

166th Independence Day National Oration
Delivered by Cllr. Harry Varney Gboto-Nambi Sherman
At the Tubmanburg City Hall, Bomi County
Friday, July 26, 2013
[As Delivered]

Your Excellency, Madam President;
Mr. Vice President;
Members of the Cabinet;
Your Excellencies: Mr. Speaker and Mr. President Pro-Tempore;
Your Excellencies: Honorable Members of the Legislature;
Your Honors: Mr. Chief Justice and Justices of the Supreme Court of Liberia;
Foreign Dignitaries and Foreign Residents;
To You, Especially, Your Excellency, President [Olusegun] Obasanjo;
My Fellow Liberians;
Good Morning, Good Morning and Good Morning:

To you Madam President, Mr. Vice President, Members of the Legislature and Justices of the Supreme Court, I recall only once in my lifetime that I had been privileged to address so many officials of the Liberian Government in one hall; and that was at the National Conference sponsored by the Taylor Government about two years after President Taylor was elected President of Liberia.

However, on that occasion unlike this occasion, the President of Liberia himself was not present. More important, it is the fact that I have never been privileged, on a “26 Day,” to speak to a room of so many “Very Important Persons” who are responsible for the governance of our country. This, therefore, presents to me the opportunity of asking, for the first time in my life, for my “26.” So, Madam President, Mr. Vice President, Honorable Members of the Legislature and Justices of the Supreme Court, my 26 on you yah!

Asking you for my “26” is indicative of what our Independence Day means to every Liberian; for all of us Independence Day is a day of joy, a day for celebration. For all Liberians, Independence Day should also be a day of remembrance. It should be a day of celebration because we rejoice for the freedom, liberty, and justice that independence has bestowed upon us as a people. Independence Day should be a day of remembrance – a day when we honor the visionary and courageous men and women who, faced with all odds and difficulties, declared this land a sovereign state when everywhere else south of the Sahara was still under European colonial rule.

We should not only remember them on Independence Day. We should also honor them. We must not only honor them, but for the future of our country, we must learn from their vision, courage, and boldness. For it is only through well-defined vision, mixed with courage to take decisions and boldness to implement those decisions, can Liberia be transformed to a safer and better place for all Liberians.

For today's Liberia, Independence Day cannot merely be a day of remembrance and celebration. Even after nearly ten years of the absence of gunfire, the wounds of our civil war are still fresh; for you know that peace is not necessarily the absence of war. Even after two cycles of general and presidential elections, the social and development challenges which face our people are still very daunting; some of our people appear to give up all hope for the betterment of their situation during their lifetime. Restoration of our patrimony appears to be so overwhelming that we, as a people, cannot afford to merely remember those who sacrificed for July 26, 1847; we cannot merely rejoice in the tremendous benefits of their actions.

As I stand here today, I am conscious of the sacrifices which were made by the founders to declare our country's independence as a sovereign state; I can visualize how awesome and difficult it was for them to officially break ties with the American Colonization Society and step out in the world on their own.

I stand here today very aware of their debates and the arguments which took place between the years of 1845 to 1847 to make the independence of this country, our country, possible. I can't help but feel the risks they took; but all Liberians everywhere should be grateful for their vision and their courage during those uncertain times.

There are so many of us who don't know the major factors which motivated the Commonwealth of Liberia, as dependent as it was on the American Colonization Society for its very sustenance, to declare this part of the world a free, independent and sovereign state 166 years ago.

Among other things, my people, the Government and people of the Commonwealth of Liberia were challenged by the slave traders who continued to engage in that heinous crime of slave trading right within lands claimed by the Commonwealth of Liberia to be part of its territory. The Government of the Commonwealth of Liberia was also challenged by the captains of British merchant ships who refused to pay taxes or to accord any courtesies of a colony or nationhood to the Commonwealth of Liberia; these British merchant vessels insisted that what was referred to as the Commonwealth of Liberia was nothing more than a trading post in Africa. They contended that under international law and practices of states, the Commonwealth of Liberia was not even a colony or the possession of another nation-state, as its creation and authority did not derive from the action of another nation-state. So, they refused to pay taxes and dues imposed by the Commonwealth of Liberia; they refused to ascribe to the Commonwealth of Liberia the prerogatives of a colony or of nationhood. They arrogantly did whatever they wanted, settled in the belief that there was no basis in international law or international relations to deter them in their actions.

Cutting the umbilical cord that attached the Commonwealth of Liberia to the American Colonization Society was only possible through the actions and commitments of a bold and courageous people, who debated the issue for more than two years; but anybody who is familiar with Liberia's pre-independence history would not be surprised by their actions and their commitments. It was the same vision and courage that caused them to leave the United States and seek a home in Africa that was manifested once again when the time came for the declaration of independence. The fact that they took that decision is why we are here today, celebrating that momentous occasion and honoring them for their courage and boldness.

We celebrate Independence Day at a time when we have successfully moved our country from a 15-year civil war, which almost destroyed it. It has been said very often that the worse of all wars is a civil war; it is that time when people who know each other very well and who have otherwise lived together in peace and harmony take up arms against one another and commit some of the most heinous and egregious crimes against each other. It is the time when properties are destroyed and public infrastructure demolished by one side so that the other side would not be able to use them in the pursuit of the conflict or for its own comfort and convenience during or at the end of the conflict. It is a period when the instruments of war are used to target innocent persons with such viciousness that the civilized communities wonder whether the combatants were ever citizens of the same country. Liberia has had its share of these experiences. So many people were killed or injured during the course of our civil war; so much of our properties and infrastructures were destroyed; no village or hamlet, no matter how far away from Monrovia city they were located, was spared the ravages of our civil war.

Recently, while travelling through Grand Cape Mount County, on reaching one of the remotest areas, I wondered aloud in the vehicle whether the combatants ever reached that part of my county. People sitting in the vehicle with me said that the war reached every part of Liberia – every nook and corner of our country; everybody suffered one way or the other.

And I then recalled my days in intermittent exile in Ghana, in the heat of our civil war when I listened to the BBC's *Focus on Africa* reports on the ravages and atrocities committed in Liberia. With tears in my eyes so many years ago, I wondered whether the rest of the world had forgotten about us; I wondered whether the rest of the world was not listening to what was happening in our country. But, Thank God for ECOWAS. Thank God for the Federal Republic of Nigeria and other West African countries who came to our aid and helped stop our war.

When we thought some semblance of peace had returned to Liberia, the October 1992 Octopus Invasion took place. Those of you who were here know that it was then that the White Plains water plant was destroyed so that Monrovia would not get potable water. It was then that the Mount Coffee Hydroelectric Power Plant was also destroyed so that Monrovia would not get electricity.

“What kind of people you are who will take away a dental chair from a hospital drilled wall – to do what with?” asked a foreign friend during the course of our war. “What kind of people you are, who during the course of combat would attack a hospital from which any of the combatants could easily need medical care?” asked another foreign friend of mine.

I could go on and on, enumerating the atrocities committed against each other and the wanton destruction which took place. I will never, ever exhaust the list. Each Liberian, especially those who lived here and personally experienced the civil war, has his or her own story to tell. Today, there are so many of us who pretend to forget that these things ever happened; there are so many of us who have never asked why these things ever happened; there are so many of us who have never asked ourselves what can be done to ensure that never again should this country and its people ever experience another civil war.

Today, after nearly 10 years since the last gun was fired, we celebrate Independence Day with the theme: “Consolidating Peace and Reconciliation for Transformation.” But, my fellow Liberians, peace and reconciliation in Liberia can never be achieved if we ignore what caused our civil war and if we do not resolve to remove those causes and change ourselves and our country around for the better. Does the mere absence of war in our country constitute peace? Have we really reconciled our differences among ourselves? Have we carefully examined the ethnic, religious, and economic schisms in our society and bridge them in order to enhance genuine national unity and integration? If not, do we have the quality of peace and reconciliation that we could consolidate for transformation of our common patrimony? That is our question, and that we should find answers for.

As cynical as these questions might appear, Madam President, Mr. Vice President, and Honorable Members of the leadership of our country, there is no doubt that much has been accomplished and achieved since we heard the last gunfire in 2003. The rule of law, respect for human values and adherence to generally accepted principles of human conduct and behavior have been restored to our country through Madam President’s persistence and tenacity; the freedoms and liberties reserved by our Constitution to all our people are enjoyed by them without any prior restraint, oftentimes exposing yourself, Madam President, to insults and disrespect from some members of the public, but continue to do good.

Investment in infrastructures, such as road networks, which have direct impact on economic and social development, available, efficient, and affordable public utility and social services, including but not limited to power, potable water, sanitation, transportation and telecommunication services as the foundation for economic recovery and national reconstruction, are being vigorously pursued by your government in several parts of Liberia.

Tremendous progress has been made in restoring the credibility and integrity of our country with the international community and getting the international community to waive our daunting foreign debts and to allow new credits to us. You led the reinstatement of political governance, especially the holding of two presidential and general elections in a rather harmonious way, the restoration of normality in social interactions among our people, and the resort to the courts of law to settle grievances are all indications that we have come a long way from the days of our civil war.

The accolades and honors which have been bestowed upon you, Madam President, by governments, academia, international governmental and non-governmental organizations and other institutions, attest to the success of your policies, programs and endeavors. I am, however, concerned that enough information about these achievements and accomplishments has not flowed to the Liberian public at large, and too many of us, even within Monrovia and its immediate environs, don’t know enough about these achievements and accomplishments.

The absence of information to the Liberian people about these achievements and accomplishments is a serious deficiency that must be remedied immediately. It should be acknowledged that these accomplishments and achievements contribute to peace and reconciliation in our country. I therefore recommend very strongly that the information dissemination structure and process of this government be

revamped and adequately supported to provide all information about the accomplishments and achievements of your government – information that permeates every sector of the country.

On this 166th Anniversary of the Independence of the Republic of Liberia, I commend you, Madam President, very highly for your achievements and accomplishments of your administration; to you, Mr. Vice President and Honorable Members of the leadership of our country, we thank you for collaborating with our President for these achievements and accomplishments. But as a lawyer would say, I submit that all of these achievements and accomplishments, including the many others that I have mentioned, are not enough as a foundation to transform our country.

I believe that some of those things which made it possible for us to go to war against one another are still simmering; and I rush to suggest that at every Independence Day we, especially the leadership of Liberia, should examine ourselves and every aspect of our country and ask whether enough of the many differences and longstanding problems which caused our civil war were addressed during the previous year, and we should evaluate the extent to which our success or failure in addressing those differences and longstanding problems may have either enhanced or affected our country's progress.

Simply stated, as much as you have done and accomplished, Madam President, your government, like our founders in the years of 1845 to 1847, has a singular responsibility and obligation to be just as visionary as they were or even more visionary than they were, to be just as bold and courageous as they were or even bolder and more courageous than they were to tackle head-on our fundamental problems and differences so that genuine peace may be used as the foundation to restore our country to its pre-war status and genuine reconciliation may be the fulcrum for its transformation.

Especially for you, Madam President, in a country where nearly every successful political program or action must be driven by the highest political office, I submit, again, that you were elected to set the examples of good governance – examples that would be worthy of emulation by your successors. You were elected because Liberians believe that of all the contestants for the presidency of this country, you were the best prepared and most qualified to be the trendsetter and pacesetter for the progress of our country and the fulfillment of their individual and collective dreams.

This means that as much as you have done, it is imperative, absolutely imperative, that your government engages in one, two, or three policies and programs which makes significant difference in the lives and livelihood of ordinary Liberians – policies and programs for which your government will be long remembered and many of the people of this country would be able to say that it is because of you, Madam Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, that our country is where it is or they are where they will be. I submit, further, that among other things, public service gives the public servant the greatest opportunity to do good for so many people in the shortest possible time, to change the lives of so many people and to make fundamental difference in how things are done.

At this stage, let me tell you, Ladies and Gentlemen of our country, some of the things that I dreamed about for peace, reconciliation, and progress in Liberia, and ask why not? Let me suggest to you, Madam President and other Members of the leadership of our country, that you consider whether these things will

consolidate the gains that have been made thus far, and set the foundation for transformation of our country.

There are some who believe that the major cause of our civil strife was problem between two counties or two tribes of our country. While I don't disagree with them in the entirety, I suggest that the major cause of our civil war that is too often ignored is the poverty, social-economic deprivation, drudgery that too many of our people suffer from. They consider themselves to be the disadvantaged of our society, and so they therefore distinguish themselves from the rest of us. Poverty, social-economic deprivation and drudgery are fertile grounds for unrest; it is poverty, social-economic deprivation and drudgery that unscrupulous people take advantage of when they employ violence as an instrument to make a difference in the lives of our people.

Let us make no mistake that the greatest unspoken cause of our civil war was the extreme poverty, social-economic deprivation and drudgery that too many of our people suffered from; it is the reason why a civil war that appeared to have started on the basis of differences between two counties or tribes eventually involved the entire Republic of Liberia and affected every nook and corner of our country.

What were the combatants doing in the villages of Lofa County? What were the combatants doing in the villages of Grand Cape Mount County? What were the combatants doing in the villages of Gbarpolu County? What were the combatants doing in every village and nook and corner? Everywhere they went, my people, using their guns, they seized our people's properties and destroyed what they couldn't carry away. Then you say it is only tribal conflict between two tribes? Were those tribes situated in every nook and corner of the Republic of Liberia? Then I propose to you that we pay attention to the extreme poverty, social and economic deprivation and drudgery that our people experience.

As much as this government has done to reduce extreme poverty, to improve the lives and livelihood of our people and remove them from the experience of drudgery, there is still much more that needs to be done. Some of the things that need to be done are not too expensive or too difficult to be done.

For example, Madam President and Members of the leadership of my country, we all know that a large majority of our people do not have clean, pipe-borne water and human waste disposal facilities even though these are an absolute necessity for their health and personal well-being. Too many of our people have never had the comfort of electric light; and I need not tell you the transformation that electric light brings to any community. As much as we appreciate the big infrastructure development projects carried out since peace returned to Liberia, I suggest that now is the time that we begin to think about small projects, such as the installation of water pumps and solar lights in all the villages of Liberia – projects which directly impact the lives of the greatest majority of our people.

We suggest that these projects be implemented as one way of alleviating the extreme poverty and drudgery that they live in. These undertakings, even though insignificant in their appearances, will make tremendous difference in the lives of the Liberian people and cause them to renew their loyalty and commitment to the Republic of Liberia. If our government were to invest in such things, and I mean real serious investment, we will be considered a pacesetter and trendsetter; that is what the Liberian people

elected you for, Madam President. So I call upon you, Madam President and the other Members of the leadership of our country, to explore the possibility, during the current six-year term of office, to make a difference in the lives of the majority of our people by installing hand pumps and solar lights in each village in the Republic of Liberia.

There is no doubt that the transformation of Liberia has begun, and there is an appreciable level of peace and stability within Liberia; regional peace and cooperation within West Africa and the African continent is vigorously sought by our government. All of these achievements and accomplishments for peace have been done in cooperation with the international community. In this regard, Madam President, your government has done a tremendous job; Liberia is, indeed, on the forward march because of your personal commitment and work to achieve such level of peace and stability within our country and in our neighborhood.

Unfortunately, it seems to so many of our compatriots, that having succeeded in getting our international debts waived and new credits afforded to Liberia, it would be sufficient for this government to concentrate on foreign direct investment, the repair and restoration of our major infrastructure, and the construction of new major infrastructures. Granted that these are not necessary for sustained and balanced economic development of our country, but I submit, again, that more needs to be done to establish a strong foundation for the transformation of Liberia after our civil war.

Some of the things on which genuine peace and reconciliation after our civil war are dependent are factors such as reconciliation of all our people and rehabilitation of the victims of civil war, a new and robust approach to political governance, emphasis on nationalism, and our social and cultural values and promotion of individual initiatives and Liberian entrepreneurship. And for each of these dependencies for genuine peace and reconciliation, Liberians believe that you, Madam President, have the capacity and the ability to achieve and accomplish them, and they expect that you came to the leadership of our country with new ideas directed at making the desired difference in their lives.

For our political governance, Liberians asked themselves whether the Government of Liberia is sufficiently pluralistic, transparent, accountable and responsive to their needs. They especially test for policies, programs and sanctions against corruption and the establishment of effective institutions and mechanisms to give effect to those policies and programs. We know this to be true because, as much as this government has done to stamp out corruption from Liberia, including the enactment of a special law against corruption and the establishment of an Anti-Corruption Commission, all the time and everywhere we hear the Liberian people's cry against corruption. There must be something that we have not done right. There must be something that we have not done right or something that we ought to do that we have not done that makes our people, including some members of the very Anti-Corruption Commission itself, to criticize us for corruption in our society every day.

I know what you, Madam President, have done so far. I know your personal abiding commitment to eradicate this cancer from our society, and I also know that some of the acquisitions of corruption have no basis. But, again, I submit to you that our country cannot be transformed when public service is evaluated

by the Liberian people at large as the place where corruption exists, persists and is practiced as a matter of course and with impunity.

All the good you do, Madam President, all what you achieve and accomplish will not be recognized and appreciated if corruption remains on the lips of our people the day you retire from office in January 2018. So, Madam President, you must remain resolute and strong in your personal conviction and actions to stamp out corruption from our country; you must not be deterred by the indifference of others or by a failure, for example, to get a legislation or two passed to enhance the work against corruption. For example, while I don't think we need a special court for corruption, as one of the many existing courts could be designated by law to handle corruption cases, I strongly believe that prosecutorial powers to the Anti-Corruption Commission will expedite the management of corruption matters. So, I recommend to both you and Members of the Legislature to reconsider the actions that have been recently taken in this regard, and reconsider to pass the necessary law to enable us to more vigorously fight corruption in our country.

Madam President, Members of the leadership of our country, there are several countries in the world, including some in Africa, who are reputed to have considerably reduced the incidence of corruption or even stamped it out forever. For example, in Singapore (which is known as a "Third World Country" which has made itself a "First World Country," the laws and systems were overhauled, and among other things, it was provided, by new laws, that if a government official were determined to be liable for corruption, not only was the person dismissed from his position, but such person immediately had to face the court of law. In facing the court of law, the principle of burden of proof in Anglo-American criminal jurisprudence, which we have adopted in our country without question, was turned around in the other people's country so that the burden is on the individual to vindicate himself from the charges; it is he who must prove his innocence beyond all reasonable doubts, and that proof must be satisfactory to a court of competent and reliable jurists and other professionals. Lawyers and other investigators were employed and set to work on nothing other than investigating, reporting and prosecuting corruption matters; and they were given unflinching moral, material and financial support for their work. Something similarly new, different and aggressive must be employed to tackle corruption in Liberia, Madam President, or else the "talk and talk and talk" about corruption will overshadow all our achievements and accomplishments since the guns were silenced in 2003.

I therefore recommend, Madam President, that we conduct a study of how countries, similarly situated as ours, managed to reduce the incidence of corruption or stamp it out completely. Our Anti-Corruption Commission should be staffed by men and women who are not only capable and qualified, but in whom you personally have the strongest confidence and with whom you are prepared to take a political risk to tackle corruption so that you will be able to give them the maximum support to solve the problem.

Madam President, it is unacceptable, I believe, that when the Anti-Corruption Commission makes a small complaint, such as a manager did not present proper evidence on the declaration of assets, then the Anti-Corruption Commission and that manager engage in an argument and debate in the newspapers and on the airwaves. It undermines the Anti-Corruption Commission.

We need to change the conversation. We need to change the debate. We need for the Liberian people to talk about your achievements and accomplishments in tackling corruption just as they talk about your achievements and accomplishments in getting our international debt waived. That is the conversation that we need to be making.

In the next couple of years, we need to change the subject matter of the public debate or discussion from corruption to genuine peace and reconciliation and to development and social-economic progress. We need to be aggressive, tenacious and consistent against corruption or else our legacy as a political party, the Unity Party, which took over the helm of this country after the civil war, will be marred forever; and neither we, as a political party, nor you, as our Standard Bearer, can afford that. Now is the time for strong and decisive policies and actions; waiting for “tomorrow” is not an option. It will be too late.

Madam President, you have advocated decentralization of the political governance of our country to make local governance responsive to the people they serve; and I need not delve into the obvious economic benefits and positive ripple effects (political, social and economic development) that inures to a people who subscribes to this principle. Given your years of experience as a public servant, Madam President, you are also aware that decentralization of political governance, like most matters political, is a process not an event. Especially for our country, which has a longstanding experience and history of a “unitary government with a tight vertical system of administration,” which is enshrined in the Constitution, decentralization of political governance is a “tall order.” So it will seem so very easy for any person, who is interested in maintaining the status quo of overly accumulated power, to play the political card by suggesting that decentralization of political governance is not possible without an amendment of the Constitution.

But, Madam President, I am a lawyer, and as you know I’m no *flakajay* lawyer. The amendment of our Constitution alone, all by itself, cannot institutionalize decentralization of our political governance; and that is why I submit to you, again, that decentralization of political governance can only be actualized through a combination of amendments of the Constitution, revision of our laws and changes in the practices and attitudes of our leaders and people.

Here, again, as everything political must be driven by the Office of the President in this country in order for it to succeed, the onus is on you to begin to develop the mechanisms and processes, within the limits of the laws and Constitution, to promote the successful decentralization of political governance of our country. You must be the pacesetter and trendsetter in this regard; Liberians expect nothing less; and as malleable as they are, they will follow your good policies, actions and practices.

For example, Madam President, it is provided by our Constitution that nearly every member of local government administration, except the chiefs – I wonder why the chiefs – should be appointed by the President of Liberia. But I suggest, Madam President, that you now consider some level of decentralization of the governance of Liberia under a formula which provides that those who are appointed by you are first vetted and agreed by a local council in each county and that you will appoint whomever is nominated, subject to exercising the authority to dismiss him or her or otherwise sanction

him or her if the local council recommends and proves to your satisfaction need for dismissal or other form of sanctions.

While this formula, which could be initiated by an Executive Order and later transformed to a Legislative enactment, would appear to be a sharing of your constitutional prerogatives with the local people of each political constituency of Liberia, it is my considered opinion that it would not violate the Constitution. But, more importantly, I dare submit that it will begin the process, it will begin the experience which will be necessary to make political decentralization a success in this country.

I therefore also suggest, Madam President and Members of the leadership of my country, our country, that decentralization of political governance does not merely consist of granting local people the authority to choose or participate in the process for choosing their local leaders. Were that the case, decentralization of political governance will be equated to the granting of authority without the power to exercise it or the responsibility that is attended to it. In addition to a change of the selection process for local government leaders, certain defined responsibilities should devolve on local government officials as their exclusive domains, with only supervisory responsibility reserved to the President of Liberia. I dare also suggest that independent sources of revenue (for example, property taxes) to finance certain local government operations should be reserved to local governments. And I would further suggest that we go another step to adopt the policy of “revenue sharing” insofar as the revenue is generated from natural resources exploited from a political sub-division. I hasten to add that I don’t subscribe to certain provisions of the Public Finance Management Act, which require that all revenues for the Republic of Liberia should be deposited in a consolidated fund at the Central Bank of Liberia in the name of the Ministry of Finance. I suggest that revenue should actually be what that expression literally means, that a certain percentage of the revenue generated from the exploitation of natural resources be for the county where the deposits are located and that the payer of the revenue will pay that percentage directly to the local government administration, obtain a receipt and report the payment to the Ministry of Finance for the purpose of appropriate record-keeping and accountability. For example, we need a law that provides that for every ton of iron ore that Western Cluster Limited eventually takes from Bomi County, a percentage of the revenue should remain in Bomi County for Bomi County.

I make these recommendations even though I realize and give credit to the policies and programs of County Development Funds and Social Development Funds, which no government before your government has ever thought about. I make these recommendations fully aware of the problems associated with the management of the county development funds and the social development funds; but I still make these recommendations because I personally believe that these recommendations facilitate more direct participation of the people in deciding their destinies and in determining what is good for them; and such more direct participation of the people in determining what is good for them enhances peace and reconciliation as a foundation for the transformation of our country.

Revenue sharing, my people, will be an impetus for sustained economic development all over Liberia; it will make local people responsible for the development of their own areas; it will encourage and facilitate competition between political sub-divisions because Bong County will want to know what Nimba County did with its own revenue, and Lofa County will want to know what Bong County did with its own

revenue; it will promote the return of qualified people to their localities to live and find employment. I submit, my people, if there were revenue sharing employed during the years that iron ore was exploited from Bomi, Nimba, Bong and Cape Mount Counties, those political sub-divisions would have been markedly different from what they are today. Similarly, if revenue sharing were in place when trees were felled from the forests of Sinoe, Grand Gedeh and Bassa, for example, those political sub-divisions would have also been markedly different from what they are today. But what did we have? Everything came to Monrovia and Monrovia decided what goes where. I can only imagine the significant difference that will be made in the lives of our people were we to adopt real decentralization of political governance.

Madam President, I'm aware of the "naysayers" who suggest that our political sub-divisions do not have the human capacity for an effective process of political governance and decentralization. But if we wait for all the members of each political sub-division to earn Masters and PhD degrees and obtain years of experience in Public Administration, Business Administration or their related discipline before we initiate the decentralization of the political governance of our country, it is my humble opinion that we will never start and we will definitely lose out on the opportunities for the transformation of our country.

Now is time, and this is the opportunity for us to be bold and courageous with new ideas to do what is right with the little that we have to develop the mechanism and set the process in motion for a dramatic change in the way Liberia does things and in the way we, as a people, do things – the way we govern the Republic of Liberia – so that all our people can feel a part of the governance process and take responsibility for their respective communities and their future.

Madam President and other Members of the leadership of our country, even with all that has been done so far by your administration, there continue to be serious ethnic, religious, and economic schism in Liberia. We must bridge these gaps in order to enhance genuine national unity, integration and reconciliation. What the Tubman and Tolbert Governments did are commendable and I'm grateful for what has been achieved and accomplished in the eight years since you, Madam President, your first election to the high office of President of this nation. But we must go beyond merely having all our people represented in the National Legislature, the building of monuments and the establishment of a national holiday to commemorate the laudable policy of national unification and integration. After a civil war, we must do something new and dramatic about bridging the gaps and making everybody feel that there are opportunities in Liberia for self-actualization and self-improvement. You have made tremendous progress in this regard, but I suggest that more needs to be done. Please don't get tired; please don't be deterred.

For example, Madam President, we are all aware that an academic degree arouses expectation in the graduate – expectations in this Liberia that a job will be available for him or her. If this expectation is not met or satisfied, frustration and disgruntlement set in and it is almost always the national government that they blame. Frustrated and disgruntled university graduates, even though some may not be as qualified as desirable, are not good for a country coming out of a civil war. Something new, some new policies and programs, ought to be put in place to address the situation of the thousands of graduates who are unemployed, perhaps languishing as part of the disadvantaged of our country.

For starters, and I'm no expert, I suggest that we consider a program where all university graduates, regardless of class, social status or otherwise, once they attended our universities, be deployed to counties other than their counties of origin. When I say our universities, I mean any university in the Republic of Liberia, be deployed to any county other than their county of origin, to live and work for a period of three years, with the option reserved to them for an extension for another period of two years. Such program will immediately relieve the pressure on the government to find or create jobs in Monrovia for the thousands of graduates from universities each year; such program will help to provide staff for local government administration and services (health, education, etcetera) with young university graduates.

These young Liberians will educate and assimilate themselves into the cultures of other local communities in which they are submerged but about which they knew so very little or nothing before then; some might even get married or make life-long friends from there; others might decide to live in their new "homes" forever; but more importantly, the social and religious schisms will be bridged substantially. So I suggest that we try something like this to achieve peace and reconciliation throughout our country, knowing full well that the fruits of such program will not be fully realized during this term of office, but perhaps 20 to 25 years, say, after the commencement of its implementation; but now, not later, is the time to begin.

After a devastating civil war, we, as a country and people, must also adopt special training programs to provide skills to the thousands and thousands of our young people who either never had the opportunity to continue their education in normal schools or who are too old to continue with normal schooling.

Madam President, I commend you for the junior colleges you are establishing throughout the country, for the junior college in Senji; but Madam President, we need to wonder whether the degrees are where we ought to be going or whether we ought to be training masons, electricians, plumbers, etcetera – men and women with skills that are marketable – instead of men and women with degrees in sociology, political science, anthropology, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera.

Some of the thousands I talk about were combatants in our civil war. Others were merely victims of the war and, like I said, they are in their thousands. The little I know about them, they are having many more children than us. This is a fact. When you, with all your book knowledge and your good job [you have] one or two children. With them, they don't count. Accelerated skills training programs would make the difference in their lives. We might not capture all of them, but the little that we capture and train are the ones who will ensure that nobody will use them to destroy our country because they now have a stake in the future of Liberia.

These thousands of young people are the "*Shoeshine Boy*" whom the singer, Eddie Kendricks – those who were around in the '60s and '70s, like me, that Eddie Kendricks asked many years ago. "Mr. Shoeshine Boy, you work so hard every day, but where would you be 10 years from now?" You remember that song? Where would you be 10 years from now? By providing marketable skills for this category of our people, we have directly addressed the issue of reconciliation because we give them hope for a better future in Liberia; we make them stakeholders in our common patrimony. If we ignore, as their numbers grow bigger and bigger, they will one day overwhelm us, if not me, then my children or my

grandchildren; and we all risk the terrible possibility that their frustration will be manifested in ways that are undesirable for our country and its future.

These disadvantaged youths of Liberia are just as important as any of us who sit in this hall today. None of us is more Liberian than any of them. I am convinced that by addressing the plight and frustration of these disadvantaged citizens of the country, we assure ourselves that peace and reconciliation is being quietly realized in the country and that the sacrifice that the Federal Republic of Nigeria of all countries, and the Republic of Ghana and others made for our peace was not a sacrifice in vain.

Even those of us who are not a “*Shoeshine Boy*,” we too need to be reconciled with ourselves and among ourselves; we too need to have a stake in the future Liberia and to realize that a better Liberia provides opportunities for all of us. A strong private sector with maximum participation of Liberians – including special incentives or affirmative action programs from Liberian entrepreneurs, especially as it relates to government’s purchases of goods and services – as the engine for the growth of our economy, for creating value, capital and wealth, as well as for energizing national development, must be pursued by the Liberian Government. The loans by the Central Bank of Liberia to the Liberian Business Association and the Marketing Association of Liberia, even though in my view outside of the purview of the agency, is a good beginning; but an affirmative action program which reserves certain business transactions with the Liberian Government exclusively to Liberian entrepreneurs, and the outsourcing of certain governmental activities on contract exclusively to Liberian entrepreneurs, will further enhance genuine reconciliation of the Liberian people.

I am not talking about reserving block-making machines to only Liberians. I am talking about direct government contracts for only Liberians. I am talking about outsourcing certain government services – messengers and cleaners – to Liberian entrepreneurs, and I can go on naming and naming and naming. Everyone is created to make a middle class.

By employing Liberians through providing them opportunities for Liberian Government business transactions, so that they can be more proactively involved in private business initiatives, we create a core population that will never want to experience a civil war again. The dream for peace and reconciliation will be a reality if, by our actions and policies, we create a real middle class of Liberians; and we can start this process by not only enabling and capacitating them to become entrepreneurs, but by also providing them the business opportunities which flow from their government.

Madam President, Mr. Vice President and Members of the leadership of our country, I have always been here, so I know us. We should encourage private entrepreneurship as a career, not merely as a convenience. Liberians who first go to public service with the objective of acquiring wealth from employment in the public sector and then veer into private entrepreneurship, are nearly always suspect of corruption, even though not all of them may have been corrupt; but other Liberians almost always ask where the money was obtained from to enter private entrepreneurship. I don’t begrudge them; but I propose that public support for private entrepreneurship should distinguish between that set of Liberians who first sought employment in the public sector and the other set of Liberians who make private entrepreneurship a career. It is in that task, I submit, who sets examples worthy of emulation by the

generation which follow us. We need to encourage this process and incentivize Liberians to become private entrepreneurs irrespective of the profession each chooses to get his or her training in.

Complementary of private entrepreneurship should be an “Own-a-Part of Liberia” policy – a policy which encourages, facilitates and capacitates each person to acquire his own land and house, to establish his own enterprise – even if it is just a small farm in his own name – to, in general, be a stakeholder in Liberia and its future.

To you, Honorable Members of the Legislature: You represent us from a particular county and you do not have a hut in your county. What confidence do I have that you will secure our county? When a person is a stakeholder in Liberia’s future, he or she will never subscribe to or condone any attempt by disgruntled people to destroy it. You think I will allow them to destroy my house or my investments? But when he or she has given up hope and sees no betterment for the future, he or she can be easily manipulated in destroying Liberia. We can avoid a reoccurrence of our civil war experience by creating as many serious stakeholders in Liberia’s future as we possibly can, and there will be no greater measure for peace and reconciliation than that since they will eventually be the “middle class” of our society.

As the overwhelming majority of our people are engaged in subsistence agriculture and are generally most victimized by tropical diseases, Liberia should adopt policies and invest substantially in the areas of agriculture and health, which directly impact the lives of these people. Unification, integration and reconciliation are not issues which are on the minds of hungry and diseased people; but it is these same hungry and diseased people who are easily manipulated into believing that a violent change of government or the system will bring relief to them. If we can seriously address the issues of agriculture, especially food production and health, and thereby give most of our people some hope in the future of our country, we can all get the comfort that our differences are behind us and that the prosperities of our country are for all of us to enjoy and benefit from. It is this type of comfort that facilitates reconciliation. Madam President, I am confident, I have told you that before, but I tell you again in public: I am confident and I trust that you can make it happen. You only need to make it happen.

Another group of people who I believe is essential for true reconciliation, are the non-resident Liberians, especially those who have been deprived of their Liberian citizenship only because they assume the citizenship of another country. Make no mistake that these people influence politics, including elections in Liberia; the financial remittances they make to their relatives and friends in Liberia certainly influence how those relatives and friends think and act. They are on the telephone everyday calling. If we insist that they are foreigners, then we must not accept their remittances; then their remittances and their telephone calls are illegal activities that they are involved in. But you know that I know that all major candidates in every Liberian election seek the support of these non-resident Liberians and they give their support to elections in Liberia. What, then, is the rationale for an antiquated law which makes them foreigners? These non-resident Liberians, my people, can be a fulcrum for peace and reconciliation. And empirical evidence suggests that tremendous economic benefits are associated with those nine ECOWAS countries – including Sierra Leone, our neighbor – who have adopted dual citizenships for themselves. Why are we different from these nine ECOWAS countries? Why don’t we see what they see?

I suggest, Madam President, and to you Members of the leadership of our country, that we begin with a “Once-a-Liberian-Always-a-Liberian” policy, through which every Liberian citizen, wherever he may be or whatever his circumstances might be, can feel a part of and be a stakeholder of Liberia – a nation where a natural-born citizen’s rights and benefits of citizenship cannot be alienated or obliterated merely by his assumption of residency of citizenship of another country. You, Madam President, as usual, could be a driver of this policy to ensure that it succeeds, and I urge you to drive the dual citizenship as quickly as you can. If dual citizenship is not accomplished during your term, Madam President, it is likely that it will be one of the first things your successor will do and then it will be your successor, not you, who will be determined by these non-resident Liberians as the real reconciler.

Madam President, for example, in Israel once you are Jew, Israel is your country, even though you might have never stepped a foot there, even though it was your great-great-grandfather who was there. So the Jews continue to contribute to the protection and development of Israel no matter where they live or no matter where they are located.

Madam President, Mr. Vice President, Members of our leadership, genuine peace and reconciliation is not possible unless we squarely face the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Report, legally discard those recommendations which are unconstitutional and are in conflict with our laws, and implement those recommendations which will foster the unity, integration and reconciliation of our people. We should not ignore the TRC Report and pretend that it does not exist; this will not auger well for us as a people and for our country. There can be no genuine reconciliation without disposition of the TRC Report; and I am one of those who believe that, after setting aside the unconstitutional and illegal recommendations, many portions of the TRC Report are very useful for the reconciliation of our people and the transformation of our country. It should be recalled, also, that some of us, given the position where we are, have already offered ourselves to challenge in court, if necessary, the unconstitutional and illegal recommendations of the TRC Report. Therefore, we should seriously pursue implementation of the legally and constitutionally implementable recommendations of the TRC, and we should make sure that the Liberian people throughout the nook and corner of our country know that we are doing just that. I submit that we will never claim that we have accomplished genuine peace and reconciliation in Liberia without the appropriate disposition of the TRC Report; and there is nothing written in there that we should be afraid of. Every day that we delay in the disposition of the TRC Report, we give the false impression that those who wish to criticize us, demean us, and abuse us tell the Liberian people that we are afraid of its contents. You, Madam President, know that we are not afraid of its contents.

Therefore, I recommend that serious and consistent attention be paid to the systematic disposition of the TRC Report; it is a facilitator for genuine peace and reconciliation which could be used for the transformation of our country. At least, the millions of dollars spent on it would not have been in vain.

Now to you, Mr. Speaker, Mr. President Pro-Tempore, Honorable Ladies and Gentlemen of the Legislature, even though I have conceded that in our part of the world national political policies and programs are driven by the highest office of the country in order to be successful, you know that that was never the intention of the founders of this nation; they intended and they enshrined in the 1847 Constitution – and it was reiterated in the 1986 Constitution – that the Legislature would be just as active

and responsible for the leadership of Liberia and for championing the cause and interest of the people just as the President would be. The principle of the coordination of the three branches of the Liberian Government mandates that the Legislature works and cooperates with the President to ensure that Liberians get the most beneficial and effective governance of this country; it means you, too, should shoulder the responsibility of being original in your thoughts and tenacious in your actions; it means that the unnecessary bickering and antagonism between the President and Legislature that often erupts in negative reporting in the media must be minimized; it means that our system of government works best when these two political branches are cooperating with each other, not when they are fighting each other. You, too, can therefore promote genuine peace and reconciliation as a foundation for transformation of Liberia through the adoption of new policies and programs and through a change of your attitude so that we can have better and more effective cooperation between these two branches of the government to achieve good governance for the Liberian people. It means that you and the Presidency should together resolve that Independence Day means we must all change for a better Liberia.

Honorable Members of the Legislature, if we can obtain a change in the working relationship between these two political branches of our government, we would have exuded the confidence that is needed to attract foreign investment in Liberia, which you know is necessary for the development of our country. So let this 166th Anniversary of the Independence of the Republic of Liberia be the occasion that you resolve to generate new ideas and programs for peace and reconciliation; to promote cooperation between you and the President; and to minimize antagonism between and among yourselves.

With this last recommendation, I promise to wind-down this National Oration; but as I wind-down this National Oration, let me tell you a personal experience that I had and that I will never forget as long as I live because it has affected my life since then. It was in the mid-1990s, hostilities in our civil war had been suspended for a while, and I was taking my usual walk one workday morning from my apartment I had on Snapper Hill, Ashmun Street, since they had expelled me from my home in Congo Town. I was taking that walk to my offices at the corner of Ashmun and Mechlin Streets. A child of about 10 or 11 years old hailed me: "Counsellor Sherman, Counsellor Sherman, Counsellor Sherman." I stopped, turned and looked at him sitting on the top of a big rock. He greeted me, and I greeted him in return. Then he made this profound remark: "Counsellor Sherman, I admire you sooooh." I said thanks to him with a wide grin. Perhaps it was possible that he had seen my last jawbone tooth and I continued my walk down to my offices. As I sat at my desk that morning, I momentarily became very sad as it dawned on me that that child might never ever become me. I then wondered what kind of country is this that we have where a child can admire somebody he will never ever become. For on that school day that that child was sitting on that rock, and for each school day that he sat on that rock, he will never become the lawyer I am. Our country needs to give hope to people like that child – hope that he can become whatever he wants to be, and we need to give all of our people that hope. When we can give all of our people that hope, we can then say to ourselves and the rest of the world that never again, never again, thank God almighty, never again will our country experience the devastation of civil hostilities.

Finally, Madam President, I reiterate that much has been achieved and accomplished in the areas of peace and reconciliation, but there is so much more to be done for genuine peace and reconciliation to be realized in Liberia and used for the transformation of our country. It is highly commendable that in spite

of all the evidence that you know about, you, Madam President, chose to dub the celebration of the 166th Anniversary of our Independence Day as a day to reflect on the urgent need for genuine peace and reconciliation and how we can use our achievements and accomplishments in this regard for the transformation of our country. It is a thought worth exploring. I can only hope that I have done justice to the subject matter. I have spoken to you today in the context of some of the dreams I have for Liberia and ask why not?

I thank you, Madam President, for the opportunity to share these thoughts about important topical and relevant issues relating to the future of our common patrimony with you, the Vice President, other Members of the leadership of our country and our citizens at large. May our God Almighty continue to always inspire and guide our thoughts about Liberia and bless the works of our hands and may he bless this Republic of Liberia. Thank You.