

August 10, 2003

Critics Assail Bush's Strategy of Restraint in Liberia

By Mike Allen
Washington Post Staff Writer

CRAWFORD, Tex., Aug. 9 -- President Bush built lofty expectations around the world about his willingness to help stanch the bloodshed in Liberia, and now is facing widespread criticism for sending only a handful of troops, with no promise of combat forces, after five weeks of delay.

Bush authorized six to 20 Marines to go ashore this week to help Liberia's West African neighbors with the logistics of humanitarian efforts. But he made no provision for reining in the rape, looting and gunfire that are terrifying residents of the capital, Monrovia.

The decision reflects the tensions between the expansive foreign policy Bush launched after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, when he began focusing on failing states as breeding grounds for terrorism, and the more circumscribed worldview he held as a candidate, when he said that "while Africa may be important, it doesn't fit into the national strategic interests, as far as I can see them."

Western leaders have a history of ignoring African crises with political impunity. But Liberia, an English-speaking country colonized by freed American slaves, was descending into chaos just as Bush was preparing for last month's trip to Africa, which he had hoped to use to build goodwill by touting his efforts to alleviate the continent's AIDS epidemic and reward progressive governments with development and anti-terrorism aid. The administration tried to buy time, dispatching Pentagon assessment teams to Liberia and later sending a three-ship amphibious ready group to the coast.

About 2,300 Marines remain nearby on those warships, but officials at the White House, Pentagon and State Department said this week that Bush had tentatively ruled against a major deployment. By Friday, when Bush met at his ranch house with Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld, aides said the United States might do more but that no decision had been made to do so. The aides said Bush would continue to insist that West Africans take the lead in peacekeeping efforts until the United Nations could take over.

Rebel attacks increased as administration officials quarreled privately about what to do. Bush's critics said that whatever he decides in the coming days, he squandered a chance to show a willingness to keep peace rather than just use war to engineer regime change. These critics said muscular U.S. involvement also would have bolstered the human-rights justification for the Iraq war that Bush began emphasizing when no unconventional weapons immediately turned up.

"This feeds into the wider debate within the international community about what the United States really cares about," said Gayle Smith, the National Security Council's director for African affairs in the Clinton administration. "When we're telling countries they have to be for us or

against us, it hurts our credibility if we are not responsive when the rest of the world is saying there's something they need us to do."

Chester A. Crocker, assistant secretary of state for African affairs for eight years under President Ronald Reagan, said the administration had "not handled the perception management on this very well," and had offered what could be seen as a timid response when "a credible force on the ground could have made a real difference."

A senior administration official said that since Bush began addressing the crisis, he has consistently said that West Africans -- not U.S. soldiers -- should take the lead.

The strategy resulted from a bitter battle within the administration, Bush's aides said. Some senior State Department officials had insisted that the crisis in the civil-war-torn nation of 3 million could not be ignored and required U.S. leadership. But the Pentagon resisted an open-ended commitment to a new mission in a country of arguably peripheral strategic importance at a time when the United States is taking near-daily casualties in postwar Iraq.

An added reason for hesitance was that this would be the first U.S. crisis intervention in Africa since President Bill Clinton withdrew troops from Somalia in 1993 after the deaths of 18 commandos in Mogadishu. Sen. John W. Warner (R-Va.), chairman of the Armed Services Committee, said Bush had not made the case that intervention in Liberia was in the nation's strategic interests. And an influential paper by the conservative Heritage Foundation argued that a Liberian peacekeeping operation would be costly and would "drain valuable resources away from vital national security requirements."

By all accounts, the Pentagon won. Leon Fuerth, a George Washington University international affairs professor who was national security adviser to Vice President Al Gore, credited Bush for breaking with his ideological discomfort with any intervention, but called the deployment "the least he possibly can do to check the box."

In the days before his week-long Africa trip, Bush took note of his nation's "special ties to Liberia." He said he was "determined to help the people of Liberia find the path to peace" and would "look at all the options to determine how best to bring peace and stability."

"Every day that goes by is closer to a decision," Bush told the South African Broadcasting Corp.

That was July 3. Eleven days later, Bush met at the White House with U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan, who had been urging the United States to send a substantial combat force. Bush said the United States wanted to help and would "participate with the troops." U.N. sources said Annan left the meeting with new optimism that Bush planned a robust commitment, with only the numbers and timing to be worked out.

It was not until this week that fewer than a dozen Marines went ashore in Liberia. Bush said at his news conference before leaving for his month-long vacation at his ranch here in Texas that "the troop strength will be limited, and the time frame will be limited," and his aides said that remains his view.

Susan E. Rice, a Brookings Institution scholar who was assistant secretary of state for African affairs under Clinton, called Bush's response "woefully inadequate," and said White House aides had allowed the president to look "whipsawed" between the Pentagon and the State Department.

"It's far worse than if these high expectations had never been set, and calls into question the commitment of the United States to Africa," Rice said.

Several analysts said any perception of dithering could hurt Bush's efforts to improve Republican standing with black voters. Jesse L. Jackson has made Liberia a major topic of his public appearances, arguing that the United States is in Liberia's debt for the raw materials and strategic location it has long provided the military. Jackson made the case in a brief audience with Bush at the National Urban League convention in Pittsburgh last month, but Jackson was not satisfied by the response.

"He said the ships were on the way to offer some assistance," Jackson said. "My point of course was that ships offshore observing is not the relief they need or deserve."

© 2003 The Washington Post Company