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Destination: Liberia

It is imperative we send troops in.

By Roger Carstens

In his piece on Liberia, Ted Galen Carpenter argued that should President Bush intervene in Liberia, he would be violating a campaign 2000 pledge to conduct such interventions only when vital national interests are at stake. He further stated, "There is not even a peripheral, much less a vital, national interest at stake in Liberia."

He went on to say that there is far greater misery in "such places as the Congo, Cuba, Myanmar, North Korea and the Sudan" than there is in Liberia, and that "from a moral standpoint, how can the Bush administration justify intervening in Liberia while declining to use force in those other cases?"

Carpenter is correct on all accounts. And yet he has reached the wrong conclusions. The United States should intervene in Liberia — and consider the others, too.

In 1994, I stood in an aircraft hanger in Stuttgart, Germany, loading ammunition into my weapon's magazines, conducting communications rehearsals, and incorporating the latest intelligence data into our plan. The mission: to send a special-forces unit to Rwanda to seize the national airport, secure American citizens and foreign nationals, and prepare the area for follow-on forces that would attempt to stabilize the situation. Despite the danger of landing in a country that was in the process of slaughtering over a half million of its citizens, we were ready and committed — and we all believed in the importance of stopping the genocide at the potential cost of our lives.

Imagine, then, the twisting feelings in the pits of our stomachs when the mission was scratched.

I still remember the tension that I felt going home to watch the news reports filtering in to CNN International — the bodies floating down the river, the corpses stacked up in the churches. I was not alone. We all felt it.

So now, faced with a decision of whether or not to intervene in the crisis in Liberia and not wanting to feel like I did on that day in 1994, I say we go. And here is why.

First of all, it is a human-rights imperative. Liberia stands on the edge of a humanitarian crisis, and it is clear that it will not dig itself out. The regional African nations are unable

to mount an effective effort to end the crisis and our European allies are unwilling to go it alone. U.S. leadership is required to end the bloodshed and suffering.

Second, the introduction of U.S. troops and the removal of the current president of Liberia Charles Taylor will promote regional stability. Taylor, who has just been indicted for War Crimes relating to Sierra Leone, has sponsored rebel groups in Sierra Leone, Guinea and Ivory Coast. Removing Taylor from power and fostering good government in Liberia will go a long way towards reducing instability in West Africa.

Third, the timing is right. The U.N., Britain, France, and several West African nations support U.S. intervention. Additionally, the two rebel factions that are closing in on Monrovia — the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) — agree that a U.S.-led intervention would be welcome. And based on Taylor's recent military demise, one can argue that Libya's Khadafi must no longer be offering support to Monrovia, isolating the government and providing a window of opportunity to effect "regime change." The stars and moons are aligning.

Fourth, a U.S.-led intervention would announce a fundamental alteration of U.S. policy towards Africa. The president has made monumental changes to American policy in Africa, as shown by the establishment of the Millennium Challenge Account and his recent \$15 billion AIDS initiative. A commitment to a stabilized Liberia might have positive second- and third-order effects with regards to Zimbabwe, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and regional stability in general.

Fifth, a U.S. operation in Liberia will be a continuation of the global war on terror. As pointed out in James S. Robbin's NRO piece this week, "Liberia has direct and indirect links to the war on terrorism." President Taylor has helped finance international terror networks (to include al Qaeda) by way of the region's illegal diamond trade, and knows network operatives from his days training in Libya's terrorist camps. Removal of Taylor and the stability of Liberia will deny terrorists money, facilities, and safe haven.

Lastly, and perhaps most important to understand, a U.S. intervention is in line with President Bush's 2001 National Security Strategy. The strategy — the document that defines U.S. national interests — states that the United States has arrived at a place of "unprecedented and unequalled strength and influence," creating "a time of opportunity for America. We will work to translate this moment of influence into decades of peace, prosperity, and liberty. The U.S. national security strategy will be based on a distinctly American internationalism that reflects the union of our *values and our national interests*. The aim of this strategy is to help make the world not just safer but better."

This baseline document goes on to say that we will achieve these goals by championing aspirations for human dignity, stating that "America must stand firmly for the nonnegotiable demands of human dignity: the rule of law; limits on the absolute use of power of the state; free speech; freedom of worship; equal justice; respect for women; religious and ethnic tolerance; and respect for private property."

This last point is key to understanding the difference between Carpenter's perspective and mine. Unlike the national-security strategies of the past — dry, academic documents that narrowly defined different levels of national interest — President Bush's strategy implies that the United States is willing to commit U.S. national power to support the intersection of national interests and American values — the very values that we recently celebrated on the 4th of July. This is a critical distinction in a security strategy for a post-9/11 world.

By increasing the level of importance placed on these values, President Bush has, in a very meaningful way, redefined the basis of national-security decision-making.

Thus my conclusion that the United States should intervene in Liberia: It is in our interest, it is in line with our values, and it is right thing to do. Robert Mugabe and Kim Jong Il, take note.

With a humanitarian crisis at hand and a world still trying to come to terms with American power, Liberia stands as a challenge that should be met with the full array of U.S. foreign-policy tools — diplomatic, economic, and military assistance. Never again should we have to look back and wish that we had intervened.

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