

LIBERIA AT 160: Reclaiming the Future

Introductions

Ladies and Gentlemen, Fellow citizens

It is a great and incredible honor to have this opportunity to speak to you on this auspicious occasion. This is a moment that I could have only dreamt of and I thank the almighty God for granting me this blessing.

Today I stand before you and you may wonder why the President has picked me to serve as national orator. I believe that in her wisdom, the President picked a young person to highlight that indeed age should not **and must never** be a barrier in determining the measure of the contribution an individual can make to his or her country. I stand before you as evidence that **any Liberian**, regardless of age or economic background can and must make significant contributions to the national wellbeing.

Over the course of the weeks, there has been many discussions and debates in attie parlors, in the palava huts of LU and elsewhere about who is Kimmie Weeks? is his experience in fact enough? Does his age give him wisdom to address the nation? These are all valid questions and concerns but I say in response the important factor is not the messenger we must be concerned it is the message. From our recollection of the Bible, we know that God Almighty on multiple occasions used youths to deliver his message. From little David fighting the Great Goliath to little Samuel being used as a messenger for God, we see that the almighty has frequently used some of the youngest members of society to bring messages to his people at the most pressing times.

I stand before you a common man. I was not brought up with access to vast wealth or resources and nobody can say that I stand here to speak today because of political favors being bestowed on me because my family is in the top level of government. What little I have been able to do has been through strength, dedication and perseverance.

Ladies and gentlemen, Fellow citizens, today the Republic of Liberia has charted one hundred and sixty full years as an independent and responsible member of the community of nations. We have played our part well in the development of the international systems and structures by which the civilized countries of the world engage one another and administer the affairs of our one global village.

Liberia has been instrumental in heralding the dawn of political, social and economic freedom among the countries of our continent. To encapsulate it all, one should not hesitate to proclaim in a loud and proud voice that our country has truly come of age, and in turn has helped to bring freedom to countless other countries.

When we crafted our flag 1847, we had one lone star shining brightly across a dark continent. Today with our help, Africa is no longer dark, but is awash with freedom from colonization. For this, we Liberians should be proud of the important role we played in breaking the claws of colonialism and helping to free our brothers and sisters across Africa.

However, ladies and gentlemen, all of our glory and achievements seem to belong in the dustbins of history. Our fame has become

naught but a historical relic. The Liberia with which one could speak with the highest degree of pride and dignity is certainly a thing of the distant past. For as you may all bear me right there is not much in our recent past of which we can be proud.

The challenge today, therefore is to examine ourselves in the contexts of our distant and recent pasts in order to objectively outline those things that made our country *so* great a nation at some point in the distant past. To sketch out those actions, decisions and policies that brought our beloved Liberia to its knees, and to harness and focus our energies towards the reclaiming of our country's forgotten glory. **And marching into the future not as a poverty stricken war torn country, but as a nation basking in the glow of nationwide development, progress, and prosperity.**

Ladies and Gentleman, it is with this challenge in mind that I have elected to speak, with your kind indulgence on the topic:

LIBERIA AT ONE HUNDRED AND SIXTY – RECLAIMING THE FUTURE!

Madam President, Fellow citizens, ladies and gentleman, as a consequence of nearly two decades of strife and destruction, it may seem almost impossible to readily identify a universally agreeable

point of departure from which we may approach the task of reclamation.

I do not need to retell the stories of the civil war. Experiences of victimization, atrocities and destruction. Each of us here who lived through that war have our stories to tell. From Fendell campus, to grestyone, to refugee camps in Ghana, Sierra Leone and elsewhere --- - we were brought down to our knees and endured some of the most extreme circumstances.

Who can forget palm cabbage and borbor John, chicken greens or Palm kernel gravy. Who can forget dodging bullets?

As I look back on my own experiences during the war, I remain in awe at the strength and perseverance of Liberians. I recall Liberian mothers and fathers who despite the adversities against them remained hopeful and steadfast. Mothers who said yes I've seen war and yes I've seen human suffering, I've watched my children die, but I know there is a better tomorrow and I will **fight** to see that tomorrow.

We see market women who lost everything and had to start from scratch selling a few paws of pepper, but who despite the obvious hardships would get up every morning and go to the market fighting and struggling to sell and grow their small business if only so they could send their children to school.

We Liberians are a strong people with an uncanny ability to rebound by whatever means necessary. And in our efforts to reclaim the future, this strength for endurance will be our greatest tool.

As you listen, some out there will ask what future was lost and why there is even a need to try to reclaim anything... I say to you, in 14 years of war, we lost 14 years of possible advances in education, health care, technology and infrastructure development.

I might not have been old enough to truly appreciate it, but there was a point when RIA was the hub of international travel to Africa...now we can barely maintain two int'l airlines. There was a point when our education system was being emulated cross continent....now we struggle to boost qualified teachers.

Even here in the sub region, our counterparts in Ghana, Nigeria, Guinea and Benin overtook us on the path of development. I'm not even talking about just infrastructure development but of development of the mind through education. We have been left far behind in the dust while our counterparts are plowing ahead.

Sadly my fellow Liberians, in 14 years of war, we lost our edge as a leader in African development and became known instead as a nation of bloodshed, violence, dictators and anarchy.

Reclaiming our future is essentially the process by which WE as a people - and mind you not just the government - moves strongly and steadfastly towards the goal of creating a new, more vibrant and solid Liberia.

Reclaiming our future is when we as a people and as a nation can once more become an economic and cultural hub for West Africa. When we not only bring back pre-war Liberia, but we triple what we had before.

So I come back to the question...what is our point of departure for reclaiming the future. How do we start and in which direction do we head.

I strongly believe that our point of departure should reside in the portion of the population who hold the future of this nation and that of any other nation in its hands. This segment of the population is none other than our youth and children.

It is the children who are the custodians of the future of our country. As a matter of fact the children are our future and our world. We can reclaim the future and reconnect with our glorious past only by preparing our youth and children to face tomorrow. We reclaim the future by giving our children and youth the power to harness and utilize the benefits and potentials of the future. Here, we are talking about the powers inherent in knowledge and the strength of character. Indeed, our children are the vehicles through whom we thrust our hopes into the future.

My fellow citizens, Madam President and friends of my people: I come convinced that this administration will continue to demonstrate the commitment to up holding the right of free speech and the respect for the views of the citizens, no matter what the disagreements would be. I come also believing that if ever I would wish for a place at the

national tenement to plead for the good of the children of Liberia, this is the place and indeed, this is the day,.

For far too long we as a nation have abandoned, neglected, and sidelined children and youth. For far too long we have lived in the principal that children should be seen, but not heard. Our country has existed for one hundred and sixty years without a solid national education policy or without a specialized entity focused on the development of the Liberian child. While we neglect our children, nations in other parts of west Africa have set in place free and compulsory education concomitant with national education programs that that ensure well trained, well paid, and well honored teachers.

Every time I visit Liberian schools I lament the state of our education system. In many cases even our teachers have not received the proper training they deserve. Imagine my shock and dismay when on multiple occasions I visited classes being taught by teachers who were making multiple spelling errors.

I remember the Liberia before when reading was prioritized, when Mildred Dean became an icon for pronunciation and enunciation. I remember a Liberia when children were inquisitive and wanted to learn. When children asked where the sun came from in the morning and where it went at night. When children asked where birds flew at night and why $2+2$ was 4 instead of 5. [many nights I would not allow my poor mother to sleep. I came up with question after question and thank God she had the patience of a good mother. Cause in the dead of the night just when she thought I had asked her all the possible

questions in the world, and just as she tried dozing off my voice would call out in the night “mommy, who painted the night black?”]

Our task of reclaiming the future tomorrow lies in our ability to prioritize education today. We are a nation set on a path to failure unless we begin to make steps towards putting in place a national education policy that addresses our shortfalls and makes practical and decisive measures aimed at promoting sound education for all of our children. This measure must include the creation of a special ministry, agency, or commission specifically focused on children. At this current point, governments resources for children is divided between multiple ministries. This must change if we are ever to set in place a sound policy on child development.

The way forward in this national drive for reclamation of the future starts with building a stakeholders’ forum of which the foundation shall be built on the stones of education. Any forum organized to address the needs of youth and/or children that does not carry the issue of education as its centerpiece is a mere talking shop. Education is the rallying issue for all parents; for all neighborhoods; for all communities.

Madam President, hear me on this. I say to you, nothing is going to count for your administration but a non-political and non ethnic focus on the needs of the children and the youth...give your greatest priority to education and you have given a new birth to this very old Republic.

The free primary education program should be revisited and adequate resources, as has being provided for by law, should be allocated to give substance to your commitment. Believe me the roads rehabilitation is good; believe me the refurbishing of the LPRC and the facilities of other public corporations is economically sound; as a matter of fact, we are in the season of omnipresent priorities ... **everything is a priority.** But choose what you want to be remembered for.

I say choose education!

I say choose child development!

and I say choose cultivation of the youth.

I want to here paraphrase the words of my late father Dr. Rocheforte Weeks Sr. who was the first President of the Liberian University who said "I believe that the erection of buildings by postponed, the construction of dams may be curtailed, and the creation of bridges may be suspended, but we must never not for a single second postpone, curtail or suspend the provision of a sound and relevant education for our children."

With education, there is no compromise.

One certain way we may be able to take the education of the Liberian child to every town, village and hamlet of this country is to make good on the free and compulsory education policy. For too long we have spoken of this lofty policy. For too long we have spoken of getting out of our streets and alleys, those poor children who have to spend the best days of their youth selling plastic bags and cold water between

moving cars. For too long have we said that those children ought to be in school. It is also true that for too long we have done very little in getting those kids from the streets into the classrooms; where they belong. This is a challenge.

The benefits that are accrued by a nation with an educated young population are innumerable. We should go for them now. Because Education makes a nation self-reliant and an educated people make a proud people.

We know there is vast wealth of knowledge and passion in the youth of this land. Every now and then, I come across Liberian youths who despite the obvious obstacles against them are determined to make leaps and bounds into the future. Just yesterday, I was privileged to meet a young man named James Kaiwon who at 13 yrs old is already in the 12th grade. I salute young Liberians like James Kaiwon and my organization is proud to be providing him a full scholarship inclusive of uniforms and books.

{We need do encourage more of this}

+++++

My fellow Liberians, this speech would not be complete if I did not touch on the issue of health. Because to build a sound and energetic future is also to ensure that our people across the country have access to health care.

Too many of our children are dying from preventable diseases like malaria and cholera. Too many of our people are sick and cannot afford to buy basic medication. Too many of our people live in towns and villages across Liberia where they no access to a doctor, nurse or midwife. Too many of our children die even before they are born and far too many die before they reach age five. When we allow our children to die from lack of basic health services we are essentially dooming ourselves to a future of misery because each child who dies has the potential of being a great statesman, orator, doctor, minister, pastor or the first Liberian in space, or the first Liberian billionaire.

So even in the face of all of the shortages and inadequacies in our health care system, imagine my frustration a few days back when I heard that our budget for health had been slashed in half and in the same breath our legislators moved to increase their own salaries. This my friends is not the new Liberia we seek to form...this my fellow Liberians is not the future we wish to reclaim. The future we hope to carve, the new Liberia we hope to build is one where civil servants and representatives of the people are exactly that...they're those who serve and represent the people first and foremost before they address their own needs and wants.

It is my hope and my fervent prayer, that in its future deliberations, our representatives will first approve **in full** the budget for education and health – then and only then should they consider salary increases. It is my hope that in forthcoming years, the President will continue to advocate for widespread increases in the budget for education and healthcare and veto any measure to slash funds for these very basic, very essential, and **all** too important sectors. For I believe that a

healthy, well educated and well fed nation is a nation that lives in peace, tranquility, and prosperity.

In the words of the United Nations, there must come a day – very soon, when the progress of nations and indeed the progress of Liberia is not measured by the size of our military, nor splendor of our capital, or the make and model of the cars our senators and representatives ride. Instead, there must come a day when our progress is measured in terms of the number of Liberians who have access to education, health care and nutrition. When our progress is measured by the number of average Liberians who can wake up in the morning and say yes I'm satisfied and go to bed at night saying yes I am happy and proud and dignified.

My fellow Liberians, the task of reclaiming the future is one that this is of outmost importance and urgency. It is also a task so great that no one shoulder can bare.

Today, we are fortunate and blessed to be guided by a President who truly has this country at heart and who is truly committed to bringing real change. {We know our President is the iron lady, but trust me even the iron lady alone cannot lift Liberia up to where we belong.} To do this, we need every hand, every shoulder, and all of our combined energies working together to lift Liberia up.

Too many times, we sit around waiting for government to take action. {If somebody's yard is overgrown we want the government to clean it.} Ladies and gentleman...let it be known today that the government *IS* the people. No government can be successful unless the people

put their hands behind it to make it succeed. No government is powerful unless the people provide it power beyond measure, no government can support the nation unless the people are willing to first provide the support that is needed.

And here I borrow the words of the US President John F. Kennedy who said in his inaugural address of 1964 "ask not what you country can do for you...ask what you can do for your country." This must become our mantra in Liberia, this must become the words we live by...let us no longer ask, or demand for what the government and our country can do for us! Let us no longer ask or demand what Ellen Johnson Sirleaf can do for us! Let us instead ask what each and every one of us...the market women, the yanna boys, the shop keepers, the farmers the single mothers...let us ask what WE AS A PEOPLE can do for mama Liberia.

Our development, our progress, our ability to reclaim the future rest heavily and squarely on we the people. Where development has happened in other areas has not been only because of sound governance but because of populations of people eager to support the process of nation building and development.

My fellow Liberians, the most developed nations are where they are because of they were able to harness the power, productivity and energies of the youth. Young people in Liberia can and must begin to think big. We need to promote ingenuity and inventions, we need to think beyond our borders, we need to become competitive in a healthy way. I say to young people across Liberia – here in Buchanan, and in Monrovia and across Liberia find something you can do and try to do it

bigger and better. Be the best you can be and Liberia and the world will remember you. Never be satisfied with a certain level of achievements, always strive for more, much much more.

{Of course when I say be good as what you do I don't mean you should strive to be good at violence or armed robbery or stealing.} These are acts that are contrary to reclaiming our future. To youths of today I say to you there is no profit to be made in armed violence and armed insurrections. When we resort to violence and follow those who preach violence we are the once who suffer while a wealthy few reap the plunders of destruction.

Towards this end we can and must decisively oppose those who seek to overthrow, destabilize, or render our government ineffective. In the face of temptations to engage in violence against our people and our nation, we must say --- peace be still.

To those who might be plotting violence and unrest, to those who may be planning to destabilize our country, to those out there who seek to return Liberia to chaos... we say to you in the name God Almighty desist from any and all acts that will once more launch Liberia back into time. From this day July 26, 2007 onwards I in my own weak way and on behalf of the young generation of Liberia pledge to create and maintain a peaceful country which will never again see war and bloodshed.

Indeed, we as a people in a post war country must exercise extraordinary patience and faith that something is happening even if we do not see it as rapidly as we would hope. Even where fundamental changes in the building of roads and development of new infrastructure is not happening, this must not be reason to resort to armed violence.

Everyday I see change happening on so many levels. Some of the changes will not be easy for you and me to see because they're happening behind the scenes but believe me they're happening.

As I began to prepare to deliver this speech, I went around talking to average Liberians. I was saddened that sooo many people were telling me stories of how hard things were becoming and how much they were struggling. I'm sure many of you out there in the audience and listening at home have complained about how hard Liberia has become since the crack down on corruption and rampant misuse of government funds. But my friends I say to you today that while things might be just a little bit harder than usual, and I say to you today that eventhough things might be a little more expensive than before we must all rest assure that there are so many things happening in the back corridors and back rooms of government that are not apparent to us, which will soon yield results that will jump start us into the future. A direction we are heading to thanks not only to our President and the people of Liberia, but also to our many partners and friends.

To these partners and friends of Liberia, I say to you thank you. Thank you plenty. But I also say to you that our eyes are watching carefully your action here in Liberia. We are not fooled, we know that there are those who might be foreigners coming as wolves in sheeps clothing only with an interest in exploiting out country. We are watching and we will meet with solid intellectual force any and all individuals who seek only to exploit our nation.

Here I also say to you our international partners, that you must never insult we as Liberians by feeling that your knowledge is greater or your knowhow and expertise as far more superior than ours. you must not overlook a Liberian because even the old woman in the village and towns of Grand Gedeh and Nimba who has never been to school can still understand her reality and deduce practical ways to help her own community. You must listen to us and learn. We will also listen to you're and learn and create a level playing field for the good of Liberia.

There are so many things I wished to address in this speech, so much more that I wanted to say, but I am afraid that time has passed rapidly and I must come to a close. But before I do so, I want you all to know my fellow Liberians that I truly and honestly believe that we have broken a new dawn in our history – a new day is breaking over the horizons.

I have a vision my fellow Liberians, a vision for a the new Liberia. I see a Liberia coming forth heavy with the fruits of our labor. We are on the ednge of major development and progess far beyond our comprehension. I see a Liberia bursting forth with extraordinary

opportunity, but we will never, ever see this day unless we can build a nation of well trained, well educated, well traveled young people.

The people of today cannot wait until tomorrow to contribute to the building of the preferred future. The sacrifices we make today for the good of tomorrow will bring for us the future we want for our country. Our only true investment for Liberia is investments in children and youth. Everything else we do will fail miserably unless our youths are well prepared.

I leave you my fellow Liberians with a silent prayer that together we can make Liberia bigger and better and more prosperous. Together we can sing this glorious land of liberty shall long be ours!!!!

I thank you