

 **Article REVIEW**

**George J. Hill.** "Intimate Relationships: Secret Affairs of Church and State in the United States and Liberia, 1925-1947." *Diplomatic History* 31.3 (June 2007): 465-503. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-7709.2007.00628.x. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2007.00628.x> .

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**F**or years there has been an understanding that the United States has a particular relationship with Liberia, one carved out in the very establishment of that nation and with links unlike those with any other nation in Africa. Even though it never was a formal colony of the United States, well into the twentieth century, and arguably down to today, Liberia nevertheless retained a special status with the U.S. government, missionaries, philanthropists, and business interests. In the first half of the twentieth century, these elements coalesced around issues ranging from allegations of forced labor, to economic exploitation, to support for education.

From this mix, George Hill finds particular significance in religious and philanthropic interests and their relationship with the U.S. government, especially the State Department, during the second quarter of the twentieth century. He seeks to shed light on what he sees as an elite cadre of religious leaders seeking to unduly influence the U.S. government for, as he argues, there was "a covert collaboration of church and state, contravening the spirit of the constitutions of both the United States and Liberia, [that] existed well into the mid-twentieth century" (467).

Hill's premise is that an unholy relationship existed among church leaders, particularly from the Methodist Episcopal Church, philanthropic organizations, and the State Department. Starting at least in the 1920s with people such as the Rev. Dr. Anson Phelps Stokes and Dr. Thomas Jesse Jones of the Phelps-Stokes Fund, Jackson Davis and James Sibley of the Graduate Education Board of the Rockefeller family trust, Thomas Donohugh of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and Henry Litchfield West of the American Colonization Society, a shifting core of men with ties to religious bodies sought to promote educational initiatives in Liberia, and to use the State Department to support that endeavor. State Department communications even found their way into the hands of men such as Stokes, who in turn sought to use the information to promote their educational and missionary endeavors in Liberia. This effort Hill terms the "Liberia Education Project."

Yet this effort to wield influence went the other way as well, with the State Department seeking to use philanthropic and missionary supporters to promote American interests in Liberia. Indeed, although Hill does not comment on it much, the relationship between government officials and the private sector clearly was a two-way street. In some ways it

resembled the situation that is so familiar today, with former members of Congress or their top staffers easily moving in and out of government and lobbying, or moving back and forth between the defense industry and the government sector with alarming regularity. The never-ending question remains whether people with particular expertise should be allowed to use that expertise, and in what context or manner. Should men (and everyone in Hill’s work was a man) who had religious affiliations and who also were knowledgeable about Liberia be allowed to work with, and necessarily try to influence, the State Department? Hill’s answer apparently is no, finding it a breach of the constitutional separation of church and state. It’s not clear, however, as to whether if these same men would be acceptable in Hill’s eyes had they been merely educators—as opposed to men with interests in education and religion.

The main era of this educational effort spanned the mid-1920s through World War II, after which, according to Hill, the importance of church and church-related philanthropies gradually faded in Liberian-American affairs (484). Those principally interested, such as Anson Stokes, aged and passed from the scene. In addition, one should note that other parts of Africa increasingly emerged in the consciousness of America, and other issues such as the Cold War consumed Washington’s interest. In fact, to a great extent Liberia no longer seemed to hold on to its particular relationship with the United States in the decades following WWII. One could argue, then, that the waning of the missionary and philanthropic interest contributed—for good or for ill—to the decline in U.S. interest in the affairs of Liberia.

As Hill pieces together the story, he introduces a whole cavalcade of persons, some of whom become rather lost in the maze of people and institutions. Indeed, one wishes that there had been a little more clarity of organization, as at times the story devolves into merely a chronological rendering of events with little clear sense of relative significance, while at other times Hill shifts from topic to topic with little analytical transition, and with unrelated information cluttering the way (e.g. if it is important that President Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed Anson Stokes to head the Commission on Alley Dwelling in Washington (487) it would be nice to clarify as to why, especially as it seems that FDR saw no concern about appointing a religious man to a government commission).

At times, then, people and events that are referred to have no clear antecedents and context, and one is left scrambling to piece it all together. We find out who dined with whom, and who congratulated whom on a new job, but we find out much less about the exact aims and objectives of the “Liberia Education Project,” and just why it was significant that the various actors took the actions that they did.

Indeed, “the seminal event in the history of the Liberia Education Project,” a meeting at Stokes’s home in July 1927, garners barely a paragraph in which we learn that the existing St. Paul River Industrial Institute would be enlarged with the help of entities such as the Phelps-Stokes Fund and Protestant organizations to form the Booker Washington Institute (473). That, the essence of the “Liberian Education Project,” then trails off into another

issue, that of accusations of a slave trade that roiled Liberia (and the international community) in the late 1920s and early 1930s, so that we never learn much about its seminal importance. Later, Hill writes that "a remarkable meeting" was convened when a host of dignitaries came to the Booker Washington Institute, but it's not clear why they came, nor what meaning it had for the Liberian Education Project or for the "intimate relationship" that is the purported focus of the article (495).

As for the "secret" nature of what Hill terms the "Liberia Education Project," it's not entirely clear that it reflects all that shocking of an endeavor. Certainly elsewhere in the world Protestant leaders and missionaries were seeking to influence U.S. government policy, with China perhaps most readily coming to mind. As Hill speculates as to why the "secrecy" of this endeavor, one wonders if the lack of attention to this story stems less from Anson Stokes being a member of Yale University's secretive Skull and Bones Society (628) than, more prosaically, the relative lack of attention given to U.S. relations with Africa? I doubt, too, that by the mid-1920s issues of national security -- namely an already "expected" loss of the Malay Peninsula, Indonesia, and the Philippines to the Japanese, leaving the Firestone plantations in Liberia as the only major source of rubber-- contributed much to the "secretive" nature of religious and philanthropic interests working to influence State Department policy (628).

In the end, Hill has done good work to bring to light this interesting episode, but one wishes that some elements might have been developed: perhaps the exceedingly patronizing nature of the whole project, or the racial dimensions of the story, as one learns of Secretary of State Henry Stimson writing about Liberia's president Edwin Barclay in the most offensive of ways, deriding the head of state as an "irresponsible coon" (483).

As Hill concentrates on the religious/philanthropic/government triad, it's the "secret" nature of the relationship, and the issue of separation of church and state, that weigh most heavily on Hill's mind. Hill seems to believe that because men like Anson Stokes were religious men they had no right to lobby the State Department, for to do so crossed the line of separation of church and state. Yet of course this line has never been very clear in U.S. history, and Hill certainly sets a very high bar in this affair.

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