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Liberia After The World War

(Continued from Page 2)

What was justified in wartime might be questionable in peace. It was finally thought best to have Congress act on the matter and to authorize the loan. Mr. Hughes drew up a bill for presentation; Mr. Harding gave his endorsement and the subject came before Congress. On October 28th, 1921, the Liberian Commission and the State department were in full accord and the plan of the loan was signed in due form—but dependant upon favorable action by Congress. On November 8, the Department of State notified the Liberian government that the balance of the original credit of five million dollars had been withdrawn, but there was no expectation that the matter would fail. On January 22, 1922, Secretary Hughes wrote President Harding urging prompt action to make the credit available; on January 26 a telegram came from the President of Liberia that the plan had been approved by the Liberian Legislature. But in our Congress the bill had met with hard treatment. President King sums up the situation in a few words:

This measure although strongly supported by the late President Harding, and his executive colleagues, had a very hard struggle in the Congress of the United States; its passage through the lower House was secured by a small majority. It was favorably reported to the Senate by the Senate's Committee on Finance by a smaller majority and eventually was recommended to the Senate's Committee on Finance without instructions. This latter action was regarded as a failure of the loan. The failure of the loan credit of five million dollars was a keen disappointment to Liberia, not only from a financial and economic view point, but politically as well.

For four years Liberia had counted on the loan. Through all that time there had been unsettledness of business, halting of enterprises. It would have been better for the country if the loan had never been mentioned. Personally I was never enthusiastic over it. There is no question as to the seriousness of the situation that drove President Howard and his cabinet to make the appeal for help. It was legitimate and wise for us to come to the help of Liberia—our creation—in her hour of need. Given promptly and generously it might have been of real advantage to her. But the aid we were finally ready to give, hemmed around by the conditions we imposed, invoking constant oversight and possible outside interference in the affairs of the Republic, was a doubtful blessing. It involved the employment of eighteen American officials, whose salaries totalled almost \$100,000; it called for an increased, and surely in some degree unwarranted, expenditure on the Frontier Force; it necessitated a considerable outlay in revenue guard and patrol duty and in the bonding of the financial commission; it demanded the maintenance of a depository. These were financial burdens of no small magnitude to be carried by the loan and the amount remaining after they were met and interest paid and a sinking fund for capital repayment

established was somewhat problematical. It looked as if the roads and harbor improvements, sanitation and schools would not really profit from the arrangement. In the discussion before Congressional Committees other questions were raised and difficulties were suggested—misunderstandings that might arise between the Liberian Government and the American officials, the status of these foreigners as enjoying immunities, suspicions that the loan was subject to considerable diminution for commissions or influence. These difficulties and objections had been in my own mind from the beginning and they minimized my own regret at the course the matter took. I would be glad to see an enlightened, constant, active and generous interest in Liberia in this country, ready to help in every way, even to finance.

But if Liberia can pull through without such a loan as that authorized in 1918, she will be better in the end without it.

That she is really able to do so is indicated by President King's last message to the Legislature. Liberian trade is reviving. We have already mentioned the shrinkage during the war. In 1913 Liberia received \$485,576 in customs dues. It was perhaps high-water mark. Then came the years of depression. But during the past three years there has been steady improvement.

While all the principal ports of the Republic show an increase in Customs Revenues, yet that of the Port of Cape Mount shows the remarkable increase. This port in 1920-21 showed customs receipts of \$1,092.81. In 1921-22 it produced \$3,392.74 and in this year, 1923, it has produced in customs receipts alone the sum of \$15,044.37. An examination of the reason for this great increase shows us that the merchants of Cape Mount have been taking advantage of the Act permitting them to trade in the interior and gives us a picture of what can be reasonably expected as trade with the interior develops at the different ports.

There is no question of the soundness of the last suggestion. The establishment of fair roads back from each port into its hinterland would give several of the ports as good a showing as this of Cape Mount. It is true that back of that port is a population of Vai, of extraordinary ability and enterprise, but there are good qualities in many of the interior tribes and only roads and a fair measure of encouragement are necessary to produce a steady flow of valuable raw material coastward. In a recent article Mr. Harry A. McBride who was for a time consular officer at Monrovia tells a story that carries a lesson:

They (bushmen) are not entirely unwilling to assist the government. During the last year of the war, when steamers from Europe were few and far between, there was a great scarcity of rice for feeding the frontier force.

The price of the imported article was twelve cents a pound—more than the government could afford to pay. Word was sent far into the interior to a certain Kpwesse chief. He answered the call by sending a caravan of two hundred of his tribesmen to Monrovia—a distance of 100 miles—on foot, every man carrying on his head a parcel of 56 pounds of native

rice carefully packed in palm leaf hampers.

Each of these carriers was given a Liberian dime and a piece of cotton print for his labor, and they returned highly contented to their villages. This rice cost the government about two cents per pound and the first caravan was only the forerunner of others.

These people were not Vai, but they responded willingly when opportunity offered. Such people will not be unready to profit by regular and steady trade.

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