resembled those found on southern plantations. They spurned food favored by the Africans such as sweet potatoes, cassava, and native grown “country rice,” unable or unwilling to stray from the typically American diet of flour and cornmeal, beef and bacon, and rice harvested in the United States. Strangers in their own land, the settler elite associated manual labor in general and agriculture in particular with slavery. As they struggled to govern themselves the Americo-Liberians focused all of their energy on the politics of survival, a process that dictated the maintenance of power at all costs, and that fostered disdain for natives tribes that they viewed as uncivilized and therefore beneath them.¹⁴

¹³ Staudenraus, *African Colonization Movement*, 240; Sawyer, *Emergence of Autocracy in Liberia*, 102; Gershoni, *Black Colonialism*, 13; Brown, *Economic History of Liberia*, 129-32.

¹⁴ Akpan, “Black Imperialism,” 218-19; Shick, *Behold the Promised Land*, 42-59, 122-34; Liebnow, *Liberia: The Quest for Democracy*, 20-23. For firsthand descriptions of settler life in Liberia see, for

With their strong Christian backgrounds, settlers found native practices of animism particularly disturbing. But secret societies like Poro for boys, and Sande for girls, played a central role in tribal society. Native boys had to be initiated into Poro as a rite of passage for acceptance by their tribe. At an isolated “bush school,” a Big Devil, or head of the local Poro, subjected groups of boys to ordeals designed to bring about their spiritual rebirth as men. In the past, human sacrifice and cannibalism were integral parts of Poro rituals. Breaking the secret laws of the society was punishable by death. Fertility served as the main purpose of Sande society for native girls. Other secret societies with totems like the Leopard, Snake, or Baboon, committed ritualistic murders and often ate the flesh of victims in order to acquire magical characteristics, practices that struck fear in the hearts of both Africans and Liberians.¹⁵

Yet, over time, Americo-Liberians adopted many native customs and superstitions for their own purposes. For instance, leaders in Monrovia commonly used the native trial by

instance, Bell I. Wiley, ed., *Slaves No More: Letters from Liberia, 1833-1869* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1980); and Wilson Jeremiah Moses, ed., *Liberian Dreams: Back-to-Africa Narratives from the 1850s* (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998). See also J. W. Lugenbeel, *Sketches of Liberia: Comprising a Brief Account of the Geography, Climate, Productions, and Diseases, of the Republic of Liberia* (Washington, D. C.: C. Alexander, 1853).

¹⁵ Sidney De la Rue, *The Land of the Pepper Bird: Liberia* (New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1930), 124-51; Richard P. Strong, *The African Republic of Liberia and the Belgian Congo: Based on the Observations Made and Material Collected During the Harvard African Expedition, 1926-1927* (2 vols.; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1930), I, 100-2; Blye L. Bellman, *The Language of Secrecy: Symbols and Metaphors in Poro Ritual* (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1984), 20-25. The practice of eating human flesh to attain magical characteristics continued well into the 1980s and almost certainly still exists up to the present. In 1980, Samuel K. Doe directed a successful military coup and became the first native president of Liberia. As Denis Johnson writes: “Doe was a Krahn, the most rural and deprived of Liberia's tribes, looked down on as uncivilized and often accused of savagery and cannibalism.” Doe then survived an attempted coup by General Quiwonkpa, who was killed and divided into pieces. After parading the pieces around town, and then “in order to assume the strength of this bold pretender and in front of reliable witnesses, Doe's men ate him.” Denis Johnson, “The Civil War in Hell,” in Denis Johnson, *Seek: Reports From the Edges of America and Beyond* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001), 4 (quotations). Liberian law prohibited witchcraft and conjuration, as well as groups such as the Neegee and Human Leopard Society from offering human sacrifices. Secret religious societies in the hinterland that did not follow such practices, however, were protected under the Liberian Constitution. Charles Henry Huberich, *The Political and Legislative History of Liberia* (2 vols.; New York: Central Book Company, 1947), II, 895.

sasswood ordeal as part of their legal system. In tribal life, witchcraft was blamed for any type of illness, accident, or discomfort. A diviner, usually the village medicine man, determined who had committed a crime or used witchcraft, and demanded a confession. If no confession was forthcoming, the accused would be forced to drink a toxic mixture prepared from the bark of the sasswood tree. In the rare cases where the poison caused the accused to vomit, innocence was established. On the other hand, death reflected guilt. Americo-Liberians found the trial by sasswood ordeal quite useful in prosecuting petty as well as capital crimes.¹⁶

In the 1840s and 1850s, both by treaties with native chiefs and by force of arms, the Americo-Liberian settlers extended their control over the land and indigenous peoples along the Atlantic coast, and forced the closure of the local slave trading business. In exchange for promises of protection and new schools, native Africans agreed to respect the sovereignty of the Liberian Government and the supremacy of its laws. Because Americo-Liberians viewed African culture as barbaric and therefore hardly worth preserving, they embarked on a native policy that demanded complete assimilation before the granting of any political or social privileges. To participate in Liberian society, Africans had to sever all ties with their tribes and adopt the ways of the settlers, the exact opposite of cultural pluralism. One method of doing this was through an apprenticeship system that allowed African children to live with settler families and receive a Western education. Recaptive Africans, known as “Congoes,” also used the apprenticeship system as a route to assimilation, and grew to identify closely with the Americo-Liberian

¹⁶ The diviner’s decisions could be influenced by bribery, or he could choose to weaken or strengthen the potency of the sasswood mixture. See, for instance, Strong, ed., *African Republic of Liberia and the Belgian Congo*, I, 102; and R. Earle Anderson, *Liberia: America’s African Friend* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1952), 45-46.

elite. Another common method of assimilation was through intermarriage. The limited numbers of those assimilated either through the apprenticeship system or intermarriage, however, never posed a serious threat to the Americo-Liberian hold on power.¹⁷

Almost always desperately poor and dependent on imports for survival, the settler elite attempted from the 1850s into the 1870s to venture beyond Monrovia and the coast, and establish its influence further upcountry for trade and security purposes. Especially needed was farmland to produce crops impossible to grow in the poor soil along the coast drained by millennia of torrential rains. Exploring parties into the rugged native hinterland managed to plant the Liberian flag in new territory and establish a few remote outposts, which stretched the nation well beyond its original boundaries. But without any military presence or funds for administration, the financially strapped Americo-Liberians soon learned that they were nearly powerless to control developments very far beyond the forty-mile wide strip of coastline where the 1847 constitution applied.¹⁸

What little administrative control the settlers could impose on natives in the hinterland came through occupation of all of the politically appointed positions in the new counties and districts mapped out in the 1850s. A superintendent oversaw the new counties—Montserrado, Grand Bassa, Sinoe, and, in 1857, Maryland—with the help of a County Council comprised of officials from the departments of Education, Treasury, Internal Affairs, and Public Works. Along with the new districts of Cape Mount and Marshall, the Liberian Government established villages designated as “civilized settlements.”

¹⁷ Akpan, “Black Imperialism,” 220, 226-29; Shick, *Behold the Promised Land*, 31, 99-100; Buell, *Native Problem in Africa*, II, 749-52.

¹⁸ Gershoni, *Black Colonialism*, 14-15, 30; Akpan, “Black Imperialism,” 220-22. For a firsthand account of development in Liberia from the 1850s to the beginning of the twentieth century by an ardent believer in the colony’s aims and objectives, see Hollis R. Lynch, ed., *Selected Letters of Edward Wilmot Blyden* (Millwood, N. Y.: KTO Press, 1978).

Recognized as townships, the civilized settlements were administered by a commissioner appointed by the county, and assisted by a tax collector, a roads administrator, and other minor officials. African villages, often located next to the townships, had no official status in Liberia. A new policy that attempted to ban centuries-old trade between native villages and European merchants caused anger and confusion among African chiefs. With limited supervision from far off Monrovia and no military force to back them up, county administrators often found themselves at odds with a native population that outnumbered Americo-Liberians a hundred to one.¹⁹

From the founding of Liberia in the 1820s, health care and education posed monumental problems in an environment that killed immigrants at a frightening rate. Only a few physicians, generally of questionable competence to begin with, were ever available in the republic at any one time. Moreover, many Americo-Liberians held native medicine in higher esteem than professionally trained doctors. Missionary organizations, first the Methodists and Baptists, followed by all of the major Protestant denominations, attempted to fill the void in education by establishing schools in settlements along the coast. But without proper funding and because of high mortality among administrators, they had only a marginal effect. Americo-Liberian leaders, having tried and failed to establish their own school system, encouraged the missionaries in their work of converting natives to Christianity and in their attempts at education. Cooperation between the missions and the government suffered a grievous blow in 1874, however, when an Episcopalian bishop supported a rebellion by Grebo tribesmen that required

¹⁹ Gershoni, *Black Colonialism*, 16-17; Akpan, "Black Imperialism," 221-22, 227; Campbell, *Maryland in Africa*, 59-92; Richardson, *Liberia's Past and Present*, 90-92. Anthony J. Nimley, *The Liberian Bureaucracy: An Anyalysis and Evaluation of the Environment, Structure and Functions* (Lanham and New York: University Press of America, 1977), 62-65.

American military assistance to put down. Thereafter, Americo-Liberian leaders, many of whom sent their children to private schools in Europe or the United States, restricted missionary work among Africans. By 1930, health care and education remained at best rudimentary in Liberia.²⁰

From the 1880s, when the “scramble for Africa” began among European colonial powers, into the 1920s when Firestone arrived, the inability to occupy and control land claims in the hinterland threatened the annexation of Liberian territory and led to further conflict between the government and its tribal citizens. In 1884, the Berlin Conference tried to regulate new European claims on African territory by requiring evidence of “effective occupation.” Realizing that claims staked out in the previous decades during hinterland explorations could not stand up under scrutiny by the French or British, the Americo-Liberians rushed to embark on a number of ambitious programs to help their cause. As the settler elite believed, new townships, railways, highways, and military posts, as well as measures intended to gain the cooperation of native chiefs that included a stipend system and promises of representation in legislative decision making, would strengthen Liberia’s hand against the Europeans. Nothing came of the plans, however, and both Great Britain and France annexed portions of Liberian territory by treaty agreements in the 1880s and 1890s.²¹

²⁰ Augustus Washington to Rev. John Orcutt, February 8, 1854, in Moses, ed., *Liberian Dreams*, 202-12; Nelson, ed., *Liberia: A Country Study*, 23; Strong, ed., *The African Republic of Liberia and the Belgian Congo*, I, 198-202; James L. Sibley, *Education and Missions in Liberia* (New York: Phelps-Stokes Fund, 1926); Gershoni, *Black Colonialism*, 24; Buell, *Native Problem in Africa*, II, 758, 760-62; Donald Spivey, *The Politics of Miseducation: The Booker Washington Institute of Liberia, 1929-1984* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1986), 33.

²¹ Akpan, “Black Imperialism,” 223-25; Buell, *Native Problem in Africa*, II, 784-85; Gershoni, *Black Colonialism*, 25-27, 30-35; Liebnow, *Liberia: The Quest for Democracy*, 27-29; Wilson, *Liberia: Black Africa in Microcosm*, 84-90, 94-99.

By the turn of the century Liberia began forming a closer relationship with Great Britain in hopes that it would deter the French from claiming additional land along the boundary with Ivory Coast. The British had shown good faith in honoring the boundary between Sierra Leone and Liberia once a treaty had been signed, and in the early 1900s the settler elite arranged back channel agreements with Britain for help in carrying out reforms in tax collection and the judicial system, and for creating a militia capable of guarding the republic's territorial integrity. With the agreements and the establishment of the British Bank of West Africa, the only major financial institution in Liberia, Great Britain tried to stabilize the black republic in hopes of forging a buffer between Sierra Leone and the French colony of Ivory Coast. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Liberians in effect began practicing their own brand of colonialism in the hinterland, a policy that caused anger among tribal citizens and pushed them into closer trade relations with the French and the British.²²

The first serious effort at reforms intended to convince the French and British that Liberia sovereignty extended across the hinterland came after the 1904 election of Arthur Barclay as president. With the luxury of a four-year presidential term instead of the traditional two-year terms served by his predecessors, Barclay outlined an ambitious program intended to make Liberia function as a "national organism." In 1865, Barclay left his native Barbados at the age of eleven, and immigrated with his father to Liberia. A member of the True Whig Party that rose to dominate Liberian politics in the 1870s, Barclay had held nearly all of the major political positions in his adopted nation before

²² Buell, *Native Problem in Africa*, II, 783-87; Gershoni, *Black Colonialism*, 32-36; Wilson, *Liberia: Black Africa in Microcosm*, 84-90, 94-99; Sawyer, *Emergence of Autocracy in Liberia*, 196-98.

being elected president for two successive terms. Over time he took note of Great Britain's use of indirect rule in Sierra Leone and how it managed, with a minimum of expenditures and personnel, to dictate policy in the hinterland and control the native population. Barclay's new plan called for the recognition of African settlements as townships, and for new hinterland districts divided along ethnic lines. Native chiefs chosen by traditional means headed the townships, while Americo-Liberian commissioners appointed by the president oversaw the new districts.²³

After a few years under the new arrangements, the Liberian Government tried to exert its power over the clan, the most important native organization in the hinterland, by requiring legislative approval of clan chiefs. Several towns with close kinship ties made up a clan, with chiefs generally chosen from the oldest settlement and central location for the settling of disputes through palaver. Going one step further, the Americo-Liberians created the position of paramount chief to oversee units of several clans. Although chiefs were invited to Monrovia to discuss tribal problems, and Liberian officials made visits to the hinterland, President Barclay's plan met with much less success upcountry than in areas closer to the coast.²⁴

During his first term as president, Barclay renegotiated a loan arranged in 1871 through a London banking firm that had delivered to Liberia only about \$100,000 out of a promised sum of \$500,000. Sir Harry Johnston's Liberia Development Company arranged the new 1906 loan of \$500,000 through another British financial firm. Most of

²³ Liebnow, *Liberia: The Quest for Democracy*, 54-56; Gershoni, *Black Colonialism*, 36-41; Akpan, "Black Imperialism," 229-30; Sawyer, *Emergence of Autocracy in Liberia*, 198-207. On Arthur Barclay see, for instance, Richardson, *Liberia's Past and Present*, 117-27; and D. Elwood Dunn, Amos J. Beyan, and Carl Patrick Burrowes, *Historical Dictionary of Liberia*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, Maryland, and London: Scarecrow Press, 2001), 33.

²⁴ Gershoni, *Black Colonialism*, 36-41; Liebnow, *Liberia: The Quest for Democracy*, 41-42, 54-56; Anderson, *Liberia: America's African Friend*, 91. On the clan see, for instance, Fraenkel, *Tribe and Class in Monrovia*, 70-109; and Nimley, *The Liberian Bureaucracy*, 62-65.

the loan went toward building roads to and from Johnston's Mount Barclay rubber plantation, with the rest earmarked for paying off Liberia's floating debt. Because repayment of the loan depended on customs revenues, the British demanded that it appoint European customs inspectors and financial advisers. By 1908 the Liberian Development Company had gone broke and British officials clashed with Liberian district commissioners. Additional help, the British promised, would be forthcoming if Liberia established a frontier force commanded by Europeans. President Barclay, who had tried to avoid the use of force to implement control over the hinterland, came to the realization that the intractability of certain native chiefs and the ongoing boundary disputes with the French could not be remedied without a well-trained militia.²⁵

Armed with British-made rifles and commanded by a British army major, Robert Mackay Cadell, the Liberian Frontier Force (LFF) was formed to maintain law and order upcountry and to serve the local needs of district commissioners. Cadell, however, despised Liberian district commissioners, and brought in Africans from Sierra Leone to serve in the LFF under British officers that he appointed. Tension between Cadell and Barclay's government grew as the LFF commander made it a point to ignore orders from Monrovia. In February 1909, Cadell turned the LFF against Monrovia, a revolt put down with surprising ease by a poorly trained Americo-Liberian militia. In the aftermath of the revolt, Barclay rescinded previous agreements with the British and turned to the United States for help.²⁶

²⁵ Buell, *Native Problem in Africa*, II, 789-92; Wilson, *Liberia: Black Africa in Microcosm*, 107-8; Gershoni, *Black Colonialism*, 41-43.

²⁶ Buell, *Native Problem in Africa*, II, 787-89; Azikiwe, *Liberia in World Politics*, 111-17; Gershoni, *Black Colonialism*, 43-44.

The arrival of the Taft Commission later in 1909 and its report on needed reforms, most conspicuously in the LFF, set the stage for the U. S. Government's first official plunge into Liberian politics by helping to arrange the 1912 loan and supervising its administration. Yet, with every effort at increased control over the hinterland came more tension and conflict between Americo-Liberian rulers and natives, who staged numerous uprisings against the government in the first two decades of the twentieth century. American involvement in Liberia's internal reforms, rather than bringing order and efficiency as intended, only resulted in more chaos and violence by unintentionally convincing rebellious natives that rescue by white rule was near at hand. Although tribal citizens suffered defeat and reprisals with each rebellion, their unrest formed a steady progression of troubles that became untenable by the end of the 1920s.²⁷

Because they had no major export crop, in order to generate revenue Americo-Liberians exploited their vast supply of native laborers by contracting them to work abroad. From the era of slave trading, the export of native labor had been an important source of income for native chiefs. In the nineteenth century, after abolition of the slave trade, tribal chiefs continued to export native labor, receiving "head money" from shipping companies and plantation owners in other parts of Africa. From time to time, the Liberian Government also granted concessions to Europeans for the recruitment of native labor. In the early 1900s, the Americo-Liberians gave in to farmers who complained that labor exports damaged their ability to run their plantations, and tried to ban further recruitment. But the need for workers on cacao plantations on the Spanish-

²⁷ Brown, *Economic History of Liberia*, 167-70; Wilson, *Liberia: Black Africa in Microcosm*, 108-9; Azikiwe, *Liberia in World Politics*, 78-83; Sundiata, *Black Scandal*, 18-19. Rebellions were staged by the Grebos in 1910, the Krus in 1915, the Golas in 1918, and the Kpelle in 1920. Akpan, "Black Imperialism," 233.

owned island of Fernando Po, a thousand mile journey from Liberia along the coast to the Bight of Biafra, led to a change of attitude in Monrovia.²⁸

Despite earlier accusations of abuse on Fernando Po, the Liberian Government signed an agreement with Spain in 1914 for the export of native workers to the island. Indeed, as early as 1912, Richard C. Bundy, the American chargé d'affaires in Liberia, sent the U. S. State Department a detailed report on abuses in the contract labor system, and the republic's woefully inadequate record keeping. Although the 1914 agreement imposed safeguards against mistreatment and exploitation, the system depended entirely on the honesty of Liberian agents and the Spanish Consul. With a payment to recruiters of five dollars for each worker brought into service—usually young, illiterate Kru, Bassa, and Grebo men from the counties of Grand Bassa, Sinoe and Maryland—the Fernando Po agreement generated temptations for compulsion that district commissioners and native chiefs proved unable to resist. Contracted for up to a year, many workers spent far longer on Fernando Po. Those fortunate enough to make it back to Liberia alive often had their wages confiscated or had to pay arbitrary fees imposed by recruiters or district commissioners, leaving them with nothing to show for their labor abroad.²⁹

Beginning in 1916, Monrovia imposed an annual hut tax of a dollar per year on natives, one of the reforms suggested by the Americans. Village chiefs were designated to collect the tax and turn the money over to district commissioners, an arrangement open

²⁸ From around the 1880s, coffee served as the chief export from Liberia, followed by wild produce like palm kernels, palm oil, and piassava, the fiber of the raphia palm used chiefly for broom straw. Buell, *Native Problem in Africa*, II, 764, 777-78; Wilson, *Liberia: Black Africa in Microcosm*, 116-17; Ibrahim K. Sundiata, *From Slaving to Neoslavery: The Bight of Biafra and Fernando Po in the Era of Abolition, 1827-1930* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996).

²⁹ Richard C. Bundy to the Secretary of State, November 20, 1912, 882.504, Record Group 59, U. S. Department of State (National Archives, Washington, D. C.). Hereafter cited as RG-59, NA. Azikiwe, *Liberia in World Politics*, 169-75; Buell, *Native Problem in Africa*, II, 774-81; Anderson, *Liberia: America's African Friend*, 100-2; Sundiata, *From Slaving to Neoslavery*, 140-43. Sawyer, *Emergence of Autocracy in Liberia*, 224-30.

to widespread abuse and corruption. Even after the arrival of American financial advisers, and with an American-trained LFF, district commissioners showed little self-restraint as they intimidated, humiliated, and imprisoned native chiefs, replacing the most difficult of them with docile figures who commanded no respect in local villages. District commissioners coerced native chiefs into supplying men free of charge for whatever projects that required manual labor—road building in particular—and demanded the free use of porters for travel by hammock across the rugged Liberian countryside. Within a short time, white American officials in the hinterland grew to have as much disdain for Americo-Liberians as their British counterparts had previously.³⁰

An ugly affair that caused tension to reach the breaking point between American officials in Liberia and leaders in Monrovia occurred in 1920. An American official in the hinterland, T. C. Mitchell, accused an Americo-Liberian district commissioner, B. Y. Sandemannie, of forcing natives to work as slaves on government land that he used illegally as his own private plantation. Mitchell notified Monrovia that he had dismissed Sandemannie from his post, and that he had ordered him to appear in the capital. On Mitchell's orders, another American official placed Sandemannie in chains for the twelve-day trip to Monrovia. After arriving in the capital, Sandemannie, who had close personal connections to a number of Americo-Liberian political leaders, complained to newly-elected president Charles King that Mitchell's behavior served as evidence that white men wanted to control Liberia, an accusation that the local press seized upon immediately and compared to conditions in the Jim Crow South. King responded by

³⁰ Buell, *Native Problem in Africa*, II, 747-49; Gershoni, *Black Colonialism*, 49-52; Liebnow, *Liberia: The Quest for Democracy*, 51-52.

placing restrictions on American officials in Liberia, a move intended to force them out of the country. After punching an Americo-Liberian who swore at him and blocked his path on a Monrovia street, Mitchell eluded police by seeking asylum at the American legation. On the following day, President King coaxed Mitchell out of the legation with an invitation to a meeting, and then had him arrested, tried, and fined. King's retaliatory measures and Mitchell's own disputes with his subordinates in the hinterland resulted in the departure from Liberia of the entire group of American advisers in 1921.³¹

Another incident in the same period of time demonstrated the remarkable resilience of the Americo-Liberian political system to any type of fundamental reform. Soon after his appointment by President King as secretary of the interior, James W. Cooper began operating a private plantation upcountry with unpaid labor supplied by natives and wives of troops in the LFF. American officials informed King of the problem, who dismissed Cooper and then called for an investigation. Cooper was never brought up on any criminal charges, however, and a few years later returned to his cabinet position. Typically, Americo-Liberians, with their strong family connections and fear of losing political control, were immune from any sort of punishment. Removal from one government job and transfer to another was the process usually employed by the settler elite for dealing with the transgressions, no matter how serious, of their own tightly knit group.³²

To be sure, Charles Dunbar Burgess King, who served as president of Liberia throughout the 1920s, never strayed from the unwritten rule of nepotism that guided his

³¹ Gershoni, *Black Colonialism*, 51-56; Richard C. Bundy to Secretary of State, October 20, 1920, 882.5048/-, RG-59, NA.

³² Gershoni, *Black Colonialism*, 62-63; Nimley, *The Liberian Bureaucracy*, 200-30.

nation's political leadership. Tall and dignified in appearance and manner, King epitomized the image of Liberian aristocracy with his peculiar upturned mustache, horn rimmed eyeglasses, and formal attire of gray pinstriped slacks, top hat, and tails. King was born in Freetown, Sierra Leone, in 1875 to recaptive Yoruba parents who sent him to local elementary schools, and then on to Liberia College in Monrovia. Before his inauguration as president in 1920, he had served as attorney general, and as secretary of state. When it came to public speechmaking and international diplomacy, King displayed a style smooth and polished; his gift for progressive rhetoric helped to placate competing interest groups and made him appear as a magnanimous and benevolent leader concerned about the welfare of all in his nation's multicultural society.³³

In private, however, King showed a less congenial side, particularly toward Liberia's tribal citizens. His attitude toward the Kru rebellion of 1915 is especially revealing. Well before 1907, King's first year as attorney general, an Americo-Liberian politician named Samuel A. Ross used the LFF at his command in Sinoe County to exact whatever personal financial gain he could from Kru, Bassa, and Grebo tribesmen. Through exports of young native workers, fines, coercive tax collection, and wholesale pillaging of native people and resources, Ross inflamed the tempers of local tribes. The hanging of a Kru chief along with five other natives in 1911 on Ross' orders set the stage for further trouble. In 1915, the Kru, who never accepted the legitimacy of the Americo-Liberian government, declared their independence and staged a revolt that spread among towns on the coasts of Grand Bassa and Sinoe counties. On the promise of reform in its native

³³ On Charles D. B. King see, for instance, Richardson, *Liberia's Past and Present*, 133-38; Dunn, Beyan, and Burrowes, *Historical Dictionary of Liberia*, 189-90.

policy, Colonel Charles Young, the African American officer in charge of the LFF, granted Liberia's request for military assistance from the United States. The appearance of the warship *U. S. S. Chester* quickly ended Kru resistance. But instead of reform, reprisals included the hanging of forty-two chiefs and the killing of a number of prisoners. When natives appealed for mercy, Charles King, as secretary of state, suggested to Liberian president Daniel E. Howard that harsh crimes deserved harsh punishment. The Liberian government then outlawed the owning of firearms by the Kru and the rest of the native tribes, and declared it illegal for anyone to travel upcountry without a permit, making future exploitation and retribution all the easier.³⁴

As President of the Republic of Liberia, Charles King in 1921 initiated direct rule of the hinterland after earlier promises of tolerance and justice for natives. King divided the coastal strip into six counties and the hinterland into five districts. New regulations called for fair treatment of natives and imposed fines and other forms of punishment designed to end corruption by government officials. Tours of the hinterland by President King allowed native chiefs to air their complaints against district commissioners. But until the replacement of American officials who departed after the Sandemann affair, natives actually lost the type of protection provided by colonial rule in neighboring Sierra Leone and Ivory Coast. Indeed, President King's reforms brought new responsibilities to district commissioners, which included the procurement of native laborers from village chiefs for public works projects, most notably the construction of new roads and buildings. Compulsory labor recruitment for government service, perfectly legal under

³⁴ Sundiata, *Black Scandal*, 18-19; Gershoni, *Black Colonialism*, 49; Buell, *Native Problem in Africa*, II, 740-43.

Liberian law, required tribal citizens to be away from their villages for a few months each year. District commissioners, however, still largely unsupervised by Monrovia despite the new regulations, subjected natives to much longer periods of service and required them to supply their own tools and food. Native chiefs who failed to turn over enough workers could expect fines, beatings, and other forms of intimidation. Workers unable to keep up a steady pace because of crude homemade tools or illness received similar punishment. Also, in addition to the onerous hut tax, natives were forced to pay an education tax for new schools, whether the buildings were ever brought into service or not. For natives, brutality in tax collection, arbitrary fines, and imprisonment without due process, came as the cost of reform in Liberia in the 1920s.³⁵

Maryland County, where Firestone began development of its Cavalla plantation in 1924, evolved into one of the most troublesome political units in Liberia under President King. The superintendent of Maryland County, Allen N. Yancy, had received his appointed position through his friendship with Edwin Barclay, a shrewd politician and nephew of former president Arthur Barclay. Actively involved in the labor export business, Yancy shared his profits from head monies with other Americo-Liberian officials. His tyranny in imposing fines and extorting money, food, and labor from natives ranked second to none in the black republic. Nor was Yancy above committing murder when it served his purposes.

In 1923, Yancy used the hostility that had been brewing for years between two local tribes to coerce more native laborers into shipping out to Fernando Po, a series of events

³⁵ Gershoni, *Black Colonialism*, 56-63. For a more sanguine representation of Charles King and his reform measures see, for instance, Wilson, *Liberia: Black Africa in Microcosm*, 113-14. Also, Raymond Leslie Buell claimed that “[w]hen a Liberian District Commissioner is conscientious—and this is often the case—he seems to be able to get closer to his subject than does a European Commissioner, because of the element of race.” Buell, *Native Problem in Africa*, II, 724, 743-49 (quotation on p. 746).

that had long-term repercussions. During the previous fifteen years, the use of a contested jungle pathway that led to and from the coast resulted in the murder of seven Grebos by the Krus of Po River. Tuweley Jeh, a Grebo paramount chief, brought the issue of the killings to Superintendent Yancy, who told him to stop complaining and take action. When the Grebos struck back and killed three Po River people, Yancy extorted £160 from Jeh for legal services before declaring that the chief had won his case. After a delegation of Po River people complained to President King, Jeh was summoned to Monrovia, where he was fined £300, imprisoned, and forced to turn over those who had committed the murders. Yancy offered to intervene on the condition that Jeh would provide 500 workers for shipment to Fernando Po. Local chiefs rejected Yancy's proposal, but after the burning of two villages and threats of more fines, they eventually complied. Finally allowed to return home, Jeh discovered that Yancy had issued a call for more laborers. When Jeh refused Yancy's request, he was taken prisoner and workers were rounded up by LFF troops, who then sacked the town of Julucan. The LFF marched village elders from Julucan to Yancy's farm, and forced them to labor there pending the delivery of the full complement of workers. In 1927, King made Yancy his vice-president.³⁶

As President King and the Liberian legislature sparred with Firestone over the loan agreements in May 1926, an assistant professor from Harvard University's Department of Government arrived in Monrovia for a brief stay that, at least on the surface, appeared innocent enough. In fact, Raymond Leslie Buell's visit to Liberia's capital laid the

³⁶ The specific incident that sparked the killings involved a dispute over a fish. Nimley, *The Liberian Bureaucracy*, 199-200; International Commission of Inquiry, *Report of the International Commission of Inquiry into the Existence of Slavery and Forced Labor in the Republic of Liberia* (Washington, D. C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1931), 30-37; Sundiata, *Black Scandal*, 19-22; Johnson, *Bitter Canaan*, 5-9.

groundwork—quite accidentally—for the 1930 League of Nations inquiry into forced labor and slavery and the end of the King administration. Sponsored by Harvard’s Bureau of International Research, Buell, a native Californian barely thirty-years-old, spent the better part of a year making research sojourns to a number of countries for a “report on the condition of the African.” Looking for “some good dope” on the Firestone loan agreements and involvement of the U. S. State Department, Buell discovered in Liberia what he believed to be the international crime of the century.³⁷

Upon his arrival in Monrovia, Buell received a “surly” reception by Americo-Liberian officials. A meeting with President King smoothed matters over, however, and freed Buell to go “nosing about” for the next few weeks and “break into the Firestone secrets.” After learning “all the details” of the Firestone negotiations, Buell became “disgusted with American policy” in Liberia. He suggested in letters home that the United States and Firestone had “forced the plantation system on Liberia when the other governments in Africa are trying to keep it out of their colonies because it invariably leads to wholesale forced labor and to the uprooting of native life.” Moreover, the U. S. had “virtually forced” the five million dollar loan on Liberia, which “nobody here wants” and agreed to only because American investment would bring American protection. Buell declared that Firestone “could get his concession in no other territory in Africa,” as if the Akron tire magnate had gone shopping around the continent for a deal, and that he did not believe that “economic imperialism was as bad with us until I came here.” Buell then

³⁷ Raymond L. Buell to James L. Sibley, May 27, 1926 (first quotation), Travel File: Africa, Box 49, Raymond Leslie Buell Papers (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.). Hereafter cited as RLBP. William R. Castle to George Grafton Wilson, July 19, 1928 (second quotation), Box 10, William R. Castle Papers (Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, Iowa). Hereafter cited as HHPL.

promised to “raise the deuce with our State Department and bankers” upon his return to the United States.³⁸

Having already made up his mind about the situation in Liberia without spending even a moment upcountry, Buell nevertheless went on to express strong opinions on government and education in the black republic. While hardly anti-colonial in his perspective, the young Harvard professor sympathized “with the ideal of Negro independence in at least one part of the world.” Judged against American standards, he admitted that “things are of course bad,” especially Liberian schools, but that the “average intelligence and savoir faire” of government officials ranked above other colonies that he had visited. The Liberians, according to Buell, “had succeeded in assimilating aborigines to a much greater extent than the Creoles of Sierra Leone.” Although Buell found no evidence of a single saw mill or laboratory in Liberia, he believed that with the proper educational system “these people would eventually be able to run their own show.” Because the government would “never be able to put in the right type of educational system,” and because the Protestant missionaries lacked funds and were “too divided, too weak and too unpopular,” Buell suggested that it was up to the United States to help advance Liberian education, “not by forcing money in the form of loans and industrial oppression,” but by “developing some real intellectual and moral standards.”³⁹

³⁸ Raymond L. Buell to A. N. Holcombe, May 22, 1926 (first, third, sixth, ninth and eleventh quotations), C. B. King to Heads of Department of Government, Monrovia, May 13, 1926, Buell to Arthur Woods, May 22, 1926 (second, seventh and eighth quotations), Buell to Folks, May 22, 1926 (fourth, fifth, and tenth quotations), all in Travel File: Africa, Box 49, RLBP.

³⁹ Raymond L. Buell to A. N. Holcombe, May 27, 1926 (first quotation), Buell to James L. Sibley, May 27, 1926 (second, third and fourth quotations), Buell to Arthur Woods, May 22, 1926 (fifth through ninth quotations), all in Travel File: Africa, Box 49, RLBP.

Buell's main point of contention over Firestone's labor agreements with the Liberian government centered on the company's wildly exaggerated 1924 estimate of the need for three hundred thousand workers once the entire development of one million acres came under development. In reality, the Firestone Plantations Company never employed more than twenty thousand workers at any one time before 1930. Another problem for Buell rested with Liberia's creation of a Labor Bureau, which operated under the Department of the Interior. The Labor Bureau had, in fact, been created in 1912 but did not become active until 1926, when the government attempted to stem the tide of workers to the Firestone plantations. The enabling legislation for establishing the bureau required the witnessing of contracts and strict record keeping of transactions, wages, and labor conditions. Labor agents, appointed by the President, would collect fees from employers for each laborer supplied. Employers also had to pay fees to native chiefs and headmen. Upon recognizing the act's endless possibilities for abuse, legislators added a section that made it clear that compulsion could not be used to secure workers.⁴⁰

From the beginning Firestone claimed that its success in Liberia would depend on "a permanent and contented labor force." In 1926, however, the Liberian government, needing native labor for roadwork and portage, imposed new regulations for the recruitment of workers, and forced a concession from Firestone. Through the Labor Bureau, Liberia would supply two thousand workers from each of its five counties in return for payment from Firestone of one cent to the government, one half cent to chiefs, and one half cent to paramount chiefs for each day of work performed under the

⁴⁰ Buell, *Native Problem in Africa*, II, 834-36; International Commission of Inquiry, *Report of the International Commission of Inquiry*, 123-24; Sawyer, *Emergence of Autocracy in Liberia*, 249.

arrangement. But before long Firestone added its own amendment to the agreement that allowed it to recruit and employ any workers who presented themselves without first receiving permission or registering with the government. Also, Firestone demanded that its labor force be free to bargain for terms and conditions of employment, and that workers be allowed to sever their relationship with the company whenever they chose.⁴¹

During land clearance and start up operations in 1926, Firestone hired about ten percent of its work force through government recruiters. When the Liberians made it a practice of confiscating at least fifty percent of native wages, many workers became angry with the company and began associating it with corruption. Before long, the government shifted control of labor recruitment from the Labor Bureau to the district commissioners, who demanded a fee of one half cent per day for each worker supplied to Firestone. Confusion and misunderstanding followed to the point that Firestone abandoned the arrangement after about four months. In Buell's mind, Firestone, not the Liberian Government, became the culprit in the forced labor controversy.⁴²

Several months after Buell vacated Africa for the comforts of Europe, Liberia became a signatory to the International Slavery Convention held in Geneva, Switzerland, in September 1926. In its desire to put an end to the traffic in African slaves and build on an earlier report that it had commissioned in 1924, the League of Nations extended its purview "to prevent forced labour from developing into conditions analogous to

⁴¹ Arthur J. Knoll, "Firestone's Labor Policy, 1924-1939," *Liberian Studies Journal*, XVI, 2 (1991), 50, 53, 55, 67; International Commission of Inquiry, Report of the International Commission of Inquiry, 123-24 (quotation on p. 124). See also Edwin Barclay to the Secretary of State, "Handling of Native Labor by the Firestone Plantations Company," May 18, 1926, 882.5048/7, RG-59, NA.

⁴² Knoll, "Firestone's Labor Policy," 54-55; International Commission of Inquiry, Report of the International Commission of Inquiry, 124.

slavery.”⁴³ Little did leaders in Liberia know at the time that their official support of the convention’s aims, even without ratification, would come back to haunt them. For while Americo-Liberians paid only lip service to the convention’s articles, an African American who had lived in the black republic for many years, Thomas J. R. Faulkner, considered far more seriously the corrosive effects of forced labor and slavery.

In April 1927, Charles King ran for an unprecedented third presidential term as the True Whig Party candidate. The main political opposition to King came from Faulkner, who revived the long moribund People’s Party and ran on a platform that stood in contrast to virtually every entrenched ideal of the True Whigs. A native of North Carolina and an engineer by profession, Faulkner had moved to Baltimore and married a woman from that city before immigrating to Liberia in the 1880s. Once established in the black republic he became an entrepreneur with many diverse interests and ambitious plans that threatened the Americo-Liberian status quo. Faulkner ran a hotel, installed a telephone system, and opened an ice plant before turning to politics during World War I, when he was appointed mayor of Monrovia. When he tried to bring electricity to

⁴³ In Article 1 of the Slavery Convention, the League agreed on the following definitions: “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 slaves.” Articles of the 1926 Slavery Convention reprinted in Buell, *Native Problem in Africa*, II, 954-57 (quotations on p. 545). The Slavery Convention went into force March 9, 1927. Only eight nations—Australia, British Empire, Bulgaria, Denmark, India, Latvia, New Zealand, and the Union of South Africa—had ratified the convention’s articles by July 1927. Denys P. Myers, *Handbook of the League of Nations: A Comprehensive Account of its Structure, Operation and Activities* (Boston and New York: World Peace Foundation, 1935), 119-21; “League of Nations Slavery Convention: List of Signatures and Ratifications up to July 22nd, 1927,” in Travel File: Miscellany, Box 49, RLBP. By the latter years of the Coolidge Administration, the League of Nations had gained enough respectability in addressing international disputes to lessen many American fears about its aims. While not a League member, the United States still often participated, both officially and unofficially, in League activities. Also, many private American organizations took part in League functions. Margot Louria, *Triumph and Downfall: America’s Pursuit of Peace and Prosperity, 1921-1933* (Westport, Conn. and London: Greenwood Press, 2001), 101-3.

Monrovia, he claimed: “I appealed to the commonwealth for permission, and they sent me to the secretary of state. When I appealed to him, he sent me to His Excellency the President, who directed me to the legislature, which began the same circle again.” Tall, muscular, fearless, and honest beyond reproach, Faulkner was described as not only “the most useful man in the country” but also “[t]he most hated and one of the most lonely men in the republic”⁴⁴

Opposition to the True Whig Party, as Faulkner well understood, carried inherent reprisals and guaranteed failure at the polls. Without any chance of success, Faulkner placed his own safety in jeopardy and campaigned as the People’s Party candidate. If elected, he promised to limit presidential appointive powers and provide for native representation and education, measures entirely unacceptable to the True Whigs. Charles King, an expert in political rhetoric, countered with his own pledges of equality in education, cooperation with natives, and noninterference in tribal government. With perhaps six thousand registered voters in Liberia, election returns shocked even the most jaded political observers. Faulkner received 7,000 votes to 235,000 for King. In Bassa County, which had no more than 3,000 registered voters, 72,000 ballots were cast for King. Indeed, the 1927 presidential election in Liberia ranked as the most rigged in modern history, a record that stood into the 1980s. During the “hot” campaign underway in April, Raymond Buell fired off a letter to Faulkner and inquired, “Was the election honestly held?”⁴⁵ Faulkner, his sense of protest honed during his youth in the United

⁴⁴ Johnson, *Bitter Canaan*, 161 (second quotation), 162 (first quotation); Buell, *Native Problem in Africa*, II, 711-13.

⁴⁵ Johnson, *Bitter Canaan*, 131, 148-52; *The Guinness Book of World Records* listed the 1927 presidential election in Liberia as the most rigged in modern history until 1981. See Sawyer, *Emergence of Autocracy in Liberia*, n. 12, 369. Thomas Faulkner wrote: “There is not one person in Liberia who does not know that the last election was wholesale fraud. There is no remedy against such wrongs in any country except the courts, unless the people resort to harsh measures and bloodshed; which all thoughtful people are trying to

States, resolved to bring his own case as well as the forced labor issue to an international audience, a mission that eventually led him to Geneva and the League of Nations.

Raymond Buell's own sense of mission and need for affirmation led him to seek out Reed Paige Clark, former American chargé d'affaires in Liberia, and ask that he read and comment on the portions of his new book that dealt with the Firestone agreements.

Clark, newly appointed consul general in Mexico City, congratulated Buell on the work; he was especially pleased with the author's "marked sympathy" toward Liberia, and restraint in "making statements to which the Liberians can take serious exception." On the other hand, Clark noted: "You do not treat Firestone so sympathetically!" Instead of Buell's "rather pitiless" and at times "drastic" criticism, Clark wished that the Harvard professor could have understood Firestone's point of view. He believed that the planting and loan agreements represented "an eminently fair compromise," considering "some of the demands advanced from time to time by *both* sides!"⁴⁶

Clark then proceeded, line by line, to comment on Buell's work dealing with Liberia and the Firestone agreements, a very small part of the massive, two-volume *The Native*

avoid." Thomas J. R. Faulkner, "An Appeal to Reason," Monrovia, December 22, 1927 (quotation), 882.5048/5, RG-59, NA. R. L. Embree to R. L. Buell, April 12, 1927 (first quotation), Raymond L. Buell to T. J. R. Faulkner, April 11, 1927 (second quotation), both in Travel File: Africa, Box 49, RLBP.

⁴⁶ Raymond L. Buell to Reed Paige Clark, May 21, 1927, Buell to Clark, June 16, 1927, Clark to Buell, June 27, 1927 (quotations), all in Travel File: Africa, Box 49, BLBP. In 1915, Clark was serving as the first general receiver of customs in Liberia. During the 1915 Kru rebellion, President Daniel Howard appointed Clark and three Liberians to sail to the Kru Coast and investigate the uprising. Clark and the Liberians ordered the Krus to cease hostilities and surrender their weapons. When the Krus refused and decided instead to fight, the Liberians appealed for military aid from the United States. In 1916 the U. S. sent more than 500 Krag carbines and 250,000 rounds of ammunition to the black republic. The Liberian Frontier Force, under the command of American officers, then nearly "decimated" the Kru population, afterward hanging "some" chiefs and allegedly killing "a number" of prisoners. Because the Americo-Liberians refused to make reforms insisted on by the U. S., and amid mounting tensions, Clark resigned as general receiver of customs. Buell, *Native Problem in Africa*, II, 741-43 (quotations on p. 742). In response to Buell's original version of events, Clark wrote: *Some* chiefs were hanged, I believe—and deservedly—but was the number anything like *forty*? And though this hanging and alleged killing took place after I had left Liberia, I doubt very much if prisoners, other than the chiefs, were executed." Reed Paige Clark, "Comment, June 27, 1927, Chapter 2, page 12, line 7," Travel File: Africa, RLBP.

Problem in Africa, published in April 1928. Without access to the draft sent to Clark, it is impossible to know exactly what Buell originally wrote. But when compared with the published version of the book, Clark's comments provide strong clues. For instance, Buell apparently claimed that the U. S. State Department sent Clark on official business to Akron to meet with Harvey Firestone. Clark's response to the charge is significant. "I was emphatically *not* assigned to go to Akron," Clark wrote. "I did so voluntarily as any man in his senses would have done in the circumstances. It was as important for me to know Mr. Firestone and his attitude . . . as it was to know the Liberian Government. If I served any useful purpose . . . it was because I did understand and appreciate the arguments of *both* sides." In another passage, Buell made a reference to Solomon Porter Hood, the former American minister in Monrovia, that did not sit well with Clark, who urged: "*Please* do not say this about Hood! The statement is true enough but to make it won't help anybody." As to Buell's attack on Firestone for insisting that Liberia not be allowed to refund the loan for a period of twenty years, Clark asked: "*Why* give our friends abroad fuel for criticism? Why not let them find this argument for themselves? He continued, "Isn't Firestone entitled, because of his huge prospective investment, to adequate protection of it?"⁴⁷

Curiously, Clark made no reference to the most controversial and potentially damaging of Buell's charges that appeared later in *The Native Problem in Africa*; namely, that Firestone's demand for 300,000 native workers would, by necessity, result in a need to use forced labor, and that the Liberians accepted the \$5 million loan only

⁴⁷ Clark, "Comment, June 27, Chapter 8, page 8, line 19 (first and second quotations)," "Chapter 8, page 8, lines 14-15 (third quotation)," "Chapter 8, page 16 (most), (fourth and fifth quotations)," Travel File: Africa, Box 49, RLBP.

because the U. S. State Department promised to help deflect French designs on Liberian territory. Considering the scrutiny reflected in Clark's suggested changes, it is likely that Buell simply omitted the material. At about the time that Clark made his comments, a colleague of Buell's at Harvard, George Grafton Wilson, submitted a copy of the same material for circulation at the U. S. State Department. But advance notice of Buell's work caused barely a ripple of controversy among State Department officials, even though they had learned that the author planned to disclose that "Firestone owns the Finance Corporation of America." In fact, in November 1927, the State Department decided to withhold criticism of Buell's book "so as not to lead to its further sale."⁴⁸ Much like Firestone at the Lotus Club meeting, Buell apparently appreciated the effectiveness of withholding important information for a more appropriate time in the future.

In the months leading up to Buell's bombshell, the State Department began receiving new reports of recent problems with forced labor in Liberia. From the American Legation in Monrovia in January 1928, American minister William T. Francis cabled William R. Castle, now the undersecretary of state, about an incident of forced labor "which may cause considerable trouble for Liberia and incidentally embarrass the Firestone interests." The incident involved the former Postmaster General Reginald Sherman, who stumbled upon and then heard protests from a group of about three hundred natives in Sinoe Country being held in a barracoon for shipment to Fernando Po on orders from Samuel Ross. Sherman contacted Monrovia but Secretary of State Edwin

⁴⁸ Sundiata, *Black Scandal*, 44, n. 55, 177; Harvey Firestone, Jr., to William D. Hines, November 14, 1927 (quotations), W. D. Overman Files on Liberia, Firestone Archives, Set 1, Holsoe Collection (Archives of Traditional Music, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana).

Barclay “blocked” instructions to release natives who had not volunteered for the trip. The British chargé d’affaires then heard the news and informed the British Foreign Office. Also, Firestone had been barred from labor recruiting in the district behind Sinoe. Francis reminded Castle that in 1924, before the formation of the League of Nations’ Temporary Slavery Commission, the British had raised the issue of forced labor in Liberia, a charge that the Americo-Liberians responded to with an order prohibiting the shipment of workers from Grand Bassa County for a period of six months. But “now that Firestone is in,” Francis wrote, “I should hate to see the question reopened.”⁴⁹

Alarmed by the news from Monrovia, Castle wrote to Francis a few weeks later and suggested that the attitude toward the natives “of the thousand or so people who really control Liberia . . . might lead to a very unpleasant investigation on the part of the League of Nations or some other inquisitorial body.” Although a report by the League would “have no binding control,” it would have the potential to “seriously injure Liberia in the eyes of the world and would make it much more difficult for the United States to be of assistance to the Liberian Government.” Castle then singled out the need for reform in the Frontier Force and cited Harvey Firestone, Jr., in Liberia at the time, as “the best type of young American man” to make the Liberians realize, if anything could, that “the Firestone interests must be the salvation of their country.” Liberia also needed to understand, according to Castle, that renewed British interests in developing crude rubber

⁴⁹ William T. Francis to William R. Castle, January 16, 1928 (quotations), 882.5048/1, RG-59, NA. William T. Francis, an African American lawyer and strong Republican supporter from Minnesota, worked in the legal department of a railway company before entering private practice. He succeeded Solomon Porter Hood in Liberia. James A. Padgett, “Ministers in Liberia and Their Diplomacy,” *Journal of Negro History*, 22, 1 (January 1937), 88. William R. Castle, formerly in the State Department’s Division of Western European Affairs, gained considerable influence in the 1920s as Frank B. Kellogg’s undersecretary of state. Castle grew up in Hawaii, where his pioneering missionary family became highly prominent in local affairs. See L. Ethan Ellis, “Frank B. Kellogg, 1925-1929,” and Richard N. Current, “Henry L. Stimson, 1929-1933,” in Norman Graebner, ed., *An Uncertain Tradition: The American Secretaries of State in the Twentieth Century* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1961), 155 (Ellis), 171 (Current).

plantations in Africa posed a serious threat to the nation's labor supply which, if "greatly divided," might result in "the possible withdrawal of Mr. Firestone." Castle believed that "European interests which are exhibiting such a desire of wanting to go into Liberia" were doing so mainly to "interfere with the Firestone Plantations" and "prevent the development of rubber to an extent which would interfere with their monopoly." If the British or French drove Firestone out of the black republic, Castle theorized that he could see no other solution "than the loss to Liberia in no very distant future of their independence."⁵⁰

The publication in April 1928 of Buell's *The Native Problem in Africa* and its indictment of American policies in Liberia, while not coming as a complete surprise to William Castle, nevertheless increased his concerns about the international image of Firestone and the U. S. State Department. Castle had good reason to be uneasy, considering the range of Buell's contacts. By mobilizing influential friends in the League of Nations, the World Peace Foundation, the People's Reconstruction League, and a host of other groups that shared his sentiments, Buell could generate a powerful swell of anti-American opinion with the forced labor issue. Even more troubling were Buell's public broadsides. Castle's personal dislike of Buell, who had resigned from Harvard earlier in 1928 to become research director of the Foreign Policy Association, grew in intensity in the months that followed.⁵¹ After Buell repeated his charges against the American loan

⁵⁰ William R. Castle to William T. Francis, February 24, 1928, Box 10, Castle Papers, HHPL.

⁵¹ Raymond Buell was deeply involved in a number of peace organizations in the 1920s. In 1923, Buell wrote to Manley Ottmer Hudson, a Harvard law professor and member of the America Committee in Geneva of the League of Nations Association, and asked about "the possibilities of getting taken on the League Secretariat" for the summer of 1924. Although he preferred "the mandate section," he would "jump at the chance on anything, from office-boy to stenographer." Hudson, however, could not find a position for Buell with the League. Raymond L. Buell to Manley Ottmer Hudson, July 9, 1923 (quotations), and Hudson to Buell, July 24, 1923, Correspondence, Manley Ottmer Hudson Papers (Harvard Law School Library, Cambridge, Massachusetts).

and Firestone's alleged systematic use of forced labor in a May 1928 article in *The Nation*, Castle wired Francis in Monrovia and outlined a plan of action.

In light of Buell's "critical attitude," Castle suggested to Francis that "an attempt may be made to shoulder Firestone and even the Department" with the "undesirable conditions" that existed in Liberia. The undersecretary of state had received assurances that Firestone "sincerely desires to treat the laborers properly" but that "the methods of the Liberian Labor Bureau . . . have a tendency to result in conditions analogous to those of forced labor and are likely at some time to draw the well-merited censure of civilized opinion." When that day came, Castle believed it imperative that the State Department and its legation in Monrovia should "be in a position to show beyond question" that "American influence has been exerted so far as has proved possible against such conditions." Castle then instructed Francis as a first step to write a detailed memorandum on the situation in Liberia. For assistance, Castle directed the American minister to the articles of the 1926 Slavery Convention, and reminded him that Liberia had signed but not yet ratified them. Because the State Department had recommended to Congress that the United States accede to the articles, Francis should also report on Liberia's attitude toward ratification. Castle repeated his belief that Firestone made it a point "in his treatment of labor to avoid any charge of peonage or forced labor," but if Francis learned of any inappropriate behavior on the part of the company, he should report it forthwith.⁵²

⁵² Raymond Leslie Buell, "Mr. Firestone's Liberia," *The Nation*, 126, 3278 (May 1928), 521-24. William R. Castle to William T. Francis, June 21, 1928 (quotations), 882.5048/1 RG-59, NA. The State Department recommended to President Coolidge on May 22, 1928 that the articles of the Slavery Convention be submitted to the Senate. Coolidge submitted the articles on the same day and the Foreign Relations Committee took them under review. Interdepartmental Memorandum to Henry Carter, June 15, 1928, 882.5048/2, RG-59, NA. The U. S. Senate ratified the Slavery Convention's articles on February 25, 1929, with the following reservation: "That the Government of the United States, adhering to its policy of opposition to forced or compulsory labor except as a punishment for a crime, of which the person concerned has been duly convicted, adheres to the convention except as to the first subdivision of the

When Castle learned that Buell planned in August to chair a conference on Africa at the Williams Institute of Politics in Williamstown, Massachusetts, he not only continued to make arrangements to defend the State Department's stance on Firestone and Liberia but also took measures to discredit the former professor. In July, Castle thanked the American Consul in South Africa, Charles E. Macy, for information that cast a shadow on Buell's character and integrity. Macy, in Castle's opinion an "accurate, thoroughly conscientious and reliable man, not . . . given to exaggeration," relayed a story about Buell's short stay in Dakar, Senegal, where after only a few days he managed to depart with a good deal of confidential information obtained while alone in the governor general's office.⁵³

Although Macy's news confirmed Castle's negative opinion of Buell, the undersecretary of state could hardly believe that the former scholar "would show so little sense of honor as to look at the confidential papers of another man." Even if Buell had an excellent reputation as a "historian and an economist," Castle noted that "it was a great relief" to Harvard when he resigned. *The Native Problem in Africa*, in Castle's estimation, was "a great disappointment" and "little more than a propaganda document . . . full of misleading statements." With Buell on board, the Foreign Policy Association would become, as Castle surmised, "more anti-the-American-Government than ever before." Because of his "curiously twisted mentality," Buell's only "ray of hope" rested with the fact that he had recently married George Grafton Wilson's secretary, "a young

second paragraph of Article V, which reads as follows: (I) Subject to the transitional provisions laid down in paragraph (2) below compulsory or forced labor may only be exacted for public purposes." *Monthly Summary of the League of Nations*, Vol. IX, 3 (March 15, 1929).

⁵³ William R. Castle to Charles E. Macy, July 19, 1928 (quotations), Box 10, Castle Papers, HHPL. Bernard Baruch, former head of the War Industries Board during World War I, funded the summer workshops and seminars at Williamstown. Louria, *Triumph and Downfall*, 102.

woman of very unusual intelligence,” and a “much stronger character than Buell himself” who “will eventually tone down his radical opinions.”⁵⁴

Castle then wrote to Wilson and repeated the story of their “friend” Buell’s “startling” use of private documents. If the story held true, Castle felt that Buell “is certainly not a man we should want to have in Harvard College if the question ever arose of his return.” He wondered if “it might not be wise to send a circular instruction to our people, warning them that Buell should not be introduced enthusiastically on any further trips he may make”⁵⁵ Through back channels, Castle also contacted Thomas Jesse Jones, the director of the Phelps-Stokes Fund and chairman of the Advisory Committee of Education in Liberia, and enlisted his help in launching a preemptive strike against Buell at the upcoming Williamstown conference. Finally, working with the knowledge that Firestone’s William D. Hines had already discussed the matter in Liberia, Castle advised that President King prepare a press release refuting Buell’s allegations, and send it directly to the Associated Press. Castle, at this time acting secretary of state in the absence of Frank B. Kellogg, informed the American legation in Monrovia that a strong denial by King would generate “wide and favorable publicity in the American press,” especially if received “while Buell’s charges are still fresh and before there has been time for editorial comment.”⁵⁶

In late August 1928 amid a “background of anti-imperialistic arguments,” and to the “surprise” of Raymond Buell, Thomas Jesse Jones spoke on the second day of the Williamstown conference and assured those in attendance that they should have

⁵⁴ Castle to Macy, July 19, 1928 (quotations), HHPL.

⁵⁵ William R. Castle to George Grafton Wilson, July 19, 1928 (quotations), Box 10, Castle Papers, HHPL.

⁵⁶ William R. Castle to American Legation, Monrovia, Liberia, August 18, 1928 (quotations), 882.5048/4a, RG-59, NA. Harvey Firestone, Jr., also served on the board of the Advisory Committee of Education in Liberia. Sundiata, *Black Scandal*, 42-46, 87.

“practically no cause for apprehension” about native exploitation in Liberia. Jones praised Firestone’s enlightened policies “free from the old abuses of forced labor,” and cited the eminent fairness of the loan agreements. He noted Firestone’s progress in the previous two years in Liberia which included, among many other improvements, the introduction of health services, new roads and transportation facilities, the founding of an industrial school, and a hydroelectric power plant. Jones thanked the U. S. State Department for its “wisdom and patience, not only during the Firestone negotiations but also through all the years of Liberian history.” Without the “genuine interest” of the State Department, Jones claimed, “Liberia would long ago have succumbed to the inroads of its powerful neighbors and to the persistent weaknesses within.” The *New York Times* noted that Jones “was able to put in the defense ahead of the attack” of Buell, who “expected to lead off the discussion tomorrow with a criticism of both the Firestones and the American Government.”⁵⁷

As advertised, on the day following Jones’s presentation, Buell unleashed his assault. He “severely criticized” Herbert Hoover, then the Republican presidential nominee, and the State Department, for encouraging Firestone’s venture in Liberia, a move that had caused the United States to engage in “economic imperialism” for the first time in territory that fell outside of the Monroe Doctrine. Firestone, according to Buell, paid native chiefs to recruit workers for the company, a situation that he described as “virtually slave labor.” Because of the Firestone agreements, the State Department, unless it departed “radically” from its policy in Latin America and China, appeared ready

⁵⁷ Thomas Jesse Jones quoted in “Defends Firestone on Liberia Project,” *New York Times*, August 29, 1928, p. 12, c. 1-4.

to “defend American capital in and American control over Liberia against impairment from within or without.” Buell charged that the secret agreements might in time “make Liberia another Haiti or Nicaragua.” In the entire history of international relations, he found it difficult to find “a better example of secret diplomacy, in the worst sense of the word.” He then urged the replacement of the Firestone agreements with a new international loan sponsored by the League of Nations, one similar to those extended to European nations after World War I.⁵⁸

In the days after Buell’s speech, Castle, Firestone, and President King fired back with press releases of their own.⁵⁹ A full month after blindsiding Buell at Williamstown, and while he waited for the confidential memorandum from Francis in Monrovia, Castle still felt it necessary to condemn the research director of the Foreign Policy Association. In response to a request by Christian A. Herter, editor of the Boston *Independent*, for “any lowdown” on Buell, Castle claimed that after the State Department “very freely” showed him documents relating to Liberia, his use of them proved “thoroughly unfair, since he quoted only such bits as seemed to fit in with his preconceived theory” and that “by inference suggested there was a lot more which would have been really dishonest.” Castle then repeated the Dakar story, a “sort of thing . . . so utterly dishonest and tactless that I cannot feel Buell is a man to tie up to.” With the presidential campaign underway, Castle promised Herter that he would be glad to speak in Boston on behalf of Herbert

⁵⁸ Raymond L. Buell quoted in “Sees Imperialism in Firestone Deal,” *New York Times*, August 30, 1928, p. 12, c. 1-2.

⁵⁹ For Castle’s comments, see “Denies Hoover Part in Liberia Loan,” *New York Times*, August 31, 1928, p. 5, c. 2; For King’s statement’s, see “Liberia President Says Buell Erred,” *New York Times*, September 1, 1928, p. 2, c. 6; For Firestone, see “Firestone Declares Door Open in Liberia,” *New York Times*, September 2, 1928, p. 5, c. 4. See also “Memorandum of the Press Conference, Thursday Morning, August 30, 1928, 882.5048/11, RG-59, NA.

Hoover, and that it might be worthwhile to educate some of the “high brows” there “who had strange ideas about American foreign policy.”⁶⁰

In March 1929, after his inauguration as president, Herbert Hoover named Henry Stimson, a man who had no such “strange” ideas about American foreign policy, as the new secretary of state. As abrupt and decisive as Harvey Firestone, although far more sophisticated, Stimson brought a wealth of experience to his new post. He served as secretary of war from 1911 to 1913, commanded a field artillery unit as a colonel in World War I, and in 1927 acted as a mediator in Nicaragua before accepting the appointment of governor-general of the Philippines. A native of New York City and graduate of Yale and Harvard, he left a thriving law practice to return to government. With William Castle as assistant secretary of state, Stimson inherited a strong degree of continuity vis-à-vis Liberia; indeed, everything in the State Department pipeline to the black republic had originated at Castle’s desk.⁶¹

Unlike Herbert Hoover, who wanted to minimize American political and military entanglements around the globe and rely instead on an economic approach, the activist Stimson took a more positive view of using all the means at his disposal for furthering American interests abroad. He favored a strong American presence in the Caribbean and Latin America, whereas Hoover wanted to end the American occupations of Nicaragua and Haiti. Faced with problems in political hotspots like Mexico and the Philippines, and

⁶⁰ William R. Castle to Christian A. Herter, September 28, 1928 (quotations), Castle Papers, HHPL.

⁶¹ Stimson was not Hoover’s first choice for secretary of state. Charles Evans Hughes, Harlan Fiske Stone, and Hugh Gibson turned down the job offer before Stimson accepted. See David Burner, *Herbert Hoover: A Public Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 209; and Elting E. Morison, *Turmoil and Tradition: A Study of the Life and Times of Henry L. Stimson* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 302. As his undersecretary, Stimson chose Joseph P. Cotton, a man whom he both liked and trusted. When Cotton died in 1931, Hoover urged Stimson to appoint Castle as undersecretary. Stimson regretted the decision, as Castle, who was close to Hoover, undercut him on several occasions during the Manchurian crisis of 1931–32. Henry L. Stimson and McGeorge Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1947), 192.

anxious about the militaristic rumblings in Japan, Hoover and Stimson sometimes clashed over policy; within a few years their views evolved in fundamentally opposite directions, particularly in regard to neutrality and American non-membership in the League of Nations. Both men, however, favored a firm approach toward Great Britain, whether in the area of debt repayment or in regard to British holdings abroad that impinged on American interests. In the case of Liberia, Hoover and Stimson acted in complete accord.⁶²

On March 22, 1929, four months before dying from yellow fever in Monrovia, American minister Francis submitted his long-awaited confidential memorandum on slavery and forced labor in the black republic. Francis claimed that he had no desire to injure the government but rather “a hope that some method or means may be found . . . to save the country from itself.” He had no doubt that “the policy pursued by prominent officials of the Government in trafficking in forced labor is destined to bring Liberia grief.” If the forced labor issue received enough publicity, Francis worried that the country might be “crucified on the altar of public opinion.” He wondered why those engaged in the business could not see the “breakers ahead,” unless they had become “money-mad” and “so calloused that they have lost all sense of right and wrong.” Moreover, Francis gave the republic no chance for success “until the United States, or some other Government equally as friendly, picks it up and shakes it into a realization of its stupidity.”⁶³

Over the course of eighty-six pages, Francis built what amounted to an open and shut

⁶² Burner, *Herbert Hoover*, 288-305; Louria, *Triumph and Downfall*, 144-47.

⁶³ William T. Francis to William R. Castle, March 22, 1929, p. 1 (first and second quotations), p. 2 (third through fifth quotations), 882.5048/19, RG-59, NA.

case against Ross, Yancy, and others with connections to Charles King. The memorandum, by the American minister's own account, left no doubt that "the officials of the Liberian Government have knowledge of, are engaged in, and are making large sums of money by the exportation of forced labor which has developed into a condition analogous to slavery." Francis also made "inquiry and investigation" into whether or not the Firestone Plantations Company had "engaged in securing involuntary or forced labor . . . and the information obtained indicates that it has not." Devastating in its range of details, Francis' lengthy reply to Castle's request from the previous summer served as the basis for the State Department's course of action in Liberia throughout the rest of 1929.⁶⁴

Other news in the memorandum added an air of mystery and suspense that made Castle nervous. Francis referred to a shadowy figure known as Dorothy Moll and showed some concern about the "uncertainty" of her purpose in Liberia. Moll had made at least one previous trip on board a Spanish ship with laborers bound for Fernando Po, and left again in the same manner in December 1928. By early March 1929, she had yet to return to Liberia. Some believed Moll worked for the German government or for private German interests, while others regarded her as a "soldier of fortune." No one, with the possible exception of President King, placed any credence in her assertion that she worked for the Associated Press. In Francis' opinion, "Mrs. Moll is a secret agent employed by some individual corporation or government," and at the very least her knowledge of forced labor shipments and "her presence in Fernando Po bodes no good to Liberia and may . . . result in publicity at some future and perhaps not distant date."⁶⁵

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 79 (first quotation), p. 80 (second and third quotations),.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 81 (first quotation), p. 82 (second and third quotations). Moll later published an article in the *African World* on the shipment of laborers from Liberia to Fernando Po. Dispatch from William T. Francis to the U. S. Department of State, June 13, 1929, 882.5048/42.

As Castle digested the news from Liberia a week before Stimson took command of the State Department, Francis busied himself compiling a few more interesting tidbits for his superiors in Washington to contemplate. In April, the American minister in Monrovia claimed in another cable that Yancy had recently jailed ten chiefs who had failed to supply men for Fernando Po, and then ordered the Frontier Force to conduct a raid. Francis noted that the Cape Palmas region, where Firestone's Cavalla plantation was still in the developmental stage, had been "quite thoroughly drained of laborers," a situation that prompted Yancy to attempt to coerce men away from jobs with the rubber company. The district commissioner in Cape Palmas, according to what Francis had learned, received ten shillings for each worker supplied to Yancy. In January and February of 1929, Yancy had sent 574 men to Fernando Po for £9.0.0 each. The report from Cape Palmas that Francis based his information on also indicated "Yancy and Ross pay president of the republic for privilege."⁶⁶

A month later, in May 1929, Assistant Secretary of State Castle received the kind of news that he knew was sure to come in time but that he nevertheless found most disagreeable. Francis sent word to Castle that Thomas Faulkner had recently left on a cargo ship bound for Hamburg, Germany, and that he planned to proceed to Geneva and issue a formal protest to the League of Nations against forced labor in Liberia. Afterward, Faulkner intended to air his complaints on behalf of Liberia's natives during an extended trip to the United States. Although Francis promised "a quiet but careful observance of and a full report . . . on Mr. Faulkner's movements" in Geneva, Castle saw

⁶⁶ William T. Francis to William R. Castle, April 20, 1929 (quotations), 882.5048/20, RG-59, NA.

that the State Department would have to move quickly if it wanted to soften the blow about to fall.⁶⁷ Faulkner, armed with his own knowledge and evidence of forced labor in Liberia, was perhaps the one man that the Department knew that it could not influence; indeed, it made no effort to do so.

Instead, Castle met with the secretary of state and warned him of the impending storm of criticism once the forced labor issue broke in the press. Castle had already drafted an official telegram to Liberia that could be sent whenever Stimson decided to sign his name to it, a response designed to insulate Firestone and the State Department against any charges that might arise.⁶⁸ On June 5, 1929, Francis sent another telegram with information from a Barber steamship line representative who had informed him of the shipment of one hundred native laborers from Monrovia bound for Libreville, Gabon. Profits of the shipment amounted to about \$2000, and because it “may entangle American line in slavery intricacies,” Francis requested “immediate instructions” on how to proceed.⁶⁹ With time running out before Faulkner’s June meeting with League of Nations Secretary-General Sir Eric Drummond in Geneva, Stimson acted almost immediately. He cabled the American legation in Monrovia the evening of June 5th and directed Francis to “formally present the following note to the Liberian Government,”

⁶⁷ William T. Francis to Hugh R. Wilson, American Minister, Berne, Switzerland, May 17, 1929 (quotations), and Francis to William R. Castle, May 17, 1929, 882.5048/36, RG-59, NA. Faulkner wanted to air his complaints as soon as possible after the International Labor Conference at Geneva on May 30, 1929. “International Labor Conference at Geneva, May 30, 1929: American Interest Therein,” Folder 6, Box 89, Charles S. Johnson Papers (microfilm), (Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, Louisiana). Hereafter cited as CSJP.

⁶⁸ Dr. Robert Patton, bishop of the Episcopal Church, had also prepared and sent a report to the State Department about conditions in Liberia. Sundiata, *Black Scandal*, 47. For the draft of Castle’s telegram awaiting Stimson’s signature, see William R. Castle to the Secretary of State, May 29, 1929, 882.5048/24, RG-59, NA.

⁶⁹ William T. Francis to the Secretary of State, June 5, 1929 (quotations), 882.5048/21, RG-59, NA.

four tersely worded pages intended to arouse the attention of even the most complacent officials in the black republic.⁷⁰

Stimson's telegram, delivered on June 8, informed the Liberians that receipt by the U. S. State Department of several reports "bearing reliable evidence of authenticity . . . definitely indicate that existing conditions" in labor shipments to Fernando Po had resulted in "a system which seems hardly distinguishable from organized slave trade and that in the enforcement of this system the services of the Liberian frontier force and the services and influence of certain high government officials are constantly and systematically used." Stimson also pointed to similar objectionable practices used in the country's interior and that it might be impossible "to withhold the governments of the world" from considering some form of "effective affirmative action" if Liberia failed to make necessary reforms. "It would be tragically ironic," Stimson warned, if Liberia succumbed "to practices so closely akin to those which its founders sought forever to escape."⁷¹

Because of the "century-old friendship" between the United States and Liberia, Stimson was certain that the republic would take all appropriate measures to address the problem: namely, "prompt ratification" of the Slavery Convention; "material alteration or radical change" in the agreement with Spain on Fernando Po; a "rigorous investigation of forced labor conditions throughout Liberia"; reorganization of the Frontier Force and the administration of labor in the interior; and "prompt and condign punishment of all persons, regardless of their position," who took part in "the development of forced labor

⁷⁰ Henry L. Stimson to American Legation, Monrovia, Liberia, June 5, 1929, 882.5048/20, RG-59, NA.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2 (first and second quotations), p. 3 (third through sixth quotations).

conditions so closely resembling slavery and so repugnant to the moral sense of mankind.” If the republic took the State Department’s advice it could “vindicate its good name” and “eliminate a condition which if continued threatens grave consequences to Liberia.” William Castle, the linchpin in the entire process, recognized—without irony—that the instructions were “pretty direct interference in the internal affairs of another country.”⁷²

The lightning bolt from Washington stunned President King but had less of an impact on Secretary of State Edwin Barclay, who told Francis after receiving the June 5th note: “This is an old story.”⁷³ In a few days the King administration’s formal reply to Stimson denied any wrongdoing cited in the “evidently exaggerated and uninformed” reports received by the U. S. State Department. Indeed, Liberia welcomed an “on the spot” investigation by “a competent, impartial and unprejudiced commission.” A surprised Francis respectfully urged his superiors to accept Liberia’s offer “without delay,” and to consider the appointment of Emmett J. Scott to serve on the commission.⁷⁴ Why President King so quickly acceded to Stimson’s request for an investigation is not entirely clear. King and his advisers apparently felt that they could delay and disrupt the process long enough to avoid an official inquiry, or at least make arrangements to cover their tracks in a way that would quell any negative findings. Also, King more than likely trusted that his top adviser, a medicine man feared by natives and Americo-Liberians alike for his powerful magic, could cast a spell strong enough to ward off the

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 4 (first through fifth quotations), pp. 4-5 (sixth and seventh quotations). William R. Castle to Henry Carter, June 6, 1929, 882.5048/22, RG-59, NA.

⁷³ The Minister in Liberia (Francis) to the Secretary of State, June 11, 1929 (quotation), *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1929* (3 vols.; Washington, D. C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1943), III, 277. Hereafter cited as *Foreign Relations, 1929*.

⁷⁴ William T. Francis to the Secretary of State, June 13, 1929, p. 4 (first and second quotations), p. 10 (third quotation), 882.5048/34, RG-59, NA. See also Secretary of State Barclay to Minister Francis, June 11, 1929, 882.5048/41, RG-59, NA.

investigation.⁷⁵ In any event, the State Department's maneuverings had hooked King, and neither Stimson nor Castle intended to let him wriggle loose.

On June 20, 1929, Thomas Faulkner issued his protest to the League of Nations Council in Geneva. Faulkner cited Liberia's abusive system of using native labor for government roadwork, and the "more pernicious activity" of forced labor shipments to Fernando Po, a practice that went on with "impunity." Although Yancy and Ross were named as the principal beneficiaries of profits from forced labor, Faulkner also cited Secretary of State Edwin Barclay and Secretary of Public Works John L. Morris as two key government officials who received a cut of the proceeds. Faulkner claimed that his main reason for appealing to the League was his desire to avoid "bloodshed and a lot of poor, innocent people being killed." Because President King believed himself "immune from harm or influence in his demeanor as a self-instituted dictator of the little republic," Faulkner wanted to prevent "what is sure to come if the League of Nations, of which Liberia is a Member, does not in a friendly way interpose and stop this oppression of the native people—that is a bloody fight or a revolution."⁷⁶ While Faulkner viewed the matter from an entirely different angle than officials at the U. S. State Department, his appeal to the League nevertheless sought the same goal in regard to the use of forced labor in Liberia and its export to other parts of Africa.

⁷⁵ As Charles S. Johnson would discover in Liberia, "Dr." Cole served as the "right hand man" of President King. Also, King relied on "Dr." Sidiaball, a Senegalese medicine man "supposed to be able to do anything on earth with his medicine." King attributed his success in seeking a third term to Sidiaball. Charles S. Johnson, "African Diary," 119 (quotation), 147 (quotations), Folder 15, Box 88, CSJP. A confidential report written later by a prominent local Kru in Liberia claimed that Plenyono Gbe Wolo, a friend and associate of King, told the president it would be possible to keep the commission out of Liberia with the use of the "proper medicine men." Also, the report suggested that it was public knowledge in Monrovia that King had resorted to "the highest form of fetish" to ward off the commission. Didwho Twe to Clifton R. Wharton, February 17, 1930 (quotations), Box 7011, 882.5048/270, RG-59, NA.

⁷⁶ Thomas J. R. Faulkner to Sir Eric Drummond, June 20, 1929, p. 2 (first and second quotations), p. 3 (third and fourth quotations), p. 4 (fifth quotation), 882.5048/47, RG-59, NA.

After contacting the American ambassador in Spain and giving him instructions to inform the Spanish government that the United States had no intention of including it in the investigation pending in Liberia, Stimson wired Francis in Monrovia with a message for President King. The Secretary of State thanked the Liberian government for its swift approval of a commission of inquiry, a move that he felt demonstrated the republic's determination to confront the problem of slavery and forced labor and "to do its part in eradicating these evils for all time." To that end, Stimson suggested that the commission "be composed of one Liberian member, one American member and one European member representative of general international interest in this question." As to the Liberian member, Stimson felt it "desirable" that someone without connections to the government be chosen. For its part, the United States would "be disposed to recommend a man of the type of Emmett Scott." Stimson suggested that the League of Nations could assist in finding "a suitable nominee" for the third member of the commission.⁷⁷

A day after informing Stimson that he believed findings by the commission "will be thwarted by any Liberian members," American minister Francis, scheduled to depart Liberia in July, became ill with yellow fever and was replaced by the legation's vice-consul and third secretary Clifton R. Wharton.⁷⁸ On June 28, a little more than a week after Faulkner's proclamations in Geneva, Wharton contacted Stimson with news that Edwin Barclay had received a note from the League of Nations Bureau of Labor but that the Liberian secretary of state "would not comment thereon." Wharton also spoke with

⁷⁷ The Acting Secretary of State to the Ambassador in Spain (Hammond), June 19, 1929, *Foreign Relations, 1929*, III, 282-83; Secretary of State Stimson to the American Legation, Monrovia, Liberia, June 22, 1929, 2 (first and second quotations), 3 (third and fourth quotations), 3-4 (fifth quotation), 882. 5048/33, RG-59.

⁷⁸ The Third Secretary of Legation in Liberia (Wharton) to the Secretary of State, June 28, 1929, *Foreign Relations, 1929*, III, 285 (on Francis' illness); The Minister in Liberia (Francis) to the Secretary of State, June 20, 1929, *Foreign Relations, 1929*, III, 283 (quotation).

President King, who wished to remind the Americans that under the articles of the Slavery Convention “forced labor may be exacted for public purposes.” King told Wharton in private that the State Department’s “original representations were very severe.” After Stimson’s second note outlining commission membership, King was “still considerably worried” but believed that such a course was “absolutely essential.”⁷⁹

In mid-July, a few days before the death of William Francis, Stimson cabled the American legation in Monrovia with the State Department’s views on the scope of the investigation. Stimson thanked Liberian secretary of state Barclay for the nature of his government’s response to previous suggestions, and noted that the appointment of an international commission of inquiry “will have an effect upon the opinion of the world that cannot but redound to the prestige of the Liberian nation.” In view of the “sweeping nature” of the allegations and the “wide credence” that they had gained, however, Stimson thought it necessary that the terms of reference should include the matter of shipments to Fernando Po, the Congo, and elsewhere, as well as the use of forced labor within Liberia. The personnel of the commission, rather than the “technical” terms of reference, stood out as the more important factor for Stimson. In that regard, the commissioners should have the “broadest possible powers.” Stimson then advised that the Liberian Government make a public announcement “that it has been disturbed by reports regarding labor conditions” within its boundaries, and that it would appoint a commission of inquiry as a way of preventing “such misconceptions from gaining further headway.” Upon receiving a reply from the King administration, Stimson instructed the

⁷⁹ Clifton R. Wharton to the Secretary of State, June 28, 1929 (quotations), 882.5048/39, RG-59, NA.

legation to inform the Liberians that the U. S. State Department planned to ask Emmett J. Scott to serve on the commission.⁸⁰

Over the course of the next few weeks, Stimson was jolted both by the death of William Francis and by a featured report in the Baltimore *Afro-American* of Faulkner's charges that President King and other high government officials in Liberia profited from forced labor. As the State Department and the Liberians negotiated the commission's terms of reference—Monrovia originally wanted Firestone included in the investigation—Wharton cabled Stimson with news that King's Cabinet felt that the president had acted unwisely and was "now seeking the best way out." From what Wharton had gathered, he posited that the "government will try hard to maintain a position of complete ignorance of any slave trade by its citizens and subjects that may later on be found by the Commission." In the meantime, Samuel Ross had left for Germany, and Allen Yancy had been in Monrovia making "efforts to cover up tracks."⁸¹

As discussions dragged on and forced labor shipments continued to flow out of Liberia, the U. S. State Department kept Harvey Firestone informed of developments. At the end of a cable to Wharton with proposed changes to the terms of reference, Acting Secretary of State Joseph P. Cotton noted in strict confidence that "[t]his telegram has been seen by Firestone." In his correspondence with the State Department, Firestone agreed that the future of the black republic depended on its acceptance of the terms as

⁸⁰ Henry L. Stimson to the American Legation, Monrovia, Liberia, July 12, 1929 (quotations), 882.5048/39, RG-59, NA.

⁸¹ The Baltimore *Afro-American* carried Faulkner's story on the front page, and featured a large photograph of President King. Baltimore *Afro-American*, July 20, 1929. Henry L. Stimson to the American Legation, Monrovia, Liberia, July 23, 1929, 882.5048/39, RG-59, NA; Clifton R. Wharton to the Secretary of State, July 26, 1929 (quotations), 882.5048/53, RG-59, NA.

outlined, and 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.”⁸²

The forced labor controversy no doubt concerned Firestone, but it was only one of many problems in Liberia that distracted him and fed his resentment toward leaders in the black republic. With the demise of the Stevenson plan in 1928 crude rubber prices declined to the point that the Firestone Plantations Company decided in 1929 to scale back operations and cut its work force in Liberia. Further reductions in the work force after the 1929 planting period harmed Liberian revenues and led to mounting tension and conflict between Firestone and the King administration. A clash between the U. S. State Department and President King over the authority of American fiscal officers in the weeks preceding Stimson’s June 5th note only made matters worse. To be sure, Firestone’s primary concern throughout the forced labor controversy rested with Liberia’s difficulty in the collection of its customs revenues, funds designated for repayment of the 1926 loan. Firestone had little regard for the League of Nations, an organization that he viewed suspiciously as nothing more than a means for safeguarding British imperialism.⁸³

⁸² Joseph P. Cotton to the American Legation, Monrovia, Liberia, August 3, 1929 (quotations), 882.5048/53.

⁸³ Bixler, *Foreign Policy of the United States in Liberia*, 85-88; Knoll, “Firestone’s Labor Policy,” 56-57. In December 1929, financial adviser B. M. Robinson wrote to Harvey Firestone, Jr., and indicated “it appears that the high executive officers of the Government of Liberia are either engaged in or acquiescing in a program for defeating full enforcement of the terms of the Loan Agreement by the Financial Advisor.” B. M. Robinson to Harvey Firestone, Jr., December 23, 1929, Box 88, Folder 6, CSJP. The increased use of reclaimed rubber and high prices in 1926 forced those in charge of the Stevenson plan to issue, temporarily, a one hundred percent release from restrictions. Averaging \$1.00 per pound in 1926, crude rubber prices fell to 36 cents, as supplies and exports continued to grow. A buying pool joined by Firestone in 1927 held prices low, and in April 1928, British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin announced that restriction would end the following November. As automobile production and rubber use soared in 1929, crude rubber prices remained low. After the stock market crash, crude rubber prices fell to 16 cents in December 1929, causing huge losses for investors forced to buy ahead at higher prices. The repeal of the Stevenson plan cost Firestone about \$15 million. Alfred Lief, *The Firestone Story: A History of the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company* (New York, Toronto and London: Whittlesey House, 1951), 167-70. Financial adviser John Loomis wrote to President King in December 1928 and informed him that Firestone would spend \$500,000 less in the coming year. Loomis also suggested to King that “the most rigid economy must be observed by various departments of Government.” John Loomis to Charles D. B. King,

No longer able to project his anger directly at the British for the deviousness of the Stevenson plan, Firestone found convenient substitutes in President King and the Americo-Liberians.

In September 1929 the King administration and the U. S. State Department finally reached agreement over the commission's terms of reference. The terms empowered the commission to ascertain if slavery as defined by the 1926 Slavery Convention existed in the republic, and if leading citizens or government officials encouraged or participated in the practice. The question of compulsory labor, either for private purposes or for shipment to Fernando Po and other parts of Africa, also came under the commission's purview, as did the use of the Frontier Force for recruiting it. In order to carry out their inquiry effectively and issue a report with recommendations for reform, commissioners were given the power to subpoena documents and summon witnesses. Projected to begin its work as early as possible in 1930, the three-person international commission of inquiry into slavery and forced labor in the Republic of Liberia was tentatively allotted two months to complete its job and an additional month to make its report. The appointment of commission members remained as the only hurdle left in the process.⁸⁴

December 19, 1928 (quotation), HC. On Firestone and the League of Nations, see Sundiata, *Black Scandal*, 51.

⁸⁴ The commission's terms of reference were as follows: "(a) Whether slavery as defined in the anti-slavery convention in fact exists in the Republic. (b) Whether this system is participated in or encouraged by the Government of the Republic. (c) Whether and what leading citizens of the country participate therein. (d) To what extent compulsory labor exists as a factor in the social and industrial economy of the State, either for public or private purposes, and, if it does exist, in what manner it has been recruited and employed, whether for public or private purposes. (e) Whether the shipment of contract laborers to Fernando Poo under the terms of arrangement with Spain, or shipment of such laborers to the Congo or any other foreign parts is associated with slavery, and whether the method employed in recruiting such laborers carries any compulsion. (f) Whether the labor employed for private purposes on privately owned or leased plantations is recruited by voluntary enlistments or is forcibly impressed for this service by the Liberian Government or by its authority. (g) Whether the Liberian Government has at any time given sanction or approval to the recruiting of labor with the aid and assistance of the Liberian Frontier Force or other persons holding official positions or in Government employ, or private individuals have been implicated in such recruiting with or without the Government's approval." International Commission of Inquiry, *Report*

In Geneva, M. A. Sottile, Liberia's permanent delegate to the League of Nations, issued a formal proposal on September 16 for a commission of inquiry composed of one American, one Liberian, and an international member to be appointed by the League of Nations. In conversation with Wharton in previous weeks, President King expressed concern over Faulkner's allegations, and inquired if the United States had determined that it would appoint Emmett Scott to the commission. King then claimed that his only desire was that the U. S. not select "a Garvey man," or anyone sympathetic to the Universal Negro Improvement Association. Wharton assured King of the improbability of anyone connected to the UNIA serving on the commission, and then inquired whom the president had in mind as the Liberian member. King replied, in strict confidence, that he was considering his father-in-law and former president of Liberia, Arthur Barclay, if in fact "the old man" would serve.⁸⁵

Shortly before Sottile made his proposal to the League Council, King again asked Wharton about Emmett Scott, and made a vague reference to a rumor that the Howard University treasurer had played some role in the failed 1921 loan other than urging the U. S. Congress to approve it. Unsure what King was "driving at," Wharton wondered if the president was "worried and wants to know Dr. Scott's present attitude towards Liberia or else wants definite information as to whether or not Dr. Scott would be recommended." If the latter were the case, Wharton deemed King's inquiry to be "of a most serious and dangerous nature." King finally confessed to Wharton that he

of the *International Commission of Inquiry*, 5, 7 (quotation). Wharton had suggested earlier that two months was not enough time to carry out the investigation, and that commissioners should be "empowered to issue subpoenas *duces tecum* and to compel witnesses to bring government records, etc." Clifton R. Wharton to the Secretary of State, July 24, 1929 (quotation), 882.5048/52, RG-59, NA.

⁸⁵ International Commission of Inquiry, *Report of the International Commission of Inquiry*, 5; Clifton R. Wharton to Secretary of State, August 13, 1929, p. 3 (quotations), 882.5048/88, RG-59, NA. Amid other League news, the Associated Press announced on September 26, 1929, that Liberia had made a formal request for an investigation. See, for instance, *New York Times*, September 26, 1929, p.9, c. 2.

understood how “to continually call attention to the necessity of an impartial man, ask that one type of man not be appointed and then ask information about another, basing the question upon a rumor, may lead the United States Government to believe that his Government is fearful of the outcome of the investigation.”⁸⁶

In the end, King had no reason to be concerned about Emmett Scott. After trying to persuade him for more than two months to accept the appointment as the American member of the Commission, the State Department finally gave up on Scott, who cited an important “transitional period” in the financial affairs of Howard University as his reason for declining the position. Running short of time to appoint someone who could be ready to leave for Liberia in January 1930, Stimson and Castle in November 1929 began to look more closely at Scott’s recommendation of Charles S. Johnson to serve on the commission.⁸⁷

Several days after the Liberian legislature ratified the articles of the Slavery Convention, William R. Castle cabled Charles S. Johnson on November 26th and urged

⁸⁶ Clifton R. Wharton to the Secretary of State, September 16, 1929 (quotations), 882.5048/111, RG-59, NA.

⁸⁷ If Johnson could not serve, Scott suggested Charles H. Wesley, a black history professor at Howard. Emmett J. Scott to William R. Castle, September 19, 1929, 882.5048/128, RG-59, NA. Stimson, at the suggestion of Henry Carter, an official in the office of Western European Affairs, urged President Hoover to nominate Henry L. West, a white journalist and, since 1916, president of the American Colonization Society, if Scott declined. Henry L. Stimson to Herbert Hoover, October 24, 1929, Presidential Foreign Affairs: Liberia, Box 99, HHPL; Henry Carter to William R. Castle, October 22, 1929, 882.5048/116, RG-59, NA. Castle, on the other hand, was not so sure about West. He noted that West “is a pleasant little man, but I am, nevertheless, convinced that if a good colored man exists we ought to send him.” William R. Castle to Henry Carter, November 18, 1929 (quotation), 882.5048/130, RG-59, NA. As a last resort, the State Department would even consider W. E. B. Du Bois who, “[i]n spite of the radicalism and bitterness which marked him in previous years . . . has calmed down very considerably and there can be little question as to his ability and distinction.” Even if Du Bois proved “somewhat difficult to handle,” under the circumstances, one official thought he should be considered “pretty seriously.” J. P. Moffat to William R. Castle, November 18, 1929, 882.5048/130, RG-59, NA. Henry L. Stimson to Emmett J. Scott, November 2, 1929, 882.5048/118, Emmett J. Scott to Henry L. Stimson, November 15, 1929 (quotation), 882.5048/124, RG-59, NA. Scott, a member of the Colored Voters’ Division and of the Republican National Committee, Campaign of 1928, expressed concern to White House secretary Lawrence R. Richey in June 1929 about “Anti-Administration propaganda” in the black press. Scott then offered to discuss an approach that was followed during the Coolidge years. Emmett J. Scott to Lawrence R. Richey, June 5, 1929, and Scott to Walter L. Newton, July 17, 1929, President’s Secretarial File, Box 84, HHPL.

him to consider President Hoover's invitation to serve as the American representative of the commission. Castle offered a per diem allowance of fifteen dollars, and a salary of \$250 per month from the time that Johnson left Nashville for a mission now projected to run five months. The government would also pay the salary of a personal secretary selected by Johnson. Castle urged Johnson to accept the appointment because an honest and thorough investigation of the forced labor issue in Liberia "would have a most valuable effect on all other parts of the world where such conditions exist." Furthermore, Castle suggested that serving as the American representative "on such an important piece of work" would be "something which you would always feel to be one of the very important incidents of your life." The State Department had "a great deal of material" for Johnson to study and needed a quick reply, as Castle believed that the League of Nations was waiting to hear about the appointment of the American commissioner before selecting its own delegate.⁸⁸

Johnson received Castle's telegram on December 2nd upon his return from trips to Texas and Georgia. While honored to be considered and "favorably disposed" to serve on the commission, Johnson informed Castle that he first had to consult with university and foundation officials about "temporary release from certain commitments" before final acceptance. At the time, Johnson had in the works three projects for the Social Science Research Council, and two others for "important Foundations." Everyone agreed, however, that "the commission contemplated by the State Department should take precedence," and Johnson accepted the appointment officially on December 6, 1929.

⁸⁸ William R. Castle to Charles S. Johnson, November 26, 1929 (quotations), 882.5048/215a, RG-59, NA.

Even if Emmett Scott notified him beforehand about his recommendation, and there is no evidence that he did, the quick turnaround between nomination and acceptance indicates that the Fisk sociologist may not have considered realistically the consequences of an extended stay in Liberia, a country with a reputation as a graveyard for foreign visitors.⁸⁹

In Liberia, American chargé d'affaires Wharton spoke with Secretary of State Edwin Barclay, who "made no comments on the nomination of Johnson." Wharton cabled Stimson, then in England preparing for the London Naval Conference scheduled to begin in January 1930, and claimed that because of the delay in the nomination of commissioners, Barclay had hinted that Liberia might consider an independent investigation of its own. Stimson then hurriedly wired to Switzerland "for the purpose of expediting the League nomination." Searching for a representative from a country without African colonial possessions, the League, after prodding from Stimson, nominated Sigvald Meek, a Norwegian jurist with experience as a prosecutor in the Belgian Congo.⁹⁰

In the meantime, a report by J. P. Moffat, the U. S. State Department's chief of Western European Affairs, outlined "a first line of attack" for the commission to follow, which included the observance of labor shipments to Fernando Po, a trip into the interior, and an audit of the financial records of recruiting agents. He believed that it did not take a "prophet" to foretell that the Liberian member, Arthur Barclay, would not agree with any report that disparaged the Liberian government. Indeed, Moffat claimed, "Life for

⁸⁹ Charles S. Johnson to William R. Castle, December 2, 1929 (quotations), 882.5048/149, RG-59, NA. Johnson to Castle, December 6, 1929, 882.5048/152, RG-59, NA. James L. Sibley, a white American educator and principal of the Booker Washington Institute in Liberia died from yellow fever in November 1929.

⁹⁰ J. P. Moffat to the Secretary of State, December 4, 1929, 882.5048/150, Clifton R. Wharton to the Secretary of State, December 10, 1929, 882.5048/157, Henry L. Stimson to Henry Carter, December 11, 1929, 882.5048/157, RG-59, NA.

him would not be worth living if he were to do so.” Because the League member “may only report generally that conditions might be improved,” Moffat urged that the American member issue a minority report and “not hesitate to describe fully conditions as he finds them.” Liberia, according to Moffat, “is attempting to prove that a country can be run by colored people and are making a mess of it to the dissatisfaction of every man, white or colored, who has an interest in the welfare of the colored people.” Although he felt it “quite possible” that the republic could eventually “run its own affairs,” the United States was probably “building on sand” in Liberia. In Moffat’s estimation, Americo-Liberians may have been entrusted “too early with complete political liberty,” for up to the present time the nation had shown itself to be “characterless.”⁹¹

In late December, after being accompanied by Emmett Scott to a meeting in Akron with Harvey Firestone, Jr., and William Hines, Johnson contacted J. P. Moffat in Washington. As his first choice for a personal secretary, Johnson submitted the name of John Matheus, an African American teacher at West Virginia Collegiate Institute, and a former winner of an *Opportunity* prize in poetry. Arthur Schomburg served as the American commissioner’s second choice. Johnson then asked Moffat for copies of a number of documents to supplement what the State Department had already given him, such as the Firestone loan agreements, and arranged for a meeting in Washington the following month.⁹²

⁹¹ J. P. Moffat to William R. Castle, December 16, 1929 (quotations), 882.5048/183, RG-59, NA.

⁹² Johnson also requested financial and customs data from Liberia, a copy of the report of the 1909 commission, information on the Labor Bureau and the Frontier Force, articles of the Slavery Convention, and Faulkner’s charges filed before the League Council, among other items. Because of his “unfamiliarity with official governmental procedure,” Johnson asked Moffat other questions which had “a bearing more upon personal orientation: 1. What should be my relation to the American Chargé d’Affaires, and to the American Legation in Liberia? 2. Will the Commission be guests of the Liberian Republic in any other than an official sense? 3. To whom shall the official report be made, and if it should become desirable to make a minority report would it be made or filed with other than the Liberian Republic? 4. Is the

As 1929 came to a close, Raymond Buell wrote to Secretary of State Stimson in response to a State Department query on his thoughts about commission procedure. Buell, however, offered little that had evaded either Stimson or Castle. Even so, one idea stood out amid Buell's advice on compiling documentary evidence and other fundamental procedures. Unable to move beyond his original views, Buell suggested that, although it was "entirely possible that a perfectly voluntary system of recruiting is now being followed," the commission should not forget to include the Firestone Plantations Company in its investigation. As far as the commissioners named for the League of Nations inquiry, Buell made no comment.⁹³

Far across the Atlantic Ocean in Monrovia, President King had a response quite different from Buell's when he learned that the United States and the League had named their commission representatives. In order to protect themselves from the upcoming investigation, King and several members of his Cabinet, alleged to be active participants in the Alligator Society, took the unusual step of sacrificing a goat. The sacrifice, according to tradition, should have been a human one. When a boatload of native Kru drowned in waters off Monrovia, it was "generally felt that the alligator was dissatisfied with the goat."⁹⁴ Although knowledge of the King administration's dependence on superstition and the occult in decision-making may not have affected the State

connection of the League of Nations with the inquiry made explicit in any article which should be known about?" Charles S. Johnson to J. P. Moffat, December 30, 1929 (quotations), 882.5048/204, RG-59, NA.

⁹³ Raymond L. Buell to the Secretary of State, December 31, 1929 (quotations), 882.5048/192, RG-59, NA.

⁹⁴ Graham Greene, after a discussion about secret bush societies with a white physician in Liberia, wrote in 1935: "I am not an anthropologist and I cannot pretend to remember very much of what Dr. Harley told me: a pity, for no white man is closer to that particular 'heart of darkness', the secret societies being more firmly rooted in Liberia than in any other country on the West Coast. The Government have put up the feeblest of resistances: though Colonel (Elwood) Davis, so he told me later, had court-martialled and shot fifty members of the Leopard Society in a village near Grand Bassa. Indeed, they could not properly resist because they *believed*." Graham Greene, *Journey Without Maps* (New York: Doubleday, 1936), 173-74 (quotations), 174 (quotation on Kru drowning).

Department's opinion of Liberian leadership—it could not fall any lower—it might well have caused it to exert pressure on different, and perhaps more vulnerable, points than those eventually chosen.

Convinced that Americo-Liberians would never take it upon themselves to make the reforms necessary to stabilize the republic so that it could develop and prosper, and unwilling to delve any deeper into its internal affairs, the U. S. State Department chose to steer Liberia onto an uncharted course in the hope that it might lead—no one knew how exactly—to substantive change. After the stock market crash of October 1929, protecting American corporate interests like Firestone took on added importance for officials at the State Department. The approach taken by Secretary of State Henry Stimson and Assistant Secretary of State William Castle allowed them to both address the forced labor issue on humanitarian grounds, and protect the image of the State Department and Firestone. The selection of Charles S. Johnson seemed to Stimson and Castle a safe choice to carry out the inquiry into the forced labor controversy. Yet, neither Stimson nor Castle truly understood what Johnson's mission meant to Liberia's tribal citizens, or the calamitous effects that his objectivity and scholarship would have on the republic's political future.

CHAPTER 4

“TO SEE CLEARLY AND SIFT WISELY”: CHARLES S. JOHNSON IN LIBERIA

West Africa is the land where God came
to learn to wait. And then wait a little longer.

Denis Johnson, “The Civil War in Hell” (2001)

For Charles S. Johnson, the first few weeks of January 1930 were given over almost completely to the “adjustment” of research projects then in process, as well as leaving instructions for administrative duties so that “no serious results” would occur in his protracted absence from the United States. Concerned with what he would be leaving behind, and without adequate time to prepare for what lay ahead, he gave little thought to the fundamentals needed for surviving an extended stay in Liberia. On January 10, less than two weeks before the beginning of the London Naval Conference, and as Firestone began to pressure President Charles King for reform in Liberia’s customs collections, Johnson left Nashville for New York and a brief visit to the State Department in Washington. Scheduled to sail from New York on January 29 aboard the *S. S. President Roosevelt*, Johnson had to accept third-class accommodations because objections from white American passengers denied his securing anything better.¹

As Johnson began packing for his trip, he felt troubled because he could find “no guides to equipment or clothing, or medicines, or the myriad precautions for the tropics at

¹ Charles S. Johnson to J. P. Moffat, December 30, 1929 (quotations), 882.5048/204, RG-59 (National Archives, Washington, D. C.) Hereafter cited as RG-59, NA; Charles S. Johnson to Arthur Schomburg, January ?, 1930, in David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 256; *New York Times*, January 29, 1930, p. 16, c. 6.

this distance.” The only practical advice came from “those lonely adventurers who have wandered into these far parts of the Earth.” He found their advice wanting, however, “in that it recalls only the freakish remnants of experience. Never the essential steps of preparation.” In his new “upside-downness of life,” he could only sort and guess “far into the night.”²

At the State Department, Johnson examined records that dealt with Liberia and met with, among others, Raymond Buell, Anson Phelps-Stokes, Harvey Firestone, and Harvey Firestone, Jr. Earlier, the State Department had arranged an itinerary for Johnson that included trips to London, Paris, Bern and Geneva “for the purpose of consultation in connection with your mission.” While Johnson gathered facts and listened to conflicting points of view in Washington, it is doubtful that he received any useful information on day-to-day techniques for survival, considering that Harvey Firestone had never visited Liberia, and Raymond Buell had never spent any time in the country’s hinterland. On the other hand, Harvey Firestone, Jr.’s knowledge of Liberia did not extend far beyond the country club-like company headquarters at the Harbel plantation on the Du River.³

In New York again after his trip to Washington, Johnson went out of his way to fulfill a commitment made months earlier. A few days before his departure for Europe, a fatigued Johnson made a trip to Bronxville to deliver a speech “to a polite girls seminary or rather Junior College, on a favorable theme.” Kept waiting in the school’s office until a student worker finally sent word that someone named “Johnson” wanted to see the dean, the African American sociologist eventually made his way to the assembly hall to be met by “two hundred curious faces, some interested, some mildly and politely

² Charles S. Johnson, “African Diary,” 1, (quotations), Folder 15, Box 88, Charles S. Johnson Papers (microfilm) (Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, Louisiana). Hereafter cited as CSJP.

³ Charles S. Johnson to the Assistant Secretary of State, October 1, 1930, 1-2, Folder 6, Box 89, CSJP;

scoffing, some obviously bored.” Later, an exhausted Johnson recalled the day “as an almost dead loss in the task of getting prepared” for the longest and most difficult journey of his life. As he tried to fall asleep he heard his wife, Marie, at the sewing machine, her fingers flying “as in a spell.” But he made no protest, noting, “that gown is not nearly so important as something else, but it represents a promise and one of those curiously intimate interests which no amount of necessity would provoke one to question.”⁴

The next day brought “a mass of details still unattended,” which included “more instructions to the staff, more purchases, more interviews, telephone calls, money matters to arrange, telegrams to send and the farewells.” At a bon voyage party that night Johnson marveled at the presence of nearly all of the friends that he had made in New York during the exciting years of the Harlem Renaissance. Guests included James Weldon Johnson, Alain Locke, Walter White, Aaron Douglas, and a physician who urged the guest of honor to pack a supply of quinine pills, something that, astonishingly, Johnson had not thought of previously. Two more parties suggested “the going for a long time . . . not all were certain whether this was for a month, three months, a year, or for years.”⁵

Charles S. Johnson and his personal secretary, John Matheus, sailed from New York on January 29, 1930, and arrived in Plymouth, England, on February 5. While Johnson’s assignment was far different from his only previous transatlantic voyage, when in 1918 he wore a U. S. Army uniform, confusion still ruled the day. On January 30, the New York *Times* announced Johnson’s appointment to the League of Nations commission,

⁴ Johnson, “African Diary,” 1 (quotations), CSJP.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1-2 (quotations). Johnson’s ignorance in regard to health risks and precautions in West Africa is all the more remarkable considering his meeting with Harvey Firestone, who had funded the Harvard expedition of tropical medicine experts only a few years before. Indeed, Johnson met with Firestone as the Harvard team’s two-volume report was being prepared for publication only months later in 1930.

scheduled to meet in Liberia the first week of March. The report also announced the resignation of the elderly Sigvald Meek, who “did not wish uselessly to endanger” his health “by a stay in Liberia during the rainy season.” Because the League Council might have to wait until its May session to appoint a new commissioner, the report claimed that no inquiry would be likely before the end of the year. In Monrovia on February 13, Henry Carter, the impassioned white chargé d’affaires who began his work in mid-December 1929, wrote to Secretary of State Stimson and asked when Johnson planned to leave New York. Carter, whose assignment in Liberia was designed “to coincide . . . with the duration of the forced labor investigation,” expressed concern over a local report that Johnson had postponed sailing from New York for two months after Meek’s resignation. Acting Secretary of State Joseph P. Cotton then hurriedly wired Carter with the incorrect information that Johnson had left on January 22.⁶

Searching for a “first clue” in London to begin his mission led Johnson to the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures. At a glance he believed, “The problem of native labor in Liberia seems . . . to be inseparably locked with the structure of native life—social customs, religion, laws.” Johnson wanted to meet Diedrich Westermann, an expert on the Kpelle in Liberia, and editor of *Africa*, the Institute’s

⁶ Sigvald Meek to Sir Eric Drummond, January 27, 1930 (first and second quotations), Box 7011, 882.5048/243, RG-59, NA. Henry Carter wired the State Department on January 30, the same day that the New York *Times* announced the resignation of Meek, and noted that the Liberian Government was “seriously alarmed . . . over the possible outcome and effect of the investigation and would gladly seize upon any pretext—such as a proposal at this time to alter the terms of reference—to prolong discussion to point where investigation might fail of its purpose. In fact, the rumor is already being circulated here, presumably by the Liberian Government, that the commission has been entirely called off.” Carter then urged that Meek’s replacement be named before the Liberians could take any action to prevent it. Henry Carter to the Secretary of State, January 30, 1930 (quotations), Box 7013, 882.5048/2221, Carter to the Secretary of State, February 13, 1930 (quotation), Box 7011, 882.5048/235, RG-59, NA. Joseph P. Cotton to the American Legation, Monrovia, November 14, 1929 (third quotation), 882.5048/111, and Cotton to the American Legation, Monrovia, February 14, 1930, Box 7013, 882.5048/2129, RG-59, NA. The New York *Times* mistakenly cited “Mrs.” Charles Johnson as a passenger aboard the *Roosevelt*, but identified Matheus correctly. New York *Times*, January 29, 1930, p.16, c. 6 (quotation), and January 30, 1930, p. 11, c. 1; London *Times*, February 5, 1930, p. 24, c.2.

official journal. “Westermann is, of course, out of England,” Johnson discovered, but through Westermann’s assistant, Dorothy Brackett, a meeting was arranged with Polish-born, British anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, then a professor at the London School of Economics. Malinowski, a founder of the “functional” school of anthropology, agreed to meet with Johnson that evening in front of the bulletin board at Victoria Station, and then later to arrange for a longer discussion. Arriving early, Johnson waited until the appointed time, whereupon Dorothy Brackett appeared and told him that Malinowski had a change of plans, and requested a dinner meeting at the apartment of Captain George Henry Lane Fox Pitt-Rivers, near Buckingham Palace. Through Brackett, Malinowski informed Johnson not to be upset with the captain’s “brusqueness” or anything that he might say, since he had “ideas sometimes considered odd.” Johnson, his interest piqued, made “a rapid mental picture” of a “sun-beaten soldier with ready-made and not too flattering opinions of natives—imperialistic and bluff.”⁷

Later, “in the shadow of Buckingham Palace,” Johnson reached the captain’s address, a “small but finely made structure, like the prototype of some of the recreated tiny apartments in Greenwich Village.” A “surprisingly stalwart” French maid greeted

⁷ In Europe, Bronislaw Malinowski, along with A. R. Radcliffe-Brown and other anthropologists of the functional school, based their ideas on the work of French sociologist Émile Durkheim, who stressed the need to study all aspects of a culture in order to understand how they fit together as interdependent parts of a complex model. As anthropology became a professional academic discipline in the 1920s, colonial administrators often enlisted scholars to help them predict how native societies would respond to particular policies. For instance, before imposing a hut tax, colonial administrators would assign an anthropologist like Malinowski to study its possible effects, an approach that Liberian secretary of state Edwin Barclay urged President King to adopt. King liked the idea but never acted on it. Charles S. Johnson, *Bitter Canaan: The Story of the Negro Republic* (New Brunswick, N. J. and Oxford: Transaction Books, 1987), 170-71 (on Barclay and anthropological approach); Talcott Parsons, “Malinowski and the Theory of Social Systems,” in Raymond Firth, ed., *Man and Culture: An Evaluation of the Work of Bronislaw Malinowski*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960), 53-70. John W. Bennett, *Classic Anthropology: Critical Essays, 1944-1996*, with contributions by Leo A. Despres and Michio Nagai (New Brunswick, N. J.: Transaction Publishers, 1998), 167-76. Some of Malinowski’s studies during the 1920s include: *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), *Crime and Custom in Savage Society* (1926), *Myth in Primitive Society* (1926), *Father in Primitive Society* (1927), and *Sex and Repression in Savage Society* (1927).

Johnson at the door and directed him upstairs to the library, where he mistook the youthful and “almost fragile” figure of Pitt-Rivers, dressed in a “blue, double-breasted lounge suit,” for Malinowski. As the two smoked the captain’s custom-made cigarettes and endured moments of awkward silence, Pitt-Rivers finally asked, “Did Malinowski say something about your going to Africa?” The question, much to Johnson’s relief, at least allowed him to explain his mission. Afterward, he learned that, contrary to his preconceived ideas, the captain was quite sensitive about the question of native life in Africa, particularly as it concerned British colonial possessions. After another lull, Johnson asked “if this is the Pitt-Rivers associated with anthropological writings.” The captain replied nervously and haltingly as he extracted a small volume from a bookshelf and then, with some confusion and “almost apologetically,” noted that his grandfather had written several books and founded the Cultural Museum at Farnham, and his father had done some writing but since then the only Pitt-Rivers “who had connected himself with any volumes on anthropology was probably himself.” Indeed, Johnson had read the captain’s *Clash of Culture* on the voyage from New York.⁸

While sipping vermouth and smoking another cigarette, Johnson heard Malinowski enter downstairs and speak in French to the maid. Soon the anthropologist hastened into the library and launched immediately into the “midst of the subject.” “In any approach to the questions in hand,” he began, “our sympathies are first with the natives . . .” an

⁸ As Johnson learned, Pitt-Rivers’ *Clash of Culture* had recently entered a “political phase,” and was “being developed on request and for some practical end of government.” Johnson, “African Diary,”⁵ (first through third quotations), 6 (fourth through ninth quotations); and on *Clash of Culture*, CSJP. In his diary Johnson mistakenly noted the book’s title as *Contact of Cultures*. George Henry Lane Fox Pitt-Rivers, *The Clash of Culture and the Contact of Races: An Anthropological and Psychological Study of the Laws of Racial Adaptability, With Special Reference to the Depopulation of the Pacific and the Government of Subject Races* (London: G. Routledge, 1927). Pitt-Rivers’ grandfather published a book on artifacts “obtained by the punitive expedition in 1897, and now in General Pitt-Rivers’s Museum in Farnham, Dorset.” Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt-Rivers, *Antique Works of Art from Benin* (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1968; originally published 1900), 1 (quotation).

approach never discussed by the U. S. State Department. After firing off questions about the terms of reference, Malinowski confessed that his knowledge of Liberia was quite limited. Although he would have to leave after dinner, he believed that they could “get an understanding of the question,” and then meet the next morning at his home near Primrose Hill Road.⁹

On the following day, Malinowski wasted no time in setting down the points to be clarified: the exportation of labor; the presence of Firestone; the use of labor by Government agencies; and adoption and pawning. The anthropologist asked so many questions that Johnson wondered “whether I am interviewing him or he me.” Because neither of the two men had any direct knowledge of Liberia, most topics fell into the category of “something to be inquired into.” Asked about his methodology, Johnson relied on his advice from the State Department and suggested, “first, getting documents, then selections of sections for intimate visits inland, combining of sociological inquiry with the terms of reference,” and “later hearings on the basis of such evidence as is disclosed.” Malinowski regarded Johnson’s approach as “sound.” As their meeting came to a close after mid-morning cake and wine, Malinowski mentioned that, as a Pole in England, he felt a deep connection with minorities. Also, according to the professor, England seemed more “generous” toward its colonies than any other nation, and Liberia might “require some sort of impartial white tutelage.”¹⁰

While the ongoing London Naval Conference necessarily limited interview possibilities, Johnson, and presumably Matheus, nevertheless managed to meet with at

⁹ Johnson, “African Diary,” 7 (quotations), CSJP. Johnson also met Malinowski’s wife, Elsie Masson, who shared significantly in her husband’s work. See Helena Wayne, *The Story of a Marriage: The Letters of Bronislaw Malinowski and Elsie Masson* (London and New York: Routledge Press, 1995).

¹⁰ Johnson, “African Diary,” 8 (first quotation), 9, 10 (second and third quotations), 11 (remaining quotations), CSJP.

least two officials from the British Foreign Office who had been stationed in Liberia, several diplomats from the League of Nations, and Sir Frederick John Dealty Lugard, “a high authority on matters of colonial administration and native development,” who provided a letter of introduction to the governor of Sierra Leone.¹¹ After concluding his business in London, Johnson used a letter written on official commission stationery as “an excuse for seeing the expatriated sons of the pen sojourning in Paris,” namely, his friend Countee Cullen. Hardly an expatriate, Cullen had received a Guggenheim Fellowship for study at the Sorbonne. Cullen showed Johnson around Paris where they met up with mutual friend Paul Robeson, then at the peak of his fame in Europe after a sold-out singing tour and starring role in *Othello* in London. Johnson’s stopover in Paris, unbeknownst to the State Department, had no connection with his mission but was purely for recreational purposes, a brief furlough and chance to catch his breath that received no mention later on in his minority report.¹²

From Paris, Johnson traveled to Bern, Switzerland, where he met with U. S. State Department officials before moving on to Geneva, the international headquarters of the League of Nations. Secretary-General Sir Eric Drummond, whom Johnson would meet, had followed a policy of restraint throughout the 1920s in dealings with the United States, the League’s most conspicuous nonmember. While not bound by any of the peacekeeping organization’s decisions, the United States still actively participated in many League conferences as the 1920s progressed, particularly in regard to armaments

¹¹ Johnson to the Assistant Secretary of State, October 1, 1930, 2 (quotation), CSJP. See Frederick John Dealty Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (Edinburgh and London: W. Blackwood and Sons, 1926).

¹² Charles S. Johnson to Countee Cullen, February 9, 1930, and Johnson to Cullen, February 27?, 1930, Folder 9, Box 3, Countee Cullen Papers (Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, Louisiana). On Paul Robeson see, for instance, Martin Duberman, *Paul Robeson: A Biography* (New York: New Press, 1989).

and commercial subjects, or, as in Liberia, whenever it suited its purposes. When it came to settling international disputes or measures to prevent war, however, the U. S. adhered to its own course and refused to collaborate with the League.¹³

In Geneva, Johnson's interview with Drummond "revealed the embarrassment of the League following the sudden resignation of Judge Meek." But after "full and satisfactory references" by the former governor of South Africa, Drummond was confident that Meek's replacement, British physician Cuthbert Christy, could successfully fill the role. While Drummond felt "a bit provoked" over Meek's last second resignation due to health concerns and Liberia's rainy season, sixty-six-year-old Christy, a veteran of numerous medical missions in the tropics, had assured him that "the rainy season should place no important barriers in the way of work in the hinterland." The League had wished to avoid appointing anyone from Great Britain, but after failing to persuade candidates from France and Switzerland, Drummond felt relieved that Christy, a man of "independent judgment," had accepted after such short notice. As to the prospect of traveling to Fernando Po in order to investigate conditions there, the League would need an invitation from the Spanish Government, and "it was left to the result of the Inquiry to determine if such were necessary."¹⁴

¹³ On the League of Nations and the United States see, for instance, F. P. Walters, *A History of the League of Nations* (2 vols.; London, New York and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1952), I, 348-54; George W. Egerton, *Great Britain and the Creation of the League of Nations: Strategy, Politics, and International Organization, 1914-1919* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978); F. S. Northedge, *The League of Nations: Its Life and Times, 1920-1946* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1986); and Margot Louria, *Triumph and Downfall: America's Pursuit of Peace and Prosperity, 1921-1933* (Westport, Conn.: and London, 2001), 101-3.

¹⁴ After taking his medical degree from the University of Edinburgh, Christy served as a medical officer in the West African Field Force in Nigeria in 1898-1900. Afterward, he participated in medical missions to, among other places, Bombay, Sātāra, Kashmir, Baluchistan, Uganda, Congo, Ceylon, Cameroons, Mesopotamia, Sudan, Tanganyika, and French Equatorial Africa. A few of Christy's publications include *Mosquitos* [sic] and *Malaria* (1900), and *Big Game and Pygmies* (1924). His "recreations" included "shooting and general field natural history." Johnson to the Assistant Secretary of State, October 1, 1930, 3 (quotations), 14-15 (on Christy; quotations on p. 15), CSJP; *London Times*, June 7, 1932, p. 16, c. 5. J. P.

Johnson then traveled to Rotterdam, Netherlands, where he was scheduled to depart for Africa on February 21. His short stay in the port city evoked some unusual prejudices in the normally even-handed scholar. In a letter to Countee Cullen, he asserted, “. . . in Switzerland and Holland a mighty attempt is made . . . to avoid intelligibility thru barks, snorts, and sneezes.” Johnson claimed that when he “did what was playfully referred to as ‘studying’ German” in his school days, he always carried in the back of his mind “the notion that this race of adults tried to talk like children.” Johnson’s letter to Cullen also displayed a sensitive side normally kept hidden from others. After asking a “Dutchman” in Rotterdam to locate a telephone number for him, Johnson became “so disgusted” that he returned “forthwith” to his ship and buried his head in his pillow.¹⁵

Except for the list of documents and receipts that Johnson acquired, his two weeks in Europe served more as a means for fulfilling formal obligations than it did toward collecting any solid information that he could use in Liberia. Johnson’s interview with Malinowski no doubt reinforced his sympathetic attitude toward the black republic’s tribal citizens and helped shape his ethnographic approach to the investigation, but nothing observed or learned during the two weeks could have prepared him for what lay ahead. During the four-thousand mile voyage to Liberia, Johnson felt a sense of adventure as well as a certain degree of trepidation in the face of what his “cheerful

Moffat wrote a memorandum on February 1, 1930, and suggested that the State Department was not so much interested in the “prominence” of Meek’s replacement but in his qualifications. Moffitt also suggested “the possibility of a two-headed commission, that is, if the League of Nations does not appoint a member.” J. P. Moffat Memorandum, February 1, 1930 (quotations), Box 7013, 882.5048/2221, RG-59, NA. Liberia’s League of Nations delegate, M. A. Sottile, declared Christy *persona non grata* because of his British citizenship. J. P. Moffat to the Secretary of State, February 12, 1930, Box 7011, 882.5048/234, RG-59, NA.

¹⁵ Albert Halstead to the Secretary of State, February 21, 1930, 882.5048/182, RG-59, NA. Johnson to Cullen, February 27?, 1930 (quotations), Cullen Papers.

friends” had “conspired” to make him believe was “the most malarial quarter of the dark continent.”¹⁶

A week out to sea Johnson’s ship called at Tenerife, “once an outpost of civilization” in the Canary Islands. On shore waiting to buy postage stamps from an “advance guard” of street venders, Johnson revealed his Victorian sensibilities in imagery that he recalled from a manuscript by Martinique-born writer Rene Maran. Johnson remembered a passage where Maran “talks of Tenerife and the lady with the rose in her mouth and one thing and another which no gentleman would ever speak to a lady, and how all this was interrupted by the shrill blast of the steamer’s whistle.” But at sea again after departing Tenerife, his thoughts drifted away from “rose laden lips and language and stringed music” to the more practical problems of “trying to get this damned sun helmet to feel like a hat (in the privacy of my cabin, of course),” and shaking out his “little white suits.”¹⁷

As the voyage continued down the West Coast of Africa, Johnson, no marine biologist to be sure, sighted a passing “school” of whales, and noticed that the ship’s captain had already “donned white suit and helmet.” In order to pass the time, Johnson observed: “One gives himself over to reading,” something “still possible and pleasant.” After finishing Albert Schweitzer’s *On the Edge of the Primeval Forest*, with its warning not to trust the “treachery of the sun,” Johnson became “head conscious” and resolved “to wear something.” Between Cape Verde and Gambia on the long voyage he reminded himself

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, (quotations).

¹⁷ Johnson, “African Diary,” 12 (first and second quotations), CSJP; Johnson to Cullen, February 27?, 1930 (third through sixth quotations), Cullen Papers. Exactly which Maran manuscript Johnson was referring to in his letter to Cullen is unclear. Maran, who served as a colonial commissary of police in Gabon, received the Prix Goncourt literary prize in 1921 for *Batouala*, his novel of African tribal life. Johnson had, more than likely, seen several Maran manuscripts while at *Opportunity*. See “More About Rene Maran,” *Opportunity*, 1 (January 1923), 30-31.

“it is time to start taking the quinine.” At midnight the ship passed Dakar, Senegal, without stopping and Johnson noted, “Soon Sierra Leone and the ponderous duty of a visit to the Governor. These visits become much alike now.”¹⁸

On the evening of March 5, after navigating “an oily sea” in an atmosphere “heavy and bit depressing,” the ship dropped anchor in the waters off Freetown, but too late for a visit to the Government House. Waiting to go ashore, Johnson had “a session of mutual photography” with fellow passengers before the captain told him that he had just seen the sociologist’s name in a copy of the *African World* newspaper under the heading “Slavery Investigation.” Johnson then returned to his reading and noted, “Buell has my attention at the moment.” After nightfall a group of Kru natives rowed their way to the ship and Johnson, along with Matheus, a “husky young German,” and a “strutting Dutchman” with a “trilling lisp,” climbed down a ladder in the dark to the awaiting surfboat for the trip inland. When they reached the stone steps of the dock, Johnson took his first step in Africa.¹⁹

Immediately, one of the Kru boatmen, a young man named Kofi, offered to act as a guide for the group, and Johnson drew his initial impressions of Freetown from the seat of a Ford touring car. He noticed a “Catholic Church, the Church of God, a woman crying over death in the street, Syrian merchants . . . and on the curb a derelict white man.” While waiting in the car in front of the City Hotel, Johnson wondered at the approach of “a black, careless woman” with a missing front tooth. Although unfamiliar with “the plan,” Johnson felt a “distinctly individualized repulsion” at the woman’s overly friendly manner and “looseness.” She addressed the Dutchman with a word that

¹⁸ Johnson, “African Diary,” February 28, 1930, 13 (first and second quotations), 14 (remaining quotations), CSJP.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, March 5, 1930, 14 (first and second quotations), 15 (remaining quotations).

sounded like “Daddy.” Surprised, Johnson made a “mental note” of it for his “racial attitude study.” When the man reached his hands out and tried “to begin a conversation in underworld banter,” the woman suddenly noticed Johnson, who was “not flattered.” She said, “Hello, Daddy,” repeating the words “as if she was sure she was making me feel Harlemese . . . I love you, Daddy, you my color.”²⁰

The American commissioner made his official entry into Monrovia on the morning of March 8, 1930, the same day that former president William Howard Taft died. Johnson and Matheus, having arrived before seven a. m., waited on board the ship and presented their passports to Liberian customs officer Henry Cooper, who then introduced his son, the chief clerk of the Liberian State Department, referred to as “the bright one” by natives. Outside on deck the personally honest but politically troublesome Thomas J. R. Faulkner stopped Matheus and mistook him for Johnson. American Chargé d’Affaires Henry Carter then appeared and reintroduced the Coopers, but failed to present Faulkner, who had to make his own introduction. Carter said to Johnson, “Hope you brought your helmet.” With one of his frequent migraine headaches brewing, Johnson waited as a group of native boys gathered his twenty-two pieces of luggage, and then climbed down into a surfboat that bore a United States flag. Manned by a dozen skilled Kru rowers, the boat easily made its way around the formidable sandbar that had shifted and lengthened over time and that prevented ships from entering the harbor, a problem that Firestone had promised to address but soon gave up on as too expensive. Upon reaching the waterfront

²⁰ *Ibid.*, “Africa,” 18 (first and second quotations), 19 (remaining quotations). In *Bitter Canaan*, Johnson sanitized the proposition. He wrote: “In the shadow of the hotel a gangrenous native woman, toothless and brazen, employs flip phrases of solicitation, borrowed whole, it would seem, from the port towns of Europe.” Johnson, *Bitter Canaan*, 5 (quotation). For Johnson’s “racial attitude study,” see Willis D. Weatherford and Charles S. Johnson, *Race Relations: Adjustment of Whites and Negroes in the United States* (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1934).

“thick with spectators” who studied the landing with great interest, Carter mentioned ominously to Johnson, “They came down to look you over.”²¹

Shortly after going ashore, Johnson learned that because no accommodations had been arranged he and Matheus would have to take temporary quarters at the home of Clifton Wharton, on leave from Liberia until the end of the investigation. On the waterfront Johnson met with Firestone’s Donald Ross and William Hines as well as a group of American financial advisers, and Bishop Robert E. Campbell of the Protestant Episcopal Church, whom he had interviewed earlier at the State Department in Washington. He then had to board a surfboat once more for a return to the ship to gather his belongings, a trip much rougher than the earlier one. Already with a headache and nearer to “sea sickness . . . than any time before,” Johnson had a difficult time reboarding as a rope broke and the surfboat swerved away from the ship “suddenly, perilously.” After making his way to the smoking room, he met Charles King’s aide-de-camp, Colonel T. Elwood Davis, who informed him that the president happened to be away from the capital but would return in a few days. Davis also mentioned the circulation of a rumor in Monrovia that the “American commissioner had come in on one boat and left immediately on another.” In fact, rumors flew fast and thick in the seaside capital because the Liberian Government had said nothing to its citizens about the investigation.²²

²¹ Johnson, “African Diary,” March 8, 1930, 19 (first and second quotations), 20 (remaining quotations), CSJP. Under the terms of the harbor agreement, Firestone was obligated to invest a sum not to exceed \$300,000, and to be repaid by Liberia. After investing \$115,000, Firestone recognized that it would cost far too much to improve the harbor, and forgave Liberia’s repayment. During World War II, President Franklin D. Roosevelt promised to aid in the project with the use of Lend-Lease funds. The Free Port of Monrovia, at a cost of over \$22 million, opened in 1948. Wayne Chatfield Taylor, *The Firestone Operations in Liberia* (Washington, D. C.: National Planning Association, 1956), 15, 52.

²² Johnson to the Assistant Secretary State, October 1, 1930, 4, CSJP; Johnson, “African Diary,” March 8, 1930, 20 (quotations), CSJP. Thomas Elwood Davis was a former noncommissioned officer and medical orderly in the U. S. 10th Cavalry. He served as Liberia’s chief medical officer in addition to his military role. Johnson, *Bitter Canaan*, 153.

Other spectators on the waterfront that morning who went unnoticed by Johnson, but who took an especially active interest in the investigation, included President King's friend and adviser Dr. Cole, and Didwho Twe, an "intensely tribal-minded Kru" and subject of a host of rumors himself. Cole, who claimed to have prognosticated the 1898 Sierra Leone revolt by measuring the line of flight of a group of carrier pigeons and "reading the message in the stars," was in attendance to document the exact hour and minute that Johnson set foot on Liberian soil. Twe, on the other hand, would shadow Johnson throughout his stay in Liberia. In November 1928, the radical Kru had introduced a bill in the Liberian legislature against forced labor and pawning, a move that led to his expulsion and charges of sedition. Like Thomas Faulkner, who wished to bring political and social change to his country through peaceful means, Twe, Harvard-educated and a former valet to Mark Twain, feared that violent revolution would follow if the commission's work failed to enact needed reforms.²³

A few days before Johnson made his way into Monrovia, Twe sent a report to the U. S. State Department with news on recent Liberian machinations and native attitudes. Twe claimed that a Liberian senator had traveled to the hinterland "to shut up Chiefs' mouths" but "ran back" because natives became "so furious that he saw it was wise and safe for him to return." Another Liberian politician, according to Twe, had been in the Gola country, where he ordered paramount chiefs not to allow any natives to speak before the commission. When the people of the Dey country heard about the order, they "became so enraged that they at once met in the Poro Bush and the Devil sent a Proclamation . . . that no chief holding a commission from the Government should be

²³ Johnson, "African Diary," 20, 219 (quotation), CSJP; Johnson, *Bitter Canaan*, 166-67 (on Twe); D. Elwood Dunn, Amos J. Beyan, and Carl Patrick Burrowes, *Historical Dictionary of Liberia*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, Maryland and London: Scarecrow Press, 2001), 339 (on Twe).

permitted to speak for the Dey people . . . but that he, the Devil, would appoint the speaker for the occasion.” “There is a penalty attached to the decree,” Twe noted, “but I cannot repeat it here nor put it in writing.” Twe feared that “if the people are not let alone to get before the Commission and speak freely, trouble is liable to rise: to put it nakedly, the people (natives) may fight at any time because they are fed up and tired.”²⁴

Several days after his arrival, as he settled into an unoccupied house leased by the Firestone Plantations Company, Johnson had no idea that he would have to bide his time for an entire month in Monrovia before a “busy” and then an “ill” President King officially constituted the commission. Johnson met the Liberian commissioner, the elderly Arthur Barclay, who had yet to see the commission’s terms of reference, but he had to wait two weeks for the arrival of Christy. In Monrovia, with its “extravagant emphasis on politics” and “powerful influence of family connections between the executive officers and the Government,” Johnson tried to “right” himself and passed the tedious days by taking photographs, observing native customs, and adjusting to the “unnecessary heat and body strain, mosquitoes and snakes, tin houses and corroding iron, dangerous surf and roadless roads.” After only a few weeks, he admitted: “Days with my subject and no escape from it have almost warped my mind.”²⁵

In a letter written from Monrovia to sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, then a new faculty member at Fisk, Johnson apologized for the “vast amount of detail left on your shoulders, the haste of departure, and the onerous proofs” of *The Negro in American Civilization*,

²⁴ Didwho Twe, “Latest Reports,” Monrovia, March 6, 1930, in Henry Carter to the Secretary of State, April 27, 1930 (quotations), Box 7011, 882.5048/268, RG-59, NA.

²⁵ Johnson to the Assistant Secretary of State, October 1, 1930, 4; The International Commission of Inquiry, *Report of the International Commission of Inquiry Into the Existence of Slavery and Forced Labor in the Republic of Liberia* (Washington, D. C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1931), 10 (first and second quotations); Johnson to Cullen, April 4, 1930 (remaining quotations), Cullen Papers.

the summary report from the 1928 National Interracial Conference. Johnson told Frazier “it is impossible to be casual” in surroundings so “wrought up” with “meetings, facts and prayer services, vicious charges and counter charges and really fundamental economic and cultural problems to be studied over a long period.” Questions of “finance, sanitation, labor, imperialism, slavery, natives, resources, autonomy, sovereignty, internationalism, nationalism, sedition—these touch off each a separate and powerful combination of forces and fears.” Johnson would have liked “a brief respite at a movie theatre. But there are none.” In the solitude of Africa “all there is to do is see and hear in the day time, ponder and reflect at night—perchance over a whiskey and soda.” Johnson found it “futile to speculate” on “how it is all going to end.”²⁶

An “interesting sort” is how Johnson described Cuthbert Christy after the British physician’s arrival on March 22. During long walks as they passed the time and waited for President King to officially constitute the commission, Christy spoke “dogmatically” on “flora, fauna, malaria . . . the physical basis of sleep, therapeutic properties of tobacco, tea, coffee, rainy seasons, the African tom-tom, rubber, road building, labor, etc.” During a conversation with Christy on an uphill hike along Monrovia’s main residential street that led past the British and American legations and ended at the Cape Mesurado lighthouse, Johnson began to rethink his initial assessment of his fellow commissioner. The “slow and deliberative” Christy, thirty years older than Johnson, blamed Liberia’s current economic convulsions on corporate meddling, and condemned Firestone for its role in the crisis. Christy also claimed that he resented Henry Carter’s “interference.” From the hilltop Christy and Johnson viewed in the distance a cemetery where gallows

²⁶ Charles S. Johnson to E. Franklin Frazier, April 3, 1930 (quotations), Box 131.11, E. Franklin Frazier Papers (Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D. C.).

had been erected between a pair of large palm trees for the public execution the following day of two natives—a Bassa and a Grebo. Johnson noted: “There will be crowds for the execution.” Referring to Christy, Johnson wrote later that day: “One difference has been that I have been disposed to listen to any evidence and he to none.” Christy took “slowly to new ideas” and clung “persistently” to what he “supposes already to be a fact.” Johnson ended his meditation by asserting, “Christy’s mind runs in deep grooves.”²⁷

Johnson and Christy also discussed the “strange proposals” made by the Liberians in regard to the constitution of the commission. Secretary of State Edwin Barclay suggested a “rotary chairmanship,” while his uncle, Liberian commissioner Arthur Barclay, mentioned that “the visitors might not wish to return home without visiting our interesting hinterland ‘*afterwards*.’” Barclay told Johnson in private, “I shouldn’t think you would want to stay here more than two months.” For his part, President King suggested a permanent secretary provided by his government to keep records and summon witnesses so that hearings could be conducted with “dignity.” King then said something about “guards and messengers.” Johnson felt that “the government’s position ends with the bringing of the Commission.” Moreover, both Christy and Johnson viewed “the hanging job” scheduled for the following day as an important “immediate forerunner of the Commission. With uninformed natives it could suggest intimidation.” Indeed, in an environment laden with political intrigue and chicanery, Johnson concluded that one of his native houseboys, Titus, “is most definitely a spy, although he is as most spies

²⁷ Johnson, “African Diary,” March 27, 1930, 28 (first through fourth quotations), 29 (fifth through eighth quotations), 30 (ninth quotation), CSJP.

ready to play a double game.” Johnson also noted: “The boys are eager to see the hanging tomorrow.”²⁸

Early the next morning Johnson traveled to the cemetery to witness the executions. Tribal courts had sentenced both men to die as murderers. Johnson learned, “One killed his wife for infidelity, although he could have taken her back and received his money according to custom—says he is not sorry but glad he killed her.” As the man spoke from the gallows, Johnson received a translated version of his words: “Beware of women They will make you do things like I did to bring me to this place My woman went out to her lover and when she came back I talked to her and she talked smart But I prayed and confessed and feel better. The woman was the cause of it all.” Another of Johnson’s houseboys, Josiah, “explained that the natives are very particular about their women—possessions.” Later Johnson wrote: “I know of no place where the unimportance of women, of all classes, is more marked They are not public figures. They are not leaders in church. There is no idolization. They are wholly unimportant except as breeders.”²⁹

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 30 (quotations).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, March 28, 1930, 32 (quotations), CSJP. On tribal courts, see Merran Fraenkel, *Tribe and Class in Monrovia* (London, Ibadan, and Accra: Oxford University Press, 1964), 97-109. Johnson’s comments about women, particularly their “idolization,” are most interesting, considering the accusation by one author that he was a misogynist. The charge of misogyny stems from Johnson’s alleged “elevation” of Alain Locke to a leadership position in the Harlem Renaissance that deliberately shut out Jessie Fauset. If Johnson harbored feelings of misogyny, it is doubtful that he would have gone out of his way to help Zora Neale Hurston, the most outspoken female voice of the Harlem Renaissance. Thadious M. Davis, *Nella Larsen, Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance: A Woman’s Life Unveiled* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), 159-60. In an *Opportunity* editorial, Johnson dismissed as “puerile sophistry” a report that claimed “women average about five ounces less brain matter than men, and the part they lack is the reasoning capacity.” Johnson wrote: “Even in this enlightened age scientists are trying to find some justification for the very convenient status to which (women) have been relegated.” Johnson found it more than accidental that black suffrage and woman suffrage “were proposed and fought for at the same time. And there is a most uncanny similarity between charges made against the mentality of women and those made against the mentality of Negroes. The only difficulty seems to be that none of them can be successfully established.” See “Women’s Brains,” *Opportunity*, 4 (April 1927), 4 (quotations).

As Johnson wandered around the native communities of Vai Town and Kru Town on Monrovia's waterfront taking photographs and buying handwoven cloth and other trinkets, he took note of the sanitation program initiated by the U. S. Public Health Service and the U. S. State Department in the wake of the yellow fever outbreak that had killed William Francis and James Sibley in 1929. American physician Howard F. Smith, in charge of the program and working with limited funds from the 1926 loan, paid especially close attention to the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, the most notorious of yellow fever carriers, and tried to eradicate their breeding grounds by burning trash and disposing of bottles and tin cans. Johnson learned that "failure to put out the fires one day caused the loss of a house," and noted "Dr. Smith's cans are piled high all over the town." Near Kru Town, Johnson and Christy met a native boy at work clearing a dumping ground. The boy said in broken English, "I move bottles make people sick." Christy, however, thought that he heard the boy say, "Firestone . . . make people sick," and then "commented on the extensive grip which the Firestone development had on the country." Before long, Johnson developed a negative opinion of Dr. Smith, whom he considered ineffective, and came to regard the natives working barefoot in piles of broken glass as the "heroes".³⁰

At a luncheon held on March 31 before the ceremonial opening of a new bridge that connected two sections of Firestone's Harbel plantation on the Du River forty miles outside of Monrovia, Johnson had his first meeting with President King. On the way

³⁰ Raymond W. Bixler, *The Foreign Policy of the United States in Liberia* (New York: Pageant Press, 1957), 90-91; The Secretary of State to the Chargé in Liberia (Wharton), November 23, 1929, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1929* (3 vols.; Washington, D. C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1941), III, 327-28; Richard P. Strong, ed., *The African Republic of Liberia and the Belgian Congo: Based on the Observations Made and Material Collected During the Harvard African Expedition, 1926-1927* (2 vols.; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1930), I, 190, 224; Johnson, "African Diary," March 26, 1930, 25 (first and second quotations), March 27, 1930, 31 (remaining quotations), CSJP.

Johnson and Christy passed through the Mount Barclay plantation and stopped to examine the closely planted trees and method of tapping. Introductions at the luncheon went awkwardly although the president seemed friendly enough and several times made a “conspicuous” effort to draw Johnson near him. At his first opportunity, King, whose bearing was “quite good,” made his way to the sociologist’s “little group,” which included Arthur Barclay and Bishop Campbell. With Johnson, King chatted about natives and the “fusing of cultures,” a process that, according to the president, had “to go slowly and with their consent.” King then invited Christy and Johnson to his table and the conversation turned to “Hoover’s internal commission policy, hours of presidential work, building (his house ordered from America), flora and fauna, tobacco, etc.” When Johnson rose to leave, King shook his hand. Noticing its warmth—Johnson had been holding his hands folded behind him—the president “expressed anxiety” about his health and “the possibility of fever.” Later, King returned to feel Johnson’s hands again, and warned him about the sun.³¹

The Fisk sociologist described the president as “an exceptionally clever man” after listening to his delicately balanced speech aimed at appeasing “the Firestones, all the foreign consuls, his staff, the Commissioners, the natives, the Liberians, and the European colony.” King claimed that the only use of forced labor in Liberia “has been to get the men away from the Firestones when the chiefs called them home.” At the

³¹ Johnson, “African Diary,” March 31, 1930, 36 (first and second quotations), 37 (remaining quotations). King had never heard of Johnson before the League inquiry. Clifton R. Wharton to the Secretary of State, January 10, 1930, Box 7011, 882.5048, RG-59, NA. Planting continued at the Harbel and Cavalla plantations until 1932. By 1933, the heart-shaped Harbel measured twenty miles at its widest and longest point, and covered fifty-five thousand acres. By World War II, Harbel’s ninety thousand acres contained eight million trees. Taylor, *The Firestone Operations in Liberia*, 58, 60; R. Earle Anderson, *Liberia: America’s African Friend* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1952), 138.

luncheon, the president's wife, a "slightly rounded, freshly middle-aged" African American, studied Johnson "closely."³²

Moving on to the ceremonial ribbon-cutting at the bridge, an affair "quietly done" with a "heavy dignified tolerance" as "everyone moved about as in the silent pictures," Johnson scrutinized the personal appearance and speech habits of President King. While drinking champagne along with the other guests, Johnson observed King's graying hair, wilted collar, and "teeth not so good, unevenly aligned, and out on the side of his mouth where he held his cigar." King spoke with "the merest haltingness" as he slurred over "grammatical uncertainties," a style that lacked "crispness of expression." The "totality" of the effect, however, "was usually good." On the other hand, the Firestone ladies in attendance were "not profound by any means—modish, easily adjusted to the fabricated comfort which the extended importance of their husbands, backed by money in the situation, gave. Their "status in the states," as Johnson observed, "would probably be different."³³

Johnson and Christy then toured the Firestone properties with general manager William Hines. The efficiency of the entire enterprise, which included a cold storage plant, machine shop, and a hospital under construction, had the desired effect on Johnson, who believed "if Hines' purpose was to make a good impression, the day gave him a good break." When one of the tires on their car went flat—presumably a high quality Firestone product—Hines managed to summon a mechanic and extract the group from "a bad predicament." Christy, who viewed Firestone in only the most negative light, later remarked that Hines explained his business "better than any person he had met in a long

³² Johnson, "African Diary," March 31, 1930, 36 (fourth and fifth quotations), 37 (first and second quotations), 38 (third quotation).

³³ *Ibid.*, 38 (first through third quotations), 38-39 (fourth quotation), 39 (remaining quotations).

time,” and that he “was much impressed.” Although highly efficient and technologically advanced, the Firestone Plantations Company still had much to learn in Liberia. As Hines noted, the company had built Western-style cottages for workers, but when natives began modifying them by trying to attach tin or thatched rooftops, which “disfigured the original,” it was finally understood that the preferred style of building should have resembled the conical-shaped huts in local villages. Hines also mentioned that six hundred tons of rice that the company had purchased from Ceylon ended up as food for “weevils.” But after importing some chili peppers from Sierra Leone and sheeting the rice with them “the weevils scampered out.” Both Johnson and Christy praised such “a notable and useful discovery,” but Hines explained that “the natives had suggested it They use this method.”³⁴

Confident that the commission would soon begin its work, and that some degree of equilibrium would be restored to the “upside-downness” that he had felt before even departing for Liberia, Charles Johnson learned that a mysterious illness had seized President King, causing a further delay in launching the investigation. Another week in Monrovia, with little electricity or running water, and no free press, only added to the sense of disorder that frustrated Johnson. In conversation with Henry Carter’s young nephew, Johnson referred to a makeshift zoo with a pygmy hippopotamus that he had seen, to which the teenager remarked: “The whole place seems like a zoo.” Cuthbert Christy contributed to the tension and confusion by following Johnson’s every move and referring to the American commissioner as a white man, “reflecting in his mind between civilized and native.” Drinking, as discovered by many of those displaced in Liberia,

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 39 (first through fourth quotations), 40, 41 (remaining quotations); Arthur J. Knoll, “Firestone’s Labor Policy, 1924-1939,” *Liberian Studies Journal*, 16 (1991), 62 (on housing).

offered temporary relief from the tedious days. After a visit with Bishop Campbell—“the jolly Bishop” with red hair and goatee—Johnson noted, “. . . got drunker at his good place than any visit in town.” Campbell also relayed the news that at Cape Palmas, the most important district that Johnson and Christy planned to investigate, native chiefs had been forced to “eat a brew with their rice under the ministrations of a medicine man, which will make them die if they talk to the commission.”³⁵

An official meeting with President King finally came on April 5 at the Executive Mansion. At the meeting Arthur Barclay read aloud from a paper that laid out “suggestions to the commission on procedure.” One “suggestion” limited the receiving of official testimony to Monrovia, and only allowed the commission to travel to the interior after the hearings had ended. Johnson’s cards and stationery fell to the floor as he listened to Barclay’s inclusion of a “sick provision which would suspend sessions during illness of any member and if he is still disabled after two weeks to ask his government to name a substitute.” Johnson objected to the “two weeks” provision, knowing that it would take at least six to eight weeks to get a replacement either for himself or for Christy. He noted: “Obviously it was a provision for Barclay, giving power to the Liberian Government to name a substitute, or a very clever means of intimidation.” Johnson felt that the provisions “unnecessarily put a premium, in the event of an unexpected turn, upon the fact of a commissioner’s sickness and place a temptation.” Everyone eventually agreed, however, to Johnson’s proposals for a quicker method of replacement. Johnson and Christy had less success in their objections to

³⁵ Johnson, “African Diary,” March 31, 1930, 47, 48 (first and second quotations), April 2, 1930, 49 (remaining quotations). In Monrovia, where “. . . almost every other man is a lawyer and every man a politician,” Graham Greene noted, “there was little to do but drink, drink and wait for the fortnightly mail-boat which might bring frozen meat but was unlikely to bring a passenger.” Graham Greene, *Journey Without Maps* (New York: Doubleday, 1936), 231 (first quotation), 234 (second quotation).

President King's idea of appointing a Liberian as official secretary to the commission, attorney Plenyono Gbe Wolo, who had received promises of lavish political favors for his services. In the end an agreement that "due consideration" would be given to changes suggested to the government left all matters open to further discussion.³⁶

Later that evening the "suggestions" of the Liberian government read at the Executive Mansion earlier in the day appeared in written form. The changing of "suggestions" to "instructions" caused immediate alarm for Johnson and Christy. Because the Commission could not be constituted until after it had committed to the "instructions" limiting native testimony to Monrovia, "there was the dilemma of running promptly on the rocks on the one hand, thus delaying the constitution as the President had hinted; and on the other the acceptance of conditions which obviously restricted operation and would be regarded at home as taking an inadequate position for such an inquiry." Johnson and Christy wrote a joint letter of protest, which they showed to Arthur Barclay, and promised to raise the issue at a meeting the next day with President King before he officially constituted the commission.³⁷

When Johnson and Christy arrived at the Executive Mansion, President King made "certain points" that he had "rehearsed", transmitting them through Arthur Barclay, "whose deafness prevented him from following the remarks closely." King explained that changes to the "instructions" would only cause further delay, and Barclay asked Johnson why the "due consideration" agreement "wasn't sufficient under instructions?"

³⁶ Johnson also spent three days writing twenty-six letters to be carried by mail boat. Johnson, "African Diary," April 3 and April 5, 1930, 50, 54, 55, 56 (quotations), CSJP. Wolo was born in 1883 in Grand Cess, Kru Coast Territory. Through the help of various missionary friends he traveled to the United States in 1910, where he received degrees from Harvard and Columbia universities, and Union Theological Seminary. Like Arthur Barclay, he served on Firestone's legal team in Liberia. Dunn, Beyan, and Burrowes, *Historical Dictionary of Liberia*, 359.

³⁷ Johnson, "African Diary," April 5 and 6, 1930, 57 (quotations), CSJP.

Johnson replied, “smiling and with halting words,” that “‘due consideration’ could conceivably mean no consideration at all,” a point “pleasantly taken.” The discussion then “swerved over” to the nature of evidence, and “at one warm tilt” Johnson explained that he “considered this a fact finding body, a commission of inquiry and not a court; that testimonial evidence was . . . only a fraction of factual evidence and usually the least convincing of it; that evidence meant documents, observations, the assembling of as many elements of a situation as to constitute for any person an objective fact” Johnson claimed that he “would not presume to requisition the prerogative of God in determining who was lying and who was telling the truth.” Further discussion of objective evidence, Johnson felt, “created more faith in the field work,” and “the discussion was also softened considerably.”³⁸

President King reminded everyone that his Cabinet awaited introduction outside, and Johnson “asked pleasantly” of Arthur Barclay if he could think of a word other than “instructions” that indicated the commission’s “wish to follow the convenience of the government as far as possible.” Barclay turned the question back on Johnson, who began “Memorandum Embodying the” Barclay supplied “Views,” and Johnson continued, “. . . of the Liberian Government on the Constitution and Procedure of the International Commission of Inquiry.” “A happy solution,” Johnson noted later. “Everyone agreed, and with a mighty relief.”³⁹ The diplomacy that Johnson used so successfully in dealing with Barclay and King, career politicians at least as shrewd as the bulk of local white leaders in the Jim Crow South, is precisely the approach that present-day historians cite as insufficiently militant. One can only speculate on the results of the meeting with

³⁸ *Ibid.*, April 7, 1930, 59-60, 61 (first through sixth quotations, 62 (remaining quotations).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 62, (quotations).

Barclay and King had the irritable W. E. B. Du Bois or the combative E. Franklin Frazier been placed in Johnson's position.

After adjourning to the "Gold Room", President King presented his Cabinet, and then "took a bible and an envelope" for the swearing in ceremony, something that Christy, a Quaker, "had been worrying about . . . for a week." Christy "bent in the direction of the bible," but according to Johnson only "got within two inches" of it, "although he swore later that he had touched it." Christy worried about "being silly, wondering if reporters were around," and if he should repeat the entire oath. In fact, after repeating only one line and feeling "more foolish because he should have been talking to God," Christy added "Your Excellency," and "ended the thing." After the swearing in of the commissioners, "speeches were expected," for which neither Johnson nor Christy had prepared, "and both had feared." After Christy's awkward effort, Johnson began, ". . . I can only say that I accepted this responsibility after some deliberation and being in it will conscientiously endeavor to see clearly and sift wisely; that it is my hope that whatever the findings are they will prove of highest good to the government of Liberia."⁴⁰

Johnson noticed "a look of relief" on the faces of his fellow commissioners at their first meeting, which dealt with procedure and moved off "slowly." Arthur Barclay made "one phrase sentences definitely and economically," his deafness another obstacle to overcome. "He has a difficult role," Johnson wrote. Plenyono Gbe Wolo, on the other hand, proved "to be a very much overrated Harvard product," who probably had "the

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 63 (first through tenth quotations), 64 (last quotation).

intelligence but lacks energy.” Johnson conceded Wolo “in my soul out of clear sportsmanship,” and noted sardonically, “It is an unmatched trio.”⁴¹

At the conclusion of the meeting in the “Special Room” of Liberia’s Department of State, Arthur Barclay called Johnson aside after reading a note that he had received from Thomas Faulkner, who had opposed Barclay’s appointment to the commission, and who had been holding anti-King political rallies. Barclay, with his “white knotty hair and beard” and “two prominent fore teeth” with “no others in evidence,” told Johnson, “We are both Negroes, but I hate ‘nigger doings.’” Earlier Barclay had remarked to Johnson that he regretted their status as commissioners, hoping that they could speak informally afterwards. Johnson grew to admire Barclay, reported to know more about the history and politics of Liberia than anyone alive, and whose interest in literature helped form a special bond with the Fisk sociologist. The former president of Liberia and senior member of Firestone’s legal team in the black republic moved easily between discussions of “African societies, archaeology, cultural problems, ‘air flying’, and legal procedure in England and the States.” He explained that Faulkner held “a lot of personal bitterness” against President King. Barclay, however, claimed that he would tell Johnson anything that he wanted to know, “and what I say can be written and said again. I stand behind it.”⁴²

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, April 8, 1930, 64 (first quotation), 65 (remaining quotations). The following is an example of dialogue from the commission’s early work on procedure: Christy: “There is the point of summoning witnesses.” Barclay: “The form of the summons is the first thing. There are the legal forms prescribed by the Liberian law. Johnson: “I should like to see a form—if there are any changes, the Commission would like to make suggestions for them to suit our particular purposes.” Barclay: “I didn’t hear what you were saying.” When Johnson asked about the oath, Barclay replied, “The Christian can swear on the Bible, the Islamite on the Koran, the pagan according to his tribe—the Kru on knife and salt, etc.” *Record of Testimony of Witnesses Before the International Commission of Inquiry into the Existence of Slavery and Forced Labor in the Republic of Liberia*, 2 (quotations on witnesses), 7 (quotation on oath), Box 7012, RG-59, NA.

⁴² Johnson, “African Diary,” April 9, 1930, 65 (quotations), CSJP.

During the first sessions, with Christy as chairman, Johnson tried to “concede as much as possible, in graciousness to Liberia.” He soon found, however, that “the minutes are bad” and “the re-wording is clumsy.” Wolo insisted “on giving large typographed prominence to Secretary to the Commission,” and Christy acquiesced only when “the Chairman’s name shows on the summons and other papers; also about the bold type.” Johnson wondered how he would explain “either to the Government or to my wife the extraordinary anonymity of the American members,” and forced “a change by making the forms ridiculous.” Christy “got the point” but Wolo had “to be bluntly told to *lower case* his name,” which aroused “indignation” in the chairman. Barclay tried to “throw as much . . . as possible” to Christy. Johnson claimed, “He has his reasons, presumably.” After Johnson called “for a check on the unequal representation of the chairman, which is merely a courtesy office, and has no more strength of power,” the group had to “practically rewrite the minutes.”⁴³

The question of accurate interpretation of native testimony presented the commission with a dilemma until Johnson suggested that witnesses bring their own interpreters, “a point that cannot be argued against successfully, because if a man gives false testimony or complains that he is misinterpreted it is his own fault.” The point seemed “so clear” that Johnson felt “ashamed to have pitted so successfully.” After winning his argument, Johnson looked “away and up at the picture of Liberia’s presidents.” He studied “the two flags above the photographs, painted in by rough hands; the horribly executed and speculative likeness of President King, in oils, on the wall,” and “a flood of concern” passed over him. Obviously thinking back on the Harlem Renaissance, Johnson wondered, “Where are the skilled fingers, the creative art, the sense of fitness of things

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 65 (first through tenth quotations), 66 (remaining quotations).

other than in politics?” Christy observed, “that the trouble is graft, incompetence and ignorance, and this before the hearings begin.”⁴⁴

Several days after the commission officially launched into its work, Chargé Henry Carter wired the State Department with information gathered from the new financial adviser that claimed Liberia’s revenues had “so fallen off” that a budget deficit of at least \$200,000 loomed, and that the government had only about half of the funds needed to meet its May 1st interest on outstanding bonds. Carter suggested confidentially that the source of the problem lay in the fact that eighty-five percent of Liberia’s government expenditures went toward paying salaried government positions. Unless President King took “rigorous measures,” Carter not only anticipated a default on interest payments but “a serious paralysis of responsible government here which will be intensified by the probability that many high government officials will be discredited through the slavery investigation.” Carter then made the startling assertion that the U. S. Government might have “to consider whether a temporary friendly intervention on its behalf may not be advisable for the purpose of forestalling European intervention which . . . would probably mean the end of Liberian independence.”⁴⁵

On April 11, Liberia’s National Fast and Prayer Day, Johnson wrote: “Ben the Kru barber comes up to cut hair.” As a boy growing up in Bristol, Virginia, in the 1890s, Johnson shined shoes at a local barbershop, where he listened carefully to the conversations of men, both black and white. Indeed, he credited those early experiences for sparking an interest in human relations that led to his becoming a sociologist. In Monrovia, Johnson listened as the “nattily” dressed Ben, between snips of hair,

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 66 (quotations).

⁴⁵ Henry Carter to the Secretary of State, April 10, 1930 (quotations), Box 7013, 882.51/2089, RG-59,NA.

“delivered one of the most powerful folk addresses I have ever heard.” The barber said, “I’m a Kru. I have my house down in Kru Town. We have our feelings about these people here, these Americo-Liberians who want to sit down all the while and make us work; drag our men and boys out of their houses to work on the streets, for no pay, with no tools and no food. Do they go out to work? No! That’s what they want the natives to do. That’s why they are no further now. Lazy. Over a hundred years they been here and look at the houses. Look at the streets. Full of the same rocks they found here. All the rich palms and coffee go to waste while they sit down. No farms, no business, no nothing. All of them want to be government. All of them want to be lawyers They scared stiff about this commission. A lot of them going to get caught and know it.”⁴⁶

Narratives like the barber’s “folk address” later became a hallmark of Johnson’s best known sociological studies, such as *Shadow of the Plantation* (1934) and *Growing Up in the Black Belt* (1941), where he focused attention on the structure and internal rhythms of rural black life in the American South, and the effects that external forces had on an

⁴⁶ Charles S. Johnson, “A Spiritual Autobiography,” in Louis Finkelstein, ed., *American Spiritual Autobiographies: Fifteen Self-Portraits* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1948), 191-206. The Kru barber told Johnson: “When I look at you, I call you white man, because you live in America and see everything. You study book. You know everything white man know. These people here don’t know much. They can’t rise, and they hid book we natives. Say they have schools for natives. Where they? When you go upcountry you try to find them. They don’t like American Negroes to come here because they work. They want them to treat they boys like they treat them, so they be all the same. They say you have to treat them this way and if you don’t they don’t like you. Faulkner wouldn’t do it. He came here and worked and set up a telephone line . . . put in an ice cream plant, ice plant, and paid off his men. They liked to work for him—but only one Liberian would work then. They said in their campaign, ‘We made him mayor of Monrovia, and he couldn’t do nothing and he resigned.’ Well, why did he resign? Because he told them he wouldn’t work men on the streets unless they gave him money to pay them. Faulkner won the election, but they robbed him of it. By twelve o’clock he was ahead, and when King heard about it, he got in his car and went to Congo Town—you’ve seen it—about twenty houses there. You know how many thousand votes he got? Three thousand!” Johnson, “African Diary,” April 11, 1930, 67 (first through third quotations), 68 (remaining quotations), 69 (quotation cited above), 70, CSJP. Johnson mistakenly referred to April 11 as Liberia’s Thanksgiving Day, a holiday that takes place the first Thursday in November.

otherwise functional pattern of existence for individuals, families, and entire communities.⁴⁷

The next day Johnson and Christy traveled to Firestone's Mount Barclay Plantation outside of Monrovia, where they met the manager, "a Mr. Allen." The "slim, nervous" Allen, wearing white mosquito boots and sitting alone at home, greeted the two commissioners "most cheerily . . . as if wanting company." After their introductions, Allen called "Boy," and "a big, husky" native servant entered, who received a "bawling out" after bringing only two cups of tea. Johnson may have felt he had been transported back to the antebellum South when he noticed lying on a table a thick, "rounded leather whip, about 2 feet long," with "a tapering handle, flexible end," and "8 to 12 thongs tipped with metal." Allen said, "King has done more for the country than any other man . . ." but "he's got his fingers scorched in this business, I'm afraid." Allen claimed that the district commissioners, appointed by King, "made life hard" for the natives. "The government," according to Allen, "has hurt more than it has helped recruiting—would rather do voluntary recruiting—too much filthy graft in the whole affair." Because of the "simplicity" of the natives, Allen explained, "anyone can come to them . . . with a little gin, some tobacco, and . . . lead them anywhere. This is partly the reason for the willy-nilly loyalty of the natives" and "why King has had so much trouble with them." Allen concluded that the only way for the natives "to get out from under this stupid oppression . . . is white rule, and I say this without any disrespect to you, Dr. Johnson."⁴⁸

⁴⁷ John H. Stanfield, *Philanthropy and Jim Crow in American Social Science* (Westport, Conn. and London: Greenwood Press, 1985), 119-34.

⁴⁸ When Christy learned that Allen had been born in Ceylon, he remarked later to Johnson that the plantation manager may "have a bit of Ceylon in him." Johnson, "African Diary," April 12, 1930, 70 (first through seventh quotations), 71 (tenth through twelfth quotations), 72-73, 74 (fifteenth through eighteenth quotations), 75 (seventh through ninth, and fourteenth quotations), 76, CSJP.

Christy later told Johnson that he agreed with the plantation manager about the need for white rule in Liberia. Christy asserted that Liberia had fallen “a hundred years” behind England or France, and that “U. S. Negroes were a hundred years behind whites.” Johnson explained patiently “that some U. S. Negroes were one-hundred years behind some U. S. whites, but not all Negroes were one-hundred years behind all whites.” With the rest of Africa colonized, Johnson argued that Liberia stood alone as “an experiment in Negro self-rule.” As “polite,” “gracious,” and “personally friendly” as he was “childish,” “grasping,” and “acquisitive,” Christy perplexed Johnson and pushed the sociologist’s remarkable patience to its limits. Although “opposed on race issues,” Johnson thought Christy “more national than racial.” Christy “began most immodestly by wanting to see the League honored by making him chairman; when he got that he wanted to call it ‘President’; then to sign all letters, approve all correspondence, write the minutes, lead the expeditions,” and “use Matheus’ verbatim notes.” Most annoying for Johnson, Christy “hops on to every interview out of the house like grim death, fearing that I would learn the secret ahead of him.” While Christy had “many interesting facts of humanity and collecting and travel stored in memory,” he was “too apt to apply Congo to Liberia, or South America to Polynesia.”⁴⁹

Commission hearings began in Monrovia on the morning of April 14. Because of the scheduling of Thomas Faulkner as one of the first witnesses, Charles Johnson arrived shortly after eight a. m. feeling “a moderate excitement of anticipation and wondering if any trouble is going to break.” Faulkner, “dressed in white drill,” delivered his testimony against the King administration without incident, however, and his clerk provided the

⁴⁹ Johnson also noted that Christy “believes he can learn to typewrite in a couple of days” and “sits up late trying to compensate in writing for unfortunate inadequacies of concise speech.” *Ibid.*, 76-77 (quotations).

names of other witnesses. Christy asked Johnson to preside over an important session a few days later, which “provided the most direct and definite record of facts so far.” Johnson, with a headache from the previous night’s “late hour and whiskey and sodas,” took the chair and listened to a “clean confession” by Quartermaster Edward Blackett. Working out of Sinoe County, the “eternal man-stealer” and “heartless” Blackett would receive orders from Postmaster-General Samuel Ross, and then use the Frontier Force to carry out raids and abduct the required number of boys and men for shipment to Fernando Po. Blackett offered no apologies for his actions after someone pointed out that “this is slavery of the worst sort.” “That don’t concern me,” Blackett stated, “. . . I’m acting on orders, and I carries out my orders.” In the following days came hearings “in which the most vital testimony broke,” including more evidence of the direct involvement of high government officials in profiting from forced labor, particularly Vice-President Allen N. Yancy.⁵⁰

On the day that Edward Blackett testified before the commission, Henry Carter paid a visit to Johnson. Carter, whose alcoholism would eventually force the State Department to remove him from Liberia, arrived “half tanked,” and “spilled a lot of mysterious stuff about not revealing the U. S. hand or intentions regarding the impending bankruptcy of Liberia, and of taking over—saw no hope there.” Johnson praised Carter’s attitude, especially because it unintentionally “threw Christy to the defense of Liberian autonomy.” Christy and Johnson later overheard the discussion of “a typical German party” coming from a saloon across the street. The drinkers, including some British citizens, proclaimed in “loud, boisterous voices what they would do with Liberia if their

⁵⁰ Ibid., April 14, 1930, 77 (first quotation), April 16, 1930, 78, 79 (remaining quotations), 80. For Faulkner’s testimony, see *Record of Testimony of Witnesses*, 6-12.

government had it.” Johnson wrote: “This ghoulis European business quite irritates me.” Christy conceded, “the natives are anxious to talk,” and claimed once again that they “want help and relief and intelligent guidance from Europeans.” Johnson “argued more hotly than usual,” that Liberia “had been both menaced and stolen from all sides,” and that “the only solution is not giving it away to England, or Germany, or even America.”⁵¹

While discussions of financial problems and possible intervention grew more intense in Liberia, State Department officials in Washington displayed more puzzlement than alarm. J. P. Moffat, after reviewing Carter’s telegram about the possibility of Liberia’s defaulting on its May interest payment, suggested that budget deficits in the black republic “may be taken as a matter of course,” and that “the amount of this deficit is no greater than deficits in previous years.” Moreover, Moffat’s information showed that only fifty-six percent of Liberian government expenditures, not eighty-five percent as Carter had indicated, went toward salary payments. Although Liberia needed “a good house cleaning,” Moffat noted “the serious reduction in revenue is largely a result of the reduced export of rubber.” Because Firestone controlled “to a large extent the revenue of the country,” and because “the revenue of the country is dependent upon the development of the Firestone Plantation,” it hardly seemed “reasonable . . . for the bondholders of the Finance Corporation to complain when the revenues of the country diminish as a result of their own action.” As to Carter’s reference to “the necessity of intervention by the United

⁵¹ Johnson, “African Diary,” April 16, 1930, 80 (first through sixth quotations), 81 (remaining quotations).

States Government to forestall European intervention,” Moffat found it “unclear” and invited an explanation.⁵²

In the meantime, Charles Johnson reached the conclusion that his British colleague harbored a “cold-blooded discontent” for the idea of Liberian self-rule, and found his “lighthearted” stories of past behavior particularly disturbing. Christy’s previous adventures in Africa included shooting six “beggars” for killing a white military officer. Christy and his group first tried to hang the men but the tree limb broke. One of the men, still chained to a dead comrade, managed to free himself and jump into a river, where he was promptly shot. Another story involved Christy leading an expedition against a native tribe, where from the prow of a boat and armed with a Mauser he “opened fire on the lot” with devastating effect. Johnson also learned that Christy once “played medicine man to a village chief who would not join . . . a punitive expedition against a relation.” In order to purge his “protesting spirit,” Christy stuck a hypodermic needle into the chief’s ear, which induced “violent vomiting,” and persuaded him to join the expedition. Johnson found it hard to believe that “in all this he seems to regard me as an entirely sympathetic associate.”⁵³

After dinner one night “the storm broke on the utter childishness” of Christy, who wanted to “put his name exclusively to all transactions, control the commission, absorb all documents, be considered the ‘one boss’, etc., of a tripartite arrangement.” Only a few days before their first trip inland, Johnson lashed out at Christy for “doing his damndest to appropriate the party,” and wanted to know what he meant by “one boss.” Following a “debate” Johnson told Christy of his complete indifference to whether or not they hired

⁵² J. P. Moffat, “Memorandum: Financial Conditions in Liberia,” April 17, 1930 (quotations), Box 7013, 882.51/2089, RG-59, NA.

⁵³ Johnson, “African Diary,” April 16, 1930, 81-82 (quotations), CSJP.

a guide, or where they chose a campsite, but that he would not allow the Englishman to dictate his way of working. Having sent his own secretary packing back to England, Christy asked Johnson if he could borrow the services of John Matheus. Johnson “dropped a cold discouragement” on the idea, and underscored his annoyance with Christy by suggesting that he could always “leave the party, write a minority report, and go home” to Nashville. When Christy finally backed down Johnson deemed the entire discussion “an unnecessary fuss” and “an elderly gentleman’s fear of not having all the prestige.”⁵⁴

As the commission’s first set of hearings in Monrovia came to a close in late April, Johnson and Christy began preparing for their trip to Kakata, some 60 miles northeast of Monrovia. A prearranged agreement allowed the elderly Arthur Barclay to avoid the hazards upcountry and stay behind in the capital city. Shopping for field equipment at Firestone’s Du Plantation store, Johnson “engaged” two steel boxes and two dozen tins of Lucky Strikes. As a “check on interpreters,” he also decided to bring along a “small field machine” that could make temporary recordings on wax discs. Didhwo Twe, one of the most important witnesses against the government, added a wrinkle to the departure of the commissioners when he notified the American legation that he would very likely “either be poisoned or shot,” and left a note “to be opened in case of his sudden death.”⁵⁵

To be sure, Twe, whose list of grievances against the government stretched at least fifteen years into the past, posed innumerable problems for the King administration. A few months after the 1915 Kru rebellion, Twe witnessed the execution of his tribal chief, and in 1927 his own son was captured by Edward Blackett’s raiders and carried aboard

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, April 24, 1930, 85-86 (quotations).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, April 19, 1930, 83 (first through third quotations); Henry Carter to the Secretary of State, April 27, 1930 (quotations), Box 7011, 882.5048/268, RG-59, NA.

the *S. S. San Carlos* bound for Fernando Po. Twe and his “confidential men” kept a close watch on developments in the hinterland and informed the State Department in February 1930 how much the coming of the commission meant to natives. Indeed, Twe went to great lengths to protect native witnesses, such as “the three men who were made to eat up their own shit at Vonjama,” by hiding them at his farm so that President King and his “crooked bunch” would “know nothing about them.” Through his “messengers”, Twe had urged native chiefs to speak openly to the commission because only by “telling everything” would they be able “to live in peace and acquire property.” Yet, Twe was forced to operate largely in secret.⁵⁶

As Johnson and Christy packed for Kakata on April 26, Henry Carter appeared in the afternoon. Carter, “drunk and afraid for Twe,” informed Johnson that he had wired the State Department regarding the radical Kru and the threat he had received “to take his life by poison.” Carter also sent word “through unofficial but effective means” that he would be most displeased “to hear of Twe’s taking off.” Although Carter informed the State Department that he found it difficult “to realize that such a situation . . . can exist,” he would not have brought the matter to their attention “unless convinced that it were true.”⁵⁷

⁵⁶ International Commission of Inquiry, *Report of the International Commission of Inquiry*, 23; Johnson, *Bitter Canaan*, 166-67; Didwho Twe to Clifton R. Wharton, February 17, 1930 (quotations), Box 7011, 882.5048/270, RG-59, NA.

⁵⁷ Carter also told Johnson, “quite inexplicably, ‘I’m not jealous, if you can do this job better than I can, I am willing to step out of the way and let the person do it who can do it best.’” Johnson protested “that he had his job and I mine, and that I could not see where any such question could arise.” Johnson, “African Diary,” April 26, 1930, 88 (first and second quotations, and above), CSJP. In his transmissions to the State Department, Carter used the hilariously transparent code “T. W. E.” to refer to the Kru leader. Carter to the Secretary of State, April 27, 1930 (remaining quotations). In conversation Carter told Twe that he should not “single out King for the sole blame of the present situation,” because “of all the government officers (King) was infinitely the most farseeing.” Carter also understood that the Kru nation would not be “going over the hill” unless first giving notice to the chargé. Henry Carter to the Secretary of State, May 2, 1930 (quotations), Box 7011, 882.5048/281, RG-59, NA.

Johnson felt a rush of excitement—tempered by recognition of the possibilities for disaster—at his first chance to observe native life in the Liberian hinterland. Because Christy’s endless deliberation had left the commissioners without adequate transportation for the trip, Johnson was forced to hurry off a letter to William Hines at the last minute and request that Firestone furnish them with the use of a company truck. Still, the always optimistic Johnson saw signs of hope for Christy. As they discussed Liberian politics at lunch the day before their departure for Kakata, Christy admitted “this should be a Black Republic, if possible.” Johnson felt Christy had “been helped . . . in his estimate of Negro ability and congeniality,” especially in conversation with the British chargé d’affaires, to whom Johnson “gave a good game of tennis.” Christy also provided occasional moments of comic relief. With elections in Liberia still a year away, he asked Johnson, who had struggled for some days with stomach pain, “Why don’t you run for President?” Whereas W. E. B. Du Bois most likely would have taken the suggestion seriously, and may even have felt that the position suited him, Johnson laughed off the idea of a sociologist/politician, and told Christy that he “liked (his) own work too well, etc.”⁵⁸

A visit to the government hospital later in the day did little to alleviate any concerns that Johnson had about the inland trip. Apart from Firestone’s medical staff, Liberia had no more than six practicing physicians in the entire country, and Monrovia’s government hospital, which Johnson described as a “farce,” only made him more aware of the possibly tragic consequences should an otherwise minor illness or injury befall him upcountry. Johnson discovered that the hospital’s chief administrator, “Dr.” Cole, whom he had played cards with a few evenings before, was actually an “herbalist.” Furthermore, the nurse knew “nothing of nursing, and yet handles all gynecological

⁵⁸ Johnson, “African Diary,” April 26, 1930, 88, 89 (quotations), CSJP.

cases,” and another doctor had been there “so long he has absorbed many of the superstitions of the natives.” Even worse, the hospital charged patients 6 shillings per day while “anywhere else this type of patient would pay no more than 2 shillings.”⁵⁹

On the morning of April 28, Johnson and Christy boarded two trucks, “one Interior Department, one Firestone,” and left on their first expedition into the Liberian hinterland. Johnson noted matter-of-factly, “Made my will, got off letter to wife, put important papers in Legation, and drew £6.” Five miles outside of Kakata the government truck broke down, but the group eventually made its way to President King’s still unfinished but “quite extraordinary” twelve-room summer retreat, complete with tennis court. Johnson’s “first night in a field outfit” was actually spent in the room designed for the future use of the president’s wife. As Frontier Force soldiers lounged across the street from the compound, Johnson poked around in a storeroom where he stumbled upon a cache of “exquisite wood carvings.” The discovery of the art objects no doubt pleased Johnson’s aesthetic tastes, while the likely means of their acquisition, as well as the rest of the materials used for the new presidential compound, troubled him and struck at the very heart of the political corruption that plagued Liberia.⁶⁰

The next morning Johnson walked from the hilltop compound down to the village about a mile away, where he took photographs and familiarized himself with his new surroundings. President King had chosen Kakata as the site for his “commodious” compound because of a series of roads that connected it with Firestone’s Harbel plantation, and he held his last conference of upcountry chiefs there because of the town’s central location and easy accessibility to many of northern Liberia’s native tribes.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, April 28, 1930, 90 (first, second, third, fourth and seventh quotations), 91 (fifth and sixth quotations).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 90 (first and second quotations), April 29, 1930, 91 (remaining quotations).

In the village Johnson noticed the “hand of the government” in the “wide, seldom-used marketplace” and military station built by unpaid native labor. Indeed, even though Liberian law prohibited travel between one district and another, because of the murderous tactics of the Frontier Force, many natives had fled from the area around the once prosperous town and escaped deep into the bush along the border of French Guinea. The Booker Washington Agricultural and Industrial Institute, founded in 1929 by the Phelps-Stokes Fund and the International Education Board, served as the one bright spot in Kakata. Unbeknownst to Johnson at the time, native thirst for education, or “to get book,” led to a strong desire for a liberal arts curriculum, and caused some resentment both toward the Institute and Firestone.⁶¹

Before long a group of Kpelle natives began filing into the village, led by Paramount Chief Dado, a “well-dressed ordinary looking person,” who brought an interpreter and about thirty followers with him. Like other paramount chiefs, Dado received a government commission for supplying laborers for roadwork. He indicated to Johnson that he was only paying a visit but planned to return the next day with more of his people, and an interpreter other than the Frontier Force soldier then accompanying him. In the afternoon came three town chiefs with a group of about fifty natives, including drummers for entertainment purposes. Many of the natives seemed “bursting with things to tell Will be back tomorrow.” The drummers, dressed in blue smocks and khaki trousers

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, April 29, 1930, 91; Johnson learned that the mysterious Dorothy Moll lived in seclusion in Kakata. Her articles published in the *African World* defended Liberian labor policy in regard to Fernando Po. Johnson, *Bitter Canaan*, 200 (quotations). The Booker Washington Institute was modeled on Tuskegee Institute but had no direct affiliation with it. Thomas Jesse Jones of the Phelps-Stokes Fund, and James L. Sibley, the Fund’s educational adviser in Liberia, did much of the work of founding the Institute, and received financial contributions from Firestone. Louise Johnston, “Tuskegee in Liberia: The Politics of Industrial Education, 1927-1935,” *Liberian Studies Journal*, 9 (1980-81), 61-67; Donald Spivey, *The Politics of Miseducation: The Booker Washington Institute of Liberia, 1929-1984* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1986), 34-57.

rolled up to the knee, beat their instruments with “turned sticks,” and “shuffled in rhythm” while another group of men danced. Afterward “the men said something about dying if they talk. Don’t care if chiefs are here, are going to talk.” Johnson later concluded: “There is evidence that the men are made uncomfortable, fined, ground down, but the inefficiency of the Liberians shows again in failure to grind them down as completely and as effectively as the Germans, Belgians, and English, in a more English way. Otherwise they would not have the courage to protest so arrogantly.”⁶²

In the village early the next morning Johnson heard the loud beating of drums and gazed in the distance at the spectacle of a group of Kpelle chiefs dressed in white gowns leading about 200 natives down the hill. Johnson noted: “Nine o’clock comes, and they are still assembling. Nine-thirty they start down—a great mass . . . They bear down, led by Paramount Chief Dado, and all his town chiefs. They crowd into the *baraza*. There is no more room. They sit on the floor. We can scarcely breathe.”⁶³

The session proved particularly difficult for Christy, who “had a bad night” with symptoms of what first appeared to be dysentery. Paramount Chief Dado, on the other hand, sat through sessions of “the most vital accusations of him, yawning, not disturbed, apparently pleased that the men are talking.” The evasive Dado, whose “authority is very weak,” claimed that “he tells all he sees” and that “it is his business to supply the men,” which immediately drew shouts of protest from the natives. After changing interpreters,

⁶² Johnson, “African Diary,” April 29, 1930, 91 (first through fifth quotations), 92 (remaining quotations); Johnson, *Bitter Canaan*, 201.

⁶³ Johnson observed: “The natives are pretty well out of control because they have obviously been called on to do too much while others are idle or they can see them benefiting privately. The others are out of control because they haven’t been paid since January.” He also noted: “Pawning is really a primitive monetary system. If a man needs money, instead of giving security in capital he gives it in potential labor—stored up labor (that of his son or wife) which is, after all, what capital is.” Johnson, “African Diary,” April 29, 1930, 93 (quotations cited above), April 30, 1930, 93-94 (quotations), CSJP.

Dado argued that he was only doing his duty as assigned by President King, which elicited more screams of anger from his people.⁶⁴

When the town chiefs spoke, however, they received “shouts of approval,” and their “fine voices” and “good bearing” led Johnson to describe them as the “most extraordinary orators I have ever heard.” During sessions over the course of the next few days Johnson learned in great detail of the depredations incurred by the Kpelle natives at the hands of the Frontier Force. Corruption in the system of pawning and road construction in particular infuriated the Kpelle, as did the annual hut, poll, and education tax. Native chiefs, stripped of their power by the district commissioners and humiliated by the ruthless Frontier Force, faced torture and death if they did not provide enough men for long-term work on the roads. Unpaid native laborers had to supply their own tools for the roadwork, and if they could not were fined, beaten, and forced to pawn their wives or children. A practice most grievous to native dignity involved feeding the very people who subjected them to so much suffering, as rice from communal granaries had to be supplied to military and civil stations every month. In turn, soldiers and government workers, themselves unpaid for many months, generally demanded more rice than needed in order to sell it in markets along the coast. As in the Monrovia hearings, native testimony received by the commission at Kakata provided ample evidence of corrupt practices by government officials associated with forced labor for public purposes.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Christy’s symptoms included “violent vomiting and movements. Next day 150 stools.” *Ibid.*, 94 (quotations), 95 (quotation on Christy).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 94; Johnson, *Bitter Canaan*, 202. Johnson noted: “To prepare rice means considerable labor for (native) women. When the rice crop is ripe it has to be harvested ear by ear, tied into convenient small bundles, carried to the village, and hung to the rafters of the living house that it may dry. When required for use, each bundle is placed in a wooden mortar and pounded till the grain is separated from the straw and chaff. It then has to be pounded in another mortar till the husking process is complete.” International Commission of Inquiry, *Report of the International Commission of Inquiry*, 21 (on pawning), 81 (on rice; quotation), 83, 85-87, 95, 97-99.

From Kakata, Johnson and Christy had planned to return to Monrovia and proceed down the coast to Cape Palmas, the area that produced most of the native laborers shipped to Fernando Po. Christy's illness worsened, however, and over the Englishman's protests, Johnson sent to Firestone's Harbel plantation for a doctor. After some testing the doctor ruled out dysentery and instead suggested the presence of a stomach microbe introduced "from filth in some way." The group checked "every conceivable source for accidental or deliberate infection," but because they had been drinking only bottled water and eating the same food, Johnson ventured "the possibility that the native medicine man's pharmacopoeia . . . and parings and dung from a human carrier" would produce the same results. Johnson learned that ten chiefs at President King's 1924 Kakata conference had died from the same illness. "They were all troublesome chiefs," the district commissioner told Johnson.⁶⁶

Johnson later had a "tremendous argument with Christy about going on to Cape Palmas," a district ruled by the thoroughly corrupt Vice-President Allen N. Yancy. Christy objected to Johnson proceeding alone, claiming that it would be unfair to him and to the League, and that he would be blamed for any delays. In town Johnson spoke with the British consul, "who was presumably anxious to learn if Christy had become ill from unnatural causes—poisoned." Johnson "discussed the possibilities" but "could not say with conviction that any such thing had happened." Later Johnson sought out Henry Carter and explained his wish to go on and "to continue friendly relations" with his colleague. Convinced for many months of the necessity to investigate conditions around Cape Palmas, Carter "promised to write a note which would point to the possibility of American State Department criticism, and that of the American people if there is delay."

⁶⁶ Johnson, "African Diary," April 30, 1930, 95 (quotations), CSJP.

Feeling the “very imminent possibility of becoming ill” himself, Johnson drove Carter’s car to the hospital to tell his plans to Christy. He found the Englishman “still persistent” as he tried to get up to “show he is better,” but then fell against a table from “weakness.” Even so, Christy vowed that he would try to be in Monrovia soon. Johnson recognized “that this is suicidal” and promised to “put in” at Sinoe County and meet Christy later at Cape Palmas.⁶⁷

After returning to the hilltop capital of Monrovia, Johnson learned that the ship scheduled to depart on May 6 for the Kru Coast had been delayed for at least three days, forcing him to bide his time once again. As Henry Carter informed the State Department, “Johnson has acted with great tact in dealing with Christy and has shown remarkable ability and acumen throughout the work of the commission, of which he is the driving force.” Indeed, as if “dealing with Christy” were not enough, Monrovia’s atmosphere of political intrigue and rumor only made Johnson’s work more difficult—and more dangerous. While he tried to keep a low profile in the Liberian capital—impossible under the circumstances—Johnson received an unusual note from the doctor who had treated Christy. The note “confirmed” rumors “that the Commission had ordered dug up at Kakata a young girl who had been buried alive, as a living sacrifice to fend off the effects of the Commission. When exhumed in the presence of the Commission she had a string around her neck and one around her forehead with Arabic characters which a Mohammedan woman was able to translate. Two names—Faulkner and Twe were

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 96 (first through seventh quotations), 97 (remaining quotations). Henry Carter informed Christy in writing that “further delay on Johnson’s part in going to Cape Palmas would not be understood by Department, and might well be subject to criticism at home. Christy ignored this consideration as he has been obsessed from start with wholly unfounded notion that I (?) attempting to manipulate commission for some ulterior motives.” Henry Carter to the Secretary of State, May 5, 1930 (quotations), Box 7011, 882.5048/260, RG-59, NA.

written thereon.” On the girl’s head “was an overturned pot, and buried at her head a rooster, the earth over which had been tramped down by the President.” Although pure fabrication, Johnson realized that the “exactness of the details and the general character of the report lent the aspect of truth.”⁶⁸

Trying to disentangle fact from fiction in Liberia proved just as difficult for chargé Henry Carter and his superiors in Washington as it did for Johnson, particularly during the stressful days preceding the commission’s trip upcountry to Cape Palmas. In early April, an excitable Harvey Firestone had flown into a rage when he discovered that the Liberian auditor had failed to submit important financial reports, and had neglected to pay his office help any wages since the first of the year. While Liberian government officials remained reluctant to make any cuts in expenditures that involved their own salaries, the auditor’s accountants and typist who complained of “hunger and weakness” could not draw up the necessary reports because they were “absent sick on account of lack of proper, regular nourishment.” In a conversation with President King, Carter learned of Liberia’s “desperate” financial straits, and then received a memo from Secretary of State Edwin Barclay that outlined a plan to call on the Finance Corporation of America for assistance in obtaining a £40,000 loan from the Bank of British West Africa to cover its outstanding debts. In early May, as Firestone declined any further loan advances and turned up the pressure on King for reforms in government spending, Carter informed the State Department that the Liberian Secretary of the Treasury had in the previous few days “openly on two occasions taken action clearly in violation of the loan agreement.” As Carter saw it, Americo-Liberian mishandling of funds had created a

⁶⁸ Carter to the Secretary of State, May 5, 1930, (first quotation); Johnson, “African Diary,” May 5, 1930, 97 (remaining quotations), CSJP.

situation “which becomes worse daily and which may easily lead to . . . political chaos in the country.”⁶⁹

Secretary of State Stimson, annoyed with Carter’s handling of affairs, abruptly informed his chargé in Monrovia that, as the State Department understood the matter, “the semi-annual interest due May 1st has been paid,” and Liberia’s salary outlays amounted to forty-six and not eighty-five percent of total expenditures. Stimson then wanted to know why Carter had not stated “the cause of the present financial stringency.” More importantly, Stimson wrote: “As you, of course, are aware, this Government has no intention of ‘intervening’ in Liberia.” The secretary of state reminded Carter that “Liberia’s total foreign indebtedness is covered by the Loan of 1926 held in this country and as the Department has no information of any danger to foreign lives or property in Liberia, it does not understand on what facts you base your fear of foreign intervention.” Although he would be glad to consider any “concrete” suggestions that Carter may make “in the way of informal advice” to help Liberia out of “the present difficult situation,” Stimson ordered him to “refrain from making any commitments or expressing any views on behalf of this Government respecting important developments in Liberian internal affairs.”⁷⁰

Undeterred, Carter wired Stimson and claimed, “Figure of 85 per cent confirmed by financial adviser’s office.” The principal causes of Liberia’s economic woes, according to Carter, rested with Firestone’s curtailment of operations “due to government’s labor

⁶⁹ P. J. Fitzsimmons to Honorable Financial Adviser, April 5, 1930 (first and second quotations), Box 7013, 882.51/2094, Carter to the Secretary of State, May 2, 1930, “Draft Memorandum,” (second quotation), Box 7013, 882.51/2107, Carter to the Secretary of State, May 3, 1930 (remaining quotations), Box 7013, 882.51/2093, RG-59, NA.

⁷⁰ Henry L. Stimson to the American Legation, Monrovia, May 9, 1930 (quotations), Box 7013, 882.51/2093, RG-59, NA.

policy and Fernando Po traffic”; “maladministration” in native policy and “unwise” financial policy; and the “slump” in the international economy. As to his suggestion of an “intervention,” Carter had “envisaged a possible intensification of American control including financial dictatorship,” and “reform of government machinery and reorganization of hinterland administration by American officials approximating 1921 loan plan,” rather than any kind of “forcible” action. Although Carter admitted that foreign intervention was not actually imminent, he believed that it “would become a distinct possibility” in the event of the government’s collapse, unless “the United States were then prepared to take a *fierce* stand and to undertake rehabilitation of the country.”⁷¹

As the overzealous Carter continued to play Russian roulette with his assignment in Liberia, Johnson decided to use the extra time available and visit the Suehn Industrial Academy, located about forty miles outside of Monrovia. Like many otherwise mundane activities in the black republic, the trip provided him with more excitement than he had anticipated. Treacherous government roads constructed by the crudest methods caused two tire blowouts, and Johnson thought “every bridge would be my last.” He and his traveling companion, Firestone’s Dr. Rice, twice “fell into streams” before reaching the school.⁷²

The Suehn Industrial Academy, founded in 1912 by the National Baptist Convention and administered by Sarah C. Williamson, impressed Johnson with its manicured lawn and “touches of neatness and beauty.” The school had a “well-disciplined” coed student body of 115 who “chanted” books of the Bible and recited the names of the presidents of Liberia. Johnson noted happily, “no mosquitoes found yet,” although the mission had

⁷¹ Henry Carter to the Secretary of State, May 12, 1930 (quotations), Box 7013, 882.51/2096, RG-59, NA.

⁷² Johnson, “African Diary,” May 5, 1930, 97 (second quotation), 98 (first quotation), CSJP.

“leopards about.” The Fisk sociologist had met one of the teaching staff before at a conference of social workers in Memphis, and praised the group for its efforts. Christian missionaries played a key role in Liberian education, having founded over half of all the schools in the country. Yet, Johnson felt that “the missionaries began at the wrong end. Instead of trying to transplant a highly developed and abstract religious concept from a civilized to a preliterate group, and get them to understand it, it seems wiser to change the preliterate character of the individual, making it only logical that he would then seek higher spiritual satisfaction than the gods of the old culture can yield.” That night as Johnson reflected on his time at the Suehn Academy, a heavy rain began to fall and continued into the following morning.⁷³

Before leaving for Cape Palmas, Johnson learned of “several new wild rumors . . . some of which were brought seriously to me by Twe, who wondered if I had been confidential with Faulkner since he was originally in America.” One rumor suggested that Faulkner’s secretary had “obtained by stealth a rough stenographic note of an important paper” which Johnson had supposedly shown to Faulkner. The “note”, allegedly a State Department cable, concerned “French and English desires for a mandate which the United States would block to take for itself.” The second rumor claimed that a League of Nations cable had been intercepted and purported to state: “King and Yancy would have to be made to resign.” Johnson noted that the cables, according to rumor, “were sold to President King for £5 and when he read the last one he fell on the floor and

⁷³ Sarah C. Williamson, “Suehn Industrial Academy, Monrovia, Liberia, West Africa,” *Southern Workman*, 10 (October 1930), 454-58; Johnson, “African Diary,” May 5, 1930, 98 (first through fourth quotations), May 12, 1930, 107 (remaining quotations), CSJP.

wept.” Johnson wrote: “There are no such messages anywhere, so far as I know, and I have given Faulkner nothing, of course.”⁷⁴

Later in the day, Plenyono Gbe Wolo urged Johnson to meet privately with Dr. Cole. Believing that Cole “was the one who knew folklore,” Johnson consented, only to discover that “he was a different person.” The seventy-eight-year-old Cole told the American commissioner how he diagnosed cases by reading the stars, and that he had cured President King’s high blood pressure. After more talk of “herbs”, “occult sciences”, and “old men’s prostate troubles”, the “very dangerous” Cole gestured and three women and a boy came into the room with a plate of food and two thermos bottles of “light fluid—one coffee, one Hevea.” Both Wolo and Cole insisted on Johnson’s eating or drinking, which he declined after a “most recent dinner.” He found the situation especially embarrassing, however, because he “suspected” the food.” Indeed, he later learned that the Hevea tea had in fact been “intended to ‘get’ something in” him so that Cole could influence him “advantageously for President King.” The Hevea, Johnson discovered, “as many of the other drugs played with by these ‘doctors’ has its action on the sexual glands and eventually exhausts their power.” He described the day as “most phantastic.”⁷⁵

On May 10, with the rainy season in full swing, Johnson and the remarkably resilient but still “rocky” Christy, along with Firestone’s William Hines, boarded the “little German cargo steamer *Wakama*” for a fact-finding trip down the Liberian coast to Cape Palmas in Maryland County. Although Johnson argued against it, Didwho Twe also booked passage on the *Wakama*, while Arthur Barclay stayed behind in Monrovia as

⁷⁴ Johnson, “African Diary,” May 7, 1930, 101 (quotations), CSJP.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 100 (first and second quotations), 101 (remaining quotations).

planned. After two months of hovering conspicuously around Monrovia in its unnerving political atmosphere, Johnson was anxious to carry on with the commission's work elsewhere, no matter what perils lay ahead in the blinding rain. For its part, the King administration hoped that the American commissioner would never return from the hinterland. If Johnson managed to survive the expedition, King and his associates knew, as did the U. S. State Department, that evidence gathered along the Kru Coast would almost definitely implicate high government officials in trafficking in forced labor. Without any word from home since he left the United States, and amid endless complications, distractions, and dangers, Johnson must have questioned the veracity of the adage that he quoted earlier in a letter to Countee Cullen: "All things, in time, can be understood, I suppose, and mayhap, loved."⁷⁶

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, May 11, 1930, 104 (first quotation); Johnson to Cullen, February 4, 1930, (second quotation), Cullen Papers.

CHAPTER 5

“JOHNSEY COME TO SET US FREE”

I dreamed of crusades, of unrecorded voyages
of discovery, of republics with no history, of
hushed-up religious wars, revolutions in customs,
displacements of races and continents: I believed
in every kind of witchcraft.

Arthur Rimbaud, *Delusions*:

II. *The Alchemy of the Word*

By the time that Charles S. Johnson left for Cape Palmas in May 1930, the relationship between Firestone and the King administration had reached a new level of discord that only further complicated matters in Liberia, and that suggested the possibility of more drastic upheavals in the future. While the U. S. State Department looked on in bewilderment, Firestone cited nine specific loan violations, which included the diversion of funds designated for road building between Monrovia and Kakata to the construction of private homes for Americo-Liberian officials. As a result, a fuming Harvey Firestone carried through with his threat to withhold any more loan advances until the black republic repented and changed its ways.¹ Now headed for the most unstable region in Liberia, and the most important as far as the League commission was concerned, Johnson

¹ Raymond Leslie Buell, *Liberia: A Century of Survival, 1847-1947* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1947), 34. For Firestone's list of grievances against the Liberian Government, see The Finance Corporation of America at Cleveland to the National City Bank of New York, June 14, 1930, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1930* (3 vols.; Washington, D. C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1945), III, 400-4. Hereafter cited as *Foreign Relations, 1930*. John Loomis, the American financial adviser in Liberia, submitted an "imaginary budget" to Harvey Firestone, Jr., that zeroed in on the company's main concern in the black republic. Loomis wrote: "The Hinterland will be the source of enough additional revenue if we can get the hinterland in our control so far as revenue collections are concerned. In a few years Internal Revenue should exceed, or at least equal, Customs Revenue. John Loomis to J. P. Moffat, May 28, 1930, (quotations), Box 7013, 881.51/2106, Record Group 59 (National Archives, Washington, D. C.). Hereafter cited as RG-59, NA.

found himself caught in the middle of a situation that could, given a hard enough push from one direction or another, deteriorate into anarchy and chaos. But unlike before—in France in 1918 and Chicago in 1919—he had at least a degree of autonomy and control amid the disorder that surrounded him. Indeed, he understood that completion of the inquiry rested mainly on his shoulders.

On board the *Wakama*, Johnson soon realized that a recent brush with death had in no way diminished Christy's capacity for intransigence. At the first call for dinner the chairman of the League commission chose to sit in the captain's chair, a decision that elicited a mild reprimand from the steward. After learning that the captain always ate at second call, Christy became "apprehensive about his status," and missed first call for the duration of the trip. The Englishman's "quite obvious fright about being mistaken for less than what he is" would have been all right by Johnson, "except that a truly large person would not be so affected." Johnson felt that his fellow commissioner would "make any compromise in return for being respected as the head of this work—instead of the expected role of one of a trio acting as chairman by courtesy."²

During a lengthy discussion with William Hines, Johnson learned that the price of rubber, which stood at \$1.40 per pound when Firestone began operations in Liberia, had dropped to twelve cents, well below the cost of production. Hines then explained that more than fifty percent of the crude rubber produced in Dutch-owned areas of the Far East was in fact grown independently by natives, a system that Firestone encouraged "selfishly in their own interest" in Liberia by offering free seed and plants "to any who wanted it." President King and several other Americo-Liberian officials, along with the

² Charles S. Johnson, "African Diary," May 9, 1930, 103 (fourth quotation), May 11, 1930, 104 (first through third quotations), Folder 15, Box 88, Charles S. Johnson Papers (microfilm) (Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, Louisiana). Hereafter cited as CSJP.

radical but capitalist-minded Didwho Twe, had accepted Firestone's generosity to the tune of about thirty thousand rubber plants. Hines also indicated that Firestone had initiated a lawsuit against William V. S. Tubman, a senator from Maryland County and future president of Liberia, who purchased a company car and then sold it before paying for it. Johnson noted: "Hines is also keeping an eye on the investigation, I presume."³

At Grand Cess, the last stop before Cape Palmas, a Kru man intent on seeing his young son off to school down the coast, attempted to board the steamer. A Liberian official "quite bumptiously asserted that the boy would have to pay £4 head tax, which the father did not have. He cried." Didwho Twe told the official, "When you see a Kru man cry . . . it is very serious. It is also very dangerous. Remember, you have to come out on these Kru boats every day." The officer then "growled, 'Well, go on.'"⁴

Upon reaching Cape Palmas on May 11, Hines preceded the commissioners ashore and arranged for their stay in a house leased by the Firestone Plantations Company. Johnson felt none too "keen" about accepting the general manager's favors "just on general grounds," although Hines seemed "perfectly fine about it." The bungalow, located on a promontory near a lighthouse, provided an ocean view that Johnson considered " . . . one of the most beautiful I have ever seen." A few hundred yards from shore was a small, picturesque island, and "down the water line . . . the fantastic figures"

³ *Ibid.*, (quotations). Some of the privately owned rubber farms ranged from 200 to 500 acres in size. See "Interoffice Memo from D. A. Ross to Harvey Firestone, Jr.," May 11, 1933, W. D. Overman Files on Liberia, Firestone Archives, Set 1, Folder 4, Holsoe Collection (Archives of Traditional Music, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana). William Vacanarat Shadrach Tubman was born in 1895 in Harper, Maryland County, where he studied law. His father, a descendant of settlers who emigrated from Augusta, Georgia, in 1834, was a Methodist minister and former Speaker of the House of Representatives. His mother emigrated from Atlanta, Georgia, in 1872. Tubman was elected to the senate in 1923 and, like Arthur Barclay, served as a member of Firestone's legal team in Liberia. In 1944 he succeeded Edwin Barclay as president of Liberia, a position that he held until his death in 1971. D. Elwood Dunn, Amos J. Beyan, Carl Patrick Burrowes, *Historical Dictionary of Liberia*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, Maryland and London: Scarecrow Press, 2001), 176; Nathan P. Richardson, *Liberia's Past and Present* (London: The Diplomatic Press, 1959), 294.

⁴ Johnson, "African Diary," May 11, 1930, 105 (quotations), CSJP.

of rock outcroppings that concealed more jagged formations below. Lying nearby in waves that broke “mysteriously” was the “slowly rotting hulk” of a ship “that had its bottom ripped out” while transporting its cargo of eleven automobiles, a “total loss.” The house, however, approximated “luxury”, with a living and dining room, “two bedrooms (one mine, overlooking this eternal charge and rumble of the waves) books and magazines, two servants and two closets of stores.” In addition to the plentiful supply of Evian and Perrier water, Johnson counted twelve bottles of wine.⁵

The presence of Christy, however, along with other distractions, ruined any hope that Johnson may have had for finding a few moments of peace before the rugged trip ahead. Hines had told Johnson earlier in Monrovia that labor at Firestone’s seven-thousand-acre Cavalla plantation had become such a problem that it had interrupted development, and only six hundred workers were now employed there. Firestone found it particularly “hard to get the Grebos to work” because they were “difficult” and “liked to fight.” Indeed, Johnson had to cope with constant fighting between the six houseboys who had accompanied the commissioners from Monrovia, and the Grebo houseboys at Cape Palmas. The fighting, combined with the close proximity of Christy, nearly caused Johnson to crack. The black sociologist, who would have to sit through endless conferences with southern segregationists in the Jim Crow South in the 1930s, wrote: “If Christy doesn’t stop sucking and clicking his teeth I’ll lose my mind and temper completely, I fear.” “Africa,” as Johnson observed, “begins to take its toll of patience.”⁶

From Cape Palmas, Johnson and Christy planned to proceed to towns along the coast and inland, where travelers from throughout Maryland and Sinoe counties who wished to

⁵ *Ibid.*, 104 (quotations).

⁶ *Ibid.*, April 19, 1930, 83 (first through third quotations), May 12, 1930, 107-108 (remaining quotations).

testify before the commission could reach it. Christy wanted Twe to accompany the group upcountry, an idea that did not sit well with Johnson. He wrote: "I like Twe immensely, and it would reduce our work a great deal, but it seems like taking an unfair advantage. It is not well as finding what we can ourselves." As they prepared for the trip, the county superintendent introduced Johnson to Vice-President Allen N. Yancy. Expecting a "stout, pompous, rather forceful person," Johnson instead discovered a "rather small, cunning individual, who would be arrogant if he dared." Resenting the encroachment on his territory, Yancy "rubbed it into" the Liberian official "several times about just coming to this county." Johnson learned that "Yancy is hostile to the Firestone Company," particularly because Firestone, unlike the vice-president, paid wages to natives for work completed, leaving fewer men and boys for shipment to Fernando Po.⁷

After a few days in Cape Palmas, Johnson had a clearer picture of how the illegal recruiting for Fernando Po worked, as well as Yancy's central role in the process. In nearby Harper, where Yancy ran the Maryland County Recruiting Company for native labor, Johnson learned that authorities in Fernando Po paid more than £12 per worker, out of which £2.10 went for "government fees", and £9 to the recruiting agent, Postmaster-General Samuel Ross. In the labor contract with Spain, workers were supposed to receive half of their monthly salary of £2 in Fernando Po, and the other half from the Spanish Consul after their return to Liberia. More often than not, workers fortunate enough to return alive after being away as long as two or three years, received nothing.

⁷ *Ibid.*, May 12, 1930, 107 (first quotation), May 13, 1930, 108 (second quotation), 109 (remaining quotations). Allen N. Yancy was born in 1881 in Cape Palmas. His father was a Methodist minister from Georgia who immigrated with his wife to Liberia in 1873. Yancy's father taught him farming, blacksmithing, and later wheelwrighting, a business that he conducted for trading firms in Cape Palmas. Yancy learned Grebo well enough to marry a native woman from a powerful clan in Nabo. His political career began in 1905 when President Arthur Barclay appointed him justice of the peace. Charles S. Johnson, *Bitter Canaan: The Story of the Negro Republic* (New Brunswick, N. J. and Oxford: Transaction Books, 1987), 164.

Yancy handled all legal hearings in the county, although he had no jurisdiction to do so except for “President King’s orders,” and assessed all fees and fines in trials often held at his home, where he had built a jail. In lieu of payment for fines levied at the whim of Yancy, the Frontier Force demanded more men and boys from chiefs for transport down the coast. Before departing Johnson made a note to himself to subpoena the contracts of the Maryland County Recruiting Corporation.⁸

In the “beautifully situated” nearby town of Harper, Johnson noted: “This section was colonized by the American Colonization Society, largely with persons from Maryland, from which the County takes its name.” Independent from Liberia during its initial years Maryland County “now wishes it had remained so.” Johnson learned that Harper had only irregular communication with Monrovia, and he found conditions in the town most discouraging. The town, without any hospitals or doctors, had “very poor” schools, unnamed streets, and lacked either birth or death registration. “No census had been taken,” Johnson observed, “probably for political reasons, when small places of less than 500 roll up Whig majorities of 2000 and more.” Firestone’s struggling Cavalla plantation at Cape Palmas served as the area’s principal source of income. His mood already darkened by the depressing conditions in Harper, Johnson also had nearly reached the breaking point with Christy. “I fear I have been most glum all day,” he wrote. “Fed up. When Christy thinks I am getting too much attention he tries hard to get it understood that only he knows Africa. What part of it doesn’t matter. I make no claims to this; nor do I see the necessity for constantly reminding all our joint conferees.”⁹

⁸ *Ibid.*, 109; Johnson, *Bitter Canaan*, 190; International Commission of Inquiry, *Report of the International Commission of Inquiry into the Existence of Slavery and Forced Labor in The Republic of Liberia* (Washington, D. C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1931), 52-62.

⁹ *Ibid.*, May 13, 1930, 111 (first through sixth quotations), 112 (remaining quotations).

On the morning of May 15, the commissioners left Cape Palmas with 105 native porters and three hammocks. The system of portage, or transporting passengers overland by hammock, served as another serious point of contention among natives, who often had to provide up to a thousand men for Yancy and other government officials, always without payment. Johnson deemed his crew “extra good,” as they “sang, laughed, and raced,” each time reaching their destination ahead of Christy. Johnson “developed a real affection for them.” As the group crossed the Hoffman River at Cape Palmas and began its journey up the beach, Johnson noted: “Dreadful going, hot, the sand dry and yielding 2 and 3 inches under foot.” Johnson walked several miles from Harper to Rocktown, where his group rested before continuing on to Fishtown. The pause gave Johnson a chance to analyze “the parts” of him “that gave way first under the intense strain.” He commented on pain in his back and kidneys; his left eye from “the sun streaming constantly back of my dark glasses;” his right side; his left thigh; and his “head at the top, from the weight of the helmet and the sun” Yet, he “was never winded.” At Fishtown the commissioners pitched their tents a few yards from that of Paramount Chief Sie, a native labor recruiter and self-described “indomitable fighter and defier of the government.” Although too tired to sleep, and “disturbed by cattle,” Johnson found his situation “quite comfortable,” even as it began to rain.¹⁰

After hearing the testimony of two chiefs the next morning, a “terrible downpour” began and prevented the group from taking down their tents. A pause in the rain allowed for the commissioners’ departure from Fishtown, but thirty minutes later “a tremendous storm” overtook them. Johnson wrote: “It poured. Rain penetrated everything; the ocean was mad.” In the “rough elemental scene” ocean waves reaching five feet high

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, May 15, 1930, 113 (first through sixth quotations), 114 (remaining quotations).

“rolled like huge glass cylinders,” making it impossible to see “the line of march ahead.” Christy considered the storm the worst that he had ever seen. With their loads weighted down by the rainfall, the number of porters dropped to ninety-two, not understanding that “they were going to be paid.” On the approach to the town of Garawe, Johnson finally switched from his heavy, crepe-soled boots to a pair of tennis shoes as he “squashed about in water.” The image of a rain-soaked Charles S. Johnson in white sun helmet, dark glasses, and tennis shoes slogging along the Liberian beach contrasts sharply with that of the conservative, “buttoned-up” sociologist often portrayed as spending most of his time in the security of foundation boardrooms. Outside of Garawe the commissioners received “much interesting testimony.”¹¹

As the expedition moved on to Garawe and searched for a campsite, Didwho Twe suddenly appeared. Johnson wrote: “It occurs to me that Twe is staying for reasons of personal safety, within the shadow of the Commission. He was most interested in getting out of Monrovia.” Eventually the group made its way to the Garawe Mission, under the direction of “a Miss Hall,” a graduate of Clark University sent to Liberia in 1905 by the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Needing an elevated site for their camp, Johnson asked the missionaries “if they would not be embarrassed by the presence of the Commission.” After some deliberation, everyone agreed to an “alternate selection of a site in the graveyard, where the missionaries had been buried along with the other civilized natives. The spot for the tents was within 3 feet of 2 fresh graves.”¹²

Didwho Twe, however, tried to discourage the group from camping, which “exasperated” Christy. Already “in fair form” and angry at the Kru for “running off”

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 114 (first through seventh quotations), 115 (remaining quotations).

¹² *Ibid.*, May 17, 1930, 115 (first quotation), 116 (remaining quotations).

with five porters and thereby “congesting” the commissioners’ loads, Christy yelled at Twe “that we were not relying on him to provide for us.” When Twe left shortly afterward, Johnson reminded Christy that he “had argued against his invitation to Twe to come on this trip . . . so strongly that he remarked about my spirited contentiousness.” Johnson “let the matter drop” but felt: “It has never seemed quite right that Twe should escort the Commission, being, as he was, at the same time, anti-government and one of the most important witnesses against it.”¹³

As Johnson and Christy “talked casually” of the report, the American commissioner revealed that he knew nothing of how the U. S. State Department had maneuvered President King into calling for an inquiry. Johnson observed that “the arch diplomatic mistake” of the Liberian Government “from their standpoint, was that of inviting a commission of inquiry.” He told Christy that the report might be called *The Bluff That Failed*. Still “in a facetious mood,” he thought of another title that he did not share with the Englishman: *The Reneger in the Woodpile*.¹⁴ Had he known that Secretary of State Stimson had in fact pressured King into requesting the inquiry, Johnson almost certainly would have declined President Hoover’s appointment.

Over the course of the next couple of days, “few new points came up” from the assemblage of Grebo chiefs, although Johnson learned that many of the Garawe people had planned “to migrate to some British colony if they had not heard that the Commission was coming.” The chiefs, as Johnson observed, had “a doubly saddened aspect, for their land, their authority, their pride, their ‘boys,’ had been taken away, not alone by government order (against which they were then complaining), but the

¹³ *Ibid.*, 116 (quotations).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 117 (quotations).

devastating influence of coastal exposure.” Johnson also discovered that the natives from Fishtown to Garawe “want white man rule,” having suffered “an utter loss of confidence and hope in their black rulers” Natives had “nothing comparable to the ‘race pride’ of the American Negroes, or the self-determination and enthusiasm of the Americo-Liberians. They want security and a chance to earn a livelihood.”¹⁵

After another night of rain, Johnson and Christy decided on a new course of action. They determined that Christy would return to Cape Palmas to rest, and Johnson would move on to the coastal village of Wedabo, across the Po River. Later, the two would meet up again along the border with Ivory Coast. Christy left before Johnson and thus missed the bizarre free-for-all that took place along the riverbank. Although the American commissioner had been informed of the long-standing hostility between the Garawe Grebos and the Po River Krus, which in 1924 resulted in a killing and Paramount Chief Jeh’s imprisonment, nothing that morning indicated any imminent violence. As a result of the 1924 incident, it was agreed that Garawe natives could carry loads between Fishtown and the river, where they would set them down on the bank to be picked up by the Po River natives. The fact that the carriers were to be paid, however, altered the situation. Left to ride the swift current in a rickety canoe, Johnson watched as the Grebos began crossing the river with an unusually large escort of men for the relatively light load of baggage and hammocks to be transported. Other than the ominous silence of the crowds of natives that lined both banks of the river, Johnson noticed nothing else out of

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 116 (first, third and fourth quotations). Johnson’s understanding of the effects of “coastal exposure” on natives centered on their awareness of prestige associated with whites, more a cultural distinction than a racial one. Johnson, *Bitter Canaan*, 204 (third quotation). Graham Greene took a different view of coastal exposure, and claimed: “The beach is the most dangerous road in all Liberia to travelers, because its people have been touched by civilization, have learnt to steal and lie and kill.” Graham Greene, *Journey Without Maps* (New York: Doubleday, 1936), 224 (quotation).

the ordinary until he landed. Almost immediately, an argument broke out over which group of natives would transport the hammocks. Shoving between four or five pairs of men soon erupted into fistfights, buglers sounded “the cry of trouble,” and the arrival of more men turned the scene into a battle royal.¹⁶

Fighting between the Grebos and Kru quickly “became general and vicious.” As fast as Johnson “could get one scrap settled another would start. They drew blood.” Johnson noted: “Curiously they let me cuff them about, pull them apart, separate them, and they took it obediently, all of them as soon as I turned to break another fight they would be at it viciously again.” As a frightened John Matheus looked on, a messenger sent by the county governor received a severe beating. Johnson suspected the messenger, a young man named Mooney, of “being partly responsible for the scrap,” and regarded him as “uncivil and a coward.” The man’s “mother was a Kru woman, his father a Grebo. He was in a helluva fix because he belonged to neither side and yet belonged to both.” Several times Johnson dragged Mooney away from a pile of men who had been “pummeling” him, and who promised to kill him “and would have done so if I hadn’t been present.” Now nearly exhausted from separating the fighters, “holding back the boats, dragging men and putting them back in the boats,” Johnson viewed the situation as “hopeless.”¹⁷

Mooney then told Johnson: “If the Garawe men go back it will be very serious.” “Serious be damned,” Johnson thundered, and told Mooney that the men had to go back. The American commissioner later wrote: “I was tired of the scrap and it would never stop, but grow worse as long as they were both on the same side of the river.” Finally, he

¹⁶ Johnson, “African Diary,” May 20, 1930, 121, 122 (quotation), CSJP; Johnson, *Bitter Canaan*, 205.

¹⁷ Johnson, “African Diary,” May 20, 1930, 122 (quotations), CSJP; Johnson, *Bitter Canaan*, 206.

managed to get about half of the men back into the boats and was preparing to give them a small payment, or “dash”, for transporting him to the other side, when “some damned fool raised the question of giving all the dash to one man to divide.” In no time the men had left the boats and were fighting again until Johnson ordered the Po River natives to bring the loads “one by one” away from the water. Less than five minutes after he “started Matheus off” with the first load, warriors began arriving with cutlasses and poison-tipped spears “like harpoons, with string tied to them.” A quick-thinking Johnson intercepted the warriors and convinced them that the battle, termed a “palaver,” had played itself out. About two hours after the fighting began, individual carriers managed to transport the loads before either side suffered any fatalities. The women, as Johnson noted, “were a nuisance, dancing around urging the men to battle, bringing their cutlasses, old and young.”¹⁸

* * *

Liberian greeting: Shake hands, work finger down to point and snap against each other's finger. It means “brother.”

* * *

As more rain fell, Johnson and his group moved on for a brief stay in Wedabo, a pair of conjoined villages on the beach that served as outposts for the Webo tribe led by Paramount Chief Jeh that lived further upcountry. As they set up camp, the group came under “the curious gaze” of local natives, and Johnson noticed “the enormous navel hernias on the children, some as large as an orange.” He learned that midwives “bite the cords.” Before long, the “bronzed and magnificent” Jeh appeared and extended his welcome after a long journey from the Webo capital of Soloken, an inland town that

¹⁸ Johnson, “African Diary,” May 20, 1930, 122 (third quotation), 123 (first, second, and remaining quotations), CSJP; Johnson, *Bitter Canaan*, 206-7. “Dash”, a shortened form of “dashee”, is a synthesis of West African and Portuguese. Dunn, Beyan, and Burrowes, *Historical Dictionary of Liberia*, 98.

Johnson planned to visit later. Jeh, the scion of a long line of courageous and dignified Webo rulers, introduced Johnson to the native headman of the five hundred men demanded as payment by Yancy in 1924, and then escorted him to the point where townspeople had been held as hostages until those bound for Fernando Po were herded in from upcountry. Before leaving, Johnson gave the town chief a white linen handkerchief and two shillings in return for the white chicken presented as a dash to him upon his arrival. Johnson noted: "A white dash says, 'Here is my heart as white as this token.' It is like shaking hands. You must return dash."¹⁹

On May 21, after enduring heavy rainfall the entire night before, Johnson and his group "made an orderly departure" as they headed for Grand Cess. Normally a four-hour trip, they arrived in only three hours and fifteen minutes "without urging the carriers at all." At Grand Cess, an "active and alive" coastal town divided between a large native section of about eight hundred inhabitants, and a smaller area populated by assimilated natives, the commissioner happened to be away but a Kru man named Nebo "was in charge and very cordial and helpful."²⁰

As he waited two days for chiefs to assemble and offer testimony, Johnson learned that fishing had been an important source of income in Grand Cess for many years but few fishermen now lived there; farming had been all but abandoned due to poor soil conditions that natives attributed to a curse. Most able-bodied men and teen-aged boys from Grand Cess worked elsewhere along the coast. A native man who had recently returned to see his family after being away for three years, told Johnson: "I'm a tradesman. I wear tan and white shoes and eat at a hotel in Lagos." After being informed

¹⁹ Johnson, "African Diary," May 20, 1930, 125 (first, second, and fourth quotations), CSJP; Johnson, *Bitter Canaan*, 6 (third quotation).

²⁰ Johnson, "African Diary," May 21, 1930, 126 (quotations), CSJP.

that a “great tower” was being built in his town, the man felt more than disappointed when he saw the “small cement block church” across from Johnson’s campsite. “They call this thing a tower,” the man said in disgust. “If this wasn’t my native land where my wife and child stay, I never come back. Look in the streets. They don’t got none. No sewer. Nothing.” Johnson considered the tradesman’s restlessness to be “the price of domination,” a result of exposure to better conditions along the Gold Coast that only magnified the underdevelopment of his native land. Johnson also noted: “Twe wants to borrow money.”²¹

As chiefs from the surrounding area began to arrive in Grand Cess, Johnson observed: “The crowds are most amazing, standing and gaping.” The “retinue” of paramount chiefs who testified before the American commissioner was, in fact, the same that Vice-President Yancy had assembled for his “second wholesale demand” for men and boys for Fernando Po in 1928. Yancy told the chiefs that he had just returned from Monrovia with an order from President King demanding that each paramount chief in attendance furnish sixty men or pay £10.0.0. for each man less than the required number. Any chief who refused to pay or failed to supply men received a promise that soldiers would be sent to destroy his town. When a chief dispatched messengers to President King to ask if he had issued such orders, the chief was imprisoned and had his government commission revoked. Soldiers then sacked the surrounding towns, beat women and children, and killed four men. Chiefs also complained about roadwork without pay or food. One chief

²¹ Johnson, *Bitter Canaan*, 208-9, 210 (sixth quotation); Johnson, “African Diary,” May 23, 1930, 128 (seventh quotation), Notes at Grand Cess, 129 (first and second quotations), 130 (third through fifth quotation), CSJP.

stated: “We cannot send people to Fernando Po and to the road. Where we got such an amount of people?”²²

While serving dinner a few nights before leaving Grand Cess, one of Matheus’ young native assistants, Widoweh, was bitten by a poisonous snake. Without access to any professional medical care, Johnson had little choice but to allow the use of “native cures”, which began by rinsing with a mouthful of vinegar, blowing on the wound three times, and applying a layer of salt. A native man then sucked the venom out of the wound and placed Widoweh in the care of an elderly woman, who tied a palm shred around his leg above the ankle. Just outside of Grand Cess, Johnson’s group, minus Widoweh, crossed their “worst river” on the way to Soloken. Surrounded by a giant swamp of “dismal” vegetation, it took the group an hour to cross over the river on a bridge made of “frail and uncertain string poles.” Afterward the countryside consisted mainly of sandy soil and bush with uneven hills. The porters, as Johnson noted, drank from each of the small streams in the hilly depressions, “including the coffee colored water of the first rivers.” On the way Johnson observed burial sites that he described as “most lugubrious,” with “the man’s clothing, pots, lantern, jugs, bottles, pans, etc., stacked around the grave.” After crossing eleven streams, Johnson’s group eventually reached Jeh’s home of Soloken, or Bigtown, where “we sat down.”²³

As they recovered from their journey, Chief Jeh, “the most gracious of hosts, really put himself out to supervise, personally, our comfort,” and presented Johnson with a goat as a dash. With everyone “tired and worn down by the trek and setting up camp,” the

²² Johnson, “African Diary,” May 21, 1930, 126 (first quotation), Notes at Grand Cess, 130 (second quotation), CSJP; Johnson, *Bitter Canaan*, 209 (third quotation); International Commission of Inquiry, *Report of the International Commission of Inquiry*, 32, 33 (fourth quotation), 34-36.

²³ Johnson, “African Diary,” Notes at Grand Cess, 130 (first through third quotations), 131 (fourth and seventh quotations), 132 (fifth and sixth quotations), CSJP; Johnson, *Bitter Canaan*, 210-11.

American commissioner went to sleep early only to be awakened by the “ritualistic” shouting of men and the sound of cattle hurrying to an open space near the campsite. Thinking nothing of it, he went back to sleep until the cattle knocked down part of his tent and tore through the mosquito netting. Outside with a flashlight to repair the damage, Johnson learned from a native that a leopard had entered the town. Jeh offered refuge in his house but Johnson decided instead to barricade himself in his tent. After the government banned native ownership of firearms in 1916, villagers had become “easy prey,” not only for wild animals but also for the Liberian Frontier Force. On that night, however, the leopard only managed to carry off a goat.²⁴

In Soloken, like everywhere else that he visited in Liberia, Johnson took countless photographs and noted the peculiarities of native life. He observed that Webo women, who shaved their heads in back and front but left a tuft on the top like “a bald-headed man,” seemed to be “the hard workers,” although he saw only “infant girls and old women with flat, pendulous, dried up and well used breasts.” Later he learned that the hairstyles symbolized mourning. Indeed, Johnson saw few young men in the villages. Older men wore numerous styles of clothing and the boys amused themselves “by playing with the foreskins of their penises.” Many of the children had “sores like yaws—on face, buttocks, legs, back, mouth.” Johnson also took note of the “desolation” of the Webo villages. Everywhere he noticed “a silent square mound” where a hut once stood, patches of empty ground that still required payment of a hut tax. As evidence of the effects of Frontier Force raids, he photographed a deserted village with “lizards in possession,” overgrown by bush and strewn with rotting breadfruit. Although natives

²⁴ Johnson, “African Diary,” Notes at Grand Cess, 131 (first and second quotations), 132 (third quotation), CSJP; Johnson, *Bitter Canaan*, 211-12.

used communal labor to assemble huts, owners not only had to buy materials but also feed and entertain workers; the loss of a town or even a single hut placed a great burden on them in a “shilling-a-day economy.”²⁵

Most striking to Johnson was the dignity of the Webo people. He claimed: “The politeness of the Africans is generally enough to put us all to shame. They come to say ‘Good morning’ and to say ‘Good evening.’ No other business is mixed with this ceremony.” Chief Jeh, in particular, made an unusually strong impression on the sociologist. Neither had Americo-Liberians forgotten Jeh. About a month before Johnson’s arrival in Soloken, the Liberian secretary of the interior dug up the case from 1924 that involved the killing of the Po River man, and demanded that Jeh turn over the “three murderers.” The paramount chief then had to prove that he had already presented the men to Yancy, who then “put them to work on his farm, where they stayed at least a year.”²⁶

Over the course of the next few days, Johnson heard testimony from Jeh and his subchiefs as well as numerous villagers who had suffered in one way or another at the hands of the Frontier Force and Vice-President Yancy. From one nearby town, ninety-five out of 125 men who had been forcibly shipped to Fernando Po died there. Besides the abduction of men and boys for shipment to Fernando Po and Libreville in French Gabon, Johnson discovered that natives “are clamoring for the abolition of the special taxation of the seagoing men.” Head money paid by seagoing Krus and Grebos—two

²⁵ Johnson, “African Diary,” Notes at Grand Cess, 132 (first, fourth, sixth and seventh quotations), 133 (second and third quotations), May 27, 1930, 134 (itemized cost of building both mud and thatch houses), 134-37 (listing of Johnson’s photographs), 138 (fifth quotation), 139 (eighth quotation), CSJP; Johnson, *Bitter Canaan*, 212, 213 (ninth quotation).

²⁶ Johnson, “African Diary,” May 19, 1930, 125 (second and third quotations), May 27, 1930, 132 (first quotation), CSJP.

tribes that had traditionally avoided domestic slavery or pawning—“is resented by them as a form of servitude.” Before being expelled from the legislature, Twe had introduced a bill that agitated against the head money, deeming it as nothing more than another recruiting fee. When Chief Jeh asked Johnson if he should still pay the “illegal tax,” Johnson told him that, “although bad, he must until we see what effect the report will have.”²⁷

On his second night in town, Johnson had listened to a man regarded as having the finest voice in the district, Soloken’s own “Homer” or “Virgil”, who sang “the great deeds of his chiefs.” Later Johnson played for Jeh a few of the recordings that he had made on wax discs with his “small phonograph-record apparatus”. The recordings fascinated the natives, and when a village elder heard about them he asked that Johnson record the singing voice of Jua, his young daughter. Johnson had only four discs left, and although “skeptical,” he agreed “out of courtesy.” In front of a large crowd Johnson then sat transfixed as he heard Jua sing the *Lament of the Webo Women*, a song that began, in translation: “*We were here when trouble came to our people/ For this trouble Jeh was imprisoned and fined/ For this reason Yancy came to our country/ He caught our husbands and our brothers/ Sailed them to Nana Po/ And there they die They will never go to Nana Po again/ You may as well dig a hole and put us all in it/ We well never go back again/ Yancy, why?*” Toward the end of the long lament, which included names of individuals lost to Fernando Po, Jua sang: “*Dr. Johnson is here from America/ He and Twe going to help, so hold your head up and have courage.*” As Twe told the

²⁷ Johnson, *Bitter Canaan*, 214 (on number of native workers in Zoko who died at Fernando Po); Johnson, “African Diary,” May 27, 1930, 133 (first and second quotations), 138 (third quotation), 139 (fourth quotation), CSJP; International Commission of Inquiry, *Report of the International Commission of Inquiry*, 17 (on Kru and Grebo aversion to pawning).

Webo people: “Johnsey come to set us free.” If the full weight of his mission had not occurred to him already, Johnson’s time in Soloken drove the point home.²⁸

As they prepared to depart from Soloken, Chief Jeh asked Johnson to make more recordings. “He is much enchanted about them,” Johnson wrote, “and continues to refer to us as white men.” In reference to the recordings, Jeh told Johnson, “The thing you do last night the people like too much. You white people be God people, they savvy God.” Johnson, who never made any personal references to religion in his journal entries, left Soloken and a “regretful” Jeh on the morning of May 28 in a heavy rain. Headed now for the town of Kaaken, located in Sinoe County’s Tienpo section, the American commissioner and his group crossed seventeen streams and three rivers, two of the streams “above our waists . . . and no bridges.” Johnson described the bush as “deep like a mine and sunless,” the trek “the longest . . . so far, and the hardest.” In Kaaken the hearings “were as stiff and formal as all the rest,” the town chief “young and long on ceremony.” After two hours of testimony and a promise of more the next day, Johnson learned that the townspeople had heard about his phonograph and wanted to hear his “native music”. Although “tired,” he “let them hear one and made one.” Amid the serene African village noises of “cows, goats, crickets, rustle of leaves, and drowned laughing,” Johnson noted that the children, “of whom there seem to be many,” played a game called *Soldiers Catchy Men and Beat Them*.²⁹

²⁸ Johnson, “African Diary,” May 27, 1930, 133 (first through third quotations), 140 (fifth and sixth quotations), 140-41 (seventh quotation), 141 (remaining quotations), CSJP; International Commission of Inquiry, *Report of the International Commission of Inquiry*, 37, n. 22 (fourth quotation); Johnson, *Bitter Canaan*, 213-14.

²⁹ Johnson, “African Diary,” May 27, 1930, 139 (first through third quotations), May 28, 1930, 144 (fourth and fifth quotations), 145 (sixty through tenth quotations), May 29, 1930, 146 (eleventh quotation), 147 (remaining quotations), CSJP; Johnson, *Bitter Canaan*, 215-16.

After a few days in Kaaken, Johnson's group moved on to the town of Niwaken, a four-hour trip across swollen streams and up steep hills. As the beating of drums signaled their approach, townspeople brought out Paramount Chief Doe, who had traveled from his capital of Tarea, to greet Johnson. Doe was paralyzed and seated in a chair, the result of being poisoned by his own people for suspected complicity in the building of a Frontier Force barracks at nearby Borobo. Only later was it understood that Yancy and the soldiers had forced Doe to consent. "The first meeting with the people," as Johnson observed, was "very formal and impressive." Before long he took note of the severe shortage of food in the town. The people "had suffered not only from the soldiers, but with the men away and the women making barracks no one planted farms and . . . there is no food." At one point Johnson felt a sharp twinge of embarrassment over his middle-class American standards when he carelessly threw away a sandwich covered with ants. Immediately, three men ran after it, saying, "Ah, it's good! I'm goin' keep it. It hungry time."³⁰

In Niwaken, Johnson also visited a Pentecostal mission run for thirty years by J. M. Perkins and his wife. Johnson described their assistant, Miss Shelton, as "a large not bad looking Salvation Army type young lady." The Perkins' house, "like a good old American country place, even to the comfortable smells," provided Johnson with a chance to rest and recover. The missionaries sent Johnson's group two boxes of fruit, mango jelly, and fresh-baked bread and cookies. "Delightful!" Johnson noted. With the Perkins' he later ate boiled breadfruit, which he described as "very good . . . tastes like white potatoes with the consistency of yams." That evening, with a touch of fever that he

³⁰ Johnson, "African Diary," May 30, 1930, 148, 149 (first through third quotations), 150 (last quotation), CSJP; Johnson, *Bitter Canaan*, 217.

battled until morning, he recalled the different sections that he had passed through and asserted: “I can now account for 1380 boys recruited by force for Fernando Po.”³¹

After “considerable carrier trouble”, Johnson and Matheus, along with their entourage of assistants and porters, left Niwaken on June first, a Sunday morning. As Chief Doe and a small party of his men followed behind, the route turned “hilly and rough.” The caravan then crossed seven streams and two rivers during the four-hour trip to Gropaka, the town near the Frontier Force barracks. Natives beat drums and danced upon their arrival, and at the barracks gate Johnson met a group of officers, including a young captain who had immigrated to Liberia with his American-born parents. Johnson “liked them all and found it difficult to reconcile them with charges against the Frontier Force.” Most gracious in his meeting with Johnson, the captain’s mood changed suddenly when they went outside and met Chief Doe and his men on the verandah. The captain “spoke in the most patronizing manner” and the chief’s group “responded as southern Negroes to a white man.” The captain asked, “So this is the paramount chief, eh? Well, what are you doing here?” Later, Johnson wrote: “Truly has it been said that race prejudice is least of all racial.”³²

A few hours later in “threatening rain”, Johnson arrived in Tarea, or Rocktown, Chief Doe’s capital. In Tarea, the American commissioner received word from Christy. “His messenger had met mine and brought him back with my note to Christy. I sent them both back forthwith, by night.” After the group set up camp, natives received the strangers with a ceremonial presentation of kola nuts, palm nuts, “salt (white—friendship)”, and other items that signified: “We offer you what we eat—our hospitality.” On the

³¹ Johnson, “African Diary,” May 31, 1930, 150 (first quotation), 151(remaining quotations), CSJP.

³² *Ibid.*, June 1, 1930, 151 (first quotation), 152 (second through fifth quotations); Johnson, *Bitter Canaan*, 219 (sixth quotation).

following morning natives offered the American commissioner a freshly butchered bullock, an expression that he felt they could not well afford, considering the acute shortage of food in the region. Johnson refused the meat and asked if they had eggs or fowl instead, an uninformed gesture that “offended”.³³

No doubt mortified by his clumsiness in receiving the dash, Johnson regained his composure, and was soon reminded of his main purpose for being in Liberia when a group of native women who had been standing outside of the “crowd of men” asked to be heard. Johnson judged the woman who stepped forward to speak to be about thirty-five years old, and he noted that she carried a child on her back in a *kinjah*, a woven seat with matting for protection from the harsh elements. In a clear voice that commanded Johnson’s attention, the woman claimed that in their testimony before the American commissioner the men had not told everything, and it was her duty to set the record straight. She then told how soldiers had taken women in groups of two hundred to the barracks and kept them there for nine months against their will. “The soldiers used us as their wives,” she said, “we who had husbands and children. They had guns and we could not protect ourselves and our husbands could not protect us.” As a result, pregnant women from the Borobo section had to prove paternity, and many were forced to abort their unborn children. “We pray to the Commission to stop us from having to go to the barracks.”³⁴

³³ Johnson, “African Diary,” June 1, 1930, 151 (first through fourth quotations), June 2, 1930, 151, CSJP; Johnson, *Bitter Canaan*, 219 (fifth quotation).

³⁴ Johnson, “African Diary,” June 2, 1930, 153 (first quotation), 154 (remaining quotations), CSJP; Johnson, *Bitter Canaan*, 218; International Commission of Inquiry, *Report of the International Commission of Inquiry*, 39. The *kinjah* came in various forms and could serve multiple purposes. As a container, it could be used to carry produce, or to hang food for drying purposes. Porters also used *kinjahs* for transporting an assortment of goods. Dunn, Beyan, and Burrowes, *Historical Dictionary of Liberia*, 190.

Moving on once again the next morning, Johnson intended to reach the town of Webo by nightfall but had to stop at the first Nyenebo town on the way because the local chief “put up the most forceful, polite argument for our staying.” Although his paramount chief lived about a mile away, the town chief claimed that his people had much to say. Johnson, who had run out of money, wrote: “Anyhow there were no carriers at the moment, and after long discussion and argument, we sat down.” After another ceremonial presentation of kola nuts, water, and salt, Johnson’s group of fourteen received a full-grown cow that was butchered and laid before his tent. “For us,” Johnson noted, “there was selected an ungodly amount of meat.” His three clerks “took a whole quarter—the greedy dogs,” and the young assistants “stuffed themselves like hogs.” Johnson became “disgusted”, first with the clerks “who could read and write and had no consideration for the ‘heathen natives’, who couldn’t,” and then with the boys “who were getting a rare taste of meat and gorged themselves until I swore blazes at them for their hoggishness.” Later, he had to hand out “constipation pills”. Johnson then returned half of the meat “to the really poor and hungry living around us,” who divided it “down to hoofs, parts of tripe, skin, long into the day, until about fifty had gotten a small portion.”³⁵

After the feast came “palaver” over the absence of Paramount Chief Casar, whom Johnson had earlier invited to Rocktown. Casar, however, had suggested that Johnson visit his town instead, a “logical” offer that the American commissioner had mishandled “through ignorance.” After thirty minutes of palaver, Casar arrived “and accepted the invitation in good grace.” As he approached, townspeople had been “going through the

³⁵ Johnson, “African Diary,” June 3, 1930, 154 (first through third quotations), 155 (remaining quotations), CSJP; Johnson, *Bitter Canaan*, 218.

ritual of saying ‘I am afraid.’” They told Johnson, “Tomorrow you will be gone, and who is going to protect us from the wrath of the fireheads by whom we are surrounded? They will come and destroy our towns, as they have done before.” Chief Casar, after “a brief polite recognition of our visit and thanks for stopping,” said: “You hear them say that they are afraid, that if we talk our towns will be destroyed. It is true . . . we are a small people and helpless before them, their soldiers and their guns.” Then, with “a burst of voice” that startled Johnson, Casar said: “Then let it be history for our children that in the year Nineteen-thirty the towns of the little people of Nyenebo were destroyed because they made known their complaints. I shall talk fully and truthfully.” Johnson noted: “And he did.”³⁶

True to an earlier promise, the Nyenebo provided carriers for Johnson’s group, although “difficult” to do so in light of the shortage of able-bodied men in the town. Now on the last leg of his journey, Johnson settled on the town of Webó as the site for his last set of hearings after a visit to Kronokeh. Chief Casar asked permission to follow and the group paused in the small Nyenebo town of Wodoweka, where native women crowded around and sang another lament like that of the Webó maidens in Bigtown. The trip that followed was “long and hard,” with rain, endless swamps, steep hills, and high bush. Johnson rode in a hammock for less than a quarter of the trip, which lasted from eight-thirty in the morning until five o’clock in the evening. On the way they encountered sixteen streams and three rivers with “logs across.” From the time that he had left Grand Cess, Johnson determined that he had crossed a total of ninety-one

³⁶ Johnson, “African Diary,” June 3, 1930, 155 (quotations); Johnson, *Bitter Canaan*, 219.

streams. Upon arriving in Kronokeh, he found “the cables from home and the £10.0.0 cash, for check sent to Firestone.” Also waiting in town was Cuthbert Christy.³⁷

On the first night in Kronokeh, Paramount Chief Choami wanted to offer testimony but “was constantly interrupted and prodded by his followers.” Johnson later discovered that the chief had been “tampered with” by the district commissioner, a Gola native named Carney Johnson, who Christy claimed to have been “playing to and treating as a gentleman and getting some interesting letters.” While Christy ventured off to the town of Webo to talk to the district commissioner, Johnson took the time to recount the journey so far and noted eight stops made for setting up camp, eleven sections covered, and hearings with more than one hundred chiefs and subchiefs as well as more than fourteen hundred natives. As he wandered around Kronekeh, the sociologist showed signs of having readjusted his thinking more along the ethnographic lines discussed with Malinowski in London. For instance, he suspected that the characteristic geometrical design on local native houses had evolved from the leopard’s tooth “so familiar as a part of the decoration of native warriors.” Also, he thought the design’s “conventionalized” shape was due to “crude tools which can make angles more easily.” Johnson went on to note that native huts often displayed paintings of ships. He asked a native man about other patterns and learned that they represented “canoes, breadfruit, a spoon, plate, woman’s cloth”, and “a native water cooler.” “These, presumably” Johnson wrote, “are the things idealized by the natives of this town.”³⁸

With Christy away on the following day, Chief Choami made a formal presentation of a young bullock to Johnson. Thinking now more as an anthropologist, Johnson

³⁷ Johnson, “African Diary,” June 4, 1930, 156 (quotations), CSJP; Johnson, *Bitter Canaan*, 220.

³⁸ Johnson, “African Diary,” June 4, 1930, 156, 157 (first, second and fourth through sixth quotations), June 5, 1930, 158 (remaining quotations), CSJP.

welcomed the dash and “indulged this time in a bit of humor” about his “ignorance” of “delightful but strange” native customs. He told the chief that “not expecting such overwhelming hospitality as a bullock we had not brought a butcher and would have to rely again upon their help.” Johnson believed that his new, more sensitive approach “helped immensely with the session later.” He then congratulated himself on having “greater grace and understanding in doing this now,” and believed that it “went off well.” Indeed, the chief later testified “unhesitatingly and fully, and seemed to feel relieved.”³⁹

With the hearings in Kronokeh completed, Johnson took down his tent in “a pouring rain” and “scraped together enough carriers” to make it into Webo in two trips, traveling on foot the entire distance and in part down a “wide and crude” government road. In town he had an unusually frank discussion with the district commissioner. To the Fisk sociologist, D. C. Carney Johnson seemed very “engaging.” “Hale and intelligent” like “a college athlete,” he “wore his clothes like an American.” Although a Gola, the district commissioner had “received book” at the College of West Africa, and seemed to Johnson one of the few who had “not reverted.” Because of his loyalty to President King while employed as chief clerk in the Interior Department, he had been sent into the “rear of Yancy Country,” where “his sympathies were not particularly native except where Golas are concerned.” D. C. Johnson, who had initially opposed shipments of native workers to Fernando Po, felt that natives must “be doubly good to get anywhere or stay there.” But after first advising chiefs to resist the forced labor policy, the “compulsion of higher

³⁹ *Ibid.*, June 4, 1930, 157 (fifth and sixth quotations), June 5, 1930, 158, (first through fourth, and seventh quotations); International Commission of Inquiry, *Report of the International Commission of Inquiry*, 42-43 (testimony of Paramount Chief Choami on shipments to Fernando Po).

officials” eventually persuaded him to fall in line with the plan, and now his methods “were as brutal as the others.”⁴⁰

In Webo, Johnson also met with an agent of the Woerman shipping line, a young German in charge of the company store on the Cavalla River. The “cordial” young man cashed checks, arranged for boats to take Johnson and Matheus downriver to the Firestone plantation, and served meals for which he refused payment. The agent, “lonely for company,” told his guests that he rarely left the store and had not crossed the street for six months. In order for Johnson and his secretary to get an early start, he asked the two Americans to stay the night and then kept them up late “talking, talking.”⁴¹

Early on the morning of June 7, Johnson and Matheus, along with six assistants, a headman, and two clerks, loaded their field equipment into a fifty-foot long dugout canoe and climbed in for a hair-raising trip down the rushing Cavalla River along the border with Ivory Coast. Johnson did not fully trust the “fishy, suspicious looking oarsmen” who wanted to stop and drink gin made from sugar cane. As they traversed the treacherous river with “rocks and even trees concealed,” they passed a town “on the French side from which inhabitants had been driven and kept by baboons—probably chimpanzees.” Johnson noted that “the cramped position, the relentless beating of the sun, then the rain . . . and wind that pushed up waves on the river” kept him company until they reached their destination of Gyidetarbo.⁴²

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, June 6, 1930, 158 (third quotation), 159 (first and second, and fourth through remaining quotations); International Commission of Inquiry, *Report of the International Commission of Inquiry*, 108 (subchief’s testimony against D. C. Johnson).

⁴¹ Johnson, “African Diary,” June 6, 1930, 158, 159 (quotations), CSJP.

⁴² Carney Johnson had arranged for a Liberian flag for the canoe in order to “avoid French questioning” of the trip down and “reason for crossing the river.” *Ibid.*, June 7, 1930, 159 (quotation), 160 (second and fourth quotations), 161 (first and third quotations). In Liberia, chimpanzees were referred to as “báboons”. On the Harvard expedition in 1926-27, one of the scientists saw chimpanzees in the same area along Ivory Coast. A village chief asked that none be shot because natives believed “that every chimpanzee is linked

Once they had stopped, Johnson sent the headman onto the Firestone plantation with a note to bring them a truck, but about forty-five minutes later William Hines and an assistant happened by in a car “on a chance to inquire if either Christy or myself had come down—had missed the headman.” Johnson then accompanied Hines and left Matheus behind “with our lunch spread, to load our stuff on the truck to come.” Christy showed up the next day by way of “motor canoe” after learning that a ship that Hines had “called in for himself and speculatively for the Commission” was scheduled to arrive on the tenth to take them back to Monrovia.⁴³

* * *

*Strange names encountered: Cash Money, Blue Peter, Soon Be Gone, White Man
Trouble, Big Box Locked, Afraid God No More, Black Man, Monkey Brown, Little Snake*

* * *

At Firestone’s Cavalla plantation, Johnson “passed in fair comfort” in a house recently vacated “but not entirely clean”, where he “enjoyed the rest, the whiskey and soda.” The Firestone house, which faced Hines’s living quarters, was made of Celotex and described by the sociologist as “roomy” and “pleasant.” At lunch with Hines, Christy complained that the canned food must have been poisoned, and also blamed his servant, James, for poisoning him. James then sought out Johnson as “someone to cry to”, and claimed, “the old man humbugs me too much.” James vowed to quit once they returned to Monrovia because Christy “gas about everything.” Johnson deemed it “good” that Christy’s

with the soul of man, so that if one is killed the man will die.” Richard P. Strong, ed., *The African Republic of Liberia and the Belgian Congo: Based on the Observations Made and Material Collected During the Harvard African Expedition, 1926-1927* (2 vols.; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1930), II, 590 (quotations).

⁴³ Johnson, “African Diary,” June 7, 1930, 160, (quotations).

“second illness happened before we joined him at Kronokeh,” and considered the Englishman “a sick man and an ultra-suspicious one.”⁴⁴

Even so, Christy passed along at least one story of interest to Johnson. A “wizened, cockeyed, serious, non-vituperative” native complainant named Davis had told Christy of a rubber farm that he owned and worked in 1924 when Firestone’s Donald Ross paid him a visit. Ross told Davis to ask a local chief to provide men to “cut around” the farm so that he could examine it. Shortly afterward, the district commissioner had Davis arrested for stealing men away from the road, “tied and beat him”, and then jailed him along with his fifteen-year-old son. Later, the D. C. ordered them to work on the road and said, “You think yourself a white man with a rubber farm, eh?” The D. C. then put them through the “No. 1 basket ordeal”, a torture that Johnson had heard about repeatedly on his trip upcountry. Soldiers would take a double-woven basket two feet in diameter and fifteen inches deep with a concave bottom, pack it with dirt and rocks, and then place it on the head of the victim and tell him to walk with it. The basket required four men to lift. “Soldiers delight in exacting this punishment,” Johnson observed. “They sometimes spin it with a monstrous strain on the neck, sometimes breaking it, or so injuring the person that he dies later.”⁴⁵

With a few days before the scheduled arrival of the *Wahehe*, Johnson spent one evening in a long discussion with Hines, who surprised him when he asked how division of interior sections worked. Johnson replied that he thought “it was by tribes . . . and

⁴⁴ Hines, who called several times each day, made arrangements for Johnson to send a reply cable through “special routing” to his wife, Marie. *Ibid.*, June 8, 1930, 162 (quotations).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, June 7, 1930, 160 (quotations). In addition to the usual beatings, floggings, and the No. 1 basket ordeal, soldiers were also fond of hoisting victims off the ground with ropes attached to a beam, lighting a fire underneath, and throwing pepper into it. This torture was known as “putting in the kitchen” or “over the fire.” International Commission of Inquiry, *Report of the International Commission of Inquiry*, 106-7 (on No. 1 basket ordeal), 114 (on “putting in the kitchen”; quotations).

that each respected the other's towns and farm lands, but sometimes engaged in prolonged fights over it." Hines then told Johnson that he had considered sending recruiters into the interior to remain there for a time until they could form friendly relations with natives, essentially staying as "hostages" until a first group of laborers returned with positive reports on Firestone. Johnson, always thinking of ways to use the latest technology, suggested that "moving pictures" could be made of Firestone laborers receiving "rice issues, pay, etc., and purchasing of goods might help and also stimulate wants."⁴⁶

Inevitably the questions of labor and road building came up, and led Hines to cite a report from Douglas Gent, a "prospector" for the Elder-Fife Company, a British subsidiary of the United Fruit Company. Gent's tour of Liberia had taken him to depths of twenty and as much as fifty miles into the interior. Although "plenty of labor" was available upcountry behind Bassa, he noted the "desperate" state of towns behind Sinoe. Gent claimed that "extortion, pestering and pilfering by soldiers" and "bloodsucking by the station masters, particularly one by the name of Jeffrey," had caused natives to run into the bush at least fright," terrified of "all men in khaki." Jeffrey had "cleaned out the county of all able-bodied men." One Bassa chief reportedly asked Gent, "What is the use of our producing anything when they take it right away from us?"⁴⁷

After several years of dealing with Americo-Liberians, Hines concluded: "The ruling class of Liberia is non-productive, and either through habits of laziness or spurning of work as dishonorable, produce nothing." He cited "the lack of dignity in public buildings" in Monrovia, where the courthouse and city hall appeared as a "ragged

⁴⁶ Johnson, "African Diary," June 8, 1930, 164 (first quotation), 165 (remaining quotations), CSJP.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 165 (quotations).

disgrace”, with “shells of walls never finished” that “have been standing now for five years.” As a result of dependence on “eternal loans and internal fines . . . there is no economic stability.” Hines complained that the Liberian government had become dependent on Firestone “for many things which they should themselves produce,” and provided as examples President King’s requests to the company for sewer pipe, tools for road work, use of the company’s radio station, and transportation. On the other hand, the government would not grant Firestone a “license to transport, thus receiving a fee to cover the gas, labor, time, wear and tear and inconvenience. So it continues free, if one is declined, there are petty recriminations.” Worst of all, the “habit, which grows more national,” placed the Liberians “in a position of economic dependence upon Firestone—a thing which their orators and their theoretical legislation are bold in opposing, but which continues, nevertheless. In the end temptation is set. They will surely regret it.”⁴⁸

Hines also mentioned that the question of League of Nations mandates in West Africa would be revived within the next year, and that Germany was “insisting on colonies, and it is recognized that she needs them.” The British, according to Hines, had found it necessary to allow for more representation among natives and “the French have had to make certain concessions,” but “at present native courts are scarcely more than debating societies,” and “there is restlessness.” As Johnson later reflected on his conversation with Hines, he wrote: “There is some question yet in my mind whether the surrounding colonies do not find it to their advantage (unfortunate as it might be) to have the example of inadequate government. What would it mean to their administrations and to native psychology and demands to have next to them a flourishing and well-administered black

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 167 (first, and fifth through seventh quotations), 168 (second through fourth quotations).

republic? The place is rich. It is strategic. It is a useful political unit. It is an experiment.”⁴⁹

On the day before their scheduled departure from Cape Palmas, Hines told Johnson about a message that he had received from Donald Ross at the Harbel plantation. Ross radioed Hines that Chargé d’Affaires Henry Carter had also booked passage on the *Wahehe* and would be leaving Monrovia. A surprised Johnson could “hazard” no “satisfactory explanation save, perhaps, a break with the Department at home over his handling of affairs.” Carter’s “ruffling of Christy” and the “impression of his more than neutral and friendly attitude toward the investigation or some complication on the financial tangle,” as Johnson speculated, might also have contributed to the chargé’s dismissal.⁵⁰ In any event, a return to Monrovia promised more, rather than fewer, complications for the commission.

In the meantime, Johnson passed what he understood as his last day in Cape Palmas by observing Firestone’s system of issuing rice to native workers at the Cavalla plantation. As a group of “husky” young natives carrying sacks passed by an office door,

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 170 (quotations).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, June 9, 1930, 170 (quotations). Carter offered this version of events that led to his transfer from Liberia: “At the British Legation reception on June 3, at noon, I saw the President, and in the course of general conversation with him the question of the present difficulties of Liberia arose. The possibility of foreign intervention came up, and I inquired, quite informally, what the President would think of intervention by Germany. King said he was opposed to any sort of intervention. I then said that I doubted the United States would allow a foreign intervention; that I hoped, if intervention were ever necessary, it would be the United States, but that it was my belief Liberia could solve its own problems and no intervention question would ever arise seriously. Then I assured King of the continued American friendly interest. The conversation was entirely formal, the President apparently understanding and appreciating this fact, and he also appreciated my assurance of friendship.” On the following day, Carter received a “very abrupt note” from Secretary of State Barclay protesting the remarks and inquiring if the United States intended “any alteration” in its traditional policy toward Liberia. Carter believed that Barclay, who had an intense dislike for white foreigners, might carry the matter further to discredit “American activities in Liberia” The Chargé in Liberia (Carter) to the Secretary of State, June 7, 1930, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States* (3 vols.; Washington, D. C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1945), III, 329 (first quotation), 330 (remaining quotations). Hereafter cited as *Foreign Relations, 1930*.

a native using a salmon tin—"the universal standard for a cup or pint"—ladled out five "heaping" portions of rice, or the equivalent of a shilling's worth, the standard daily pay for laborers at Firestone. Rice issues took place twice a week; those who failed to work at least five days in a row had their ration withheld. Waiting nearby Johnson observed native women who Firestone "encouraged" to bring their "piles of cassava, yams and country asparagus" in exchange for rice. "This helped to vary the diet," Johnson noted, "since it would be inconvenient for Firestone to try to issue any but a basic food." The workers, according to Johnson, seemed "casual and free enough." He noticed that many of the men had "one eye punched out. This is a favorite trick in fighting—punch out the man's eyes."⁵¹

When no ship arrived the following day, Johnson was left to wait and wonder, and spent most of his time indoors working on notes and indexing data. The next morning, still with no word from the *Wahehe*, Johnson walked into town after breakfast and passed one of Yancy's farms where rice and cassava were grown, and later another of the vice-president's "well developed" farms, this one "fenced in." That afternoon, Johnson met with the governor of Maryland County, J. S. Smith, to "thank him for his courtesies." A self-described "strong man" who had been transferred from Bassa County to replace the "weak" former governor of Maryland, Smith "broke his verbs emphatically" as he spoke with "assurance" about what Johnson had found during the League investigation.⁵²

"This is a awful condition," Smith told Johnson. "Thousings and thousings (sic) of people suffer from it." Smith had been in Maryland County since February doing

⁵¹ Johnson, "African Diary," June 9, 1930, 171 (quotations), CSJP. A shilling equaled about twenty-four cents. James C. Young, *Liberia Rediscovered* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1934), 43.

⁵² Johnson, "African Diary," June 11, 1930, 172 (quotations), CSJP.

nothing more than “stopping up cracks,” and had yet to receive any payment from the government. Reform was uppermost in his mind, as he was tired “of this handing around offices in a little circle, just shifting the name of the office.” Although too early to discuss the possibilities of Liberia’s next presidential election, Smith felt that the position would have to be filled by someone “strong”, like legislators in the past. Referring to “the strong ones who founded the country,” Smith said, “When legislation time came they didn’t wait on no ship. They rolled up their pants and walked the beach that two hundred and fifty miles to Monrovia.” “You know,” Smith continued, “in a way Faulkner was right. He wasn’t fighting for himself so much as he was fighting corruption.” After the rigged 1927 election, Smith claimed that Faulkner “applied” to Liberia’s lower courts, its legislature, and then its supreme court, but “they wouldn’t hear him. Then, by gum, he applied to the League of Nations.”⁵³

Johnson found the “jolly” governor, described as a three-hundred-pound “hulk of meat,” as informative as he was amusing. With his “small head, vast feet, and most mobile stomach,” Smith expressed his “crudely good” ideas “for all the world as would a lady hippo drowned in a wave of righteousness.” But Johnson “liked his spirit,” and felt that nearly everything Smith had said, although “pedantically illiterate” and somewhat vague, aimed at “a soundness which the country needs.” “I should not like to have him meet outsiders,” Johnson wrote, “but back in the interior where good English is not as vital as honest form he would do much good.”⁵⁴

As the days crawled by and no ship appeared on the horizon, Johnson met with numerous visitors, including a variety of government officials that he referred to

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 172 (first through third quotations), 173 (remaining quotations).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 173-74 (quotations).

sarcastically as “pillars of society.” On Sunday afternoon, June 14th, after more organizing of notes for the commission’s final report, Johnson “talked at length with Christy regarding Liberia.” Both men agreed on “corruption and lack of standards” in the black republic, but Christy believed “it was a situation that could not correct itself now by American Negroes, because they could not have the standards. A good, strong white man must have control somehow.” Johnson admitted that he “knew nothing of international politics nor cared particularly,” but ventured “that a poor white man is not necessarily a better administrator than a good Negro, simply because more white persons have been good administrators.” Christy insisted that Germany wanted Liberia, “but that Britain was best equipped, through experience, to control Africa,” although it “had no desire for this place. America has the sphere of influence but knows nothing of African administration.”⁵⁵

While “allowing full reign” for Christy’s “apparently non-self-conscious observations on Africa and Negroes and Americans,” Johnson felt compelled “to make mention of one or two items.” To Christy’s comment “that the American Negro would quickly go native and carry on the same exploitation because they had not the white man’s standards,” Johnson suggested “that I was an American Negro and certainly could not accuse myself of having the same standards of those observed; moreover, that natives themselves had, to my surprise and present wonder, considering my complexion, persisted in calling me and Matheus ‘white men’” Christy “demurred, saying that we were white men—color made no difference, only standards”⁵⁶

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, June 12, 1930, 174, 175 (first quotation), June 14, 1930, 175 (remaining quotations).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 175 (quotations).

A few days later Johnson met with Vice-President Yancy to talk and take photos “which he seemed extremely anxious to have taken.” Yancy spoke “confidentially, ‘If I am made president’ and soon forgot the word ‘if.’” Once, he mentioned “emperor.” If the public knew what he wanted to do in Liberia, Yancy claimed that he would be assassinated. The vice-president vowed that he would open up the Liberian interior to industry and would forsake loans because they “are not out of the earth.” He believed in “work,” and would have been at his rubber farm if Christy had not told him that Johnson was stopping by. “People are afraid of what would happen if you let American Negroes emigrate,” Yancy said. “I’m not, I want them.” Yancy wanted to give his “own people” the first chance at profiting from any new industries, and declared: “I’m a Negro first, last and always.” “We are the same and understand,” he told Johnson. “I can’t say this to Christy. You have a chance to be President of the country, but he hasn’t . . . I say give me my eight years, and if things aren’t better, you can have the country.”⁵⁷

Later that evening Johnson and Christy dined with a group of local businessmen that included an agent of the Elder Dempster shipping line, the manager of the Bank of British West Africa, and Douglas Gent, the British agent of the United Fruit Company on the hunt for soil “sour” enough to support banana plantations. Johnson enjoyed the “good music,” which, quite appropriately under the circumstances, included Tchaikovsky’s *Pathétique*, “one of the saddest pieces ever written.” After a dinner of soup, salmon and onion, fresh beef, pudding and jelly, and then coffee and “drinks”, guests talked about music and traveling, with Christy “always ready to indicate familiarity by correcting or disputing a point.” Douglas Gent told many fascinating stories in great detail, but disturbed Johnson when he discussed the town of Grand Cess. Fresh from listening to

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, June 16, 1930, 177 (quotations).

Allen Yancy's delusional proclamations, Johnson wondered as Gent claimed with certainty that Grand Cess had only about ten trading stores "squatting on a sand hill," each of them going broke because the town consisted of only seventeen or eighteen shacks. Johnson happened to know, however, that "the big town from which they derive their trade has exactly 770 huts, for we counted them—and no less than 3,000 people; that the Woerman store was piled high with piassava and it lined the street, drying—down to the waterfront." At dinner Johnson also learned that outgoing ships had been quarantined in Monrovia due to a yellow fever scare.⁵⁸

As days passed and the quarantine dragged on, Johnson had time to get better acquainted with an assortment of Liberian officials. While he chatted with the local customs collector one afternoon, Vice-President Yancy showed up. Affecting "more poise and self-possession" on this visit, Yancy lounged around and spoke "deprecatingly of most things, as if they were mere trifles," such as the dangerous sandbar in the Cavalla River where at least ten or fifteen people drowned every year. Yancy mentioned that France had gained control of the Cavalla after two Liberian supreme court justices went to Paris and "lost the river somehow—he didn't know." The customs collector then commented that the river had risen unusually high, and that he had received a letter from a mutual friend of his and Yancy's who claimed that at least fifteen huts had recently washed away. The friend, believing that the river would take his house next, asked for advice on what he should do. Yancy replied, with "surprising cold-blooded flipness: 'Tell him to get inside and ride away with it.'" The customs collector soon left but

⁵⁸ Ibid., 177 (first and second quotations), 178 (remaining quotations). Johnson noted that at Grand Cess, native women "sat stripping the raffia palm fibers into *piassava*," ideal for making broom straw. "They could get two shillings and sixpence for each fifty-six pounds at the trading store, and these accumulated shillings paid the taxes." Johnson, *Bitter Canaan*, 208 (quotations).

Yancy stayed and talked “loudly” about “nothing in particular,” and “evaded” every “lead” that Johnson threw out.⁵⁹

Even more annoying for Johnson was a visit from an Americo-Liberian lawyer and “that incomparable boor” Chief Sie, the native labor recruiter of whom the sociologist “had gotten a different and better impression earlier.” The chief “strutted in like a bumptious colored bishop” and “was full of air . . . and lies.” Sie “added” Meharry Medical College, located next to Fisk University in Nashville, “to the fabulous list of schools which he says he attended in the States.” Also on his list were Virginia Union University and the University of Chicago, two schools that had granted degrees to Johnson. At both universities Sie “had just gotten out or hadn’t reached the school” when Johnson had attended. “His dates were horribly mixed up.” When Sie spoke of the University of Chicago, he imitated Johnson in “affected speech, which was never grammatically correct even by chance.” But when he presented a “dirty card” with addresses on it, Johnson’s “defensive spirit for Virginia Union and the University of Chicago reached its fuming heights.” Sie and the lawyer “would not rise to go,” and finally Johnson and Matheus “had to appeal to the necessity for packing our baggage for tomorrow’s boat, and we arose.” After the two left, Johnson wrote: “My only comment is Damn!” Their “boat” did not arrive the next day, however, and Johnson’s frustration began to mount once again. “I have thought so much of home,” he wrote, “I am sore with thinking and dreaming.”⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Johnson, “African Diary,” June 17, 1930, 180 (first through third quotations), 181 (remaining quotations), CSJP.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 181 (first through eleventh quotations), 182 (twelfth through fourteenth quotations), June 18, 1930, 186 (last quotation).

After nearly three months in Liberia, Cuthbert Christy had turned even more rigid in his opinion of local politics. In a “brief exchange” Johnson noticed that Christy exhibited signs that “he is getting more and more bold in his disparagement—not of what is, but what can be.” Christy claimed “that a bunch of American Negroes dumped” in Liberia “couldn’t be expected to do anything. Stink pot. No government. Exploitation of natives Americans ignorant of Africa. Know nothing of administration. Firestones in for a devil of a time, blundering ignorance—won’t take advice.” Johnson suggested that the commissioners’ duty “officially ends when we have diagnosed the case—gotten the facts.”⁶¹

One afternoon in the days of rain and waiting that followed, Johnson went to see the customs collector for papers “forgotten” on their previous meeting. “He gave me all I asked for,” Johnson claimed, and he discovered that the man “was not frightened of Yancy after all.” The American commissioner received government customs lists of shipments to Fernando Po, Libreville, and the Gold Coast, along with “names, tribes, chiefs, etc.,” evidence that provided “the most direct link yet with the testimony of the chiefs.” Johnson noted with surprise: “He let me carry them away to copy.”⁶²

On Friday, June 20, Johnson noted: “Rained all day. Net no ships. Worked on notes.” The next day his journal entry read simply: “Rained again.” To break the monotony, Johnson played snooker at the Elder Dempster office with Christy and some others the next day. That evening came more games of snooker and Johnson forgot to count his “whiskey and sodas, and went to bed dizzy and without dinner.” With an upset stomach the next day, he continued indexing his notes and received a visit from the

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 186-87 (quotations).

⁶² *Ibid.*, June 19, 1930 (quotations).

county superintendent, Harold Fredericks, who “seemed ashamed of what we had found in his section.” The superintendent, fearful of losing his job, suggested that “things have not always been so,” and that “some sort of steady hand might given without taking away the whole experiment and calling it impossible.”⁶³

Fredericks also wanted to address a personal matter with Johnson, and eventually worked his way around to asking about a new rumor. He stated that Colonel Davis had read extracts to him from a letter allegedly written by Johnson to Faulkner. In the letter, which had been “intercepted”, Johnson supposedly said “that he was impressed with the graciousness and gentility of Yancy, and didn’t see how anyone could have said such things about him as I had heard.” The American commissioner concluded that the letter probably came “by the same route as the forged ‘instructions’” from the State Department, affairs that he considered: “dangerous ground; childish tricks.”⁶⁴

Other information passed along by Fredericks, however, had a ring of truth to it. Earlier, Johnson had learned “through the strange grapevine route from Monrovia” that Henry Carter had made “indiscreet remarks” to President King one evening at the British legation. Afterward, King protested, and Carter was recalled. Fredericks told Johnson that at a birthday party for the president a “hot-headed” and intoxicated Carter had apparently asked King how he would like it if the Germans or English took over Liberia. A “surprised” King replied that he “would cross that bridge” when he came to it. Carter then said, “Well, you’d damn sight better cross the bridge, because you are at it; if you can’t cross, you had better let somebody help you across.” King sent a “stinging” note to Carter the next day, but the chargé “merely replied that he must have misunderstood what

⁶³ *Ibid.*, June 20, 1930, and June 21, 1930, 188 (first and second quotations), June 22, 1930, 188-89 (third quotation), June 23, 1930, 189 (remaining quotations).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 189 (quotations).

he said,” a description of events given credence by official State Department correspondence.⁶⁵

In his “most vital and yet calmest discussion” with Cuthbert Christy, who reiterated his argument for colonial government in Liberia, Johnson pointed out some salient ideas for the Englishman to ponder. He argued that “the present practice of Republican government in Liberia, rather than the *form* of government” stood at fault. Johnson’s explanation of the problem as he saw it displayed a sense of fairness that added even more power to the conclusions reached in the League’s final report. Johnson claimed that the commission had come to Liberia with a limited scope of inquiry “into a set of conditions condemned as bad from the beginning,” and that they had worked only in a small area while avoiding “the sections of the country reputed as sound—the northern sections with their well-knit industrial communities, the farming settlements, etc.” After spending half of their time in “the most notorious section of the Republic,” the commissioners could not, according to Johnson, “presume to speak of this as being all of Liberia” or of “the people met as *the* Liberians, or the conditions studied as being the whole of the life of *the Republic*.” Johnson later wrote: “How intransigent can judgments be, involving the fate of the lives of millions.” Rather than adopting “a visitor’s guess,” Johnson could “state the circumstances of his evidence,” and provided as

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, June 14, 1930, 175 (first quotation), June 23, 1930, 189-90 (remaining quotations). The note, written by Secretary of State Barclay, claimed that in Carter’s conversation with King, the chargé “enquired of the President whether the Liberians desired the Germans to come into Liberia and take over, and upon His Excellency replying that Liberians desired no one whatever [including?] the Americans to come in and take over the administration of the country you replied ‘well, if you do not want the Americans to come and take over you will have to submit to their doing so.’ The President suggested to you that we should not ‘cross that bridge until we get to it.’ You declared that ‘America will step in just the same.’” Barclay then went on to suggest: “The Government of Liberia, ignoring for the moment the discourtesy of the language and manner which you adopted toward the President of the Republic during the course of your conversation, merely desire to place on record their recognition of the change in American policy towards this Republic.” The Chargé in Liberia (Carter) to the Secretary of State, June 10, 1930, *Foreign Relations, 1930*, III, 331 (quotations).

an example some receipts given to him by the former governor of Kru Town that totaled “£81.0.0 to Senator Tubman” for shipments to Fernando Po.⁶⁶

As Johnson and Christy continued to wait for a ship back to Monrovia at the end of June, the district commissioner came to Cape Palmas and sent a radiogram to the government about the collection of hut taxes. Although natives “had not yet reaped their rice crops from the sale of which they usually get their tax money,” D. C. Carney Johnson had orders to collect the taxes ahead of the usual August deadline. Yancy had already imprisoned Paramount Chief Casar and a number of other chiefs for failing to pay, and Johnson noted: “There is the possibility that enforcement of this is an aid to punishment for deposing.” Word also came about a protest meeting held in Monrovia that called for the resignation of the president and vice-president.⁶⁷

On Sunday, June 29, Johnson counted seven ships that passed around the cape, and concluded that one of the reasons that they did not stop “is the small amount of cargo to be gotten” and the danger of the jagged rocks hidden beneath the water’s surface. To keep himself occupied, Johnson read all of the British papers that he could find, “graphic and sporting news”, Maurice Maeterlinck’s *The Life of the Bee*, a biography of Oscar Wilde, and two Tolstoy plays. Eventually, Firestone’s immediate need to transport fifty-eight tons of rubber tree stumps to the Du Plantation led Hines “to exert efforts in all

⁶⁶ Johnson, “African Diary,” June 24, 1930, 190 (first quotation), 191(second quotation; emphasis added), 192, 193 (third through sixth quotations), June 27, 1930, 193 (remaining quotations), CSJP.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, June 29-July 3, 1930, 194 (quotations). The protest meeting was organized by former president Daniel E. Howard and supreme court justice F. E. R. Johnson on behalf of Faulkner. The meeting reportedly drew a crowd of about five hundred. See “Resolutions submitted by the undersigned Committee appointed by the Mass Meeting and unanimously adopted by the Citizens of Montserrado County in a Mass Meeting, in the City of Monrovia, June 17th, 1930.” Folder 13, Box 88, CSJP.

directions to get a ship in.” On July 2, Hines finally “induced” the *Wakama* to stop, although its German captain insisted on bypassing Monrovia for Sierra Leone.⁶⁸

After an “exciting” surfboat trip with his six assistants and twenty-eight pieces of luggage, Johnson learned that he would have to forego a stateroom on the *Wakama* and accept deck passage. “Bribing” the steward, however, got Johnson a deck chair and blankets, and the sociologist noticed “a curious set of passengers it was” that accepted without a word Firestone’s “extreme measures” to “accommodate the Commission.” Firestone’s instructions included a departure “at Marshall—a Firestone outlet, via the Du River; take the barge to shore and a launch to the Du.” Johnson’s fellow passengers included President King’s brother, a brother-in-law of Yancy’s, and Hodges, the native Grebo stenographer “who was with us in the bush, going to Monrovia to get away from the penalty of serving us.”⁶⁹

After talking with the group of passengers Johnson concluded: “Liberia does the best it can, perhaps, without books, schools, travel, contacts, and only a government to play with.” Later, he found himself “sitting and thinking again about this Liberia business.” Uppermost in his mind was the profound underdevelopment of the Republic. The nation’s “wasteful display and lack of manual skill” bothered Johnson. He recalled the half-finished bridge on the road to the Harbel plantation, and how the Americo-Liberians had spent the “entire appropriation of £6,500 putting up two vast cement buttresses, yet

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 195 (first and second quotations), July 2, 1930, 196 (remaining quotations).

⁶⁹ Of the surfboat trip, Johnson wrote: “It was late in the day—tide was bad, change of moon, travel was rough. The surfboat took the first swells, rolling in easily, as we reached the bar the waves became higher, 15-20 feet, and the prow of the boat, angled high, either had to ride through them or over them. We could feel the scrape of the boat in the sand as we crossed—then the high waves again—high up the prow went, and the waves splashed through, drenching us all—several times. Boarding the ship from a surfboat that bobs ferociously—sinking and rising about ten feet at an unpredictable angle, swinging near and then away from the steps—is a difficult enough feat. One must stand poised and await the approximation of the boat to the steps—then leap without hesitation, for it is only there a second. If you pause it is moving away again, and when you step it will be in the water.” *Ibid.*, 196-97 (quotations).

no bridge.” At a ferry crossing one of the cables had broken two years before, repairs that Johnson estimated would have cost about £400, but “now one must get a car across on canoes lashed together, and it costs £1.” Also, the “telephone line to Bassa operated about two weeks. The radio station has been closed down because the machines have gone wrong. The power system is down because no one knows enough about machinery to keep it up.”⁷⁰

After four days on the deck of the *Wakama*, Johnson went ashore at Marshall and boarded a barge that had to navigate in “a terrible sea.” The barge master, as Johnson discovered, “is a swearing Negro from Arkansas who has rambled over the earth as a sailor.” After reaching the Du River by launch, Johnson noted: “. . . a most pleasant trip—interesting were the mangroves along the river bank—the tree branches that shoot downward to the water and implant themselves as roots—a tangled stem.” Although “dirty and tired” from their trip, Hines led the group into a Sunday afternoon party at the home of Donald Ross, manager of the Firestone Plantations Company. At the party “were the characteristic Firestone ladies being smart and leisurely and grunting sweetly for the servants and giving imperious orders, lacking nothing but a lorgnette for their gestures of command.” The Firestone physician did parlor tricks, and Hines “was efficiently cordial as usual, and everybody was drinking whiskey and sodas and smoking Lucky Strikes.”⁷¹

* * *

Dead man on a live man's back possessed of the devil. Dead man makes him talk and tell who is responsible for his death.

* * *

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 198-99 (first quotation), 200 (remaining quotations).

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 200, 201 (quotations).

On their return to Monrovia a different reception awaited the commissioners, “the most curious that we had experienced.” Indeed, Americo-Liberians exhibited “surprise of the most elaborate sort” upon seeing Johnson and Christy. At a meeting with President King and Secretary of State Edwin Barclay, the commissioners learned that an “authentic” rumor had indicated that they “had been drowned, while crossing the bar at Sinoe, some days back.” Other versions of the rumor suggested: “1. The boat had capsized and one commissioner drowned. 2. Both commissioners drowned but Matheus escaped. 3. All persons in the boat drowned, including the boys, and there was great lamentation in the Bassa Country.” Although King claimed relief at being “able to demonstrate that the report had been ‘grossly exaggerated’,” the fact that he sent “no verifying couriers” to investigate the matter left Johnson to write: “Something might be said here of the wish being father to the thought, etc.”⁷²

Not long after the commissioners returned to Monrovia, Claude H. Hall, Jr., Henry Carter’s temporary replacement, informed his superiors in Washington of the “painstaking character” of the investigation, and his belief that the final report would be signed by Christy and Johnson but not by Barclay, who would probably “deny its validity” because of his absence at Cape Palmas. Hall felt that the report would “leave no doubt as to the existence of slavery, the mistreatment of natives, and perhaps while generally discrediting the government it will not have the appearance of a criminal indictment of any high official excepting Yancy.” In the meantime, the Bank of British West Africa had decided to terminate operations in Liberia before the end of 1930, and Harvey Firestone held fast to his decision to withhold any more loan advances,

⁷² Johnson, *Bitter Canaan*, 221 (first through fourth, and sixth quotations); Johnson, “African Diary,” July 14, 1930, 207 (fifth, seventh and eighth quotations), CSJP. Johnson believed that the origin of the rumor probably stemmed from the capsizing of a boat carrying a group of French nationals.

effectively crippling the King administration's ability to pay government employees or sustain its local sanitation program.⁷³

On Sunday, July 13, Johnson had his "first important session" on the report with Christy. For two or three weeks, Christy had been trying to write a first draft and criticized the card system that Johnson used for grouping data. Eventually Christy's "unwieldy and scattered" approach led him to ask Johnson, "Suppose you make me notes on what information we have, so I can work over it and write it up?" Johnson regarded Christy's request as "naïve." After examining Christy's findings Johnson discovered "hysterical, extreme statements in summary fashion, condemning the whole government and calling everything slavery, slave dealing, slave traffic, etc." Johnson explained to Christy that in order to "create confidence" their conclusions needed to be "deliberate and analytical." Christy then proposed that Johnson "not write up any more but give him narrative notes, embodying all the testimony . . . and let him write it." Johnson noted: "I am willing to do anything to get the business over, but I dislike his attempt to cover up ineptness both in arranging his material, memory for detail and sequence, and no writing, by taking my drafts and calling them his own." After another encounter with the Englishman, Johnson concluded: "The point at issue is not what is to be done with Liberia, but what is wrong Questions of autonomy, the appropriateness or inappropriateness of a Republic in Africa in the midst of colonies; the capacity of blacks

⁷³ Claude H. Hall, Jr., to the Secretary of State, July 10, 1930, Box 7011, 882.5048/200, RG-59, NA. Johnson had lunch one day in Monrovia with Dr. Smith, the head of the sanitation program. "He has a terrible peeve," Johnson noted, and listened to the physician's long list of complaints. Smith believed that the King administration was "blocking his program—and the blocking gives the aspect of professional failure." For "the challenge of a big job," Smith had come to Monrovia from Palermo, Sicily, where he was "comfortably established, good pay . . ." and disregarded "reports all along the coast about the lack of cooperation in Liberia." Johnson, "African Diary," July 12, 1930, 203-4 (quotations), CSJP.

for self-government; the experience of the British in colonization; the inexperience of America are issues, to my mind, better to be determined by the home governments.”⁷⁴

The next day, Johnson received a letter from London written by Henry Carter, who regretted not having a chance to meet again before his hasty departure. Mail arrived every two weeks in Monrovia, and Johnson felt gravely disappointed when he found no letter from his wife, Marie. He wrote: “This not hearing from home seems to me just about unforgivable in these parts.” Then, in a rare moment, Johnson noted some thoughts of a most personal nature: “However, I got a warm glimpse in a flash of a dream which stayed with me into the day. Its consequence fades on the thinking of it rather than the feeling of it. I am playing with her and giving an exaggeratedly stern order to do something. Her little figure is all intent on doing it and she walks by me at a lively, serious gait. That is all. But very real.” Indeed, Marie had tried to contact her husband but seemed confused on how to locate him, at one point asking the State Department to help her get in touch with the “Librarian (sic) commissioner.”⁷⁵

As Johnson and Christy settled back into Monrovia, another round of hearings began. While the commission “heard a lot of inconsequential general comments,” it also received testimony from key players like Firestone’s Donald Ross and William Hines, and had a long session *in camera* with President King. Arthur Barclay asked Ross and Hines if Firestone had “ever employed anything that looked like forced labor?” Ross replied, “Never. I think we have the freest labor in the world, in the tropical world, at

⁷⁴ Johnson, “African Diary,” July 13, 1930, 205 (first through fourth quotations), 206 (remaining quotations), CSJP.

⁷⁵ Carter also indicated that the State Department believed that the “crux of the Liberian situation is now in Washington, and he is going to be on hand there; and that he had picked up at the waterside the rumor that Christy and I planned to submit one report to the Liberians and go to Geneva to work out another to present to the League, but that he questioned the source of the rumor.” *Ibid.*, July 14, 1930, 207 (first and second quotations, and above). Marie Johnson to Charles Johnson, June 7, 1930, (third quotation), Box 7011, 882.5048/283, RG-59, NA.

least.” Ross also explained that the practice of paying district commissioners for labor recruitment had “stopped a long time ago,” and Hines added: “. . . a great deal of the labor that . . . would have come under ordinary circumstances has been afraid to come for fear they would be forced to go elsewhere I must add that . . . we have been troubled considerably with the interference of soldiers and other officials on our property without permission and they disturb our labor force in many instances.”⁷⁶

During his testimony President King denied any knowledge of illegal labor shipments to Fernando Po and claimed that he had never received any complaints about ill-treatment of native laborers on his road construction program. Johnson, using all the diplomacy that he could muster after his trip upcountry, tried to allay King’s fears about the investigation when he suggested: “Personally, I would not be interested in a study which was merely intended as a newspaper article . . .” and that “. . . if attention were called to anything which was current or acute . . . it would be similar to a medical diagnosis in the case of a patient who asked for a physician to come in, and its significance goes no further than that.” King replied: “I feel we are in perfect accord.”⁷⁷

Shortly after Johnson’s return to Monrovia he ran into Secretary of State Edwin Barclay and arranged for an “informal chat” sometime in the near future. After their street encounter, Johnson underscored the fact that “Barclay didn’t tell me that he had printed a booklet containing the forged letter addressed to me.” Desiring “another slant” for his “understanding of this situation,” Johnson arranged for a “chat” on general

⁷⁶ Johnson, “African Diary,” July 14, 1930, 207(first quotation), CSJP; *Record of Testimony of Witnesses Before the International Commission of Inquiry into the Existence of Slavery and Forced Labor in the Republic of Liberia*, Monday, July 28, 1930, 10 a. m., Monrovia, Liberia, 239 (second quotation), 240 (third quotation), 241 (fourth quotation), 245 (fifth quotation), Box 7012, RG-59, NA. Hereafter cited as *Record of Testimony of Witnesses*.

⁷⁷ *Record of Testimony of Witnesses*, 250-54 (quotations on p. 254), Box 7012, RG-59, NA.

subjects of mutual interest, and met with Barclay a few days later in the secretary of state's office, "a small room surrounded with book cases, rather plainly built." Barclay mentioned that he had belonged to the Book of the Month Club but his "interest fell off," interestingly enough, after W. R. Burnett's *Little Caesar*, the 1929 novel about a small time gangster's rise to prominence in the underworld. Johnson found Barclay, later regarded as the nation's "first dictator", to be modest but "extraordinarily clever," and "about as competent a man as is in Liberia."⁷⁸

From Barclay, Johnson learned more about the system of adoption in Liberia, whereby native chiefs would send a child to live with an Americo-Liberian "in good circumstances" who would provide education "or at least . . . the benefit of exposure to civilization." Adopted children often assumed the name of their new guardian and sometimes married into the Americo-Liberian group, although "they never go back to their native life again." For Johnson, the rules of adoption suggested "a sort of caste system . . . conscientiously maintained, in self defense." He believed that with only "a bare handful of Americo-Liberians on the coast, one must guard with some defenses the little culture they have, against the possibility of reverting. If a man marries into a tribe and lives with the tribe he is bound to feel the forces of its imperatives. But if one is drawn from the tribe through such processes of education and contact . . . the danger to relapse is lessened."⁷⁹

Barclay then brought up the subject of the Human Leopard Society. Human sacrifice served as a key element of the society's rituals, and Barclay claimed that about ten years earlier Leopard men had raided towns near the Suehn section where they killed

⁷⁸ Johnson, "African Diary," July 19, 1930, 213 (first through fifth quotations) 214 (seventh and eighth quotations), CSJP; Greene, *Journey Without Maps*, 106 (sixth quotation); Johnson, *Bitter Canaan*, 168-69.

⁷⁹ Johnson, "African Diary," July 19, 1930, 215 (quotations), CSJP; Johnson, *Bitter Canaan*, 170.

“hundreds” and then tried to sell human flesh as beef in the markets of Monrovia. Before President King left for the United States to try and secure the ill-fated loan of 1921, he gave Barclay orders to round up the Leopard Society and execute its members. The Frontier Force brought in about 600 society members, and Barclay chose sixteen leaders for execution. The secretary of state “stopped smiling and with teeth shut said, ‘I ordered them shot.’” Barclay claimed that the executions “broke up” the Leopard Society, although occasional flare-ups of cannibalism still occurred.⁸⁰

On the following day Johnson received a visit from Plenyono Gbe Wolo, who brought along his friend Dr. Cole. Johnson looked on with incredulity as the medicine man, or *zo*, “entered carrying in front of him, like a crucifix, a sprig of flower or plant.” Wolo and Cole “talked with most incomprehensible conviction about astral planes, astral lights, diagnosing by stars—spiritualism” Johnson professed “astonishment” as the Harvard-educated Wolo showed “complete subscription to all of it,” sitting at Cole’s feet and “pouring out tributes of respect and adulation.” Moreover, Johnson learned that Cole counted a Liberian state department official, Gabriel Dennis, as one of his “advanced students.” Dennis later served as Liberia’s secretary of the treasury and secretary of state.⁸¹

The second set of hearings in Monrovia ended on August 8. Johnson’s longing for home and the need to get away from Christy undoubtedly spurred him on to try and finish the commission’s final report as quickly as possible. Christy’s inability to use a typewriter or to organize data left it to Johnson to write the entire report submitted to the League of Nations and to the commissioners’ home governments. Just as a decade earlier

⁸⁰ Johnson, “African Diary,” July 19, 1930, 216 (quotations); Johnson, *Bitter Canaan*, 169.

⁸¹ Johnson, “African Diary,” July 19, 1930, 218 (first through fifth quotations), 219 (sixth quotation), CSJP.

when Johnson wrote most of the *The Negro in Chicago* and received no special credit for its authorship, the *Report of the International Commission of Inquiry into the Existence of Slavery and Forced Labor in the Republic of Liberia* became known as, ironically, the “Christy report.” On August 20, Samuel Reber, Jr., who replaced Hall as chargé, notified the State Department that the commission’s report would be finished soon, and that it would, in fact, have Arthur Barclay’s signature on it, as he “is in accord” with “many of its findings.”⁸²

Indeed, Arthur Barclay’s defense of his government eroded over the course of the inquiry as evidence mounted until “disgust” characterized his attitude. Still, Liberia’s elder statesman made one final objection, arguing that natives should bring their grievances to the government rather than the League commission, and took up privately a relatively minor complaint of a tribal citizen. After four days of bouncing around between government departments just to get a hearing for his client, Barclay finally gave up when he realized no effective action would be taken. The fact that a former president of Liberia could not exact justice for a native led Barclay to sign the full report without amendments. Although the Liberian commissioner knew that he would face criticism by his colleagues, Johnson noted: “With characteristic courage and calm, Barclay faced the new future of Liberia.”⁸³

On September 8, 1930, the International Commission of Inquiry submitted its final report to the Liberian Government, and Johnson carried a signed copy with him when he sailed from Monrovia bound for England on September 11. Chargé Reber informed Secretary of State Stimson that “the report is exceedingly well documented and seems a

⁸² International Commission of Inquiry, *Report of the International Commission of Inquiry*, 9; Samuel Reber, Jr., to the Secretary of State, August 20, 1930, (quotations), Box 7011, 882.5048/302, RG-59, NA.

⁸³ Johnson, *Bitter Canaan*, 168 (quotations).

clear indictment of the government's policy of suppression and intimidation which has been permitted if not actually indulged in by nearly all high officials including the President." With conclusions drawn from "over 260 depositions," Reber noted that the report cited "many suspicious criminal practices and even torture." Although only Vice-President Yancy, and a few other officials that included district commissioners and superintendents, participated directly in forced labor shipments to Fernando Po, "the President and the Cabinet were aware of these practices, having received recorded complaints from the natives, and took no steps to put an end to them." On the other hand, King, Yancy, and other officials, used forced labor "often ruthlessly impressed under the guise of government work" on their private farms. Reber also noted that when Johnson delivered the signed report to the State Department in Washington, "it is anticipated that [he] will explain his fears regarding the almost inevitable reaction against the natives." As many "foreign observers in Monrovia" believed, the Liberian Government was then in the process of "preparing drastic measures of retaliation against the natives who testified as to these practices."⁸⁴

Indeed, while Johnson felt it a great relief to complete his mission and escape from West Africa unharmed—physically, at least—he also understood in a visceral way that Liberia's most vulnerable inhabitants, its natives, could not so easily leave their troubles behind. Concerned with the future of the black republic rather than that of the King administration, Johnson left Liberia with a clear conscience as far as politics went. Without a moment's hesitation he could file away in the past his six months of enduring the sophomoric behavior and unbending colonial ideas of Cuthbert Christy, as well as the almost unbearable atmosphere of political intrigue in Monrovia. But abandoning

⁸⁴ Reber to the Secretary of State, September 8, 1930 (quotations), Box 7011, 882.5048/298, RG-59, NA.

Liberia's tribal citizens to their fate was another matter altogether, an emotional burden unanticipated when he accepted his assignment in December 1929, and one that he alone would carry.

Had Johnson followed his own advice to Christy and detached himself completely from Liberian affairs once the commission submitted its final report, departure from the black republic would have come with no small outpouring of joy. But the heartfelt respect that he had developed for the courage, honesty, and dignity of natives in general, and for Chief Jeh in particular, made an easy transition impossible.⁸⁵ Johnson realized that he was bound to fail the very people who had treated him with the most kindness and trust, and who had anticipated his arrival with the most hope. While he understood that the violence certain to follow would not be of his making, and that his terms of reference had by necessity been limited, he also knew that in the role thrust upon him by natives—an American Moses coming to set them free—he had succeeded no further than Marcus Garvey several years earlier.

After one last surfboat trip Johnson boarded his ship on September 11 for the long voyage to England and then back home, the excitement and sense of adventure felt months before on his approach to Africa having given way to somber reflection. Although deeply interested in the question of Liberia's independence, six months in the black republic had resulted in a seismic shift in Johnson's thinking; his new primary concern—the welfare of tribal citizens—catapulted him beyond the mainstream toward larger, more complicated issues that other African Americans were not ready or able to consider. In that regard, Johnson was a radical, far ahead of his time.

⁸⁵ In 1931, Charles and Marie named their new son Jeh in honor of the tribal chieftain.

CONCLUSION

In November 1930, a month or so after he stepped off the *S. S. Leviathan* in New York and tried to return to a normal life that did not include medicine men trying to poison him or even a hint of encouragement from others to run for President, Charles S. Johnson is alleged to have told black economist Abram Harris, Jr., that he viewed a researcher as “one who gathers facts and leaves it to others to draw conclusions,” almost an exact duplication of an idea that he tried to impress more than once upon Cuthbert Christy in Liberia. Harris recoiled at Johnson’s detached attitude, for which “foundations paid liberally,” and he grew to despise the diplomatic approach of the sociologist who had helped him earlier by giving him a job at *Opportunity*.¹ Even so, the blow delivered by facts that Johnson had gathered and presented in the commission’s final report fell with all the diplomacy of a sledgehammer in the Republic of Liberia.

In order to further explain the conditions that he worked under during the months of the inquiry, Johnson also drafted a minority report that he submitted to Assistant Secretary of State William Castle. Using material drawn from his diary, Johnson provided information about key figures like Didwho Twe and Arthur Barclay, and placed into context his trips to Kakata and the Kru Coast. Furthermore, Johnson felt compelled to explain his difficult working relationship with Christy. He wrote: “Although opinionated on many points and dogmatic in his assertions,” Christy “was amenable to fact and reason, at times reversing judgment completely with such facility as to give the impression of instability.” The sociologist felt that “long years of solitary life in the

¹ Abram Harris, Jr., quoted in Jonathan Scott Holloway, *Confronting the Veil: Abram Harris, Jr., E. Franklin Frazier, and Ralph Bunche, 1919-1941* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 143 (quotations).

bush” may have been responsible for Christy’s “personal habits and intolerance which helped create situations,” but suggested that problems never reached the point of being “insurmountable.” Always the diplomat, Johnson stretched the truth to a considerable degree on Christy’s behalf when he claimed, “. . . despite frequent disagreements on policy and procedure” the two commissioners “eventually found accord.”²

Although the League of Nations commission made no visit to Fernando Po, and never actually witnessed any torture, beatings, or killings, its final report nonetheless caused President King to express “mortification” over the conditions that it found in his country. Without implicating King directly, and without suggesting any evidence of domestic slavery as defined by the 1926 Slavery Convention, the commission concluded under its terms of reference that contract laborers shipped to Fernando Po had been “recruited under conditions of criminal compulsion scarcely distinguishable from slave raiding and slave trading” The commission also condemned abuses in the system of pawning, and pointed to the widespread use of forced labor for private purposes. In regard to public construction projects like President King’s road-building program, compulsory labor had been “wastefully recruited and used, frequently under conditions involving systematic intimidation and ill-treatment on the part of Government officials, messengers, and Frontier Force soldiers.”³

Most damaging of all to the Liberian government, the commission pointed to Vice-President Yancy and other officials for their sanctioning of forced labor for roadwork and

² Charles S. Johnson to the Assistant Secretary of State, October 1, 1930, 19 (quotations), Folder 6, Box 89, Charles S. Johnson Papers (microfilm) (Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, Louisiana). Hereafter cited as CSJP.

³ International Commission of Inquiry, *Report of the International Commission of Inquiry into the Existence of Slavery and Forced Labor in the Republic of Liberia* (Washington, D. C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1931), 133 (second quotation), 134 (first quotation)

shipment abroad through the use of the Frontier Force “for purposes of physical compulsion on road construction, for the intimidation of villagers, for the humiliation and degradation of chiefs, for the imprisonment of inhabitants, and for the conveying of gangs of captured natives to the coast, there guarding them till the time of shipment.” Much to the disappointment of Raymond Buell, the commission exonerated the Firestone Plantations Company, claiming that it used only voluntary labor, although this “was not always the case when recruiting was subject to Government regulations over which the company had little control”⁴ Indeed, Harvey Firestone wrote to Henry Stimson in January 1931 and claimed that the conditions outlined in the report had been “a source of grave concern to us” and “seriously interfered with our obtaining free labor upon which we insisted from the first day we went into Liberia.”⁵

Suggestions and recommendations made by the commission bore a strong resemblance to those suggested for consideration in November 1929 by J. P. Moffat of the State Department. Above all, they called for drastic reforms in the “disastrous” administration of the interior. The most “radical” change recommended the removal of all five “corrupt and dishonest” district commissioners. Needed to assist and oversee new district commissioners would be “a higher grade of official” selected either from Liberia or the United States. Other measures urged by the commission included abandonment of the system of pawning, curtailment of road construction, and cessation of shipments of laborers to Fernando Po, along with reform of the Frontier Force, native policy, and

⁴ *Ibid.*, 134 (second quotation), 134-35 (first quotation).

⁵ Harvey S. Firestone to Henry L. Stimson, January 12, 1931 (quotation), Box 7011, 882.5048/395, Record Group 59 (National Archives, Washington, D. C.).

education.⁶ Even if President King considered comments in the report “too severe,” he quickly concluded that the recommendations “were not impossible to fulfill,” an approach that Chargé Reber viewed as “an endeavor to determine the relative importance given the recommendations compared with the other sections.”⁷

Because the League report singled out only Vice-President Yancy for condemnation, Reber claimed that King would try to vindicate himself and seek a fourth term as president by fixing guilt “upon one individual whose punishment is possible.” After a public clamor for information about the report, King allowed an “official gazette” that contained the commission’s findings and recommendations to be published and distributed. In late September 1930, a committee of King’s Cabinet members examined the commission’s findings and issued its own report. The Cabinet committee’s report, while indicating the acceptance of “certain facts”, offered only partial reforms with few measures for enforcement. Reber informed the State Department that the report had not been made public, and that it would “effect no real improvement or fundamental change” in any event.⁸

⁶ In the section on suggestions and recommendations, Johnson wrote: “For the Republic to have reached its eighty-fifth year of existence and to have survived the serious crises occurring during that long period, is a great achievement. It seems, however, to have been accomplished for the benefit of the coastal inhabitants, chiefly the Americo-Liberians and their inter-related descendants, at the expense of the indigenous peoples of the interior, without whose assistance any attempt to develop the potential wealth of the hinterland would be futile. In most other tropical African administrations the native hinterland community of tribes has received first consideration, but in Liberia instead of thoughtful attention they have been subjected, as we have already said, to gross exploitation and subjugation, a condition of things which cannot continue indefinitely. It must eventually result in a rude awakening, if a thorough reorganization of the Department of the Interior is not taken in hand without delay and the necessary reforms instituted.” International Commission of Inquiry, *Report of the International Commission of Inquiry*, 137-146 (quotation cited above on p. 139; quotations on p. 141).

⁷ The Chargé in Liberia (Reber) to the Secretary of State, September 11, 1930, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1930* (3 vols.; Washington, D. C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1945), III, 350 (quotation). Hereafter cited as *Foreign Relations, 1930*.

⁸ *Ibid.*, (first quotation); The Chargé in Liberia (Reber) to the Secretary of State, September 17, 1930, and The Chargé in Liberia (Reber) to the Secretary of State, September 29, 1930, *Foreign Relations, 1930*, III, 350 (second quotation), 352 (remaining quotations).

As Charles King assured the U. S. State Department of his intention to accede to the inquiry's recommendations, Harvey Firestone issued his own list of reforms that he wanted the Liberian president to follow. Firestone's demands concentrated on reform in Liberia's financial and fiscal affairs, and called for the hinterland districts to be opened to commerce, a measure that would boost revenue earmarked for repayment of the 1926 loan.⁹ Worried that the international community had "lost confidence" in him, and that the United States would withhold its assistance in carrying out reforms, King also faced opposition from his own administration. In particular, Secretary of State Barclay bristled at one of Firestone's suggestions that called for the appointment of white district commissioners.¹⁰ Yet, King consented to Firestone's demands, even as Thomas Faulkner's Citizen's Non-Partisan League demonstrated in the capital and demanded that the president and vice-president resign.¹¹

As tensions ran high in Monrovia in November 1930, Chargé Reber received a delegation of Kru chiefs who confirmed recent reports of Frontier Force depredations against their villages, and who expressed hope for aid from the United States "against the oppression of the Liberians whose Government not only has failed to protect them but, under the guise of other charges, is punishing them because of the information they gave to the International Commission." The delegation presented Reber with a petition signed by several hundred Kru and other tribal chiefs and headmen that recalled promises of protection made by colonization societies in the nineteenth century, and by the Liberian

⁹ The Chargé in Liberia (Reber) to the Secretary of State, September 21, 1930, *Foreign Relations, 1930*, III, 351.

¹⁰ The Chargé in Liberia (Reber) to the Secretary of State, September 25, 1930, *Foreign Relations, 1930*, III, 352 (quotation).

¹¹ The Chargé in Liberia (Reber) to the Secretary of State, October 13, 1930, *Foreign Relations, 1930*, III, 361.

Government when it declared its independence. The Kru charged that the Liberians had never kept their pledges, and asked Reber to expedite the petition to the United States “with the prayer that our appeal for aid in succor in this hour of great need will be heard and acted upon.” Although in the past the United States had helped to prop up the government in Liberia against internal rebellions with the presence of a naval gunboat, it chose not to intervene on behalf of the black republic’s tribal citizens.¹²

Didwho Twe wrote to Johnson about the recent Kru Coast raid and the “hard times” of natives in Liberia. The radical Kru saw a “dark” future for his people full of “oppression, exploitation, and destruction of lives.” Officials in Sinoe County had taken “everything” from the Kru down to pots and mats, and Twe considered the situation “hopeless.” He pointed out to Johnson that natives had “nothing to resist the Frontiers with,” and that it would be “a different story” if they had guns. Twe figured that about a half-dozen machine guns and 500 rifles would do the trick. He also noted the “strong opposition” to the commission’s recommendations even though chiefs “all over the country” were “perfectly satisfied” with them and “anxious” to see them carried out.¹³

In late November, not long after Secretary of State Stimson expressed his appreciation to Johnson for his “valuable and unselfish contribution” to the commission, Charles King came under fire from an increasingly hostile legislature that blocked his attempts at reform and threatened impeachment if he did not resign. The legislature’s anger stemmed not from the many improprieties documented in the League report, but from King’s having “exceeded his authority” when he accepted the commission’s findings and

¹² The Chargé in Liberia (Reber) to the Secretary of State, November 18, 1930, *Foreign Relations, 1930*, III, 372 (quotations).

¹³ Didwho Twe to Charles S. Johnson, December 1, 1930, Folder 13, Box 88, CSJP; I. K. Sundiata, *Black Scandal: America and the Liberian Labor Crisis, 1929-1935* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1980), 144 (on Twe’s estimate of needed firearms).

recommendations. Pressure continued to mount against both King and Yancy until both finally resigned in the first week of December. King had the last laugh, however, when he issued proclamations before he left office that outlawed slavery and stopped labor exportations, moves that further angered legislators and made it appear as if they opposed reform and had ousted a president devoted to honest government. While King retired to his farm, Liberian courts issued criminal charges against Allen Yancy. Later, after learning that he would have to pay restitution to natives for money that he had extorted from them, Yancy suffered a seizure and spent the rest of his life paralyzed.¹⁴

With the resignations of King and Yancy, Secretary of State Edwin Barclay became the next president of Liberia, a development unforeseen earlier by the U. S. State Department. In mid-1931, after trouble broke out along the Kru Coast, Barclay sent Colonel T. Elwood Davis to investigate the problem, a mission that only antagonized Paramount Chief Juah Nimley of the Sasstown Krus. A few months later, after the Sasstown Krus took up arms against the Frontier Force, Davis led a punitive expedition ordered by President Barclay that resulted in the burning of forty one villages and the deaths of 141 natives, including women and children. Davis, an African American and “firm believer” in the Lightning Society, denied that he had burned six children alive, claiming instead that he had ordered soldiers to bathe the children and had given them his own ration of porridge after they had been found hiding in the bush.¹⁵

¹⁴ The Secretary of State to the American Member of the International commission of Inquiry (Johnson), November 22, 1930, and The Chargé in Liberia (Reber) to the Secretary of State, November 27, 1930, Foreign Relations, 1930, III, 373, 375 (quotation); Charles S. Johnson, *Bitter Canaan: The Story of the Negro Republic* (New Brunswick, N. J. and Oxford: Transaction Books, 1987), 161 (on resignations), 166 (on Yancy).

¹⁵ The Barclay administration blamed much of the trouble along the Kru Coast on Twe, who eventually fled Liberia and lived in exile. Sundiata, *Black Scandal*, 128-30, 143-44; Graham Greene, *Journey Without Maps* (New York: Doubleday, 1936), 17-18, 205-6, 209 (quotation); Nathaniel R. Richardson, *Liberia's Past and Present* (London: Diplomatic Press, 1959), 144-46.

The punitive expedition effectively ended Kru resistance and allowed President Barclay to proclaim successful reforms in native policy after banning labor exports and easing government demands on natives for portage and road work. The outlawing of labor shipments to Fernando Po came without much opposition after the accidental death of Postmaster General Samuel Ross in late 1929 and the illness of his former partner, Allen Yancy. Over the course of the next four years, as the League of Nations considered a mandate over Liberia, Barclay bided his time and maneuvered Firestone and the U. S. State Department in much the same way that they had done to Charles King in the 1920s. Eventually, neither the United States nor the League took any effective action against the black republic. Although British author Graham Greene met Barclay in 1935 and considered him “worth a dozen Kings,” he failed to make any connection between the president and a “concentration camp” that he had seen where “political prisoners” were being held a full five years after they had testified before the League commission.¹⁶

For their part, African Americans supported some form of assistance for Liberia from the United States even as they criticized Firestone and absolved Americo-Liberians as victims of “economic imperialism.” African Americans as diverse in their thinking as Alain Locke and W. E. B. Du Bois both pointed out that conditions similar to those in Liberia existed elsewhere in Africa, and even closer to home in the American South. In February 1931, however, Johnson felt it necessary to point out “items of misinformation” in a forthcoming piece that Du Bois had written for *The Crisis*. Du Bois had confused Yancy with former vice-president H. Too Wesley, had described adoption when he meant to address the system of pawning, and suggested that the League commission had

¹⁶ Sundiata, *Black Scandal*, 51-162; Greene, *Journey Without Maps*, 48 (second and third quotations), 106 (first quotation).

demanded a “white” replacement for Sigvald Meek. Although Johnson believed that they were “in accord” that slavery was not any worse in Liberia than other parts of Africa, he felt that “the native population of Liberia has some claim to the interest and sympathy of the American Negro population, and that the future of the Republic will very largely rest upon their intelligent development.” Indeed, Du Bois’ thinking on Liberia never included the welfare of that nation’s indigenous tribes.¹⁷

In November 1931, Johnson attended a conference along with other speakers that included Raymond Buell, and journalist Benjamin Nnamdi Azikiwe, who would later serve as the first president of Nigeria. Both Johnson and Buell criticized Americo-Liberian policies toward natives but emphasized that, in general, conditions in the black republic did not reflect a failure of black self-government. Azikiwe defended the Liberians and suggested that forced labor for public and private purposes was accepted as a matter of course throughout Africa. The Nigerian dismissed criticism of Liberia as nothing more than propaganda intended to portray blacks as incapable of governing themselves.¹⁸

As he realized the futility of arguing on behalf of the welfare of Liberia’s tribal citizens, Johnson soon withdrew from any further public debate. Over the years, in rare moments away from other projects, he would return to his African journal and try to fashion his experiences into a book on the black republic. In *Bitter Canaan: The Story of*

¹⁷ J. R. Hooker, “The Negro American Press and African in the Nineteen Twenties,” *The Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 1 (March 1967), 43-44; Elizabeth L. Normandy, “African Americans and U. S. Policy Towards Liberia, 1929-1935,” *Liberian Studies Journal*, 17 (1993), 208; Charles S. Johnson to W. E. B. Du Bois, February 25, 1931, quoted in Johnson to J. Theodore Marriner, March 5, 1931 (quotations), Box 7011, 882.5046/426, RG-59, NA; W. E. B. Du Bois, “Postscript—Liberia,” *The Crisis*, 38 (March 1931), 101-2; Alain Locke, “Slavery in the Modern Manner,” *Survey*, 11 (March 1931), 591.

¹⁸ Carter G. Woodson, “Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History Held in New York City, November 8-12, 1931,” *Journal of Negro History*, 17 (January 1932), 3-4; Ben N. Azikiwe, “In Defense of Liberia,” *Journal of Negro History*, 17 (January 1932), 40.

the Negro Republic, Johnson focused on Liberia's economic underdevelopment, an idea that foreshadowed later studies on impoverished nations that came to be known as the Third World. Much of *Bitter Canaan*, however, dealt with the history of Liberia, particularly its economic troubles. Johnson omitted any material that described the inner workings of the commission. His writing, unrestrained and powerful in his journal, took on a stiff and controlled tone in *Bitter Canaan*. In regard to Cuthbert Christy, who died in 1932 on a mission in Belgian Congo, Johnson had only kind words. Indeed, he saw no reason to contradict the London *Times* obituary that praised Christy's "unusual tact" and "knack for getting on well with primitive peoples." As Johnson tried to prepare the book for publication in 1947, Raymond Buell was scheduled to publish his own study of Liberia to commemorate the republic's first hundred years of independence. For that reason as well as other complications, Johnson abandoned *Bitter Canaan*.¹⁹

As William R. Castle had suggested in late 1929, the League of Nations inquiry into slavery and forced labor in Liberia would indeed serve as one of the "very important incidents" in Johnson's life; it had a wide range of effects on the sociologist, both personally and professionally. On a personal level, the psychological torment that he felt over the impending slaughter of natives upon his departure from Liberia, as well as his failure to persuade African Americans to take an interest in their cause, stood out as the most negative consequences of his appointment as American commissioner. Neither did the results of the inquiry—the resignations of King and Yancy followed by years of political turmoil—endear Johnson to many black leaders in the United States. In fact,

¹⁹ John Stanfield, introductory essay in Johnson, *Bitter Canaan*, liv-lxv; London *Times*, June 7, 1932, p. 16, c. 5 (quotations). In a letter to a colleague passing along the news of Christy's death, Henry Carter wrote: "I see that our friend Raymond Leslie Buell is now pressing for a League intervention in Liberia—he is always full of bright ideas." Henry Carter to Ellis Briggs, June 8, 1932 (quotation), Box 7013 882.51/453, RG-59, NA.

apart from government circles, where he earned newfound respect, Johnson's work for the League of Nations probably did more harm than good to his career, at least for a time.

But this is not to say that Johnson came away from his African experience empty-handed. In fact, just the opposite is true; Johnson benefited enormously. Face-to-face encounters with Liberia's indigenous tribes not only had a deep effect on him personally but also had a major impact on his thinking as a scholar. His distinctly humanistic brand of sociology, evident in embryonic form in *The Negro in Chicago* and characterized most prominently by a determined effort to see the world through the eyes of his subjects, took on a more nuanced and mature tone in Liberia. To be sure, the complexity of the black republic's diverse population and competing interest groups broadened his understanding of human relations beyond anything that he had experienced in the United States.

Johnson's compassion for society's underdogs, so apparent in his African journal, carried over with powerful effect a few years later in *Shadow of the Plantation*, his 1934 study of black sharecroppers in Alabama, and again in 1941 with *Growing Up in the Black Belt*.²⁰

Above all, Johnson's six months in Liberia, a society divided by caste and class rather than by race, gave him a deeper understanding of the central importance of education in the age of globalization. Natives equated education with individual and collective superiority and power; they based their consideration of Johnson as a white man not on race but on the fact that he had "received book." In the years after 1930, Johnson examined the connections between political disfranchisement, economic exploitation, and the withholding of educational opportunities that stood out as clearly in the American South as they had in Liberia. Personal empowerment through education became the central theme of his course of action. Gunnar Myrdal in particular embraced Johnson's

²⁰ John H. Stanfield, introductory essay in Johnson, *Bitter Canaan*, xlvii-lvii.

ideas on social engineering in the field of education, and cited the black sociologist's work a remarkable sixty times in *An American Dilemma* (1944). Thurgood Marshall, in his argument on behalf of the plaintiffs in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), cited Myrdal's work—and, in effect, Johnson's—when he used it as evidence to persuade the U. S. Supreme Court that segregated education was innately inferior for African American children.²¹ Until his death in 1956, Johnson waged his own battle against social injustice and inequality through a tireless search for ways to improve education for African Americans, his most important and lasting contribution.

Harvey S. Firestone, on the other hand, did not live long enough to benefit from his struggles in Liberia, which paid large dividends to his company and to the United States during World War II when the scarcity of crude rubber made it a precious Allied commodity. As the United States hurried to develop synthetic forms of rubber, Liberia grew in strategic importance both for its natural latex and as an African base for the American military. But economic development in Liberia during and after the war, when the U. S. built an airfield and a harbor, did little to improve life for natives. Although granted the right to vote in the 1950s, tribal citizens still found themselves all but barred from the political life of the country, a situation that would have tragic consequences decades later as a horrifying civil war destroyed every last vestige of Firestone in Liberia,

²¹ Gunnar Myrdal, with the assistance of Richard Sterner and Arnold Rose, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (2 vols.; New York: Harper and Brothers, 1944); Phillip J. Johnson, "The Limits of Interracial Compromise: Louisiana 1941," *Journal of Southern History*, 69 (May 2003), n. 55, 341. On the use of *An American Dilemma* on *Brown* see, for instance, James T. Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and Its Troubled Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 67-68; and Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America's Struggle for Equality* (New York: Knopf, 1975), 890-92.

including roads, hospitals, and schools. By the end of the twentieth century, Liberia had collapsed into a nightmare unimaginable to even the most negative observers in 1930.²²

Labeled as too conservative and beholden to white-controlled philanthropic foundations, and largely dismissed as irrelevant by modern historians who nevertheless continue to cite his work extensively, Charles S. Johnson has become a misunderstood and underappreciated figure in African American history. Although Johnson risked his life in Liberia, his role in the League of Nations inquiry met with mixed feelings among fellow African Americans unable to recognize the similarities between their second-class status in the United States and the plight of Liberia's tribal citizens. But as entries in his African journal amply demonstrate, there was much that churned beneath the surface in Johnson that contradicts the image of a self-centered, essentially weak-willed scholar afraid to raise his voice on behalf of society's underdogs. His 1930 League of Nations mission to Liberia, a significant event in African American history during the interwar years, must be viewed as central in shaping the thought of an important but often overlooked African American thinker and scholar.

²² Wayne Chatfield Taylor, *The Firestone Operations in Liberia* (Washington, D. C.: National Planning Association, 1956), 15, 52. On Liberia's self-destructive civil war see, for instance, Denis Johnson, "The Civil War in Hell," in Denis Johnson, *Seek: Reports from the Edges of America and Beyond* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 3-16; and Mark Huband, *The Liberian Civil War* (Portland, Ore. and London: Frank Cass Publishers, 1998).

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