

A Radical Agenda for Re-imagining Liberia

National Oration

177th Independence Day Celebration, Republic of Liberia

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ROBTEL NEAJAI PAILEY

[SALUTATIONS; ALL PROTOCOLS OBSERVED]

As someone who loves this country with every fiber of my being, I feel very honored and privileged to address you today.

When I think of Liberia’s birth as a nation, I often picture fists of all shapes and sizes raised in the air [like this]. Because our declaration of independence on July 26, 1847 was a revolutionary act of defiance.

Back then, when blackness was synonymous with bondage, we Liberians dared to be free. Inspired by our Haitian sisters and brothers, who had led the first successful slave revolt in history, we dared to reclaim black personhood. Decades later, when our beloved continent was being carved up in the European ‘scramble for Africa’, swallowed whole by colonialism, we dared to be sovereign.

In fact, our very existence as Africa’s first black republic inspired a “race benighted”. Lest we forget, our declaration of defiance happened nearly a century before independence movements began in earnest across this continent. So, Liberia’s Independence Day should be called In Defiance Day, because 177 years ago, our foremothers and fathers defied the odds.

They attempted to prove that black self-rule was not only possible, but also undeniable. They embraced black internationalism long before this form of solidarity became an act of resistance. Our amalgam of identities and cultures— West African, West Indian/Caribbean, Central African, and North American— was a radical affirmation of Africa meeting its diasporas. This exceptional legacy *is* our destiny.

Yet, when we talk about ourselves today, in the narratives that we pass down from one generation to another, we tend to forget about the magnitude of 1847. We forget that this “glorious land of liberty” was founded on abolitionist principles. We forget that dignity once defined us.

Somehow, somewhere, somehow, we lost touch with our common humanity. We created citizenship tiers based on ethnicity, class, gender, religion and race. We mortgaged our resources to the highest bidder. We placed profit before people and planet. We silenced and suppressed dissent. We mistook autocracy for democracy. We failed to preserve and protect the cultural, artistic and scholarly traditions that fill our hearts, enliven our souls and sharpen our minds. We fought brutal, protracted wars that left death and destruction in their wake. And in the aftermath of such carnage, we achieved ‘negative peace’, the absence of direct physical violence, when we should have pursued ‘positive peace’, the absence of ‘structural violence’.

Understandably, for many, July 26th symbolizes not defiance but defeat. Not rupture and regeneration but regression and retreat. Not inclusion but exclusion. Not cooperation but contestation.

From 1847 onwards, our negotiations over land ownership, political participation, identity, and belonging yielded both productive and destructive outcomes. Our nearly two-century-old history as a nation exposed both collaborative and combative elements of who we are.

Despite adopting a Unification and Integration Policy one century after independence, we never actually united against a common, existential threat until the Ebola outbreak of 2014-2016. For the first time, in that moment, instead of attacking each other, we stepped into our collective purpose and showed that “in union strong, success is sure, we cannot fail”. We proved that what started out as a 19th century experiment in black self-determination had grown into something larger than we could ever have imagined.

In this, our 177th year, I urge us to re-imagine what it means to be “one nation indivisible”. Oh, how “sweet” this country could be if we only rebuilt it for all of us to enjoy. We must believe that there *is* sufficient space to accommodate our differences and our shared experiences. That there *are* enough resources to supply our basic needs and cultivate our God-given talents. And, so, we must narrow wide gaps between the poor and prosperous, the powerless and powerful, women and men, girls and boys, young and old, rural and urban, domestic and diasporic.

Every 26th should be a time of national reflection and reckoning: have we dared to be defiant in the previous year? Have we treated each other with civility rather than cruelty? Have we upheld high standards of accountability [including respecting time]? Have we reduced inequality and redistributed wealth to enable everyone to thrive, not just merely survive? Have we developed functioning systems that will outlive us? Have we taken full responsibility for our socio-economic transformation?

My challenge to us on this IN DEFIANCE DAY is to BUILD BACK BETTER. My challenge to us on this IN DEFIANCE DAY is to BUILD BACK DIFFERENTLY.

I have travelled the length and breadth of Liberia's 15 counties and the 16th county of our diaspora, and one thing rings true: each and every one of us wants to live a life of dignity. Now, our methods of achieving self-respect and self-worth have not always been compatible, fair or just. Yet, we cannot build a new Liberia for all Liberians, this year's 26th theme, until we all possess a basic level of wellbeing.

Dignity must define us.

This should be our creed, our mission, our vision, our roadmap, our North Star, our prayer, our central unifying core and ideal as a people.

Dignity must define us.

Those who came here yearned for dignity. Those who were already here yearned for dignity. Liberians at home and abroad currently yearn for dignity.

Dignity must define us.

I propose a radical agenda for achieving this very lofty goal.

First, we must reconceptualize and redefine Liberian citizenship. What does it mean to be a citizen in this post-war moment?

Second, we must tackle the twin development challenges of 'structural violence' and 'unfreedoms'. How do we enable all Liberians to realize their fullest potential?

And third, we must prioritize nation-building as much as we prioritize state-building. How do we build relationships between individuals and institutions of government to serve the collective good?

I have plenty ideas, but little time, so please give me small chance, yah?

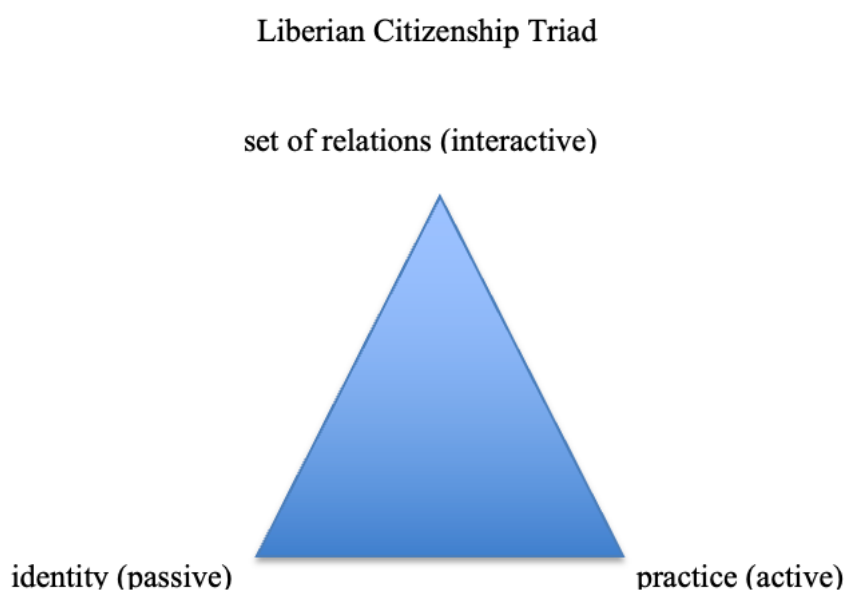
Reconceptualizing and redefining Liberian citizenship

In 2021, I published a book that investigates how Liberian citizenship has changed across space and time and what implications this has for our development outcomes.

I discovered that in the aftermath of any kind of upheaval or disorder, identities, practices and relations between people fundamentally transform. From our founding as a nation-state, to the indigenous wars of resistance, to the political rumblings of the 1970s, to the vile assassinations in 1980 and 1990 of two heads of state which culminated in warfare, Liberian identities, practices and inter-personal relations have completely changed.

Understanding why this change occurred and how we cope with it now is the beginning of re-imagining Liberia anew. So, I used the unique backstories of the Liberians I interviewed at home and abroad—in five cities, five countries, three continents—to develop a framework for reconceptualizing and redefining what it means to be Liberian. I call it the ‘Liberian citizenship triad’. Shaped like a triangle, this triad has three points that move from the individual to how the individual interacts with her/his government and society.

Point 1 on the triad defines Liberian citizenship as passive and identity-based. You are Liberian if you can claim birthplace and/or bloodline ties to the country. This passive, identity-based form of citizenship is about claiming rights, regardless of your age, gender, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, ability, etc. Do you speak Liberian English and/or a Liberian language? Do you identify with at least one of our counties as part of your lineage?



Point 2 on the triad defines Liberian citizenship as active and practice-based. You are Liberian if you consistently contribute to the country’s socio-economic transformation, in big and small ways. This active, practice-based form of citizenship is about fulfilling responsibilities.

Do you obey our laws, regardless of your stature [and I'm speaking specifically here to some of our lawbreakers, I mean, lawmakers]? Do you pay your taxes? Are you actively involved in the political process? Do you build Liberian capacities? Are you willing to invest your time, your talent and your treasure to develop this country?

Lastly, Point 3 on the triad defines Liberian citizenship as interactive, based on a set of relations between citizens and between citizens and the state. You are Liberian if you engage in healthy interactions with other Liberians and with your government [healthy interactions are defined as interactions that are neither abusive nor exploitative]. This interactive, relationship-based form of citizenship is about building bonds. Do you hold yourself, your fellow citizen and your government accountable? Do you offer constructive criticism, when necessary and appropriate, in ways that are not self-serving?

These are the hallmarks of building a new Liberia for all Liberians. So, a re-imagined Liberia is one in which we claim rights, we fulfill responsibilities and we cultivate/maintain wholesome relationships with one another.

We can implement this 'Liberian citizenship triad' by incorporating formal lessons about citizenship into our national curricula at all levels; by implementing a national youth service scheme to send graduating high school seniors who opt out of university to the counties for on-the-job training in the private, public and humanitarian sectors; and by requiring anyone who assumes public office, whether appointed or elected, to undergo mandatory civics training. For elected officials, a prerequisite for national certification should be assets declaration and at least 10 hours of civics education; appointed officials should complete training within two weeks of confirmation.

Dignity must define us.

Tackling 'structural violence' and 'unfreedoms'

For critical development scholars like myself, the main goal of 'development' is to enhance wellbeing and reduce deprivation. Yet, 'structural violence' and 'unfreedoms'—which involve institutions and structures that fuel inequality and injustice—inhibit individuals from meeting their basic needs or actualizing their fullest capabilities. Though less visible than physical violence, 'structural violence' is systemic, enduring and ultimately more dangerous. Indeed, the true test of any nation is its willingness to transform the structural conditions that render so many of its citizens hopeless and hapless.

A re-imagined Liberia intentionally seeks to reduce the ‘unfreedom’ of poverty and the inequity of ‘structural violence’. Because the contrast between our haves and have nots is entirely too stark. For example, over 50% of Liberians live in multidimensional poverty. This is unacceptable and needless for a country that can boast of 177 years as a sovereign state. We *have* the resources—both human and financial—to achieve our development dividends. However, we must change our economic model of extracting and exploiting finite resources, and focus instead on building an industrial base for manufacturing and exporting finished products such as steel rods from our iron ore, condoms from our raw latex, furniture from our timber, country cloth textiles handwoven from our locally-grown cotton, etc.

Some of these assets may not last forever, but the resilience of our people will. So, we must invest heavily in Liberians. We can begin to do this by allocating extra revenue generated from manufactured goods to expand ‘freedoms’ such as access to quality education for all. A re-imagined Liberia rejects anti-intellectualism, develops critical thinking skills and invests in lifelong learning from cradle to grave. When I worked in government over a decade ago, we developed a capacity building strategy that aligned with our development needs. So, in addition to educating geologists, engineers and epidemiologists in our universities, we also focused on training electricians, carpenters and plumbers in our technical and vocational education institutes. This is a model worth replicating because everyone does not need to attend university to contribute to structural transformation. Having said that, I must stress that a re-imagined Liberia requires an autonomous tertiary education sector that is fit for purpose.

I must also insist that we shift our attention away from the extractive industries, which make us vulnerable to the vagaries of global capitalism, and focus instead on developing our creative industries. Why not empower cultural and creative entrepreneurs so that the work of craftspeople, writers, musicians, visual artists, actors, designers, dancers, etc, is valued, protected through our copyright laws and fairly compensated?

This brings me to Liberia’s extreme levels of income inequality. The unregulated accumulation of vast wealth amidst cumulative want in this country is not only obscene and callous, but also structurally violent. Lawmakers, I urge you to revise our Decent Work Bill. Change the monthly minimum wage from US\$143 to at least US\$250 and reverse Liberia’s so-called ‘harmonization policy’. Because a country that pays its average workers below average salaries is setting itself up for failure.

We must also reform our pensions and social security system leading to a complete overhaul of NASSCORP; this way, the agency can serve all workers, including those in the informal sector who represent the backbone of our economy.

If our government does its part, then we citizens must also do ours. When I was growing up as an undocumented immigrant in Washington, DC, my humble and hard-working parents constantly reminded me that diligence and tenacity would be my ticket out of legal limbo. They were right. How many of us actually value hard work? Some of us want jobs but refuse to put in the time and effort required to secure and maintain a career. When given the opportunity, we shirk our responsibilities and demand compensation for doing very little. We must change our ethic around work and propel our labor market into the next century.

We must also enforce the Liberianization Policy by protecting Liberian businesses from the monopoly of foreign cartels. For example, because we import more than 80 percent of our food – including the staple rice – preference for government contracts should be given to Liberian agribusinesses operating at scale. This will promote food security in keeping with the Liberians Feed Yourself program.

However, protectionist policies should never give us licence to lower our standards or accept mediocrity. Liberians must constantly invent new ways to expand market outcomes and play an active role in our economy. Because the display of talent I saw at our Made in Liberia Trade Fair in Monrovia last Saturday blew me away! We are a resilient nation of gifted people who are beginning to dream beyond the realm of possibility.

I urge Liberian entrepreneurs to see the heaps of trash dotted across our country as a business opportunity. See the generation of renewable energy (solar, wind, geothermal and biofuel) as an impetus for confronting the climate crisis. See the supply of clean potable water as a business opportunity. See advancements in technology and artificial intelligence (AI) as an opportunity to produce jobs for the future. These pursuits will create sustainable employment, reduce intergenerational poverty and spur economic growth.

But our goal must be inclusive growth, not growth by any means.

And if inclusive growth is our mission, then we must cancel contracts with poorly performing multinationals and renegotiate concession agreements that violate Liberian laws (including our labor laws) and international human rights standards (including environmental governance). The agreements must be amended in consultation with affected communities and should yield improvements in tax

collection. We must leverage increased domestic resource mobilization from these revised concessions to pay off internal and international debt, and clear our arrears at regional institutions that we founded such as the African Union (AU), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and Mano River Union (MRU).

On the domestic front, we must lead a ‘values-based revolution’ against corruption. My two anti-corruption kids’ books were written for this reason, that is, to equip children with the verbal tools to question the confusing ethical codes of the adults in their lives and to model accountability. We do not need to reinvent the wheel, but we can be innovative in our advocacy of integrity. Liberia has a triple heritage of faith traditions, so what do African metaphysics, Islam and Christianity have to teach us about greed and graft? How do they address *gbagba*, the title of my first book, which loosely translates in Bassa as lying, cheating and stealing? How do they promote *jaadeh*, the title of my sequel, which means honesty, truthfulness and transparency?

Because corruption is not only rampant in the public and private sectors, it is enmeshed in our everyday human interactions. We even use coded language and other euphemisms to conceal our misdeeds. *Cold water. Gato. Flexibility fees.* Dis country you see, ehn da technique? We often point the finger at our government, failing to realize that corruption begins in homes and communities, that corruption is a function of both poverty and greed, and that a corrupt regime is a reflection of a corrupt society.

So, while modifying our values from top to bottom, bottom to top, we must enforce already sound laws while building additional safeguards to curb corruption. We must strengthen judicial bodies and integrity institutions by populating them with impartial patriots, name and shame those found guilty of evading public trust, force them to restitute stolen funds/resources and then send them to jail! High-level corruption, in particular, is like mass murder and we must treat it like the egregious crime it is. Because the rule of law is not some fashionable accessory we put on whenever it suits us; it is the protective armor we must carry every day in our ‘values-based revolution’.

In addition to prosecuting people in a soon-to-be established National Anti-Corruption Court, we must also remove corruption-inducing expenditure from our budget such as inflated salaries for elected and appointed officials, imported vehicles, fuel and scratch card allotments. These funds should be reallocated to incentivize doctors, nurses, teachers, and police officers who serve under-resourced regions of this country. All government agencies must be audited, and elected and appointed officials should declare their assets for public scrutiny as a requirement for assuming office.

On the international affairs front, we must not allow foreign financiers to hijack our development process. We cannot and will not build a new Liberia for all Liberians if we blindly pander to the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and their proxies in the United Nations. These neoliberal institutions are not committed to the radical transformation required to re-imagine Liberia. Moreover, our socio-economic transformation must be internally-driven, not externally imposed!

So, a re-imagined Liberia reduces poverty and inequality, yes, but it also redistributes wealth, invests domestic revenue in basic social services, protects land and labor in the midst of capitalist re-integration, and expands prosperity for all. This is how we address ‘structural violence’ and ‘unfreedoms’ head-on.

Dignity must define us.

Prioritizing both nation-building and state-building

For the last two decades, Liberia has focused almost exclusively on state-building at the expense of nation-building. Yet, one cannot succeed without the other. Whereas state-building concerns strengthening government institutions—such as policies, laws, courts and legislatures—nation-building is about improving the relationships that govern our lives. While nation-building is ‘people centric’ and internally driven, requiring national agency, ownership, and resources, state-building is ‘institution centric’ and often externally-supported with international resources.

Whereas state-building focuses on building physical infrastructure—roads, bridges, ports, etc—nation-building focuses on building human infrastructure, that is, the psychosocial, emotional, mental and communal wellbeing of citizens. State-building lifts Liberia by improving the government’s ability to provide privileges and protections; nation-building lifts Liberians by enabling citizens to demand representation, rights and resources while also fulfilling responsibilities.

Twenty years in the making, our recent progress on establishing a war and economic crimes court is a welcome convergence of both nation-building and state-building. Because the arc of a re-imagined Liberia bends towards justice. In our bid to achieve ‘positive peace’, we cannot afford to bungle this process. We must be the chief sponsor and architect of this court, including providing the lion’s share of financing for it. We must institute a transparent and merit-based process of selecting who shapes the court’s mandate.

And we must hold accountable those who bear the greatest responsibility for economic and war crimes without fear or favor, including foreign financiers and external state actors.

So far, we have started on very shaky ground.

First, although Executive Order No. 131 establishing the Office of a War and Economic Crimes Court was celebrated as long overdue, it still has a short lifespan of 12 months. Time is of the essence but we are moving at a snail's pace.

Second, the executive director of this Office was selected under dubious circumstances with apparently no civil society vetting or endorsement. This is unacceptable. President Boakai, I urge you to withdraw this nomination and not allow politicking to derail one of the most important appointments of your time in office. Staff the Office with upstanding Liberian human rights defenders, many of whom have been advocating in the trenches for decades.

Finally, I remain very concerned about the outsized influence of the United States in our transitional justice process. We must forge new strategic partnerships based on mutual benefit and disabuse ourselves of the notion that we have a 'special relationship' with America. Truth be told, this so-called 'special relationship' only exists in our imagination. Lest we forget, the United States was one of the last countries to recognize our independence. Lest we forget, the United States has taken more from us than it has given. Lest we forget, the United States will always serve its own interests above all else. Once we accept these truths, we will appreciate that a re-imagined Liberia can never be anyone's 'stepchild'.

A re-imagined Liberia is not only free from colonial relations of power, it is also free from colonial artefacts that cripple us. In this vein, I would like to renew previous calls to adopt national symbols that represent the "cultural breadth and historical depth" of our shared experiences. I urge us to forge a new political identity by re-imagining and revising these symbols. Why is the national motto on our seal not 'the love of liberty united us here', as suggested by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission final report? Why are we still calling our highest national honor the 'Most Venerable Order of Knighthood of the Pioneers of the Republic of Liberia', when the word 'pioneers' remains politically charged? How could renaming our capital Monrovia help us to decolonize?

By refashioning our flag, seal, national anthem, and national awards, among others, we can re-imagine Liberia based on a set of ideals that we all uphold. We should establish a committee of Liberian scholars, local government officials, cultural experts, and visual artists to devise new symbols of national relevance that will culminate in a referendum.

We must also adopt one of Liberia's most widely spoken languages as our national language, and embrace Liberian English as our lingua franca. Now, this does not negate the need to master Standard English; instead, it promotes multi-lingualism as a form of nationalism.

Because our norms and traditions are fluid rather than fixed, we must understand that the dichotomy between indigenous and settler, domestic and diasporic is false. One thing that unites us all is our shared history of migration. Some of us are more recent migrants than others. For example, most of Liberia's sixteen ethno-linguistic groups are not 'indigenous'; they actually migrated in several waves from the 12th century onwards. By the time free and formerly enslaved blacks arrived on the coast of pre-settler Liberia in the mid-nineteenth century, 250 years of migration had preceded them. So, our shared historical narrative must be that we are all (im)migrants. None of us belongs here more than the other.

Dignity must define us.

In our efforts to achieve state-building, we must build a national consensus around how we perceive and perform public service. While some people enter government to engage in post-war profiteering, others are committed to public sector productivity. While some remain political entrepreneurs, others become transformative policymakers. This duality exists in governments across the globe. We have to do a better job of not only scouting for competence, but also gauging who will put public interest before personal gain.

This is what the Liberian electorate communicated when we rejected most incumbents in the House, Senate and Presidency late last year. We said we deserve better and, contrary to global hysteria about the violence that would ensue, we delivered this overwhelming message through the ballot box rather than through the barrel of the gun. Our young post-war democracy defied the odds in a sub-region that has been wracked by political and military coups. But there is still essential state-building work to be done.

For example, a recent study found that the cost of politics is too high in Liberia; so high that wealthy and/or politically connected men tend to dominate the electoral arena. This means that people who *should* be in elected office, like women and poor people with integrity, rarely have the resources to run successful campaigns. In a re-imagined Liberia, campaign finance would be regulated to curb the misuse of state resources and to police clandestine private donations.

To members of our National Legislature, some of you are already campaigning for 2029, but I urge you to stop! Stop jockeying for power and grandstanding on Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn. Do the work of the Liberian people now.

They will decide whether you are worthy of re-election. In the meantime, go back to your districts and counties and engage in quarterly legislative dialogues so that you can report to the people you represent and hear directly from them.

The House and Senate must have functioning websites with the names and contact information of ALL elected officials, including information on your legislative agendas, the bills you have sponsored and your voting records. This will create a feedback mechanism for your constituents to hold you accountable.

Most importantly, you can hold yourselves accountable by reducing your salaries by 20% and removing all line items from our national budget in which you do not perform your core functions of lawmaking and oversight. This would mean channelling funds for social service delivery directly to the counties to help them implement our sub-national development agendas.

To President Boakai, I know many people warned you about inviting me to serve as national orator. They told you, “da lil girl got sharp mouth, oh!” But you did not listen to the naysayers, and for that, I am both humbled and grateful. The Liberian people elected you to ‘rescue’ them. Six months in, expectations are high and morale low, but all is not lost because true change takes time.

Though you inherited a laundry list of priorities to tackle, I urge you to focus on a handful of tangible goals in the next six years and work on achieving results. Forget about political niceties or partisanship and institute swift reforms that will cement your legacy as a respected statesman.

Do you want to be remembered for condoning lawlessness or respecting the rule of law? In regards to the former, you have made some mistakes along the way—from the tenured positions debacle, to the appointments of questionable characters in key positions of trust (you know who they are), to the controversy of what I call ‘Yellow machine gate’. I urge you to course correct before you lose the confidence of the Liberian people. Assemble a diverse and nationally-representative team of competent and committed Liberians with integrity; devise mutually agreeable, time-bound deliverables for them to achieve; and hold them accountable. Demand that all appointees roll up their sleeves and get to work or move out of the way of progress.

Having said that, the ARREST Agenda appears to be more of a multi-sectoral development wish-list than a broad-based vision for our future. I propose using the phrase ‘dignity must define us’ as the unifying anchor for this administration’s national development plan. The process of managing change and delivering public goods must be Liberian-led, Liberian-financed and Liberian-managed.

I urge you to run the executive branch like the well-oiled machine it should be, President Boakai. Schedule quarterly presidential town hall discussions on the state broadcaster so that citizens can converse with you in real time. Mandate your ministers and heads of state-owned enterprises to do the same. The Liberian people elected an executive they presumed would be accessible and accountable. Please, please, please, do not disappoint them.

Dignity must define us.

I would like to end my Oration with a special message to Liberians at home and abroad.

To women and youth, in particular, I SEE YOU! The twin challenges of sexism and ageism have left some of you feeling disillusioned and angry. I see that you're struggling, that some of you have lost faith in a system that rewards harming rather than helping people, especially those we deem weak and disposable. That ache in the pit of your gut is your will to demand more. Don't lose the fire in your belly.

To Liberians worldwide, I am aware that our "sweet land of liberty" is far from a utopia. I remain convinced, however, that in my lifetime our country of many firsts will re-assume its rightful place as a beacon of hope for this continent. Because a re-imagined Liberia is a liberated Liberia.

I invite you to help me re-imagine Liberia anew. Because we are the ones we have been waiting for.

Happy 177th IN DEFIANCE DAY!

Thank you plenty!