

RENEWING THE AMBITION THAT DROVE OUR NATION'S FOUNDING

AN ORATION

DELIVERED BY SAMUEL D. TWEAH, JR

**ON THE OCCASION OF THE ONE HUNDRED AND SEVENTY-FIRST ANNIVERSARY OF THE
DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE OF THE REPUBLIC OF LIBERIA**

Your Excellency, George Manneh Weah, President of the Republic of Liberia

Madam Clar M. Weah, First Lady, Republic of Liberia

Madam Vice President

Mrs. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, former President, Republic of Liberia

Mr. Speaker, Mr. President Pro Tempore and Members of the National Legislature

Mr. Chief Justice and Members of the Judiciary

The Dean and Members of the Cabinet

Mr. Doyen and Members of the Diplomatic Corps

Members of the Clergy

Officials of Government

Council of Chiefs and Elders

Fellow Liberians

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen

Mr. President, I and my family extend to you our profoundest gratitude for my preferment to deliver the 171st Independence Day Oration. Men far more gifted in the business of speech have for decades performed this national ritual. To be chosen to deliver this Oration at this defining moment of national rediscovery is truly an honor for which I will forever remain indebted.

We gather here today nearly six months after the inauguration of a new President, who is charged with the responsibility to change that which has defied our beloved country for nearly a century and three-quarter. Mr. President, I do not envy the awesomeness and difficulty of the

challenge you have inherited. Twenty-four men and a woman have occupied the Liberian presidency, yet we as a country have not been able to give social and economic justice to the majority of our people. This difficult task now rests fully on the shoulders of your Government.

On the eve of these celebrations, some of our compatriots have even questioned the value of holding these ceremonies when the majority of Liberians remain jobless and when our economy is challenged. Those calling for cancellation appear to have reasonable arguments.

Maybe not celebrating July 26 sends a louder and bigger message that the Liberian people want something different from their Government and that their Government today cannot be business-as-usual. And maybe they are right!

But there is a darker message for not holding these celebrations. If we didn't hold the celebrations, we as a people would be succumbing to our worst fears. We would be giving up on the ideals that inspired our country's founding. We would be showing that we are less than the sum of our fears. We are stronger and braver than that!

Mr. President, My Fellow Citizens, those who founded this country were brave men and women of ambition. If we lose faith in the capacity, capability and possibilities of our Government; if we turn to despair and fear; If we condemn ourselves to a repetition of the historical tragedies that have afflicted us: we would have betrayed the drive, ambition and sacrifice that our founding founders bequeathed to us 171 years ago. This is why, Mr. President, I have chosen to speak to my fellow compatriots on the subject: **RENEWING THE AMBITION THAT DROVE OUR NATION'S FOUNDING.**

The men and women who founded this country were made of ambition. They left the scourge of slavery to establish for themselves a society in which all would be free and equal. The dangerous journeys across the Atlantic did not scare them. The outbreak of diseases like malaria did not daunt them. And the fierce and battle-hardened resistance from bands of brave tribal warriors did not prevent them. The ambition of building a new, a just and a free society remained their towering ideal!

These invading settlers were met by patriotic, tribal warriors, far more fearless and even braver in the defense of their native lands and tribal customs. Armed with indigenous and primitive weapons, they faced the guns and cannons of invading settlers, who were sometimes backed by the superior weapons of naval forces from the United States and Great Britain. These tribal warriors preferred death to surrendering their lands. Today, we Liberians inherit their valor, bravery and ambition. We are brave because of them. July 26 is a celebration of their martyrdom. We should never forget about the heroism of these giants because we face challenges in our own time.

And so my fellow compatriots, our founding fathers – both settlers and tribal leaders--through many battles and prolonged rounds of diplomacy, inspired by men like King Sao Boso Kamara, that first true Liberian diplomat, our founders were able to proclaim to the world on July 26, 1847 the birth of a new Republic.

This proclamation is not important merely because it was the establishment of a new country. No! This proclamation is all the more significant because our Declaration of Independence occurred when the capacity of black peoples for self-government was in doubt in Europe and America. Black people were still perceived as less than humans, enslaved to work on farms and cotton fields. This is why our national anthem says ‘we shout the freedom of a race benighted.’ The Oxford Dictionary defines ‘benighted’ as being in a state of contemptible intellectual or moral ignorance. At our founding, this was the perception of the black race, and it was out of this precarious state of human misery that our founding settlers broke out to conjoin with their native brothers and sisters to proclaim the beginnings of our beloved country.

So this is our founding for which we shall forever remain proud. We are a people in endless search of the mastery of our destiny. The goal of our history is to give justice and equality to all our people. Mortal and highly flawed men and women will mount the political stage to pursue these ideals of our founding from time to time. We should separate events of that national search from the ideal itself. It is true that the men and women who have historically steered our national course have betrayed our founding ideal.

And over the years we have wasted these men and women with criticism. Because of their failures, we have always looked upon our past with disdain. Some Liberians would like to erase from their memory any recollection of the tragic histories from our past and pretend that we are starting a country afresh and anew.

These feelings of anger, hatred and rejection are quite justified. The mass of our people should never have been denied education for fear that their education would pose a threat to a governing elite, who were in the minority. The True Whig Party, clearly had the means to build more than 3000 kilometers of paved roads for the duration of its stay at the helm of national leadership. The True Whig Party was certainly in a position to diversify our economy and build a thriving private sector in which Liberians would have been the titans of domestic production to wean us away from our dependence on the export of raw materials. So Liberians are justified in their perennial criticism and anger.

The same is true for the People’s Redemption Council and the National Democratic Party that followed the PRC during the 1980s. The abuse of human rights and the wanton misuse of the country’s resources that characterized the 1980s were immediate drivers of our civil conflict.

And of course those who came to perfect the wrongs of the 1980s committed even more heinous and unconscionable wrongs that today haunt and burden our national psyche.

So we can spend countless hours and pages bemoaning the lost opportunities of our past. Such an exercise is more useful when we are able to glean from the past the valuable lessons that can enable us avoid our historical faults.

The failure of history is not defined by the number of tragedies that happen. The failure of our history occurs when our past cannot inspire new energies, new ambitions and new constructs and institutions that prevent the calamities of our history from re-occurring. Our history fails NOT because Americo-Liberians suppressed their ethnic brothers and sisters for more than a century. Our history fails BECAUSE, even decades after the fall of the True Whig Party, the mass of Liberians still feel marginalized in their own country, and have felt so when two men and a woman have held the Liberian presidency and when different national legislatures have been dominated by ethnic Liberians. Our history fails NOT because we rioted for rice on April 14, 1979. Our history fails because 39 years after President William R. Tolbert, Jr tried to increase the price of rice to protect domestic rice production, we still are not able to feed ourselves and are totally dependent on imported rice, the very problem William R. Tolbert aimed to solve.

And so my fellow Liberians, as we ponder the historical significance of today and look back at our past, coming out of these reflections should be a new narrative. A narrative not merely of blame or of condemnation of the things that have gone wrong in our county. We should frame a narrative of an ambitious people restlessly renewing that ambition passed on them by their founding fathers to perfect the ideals of their history.

Our history is rich with stories of bravery, daring and ambition that should inspire all of us with new energies and momentum to the face future. Those who founded Liberia set out on a dark, bleak and perilous course. All they had was the power of their conviction and size of their national ambition. There were settlers who landed on the shores of Montserrado but who fled back because of the difficult conditions they encountered. The scourge of malaria took its toll upon them. But maybe they fled because they feared the battle-hardened tribal warriors. Those who fled are the cowards of our history, the men and women we will never know about.

Today, we read about Elijah Johnson and Jehudi Ashman. We know about King Zolu Duma and that skillful diplomat King Sao Boso Kamara, whose diplomacy between arriving settlers and resisting vai, gola and mandingo warriors, proved critical to Liberia's founding.

We also read about Chief Suah Koko, whose diplomacy, selflessness and leadership enabled the expansion of Liberian Government authority in the northwest areas of Bong, Lofa and Nimba. There is also paramount chief Nowah Leemue, a female paramount chief of the Kpaai Chiefdom in Bong County. Her lack of formal education proved no hindrance to her effective political

leadership. She is widely remembered for promoting women participation in decision making. She built schools, clinics and roads.

So the blood of courage, selflessness, daring and ambition runs through the veins of our national corpus. We see these traits in countless ordinary citizens. Imagine our mothers and sisters who brave the storms of poverty every day, selling for long hours under market stalls and many times under the scorching rays of the sun to support their families. Deprived of education, they work hard through farming or selling daily to give education to their children. The education and progress of men and women of my generation did not happen because of Liberian Government. It happened because of our unsung mothers and grandmothers.

One such powerful grandmother was Emma Forky Klon Jlahh Brown, who would never allow her grandson to fail even when he was rejected by his society. Born to extreme poverty on the rocks of Gilbratar, Clara Town, George Forky Klon Jlahh Gbakugbeh Tarpeh Tanyonoh Manneh Weah had to live off the streets to make a living for himself. Inspired by his grandmother to face the adversities of Liberian life, Weah was able to lift himself up by the bootstraps from the pangs of poverty. Like the Founding Fathers of his country, his path to success and achievement was never clear. Even in football where he was naturally gifted, George Manneh Weah was told that he would amount to nothing. Coaches told him he was either too lazy or too slow or that he had to train much harder. Young George took all these criticisms or admonitions in stride, patiently working hard to improve and master his footballing skills. Liberians soon saw that mastery through his brilliant performance on the national team.

While in high school, George Weah made difficult decision to leave school to advance his football career in Cameroun. Earlier, he had rejected a scholarship to the United States, at the time when most Liberians dreamt endlessly of pursuing life in the U.S. Many criticized him for making these decisions. But brave and determined in his conviction, he ventured into Cameroun and broke through to national stardom. His path to France and Europe was subsequently paved, where he went on to become the Greatest African Footballer the world has ever seen, winning the World Best Footballer title in 1995.

Despite his football achievements, George Weah remained humble and true to his beginnings, the same selflessness displayed by Chief Suah Koko and Chief Nowah Leemue. He spent his fortune on the Liberian national team and on his fellow countrymen, supporting schools, giving to charity and communities and sponsoring a countless number of students.

During the dark days of the Liberian civil conflict, when blood spattered from beneath the land, George Weah was that shining star that beckoned to the possibilities of a new and different Liberian future, amid the bleak darkness of the land.

It was these attributes that endeared the patriot to a new generation of political ideologues and stalwarts who organized themselves under the banner of the Congress for Democratic Change to project George Manneh Weah as that mobilizing dynamic of a society in search of national transformation.

His contributions to the Liberian political landscape have been legendary. Today, he is seated in these hallowed halls as President of the Republic of Liberia.

I salute you, Your Excellency, for your outstanding achievements. Please permit me to join you, in that inspired search for a new national meaning.

George Weah's outstanding achievements and the achievements of many other Liberians stand as a monument to the power and possibilities of Liberian dream and ambition. The daring and ambition inherent in our founding exemplify themselves in many ways in our society. We should look to these for inspiration.

Today, we stand at the crossroad that defines two distinct paths in the forward march of our history. A path that sinks into the politics of hate, blame and division and a path that looks to a future of possibilities for all Liberians. The first path is widely travelled because it is easy, since it only requires the lazy art of condemnation and blaming. The second path is less travelled because it is too difficult, requiring people of ambition and national drive, determined to forge the bond of unity as we face the problems of our society.

So which part should we as a people take? Our only choice is obvious. By the results of the 2017 presidential elections, Liberians have chosen the path that is less travelled. In those elections, they rejected the politics of fear in favor of the politics of hope. Hope that a country can renew its founding ambition to overcome the big historical challenges that have confronted it for decades.

It is only in this spirit of unity and renewed national purpose that we are able to face our worst fears and biggest problems.

Intensifying the Fight against Corruption

No problem in Liberia is bigger than the problem of corruption! Corruption has been a root cause of the conflicts that have run through our history. This generation of Liberians and this new Government must renew its pledge to fight and end corruption. The first step toward this goal is to abolish the culture of impunity that has surrounded the misuse of public funds. This means we have to give more teeth and meaning to anti-corruption institutions like the General Auditing Commission, the Liberia Anti-Corruption Commission and the Internal Audit Agency.

These institutions are the watchdogs that ensure we spend public resources for the benefit of all Liberians.

Our new President has promised that under his leadership those who misuse public funds will have no place in his Government. Such persons must face the full weight of the law. This is certainly reassuring to all our countrymen and our Development Partners who provide important resources for our national development.

Many Liberians have demanded an audit of the previous Government as well as the prosecution of former officials of Government accused of squandering public funds. Toward this end, the new Government must conduct a review of all audit reports with a view to implementing many of the recommendations contained in the various audit reports.

The Government of President Weah has committed to conducting this review and this is encouraging. Whether the present Government should spend scarce human and financial resources on going after former Government or whether the Government should focus on the big economic problems that burden our people is an interesting choice to make.

It is very obvious that investing resources in preventing new acts of corruption and in the economic transformation of the country should be preferred. First, this approach minimizes the new Government's exposure to accusations of witch-hunting. To the extent that evidence of such corruption exists, delaying these prosecutions does not prevent the demanded prosecutions from happening at some time in the future. Second, a focus on past acts of corruption may be one means to restoring public faith in the credibility and possibility of Liberian Governance. Another means is to use scarce public resources more effectively and efficiently to raise the living standard of the Liberian people.

The new Government has already begun to use this latter approach. The Government has added more than 2000 healthcare workers to the national payroll in the 2018/19 National Budget.

This was possible because of the strong cooperation between the President and the National Legislature, led by House Speaker Bhofal Chambers and President Pro-Tempore Albert Chea, a collaboration that will be required to resolve even bigger problems that lie ahead. The meaning of this achievement is that financial resources in question can have now been committed to providing incomes for 2000 Liberians families and these resources are no longer available to be abused, misused or wasted.

The Government of President Weah had to make this decision because the Health Pool Fund, which had been supported by some of our Development Partners over the past several years, is no longer available in the current budget year. And the Government has placed these workers

on the payroll at a time when our economy and fiscal space are challenged. The best time to have done this was six years ago when the Government was in a stronger financial position. But where the last Government didn't achieve this, the present Government has. This is an example of how we correct the past: we not only condemn that which was not achieved by past generations or past Governments; we build on the gains they made and fix the problems they were not able to fix.

Diversifying the Liberian Economy

The second big challenge that our generation and this Government have to resolve is the diversification of the Liberian economy. The Liberian economy has historically depended on the sale of raw materials like iron ore and rubber. This is not sustainable. Such dependence exposes the Liberian economy to massive macroeconomic shocks. In 2009, the price of iron ore per dried metric ton was US\$181. Today, that price is around US\$66 to US\$ 70. Similar price decline has affected the rubber sector. These price crashes have imposed severe macroeconomic squeeze on Liberians, decreasing Government's ability to earn foreign exchange and putting downward pressure on the Liberian dollar.

But these developments come as no surprise. More than 200 years of economic history show that commodity prices will always crash. Despite this knowledge and history, the economies of African countries have always been tied to the price of exported raw materials. African Governments have themselves to blame for this failure to diversify. In the end it is sovereign states that are responsible for the ultimate direction of their societies.

As commodity prices have collapsed over the last 60 or more years, African countries have always looked to the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the African Development Bank and the European Union for support to bail them out from the shock until price recovers. Our countries will have to break out this this vicious macroeconomic cycle.

All previous Governments in Liberia have failed to unlock our economy from its historic dependence on commodity prices. This generation and this Government must address this problem. Today, the depreciation of the Liberian dollar and rising inflation can be traced to this failure to diversify.

A few politicians still smarting from defeat in the 2017 elections have recently tried to politicize what is a fundamental structural economic problem. And this is the very kind of politics that has destroyed Liberia, a destructive politics that has no place in our new national dispensation. A six-month old Government can clearly not be expected to solve a problem most African Governments have not been able to solve in 60 years. And to believe that Liberians as smart as they are can be misled into thinking that a six-month old Government should solve a 60-year-old problem in six months is to think too low of Liberians.

Short Term Approaches to Current Macro-Economic Challenges

Our people know better than this and they cannot be and should not be misled. In the last election, Liberians supported this President because they believe that he stands the greatest chance to change what has challenged us for generations. The Government remains committed to stabilizing the present macroeconomic challenge. The Government, as recently announced in an economic speech by President Weah, has already begun putting in motion short term measures to stabilize the situation. These measures include the infusion of US\$25 million into the market to mop up excess liquidity. Other measures involve the more aggressive enforcement of monetary policy.

While the loss of about US\$500 million in the Liberian economy is the main driver of the depreciation of the Liberian dollar, currency speculation in the foreign exchange market is partly to blame. The Central Bank of Liberia is developing other instruments to reduce the supply of money outside the banking sector. When large amounts of money are outside the banks, monetary policy can be weak as noted by President Weah. And this has been the case over the last two to three years. The steps the Government has taken are in the right direction.

The Government is also taking strong measures to ensure any appreciation of the Liberian dollar as a result of these measures is reflected in the price of commodities. Recently, major petroleum importers agreed to reduce their price by US\$14 cents per gallon as announced by President Weah. This should impact transport fares, which should go down in the coming days.

As part of its measures to reduce the burden on Liberians, the Government recently reduced the import tariff on several goods. This reduction is estimated to cost the Government about US\$14- \$20 million in lost revenue. But this is a sacrifice that this Government is prepared to take to bring short term relief to the majority of Liberians.

Pro-Poor Agenda for Prosperity and Development and the Long Term Fix

Again, all of these are intended to stabilize our macroeconomic in the short term as we move toward long term solutions. The Government in the next several weeks will launch its Pro-Poor Agenda for Prosperity and Development. All stakeholders are presently making their final input into the plan. The Agenda provides the roadmap for addressing Liberia's long term economic problems.

The plan will bring all actors in the Liberian economy together to address the problem of value addition and expansion of the private sector.

The plan looks to invest in road infrastructure, aiming to pave more than 1000 kilometers of road, which is about the length of road that has been paved in the past 171 years. The plan will

transform agriculture as we know it and push the boundaries of domestic production far beyond the possibilities of the past several decades.

Today, we import about 26 million bags of rice every year at a cost of about USD 110 million. Assuming a population of 4 million rice-eating Liberians, this amounts to more than 6 bags of rice per person per year. We can grow this rice in Liberia. According to the experts, we have more than 600,000 hectares of land conducive for rice production. Studies show that with the right investment and the development of a rice value chain, we can achieve food security over the next six years. This is one of the biggest ambitions of the Pro-Poor Agenda for Prosperity and Development.

But to achieve this goal will require Liberians to begin shifting their diet toward locally grown food and their preference for locally manufactured products. The Government will partner with the private sector and development partners to develop agriculture value chains across the major food crops in Liberia – rice, cassava, vegetables, plantain etc.

In 1979, William R. Tolbert, Jr. attempted to increase the price on imported rice to protect domestic rice production.

Politicians used this to incite demonstration. They accused Tolbert of increasing the price on imported rice so that his domestic rice ventures could profit from the increase. Granted this was true, had this been possible, the Liberian economy would have benefited. The capacity to grow rice domestically would have been resident with Liberians and the monies generated from this production would have supported the domestic economy.

Instead what has emerged from this April 14 episode is the enthronement of imported rice as some kind of ‘political commodity’ whose importation is largely in the hands of non-Liberians, largely because Governments in the past have tended not to trust Liberian entrepreneurs to import the commodity.

Ending the Reign of Imported Rice as a ‘Political Commodity’

This generation and this Government must aim to disestablish the myth that imported rice is a political commodity by moving swiftly to scaling up investment in domestic rice and food production. The Government should work with key stakeholders in the private sector and Development Partners to achieve this outcome because it makes both macroeconomic and food security sense.

Prior to the 1940s, the importation of rice was banned in Liberia. So we do know Liberians have not always depended on imported rice. Once the means of transformative domestic production are assured and the domestic market becomes competitive, the optimal policy would be to

raise the tariff on imported rice to protect the domestic rice markets. Under such a policy, rice importers would have the incentive to invest in domestic rice production, leading to the ultimate solution of the politics of rice in Liberia.

Within the cash crop agriculture space, serious investments is needed to enable growers add value to their products. Many Liberian-owned rubber growers today face the acute challenge of paying their workers because of the very uncompetitive nature of the current pricing structure. These growers need to add value but doing so requires some capital investment which is difficult to come by. The Government is committed to helping them.

Human Capital Development

My fellow citizens, this brings us to the next big challenge we have to solve over the next six years and the decades ahead: developing Liberian human capital. Human capital development underpins our country's transformation. A nation is only as good as the quality of its human and institutional capabilities. The quality of teachers, doctors, and engineers will have to change radically over the next several years.

The number of sub-standard teachers providing instruction in schools is still too large, but attracting higher quality teachers have serious cost implications. The 2018/19 national budget has absorbed some 2000 health care workers. The fiscal space to take on 6000 new teachers that are needed to close what has been called the teaching gap is not available. In the short term, taking on these teachers is possible with improvements in revenue performance and with further rationalization of the national budget.

I would propose that the Government launch a National Service Scheme to attract qualified college graduates to the teaching field to address the quality challenge in secondary education. The Ministry of Education already has a program to attract a small number of college folks. We just have to blow this out. These graduates should be deployed in the most deprived areas in return for benefits such as scholarship for advanced degrees in low cost countries. It is also important to overhaul the whole structure and foundation of Government scholarship program, linking scholarship to national service. As a matter of fact, students placing first at private and public high schools and at universities in the country should at least be given priority preference during the award of scholarship or for recruitment into the civil service.

This approach provides some incentive for students to study harder. Scholarship should be for scholars willing to burn the mid-night oil.

We should all push our students to work harder and strive for excellence. There is need to launch a National After-School Program that can focus on a range of subjects. These programs can compete with centers of gambling and gaming that now distract our youth from a

productive focus on their school work. The Government, Development Partners and Non-Governmental Organizations should work together to develop and sustain such a program.

Higher Education, Youth Employment and Gender

We should work to strengthen quality in college and university education. Quality challenges at higher institutions could be addressed by reintroducing the pre-war Fulbright program that existed at the University of Liberia, or some version of that program. India has a competitive advantage in the supply of quality education. Indian professors could be brought in to shore up the medical and pharmacy schools as well as the math, engineering, technology and economics departments at state run and private universities. This can be done at affordable cost as part of package of quality reforms for tertiary education. In exchange, Liberian instructors at these universities can be given scholarships to pursue advanced degrees.

The Government should continue to focus on the delivery of TVET. Partnership with German Technical Vocational Institutions can improve the quality of instruction at TVET institutions across the country to support the country's drive to provide skills and jobs for its young people. Unless Liberia is able to provide competitive skills for the majority of its young people, we face a national security risk arising from the failure to meet the employ needs of our young people. Huge possibilities lie in the agriculture space where the majority of young people can find gainful employment as we move the sector toward value addition.

While we acknowledge many young people may lack the skills, we also know that many of them have had some form of training. Despite this outcome, young people remain challenged. The Government is advised to develop a policy that links every ongoing project in the country with existing TVET institutions. Such a policy can require project managers on these projects to hire at least one Liberian youth trained in a relevant or related skill area. As part of this youth employment drive, the Government and Development Partners should increase their support to programs supporting the employment and employability of our younger brothers and sisters. The excuse that young people do not have the skills should not be blindly accepted. We see the beginnings of the emergence of a young Liberian entrepreneurial class.

Many of the stores and businesses in Ganta, Nimba County are owned by young Liberians. Liberians are looking to the private sector as a major source employment. All they need is a big push from their Government. They will have this push from the Government of President George Manneh Weah.

A major way to enhance the youth development agenda is to pay attention to what is happening to our young women. The challenges they face is even more significant and has direct causal linkages to poverty. The average young girl who drops out of school will go on to have a child that more than likely to be poor. There are many gender indicators that we can talk

about over the next several years. If we cannot achieve any of these, our society must ensure that we prevent young women from dropping out of school and from getting pregnant while in junior high school.

Solving our Land Problems

The other historically unsolved problem is the land challenge. Land disputes have been and are still rife in our country. Communities are still locked in disputes with agriculture concessions on the question of land ownership. We should address this problem and we should do so fast. The passage of a new land act will be a promising beginning but we cannot rest on the laurels of any such new land law. We must reach out to all of people throughout the country to drive home the importance of land for economic productivity. Agriculture concessions need all the land they can have to scale up their investment and provide the needed jobs to support our economy. If we are to do value addition in the oil palm sectors, the companies will have to more trees which is not possible with limited land.

Yes the awarding of these contracts was fraught with problems but this is where we are. Maybe part of the problem is that our people do not trust that the proceeds from these investments will matter for them at all. These are the consequences of the prolonged neglect or our marginalized people.

This new Government must reach out to develop a compact with our people and assure them that these concessions are for their ultimate benefit. Members of the national legislature can play an important role in these affairs.

Prioritizing is Important

It is very clear that considering the state of our economy and the fiscal constraints we face, no Government including the present Government would be able to solve all the problems that have burdened Liberia over the past 171 years.

Each problem demands a certain amount of resources that that will no longer be available to solve other problems. Using loans and budget support grants for road construction means these resources are not available to support health, education or private sector programs. This the complex business of Government, which is always about choosing and prioritizing.

In health, should we put more resources in prevention to reduce the disease burden of the future? Or do we continue with an emphasis on curing diseases? In education, should we prioritize math, science and language teachers more since these are the foundational subjects? The societies and economies that have transformed in the face of resource constraints are those that master the art of balancing development priorities.

Mr. President and my fellow countrymen, Liberia was not able to meet any of the Millennium Development Goals in the 15 years from 2000 to 2015. While the country did appear to be on solid path with economic growth nearing 9 percent around 2013, the macroeconomic collapse that followed along with the onset of Ebola eliminated whatever gains that had been made. This again makes the point for diversifying our economy. If we are to avoid the same situation with the Sustainable Development Goals, we have to pay attention to addressing the big challenges that have been argued in this oration.

If we collectively confront the menace of corruption and ensure that scarce development resources are spent on the majority of our people, we would make a big difference in impacting the lives of all Liberians. The fight against corruption should not be limited to official Government circles. It should be prominent in schools, clinics, in traffic and in places of worship. Teachers who extort bribe from students should be banned from entering the classrooms.

If we diversify our economy, empower the private sector and resolve our land challenges, we would place our economy on the sure path of sustainable development. Considering our very vulnerable economic situation, our strategic approach to growing the private sector should be to bring all stakeholders around the table. The private sector comprises foreign-owned companies and Liberian-owned businesses. Pro-Liberian business strategies need not imply opposition to foreign business interests. In our rush to economic diversification, we should not scare away those who have sustained the foundation of our economy, even before we have the ability and capacity to manage it.

Members of the Executive and Legislative Branches of Government are encouraged to find means to work with companies in Liberia as we diversify our economy. Inflammatory and violent rhetoric may threaten the short term foundation of our economy.

Pro-poor economic strategies are not anti-business strategies, and President Weah has made this point in the past. But businesses are expected to play by the rules and pay their fair share of the bargain. For example, when Government reduces tariffs on commodities, consumers expect to see this reflected in the price of the affected goods. These outcomes should be achieved by aggressive enforcement to ensure that business get their fair share in profits and consumers do not receive the worst end of the bargain in the form of higher prices.

The economic policies that will come out of the new development plan will aim to provide strong incentive to move the Liberian economy toward competitive domestic production. I believe many import-oriented entrepreneurs will respond to these incentives to make the necessary investments in domestic production. In the immediate short term, this Government should use the power of the national budget to empower local productive sectors through buy-

local policies. The seriousness of this policy should attract investments to sectors such as agriculture and the timber or rubber wood.

It is worth noting that many of these policies were announced by previous Governments. The difference now is that we have to make them happen over the next several years.

International Development Partnership

But we cannot do these things alone considering the difficult situations we face. This is where we have to turn to our bilateral and multilateral development partners to recast our relations in the context of diversifying our economy and empowering the private sector. Our development partners have stood with us over the last several years and we should thank for the massive support in raising Liberia from the ashes of war and taking us on a path to development.

The Government has promised to develop a new Partnership framework with Development Partners. The aim of this new Partnership framework should be to ensure that the big priority challenges the country faces are addressed in order to achieve real pro-poor results.

One area of particular interest is working together to reverse recent declines in the business climate in Liberia as measured through the World Bank's Doing Business index. Improving Liberia rankings can be accomplished through a dedicated task team comprising actors from the private sector.

Strengthened development partnership and coordination can deliver big results for economic transformation and macroeconomic stability. Where the outcomes of this cooperation were challenged in the past, the approach going forward should be to make it work.

Political Parties and Politicians

Political parties and politicians too have a role a very serious role minimize the politics of pettiness that aims to score trivial political points. There is really no points to score against a Government that is barely six months old. The elections cycle is six years long. The politics of macroeconomics can be dangerous for political stability. We already know this from our April 14 history.

Aiming to raise the political temperature against a party that is grounded in the masses is not prudent politics.

The prudent course is that which was introduced by Ambassador George Manneh Weah after his loss in the 2011 elections. With the mass of Liberians fully behind him, George Weah could have exploited his populism and popularity to undermine the Liberian state and the Government of President Ellen Johnson- Sirleaf. Quite to the contrary, he took the patriotic

path and announced an opposition policy of 'constructive engagement.' This was why he accepted to become the National Peace Ambassador, working overtime to unify his country. When elements of the Congress of Democratic Change were involved in a radical 'Ellen Step Down Campaign' some years ago, it was George Weah who abolished that campaign, arguing that elections have consequences and people elected should be given the chance to govern.

Members of the opposition are advised to take a similar course because in all reality, the elections are long over and governance has begun. Elections are a fight for political legitimacy in the matters of governance. The conferral of legitimacy after an election victory does not mean the loser is hopeless. No winning party has a monopoly on ideas in the matters of public governance.

The opposition are and should be invited to bring their perspectives for the betterment of our country. They are encouraged to bring their investment and their projects for the transformation of Liberia. In the spirit of overcoming our historic challenges, maybe we begin with a Government Opposition Dialogue.

Let us all abandon the politics of 'bewitching our country evil' because we are out of political power. This is the old politics that drained the blood of our country. And President Weah made this point quite recently. A Governing party is only as good as the conditions it inherits from former ruling party, at least in the first six months. The CDC is only as good as the condition it inherited from the Unity Party in the first six months. Even its Country Giant cannot wave a macroeconomic magic wand in six months!

Media

Members of the media too should get beyond the elections. The media has an important role in a democracy and the Government is under obligation to respect this role. Our country has made significant strides in the protection of press freedom and this tradition should and will continue.

But while media institutions have a patriotic responsibility to speak truth to political power, that 'truth' must be true. The persistent reporting of non-truths is a grave disservice to democracy and to our country. A disservice to democracy because the public will soon perceive such newspapers or news outlets engaged in this practice as a propaganda machinery dead set against a sitting Government. And when such a paper or media outlet is needed to expose Governmental wrongs when these do in fact, the paper might not be trusted, undermining the role the media has to play in a democracy. Also, unfounded and untruthful media reporting is a disservice to the country because it is flat out wrong to mislead foreigners and others about happenings in our country. The entire country should not suffer because a journalist has a beef with a particular Government official.

Conclusion

And so Mr. President and my fellow Liberians, our collective ambitions and drive over the next several decades will determine what country we will have. The veteran Liberian journalist G. Henry Andrews once said that no society can ever be better than the people to comprise it.

You show me a fearful, divided and faithless people, I give you a vanquished and defeated people! You show me brave and courageous men and women riding a tidal wave of national ambition rousing a nation long forlorn to nobler destiny, I give you a people called Liberians! We as a people were born to proclaim the possibilities of African self-government.

We were at the founding of the United Nations and the Organization of African Unity, now African Union, and hosted its annual meeting in 1979. We were at the founding of the African Development Bank. We inspired the formation of the Mano River Union and the Economic Community of West African States. It was President William V. S. Tubman who proposed an Economic Union of West Africa.

A beacon of black self-Government, we did battle alongside with black brothers in South Africa to dismantle the gargoye of Apartheid. We were a haven for peoples all over Africa: Sudanese, Ethiopians, Gambians, Ghanaians and many more even long before they opened their doors to our people fleeing the collapse of our nation-state.

We are greater than the sum of our fears and can only look back at the scourges of our history whose pains inspire the cries and shouts of freedom and change that will mark the next 100 years to be different than the last 100.

May Allah and God Almighty bless our Great Country on this Historic occasion!

I thank you.