

THANK YOU! MADAM PRESIDENT
A Note of Appreciation to Madam Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf
By James F. Kollie, Jr.

Our history will record it an injustice of the highest order if I didn't take out time, in this public manner, to say THANK YOU! Madam President.

God first! Only under your administration was my intriguing story possible, and for this I owe you a debt of gratitude.

Therefore, I want to use this public medium to express my sincere and profound appreciation to you, Madam Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, for the wonderful opportunity which you afforded me to be a part of this great Liberian story. I remain eternally grateful and concede that no combination of words can adequately and appropriately express my appreciation. Madam President, thank you for making my story possible.

Allow me to say here, that I mention my story with the utmost humility of spirit and person. Just 26 years ago (1992), I was at the intersection of Benson Street and Capitol Bye Pass cooking and selling "cold bowl" to survive. At that time, it was inconceivable and unimaginable, and rightly so, to think that a "cold bowl" seller could make it this far. I must admit that not even I thought such a transformation was possible or likely, but we had to keep soldiering on despite the many challenges of the moment.

I like you to imagine, for a moment, the possibility of selling "cold bowl" and yet sleeping hungry. It is indeed possible! When eating a "bowl" from your stock will dip into your capital and probably make it impossible to do business the next day, you must make the hard decision to sell that "bowl" and continue in business.

Some may think this story is made up, but the honest truth is that we lived those incredibly difficult and painful experiences, but for the Grace of God we are here today.

I know many times people wondered why I adopted such caring, magnanimous and considerate disposition in my public life. I tell you this much: when you have lived what I experienced and are unable to explain why you are where you are, when the simple conclusion is that this is only possible through divine Providence, you are obliged to be as humble as possible.

Madam President, as you punctuate, but not end, your public service, I want to remind you that you have impacted many lives and taught valuable lessons to a lot of people, many of whom you will never know.

Madam President, under your leadership, our country, Liberia is a far better place than it was twelve (12) years ago. We have come a long way in the post conflict recovery and rebuilding process and I am glad to have been a part of the team that you assembled to support the herculean task of rebuilding our beloved country.

Are we where we want to be? Without a doubt the answer is NO. But have we achieved a lot under you, Madam President? The answer is a resounding YES. Don't get me wrong, a lot more remains to be done. Nevertheless, when you consider the state of affairs twelve (12) years ago and all the attendant challenges, one can't help but marvel at what we have accomplished together.

Madam President, thank you for your leadership and thank you for allowing me to be a part of this story. Even if I am only "footnoted" in those historical accounts, I consider myself richly blessed because there were thousands of equally or more qualified people out there, but Providence led you to give me a chance.

Madam President, I hope I didn't disappoint you!

For the first time, Madam President, I must reveal this account of how it all started. Many people think that I joined the Unity Party and was thereby rewarded with the various positions I served under your administration. Many do not know that I never joined the Unity Party and despite my history with the Congress for Democratic Change (CDC) you decided to take a chance and trust me with one of the most important positions in your administration.

It was in June 2009 when, after a competitive recruiting process by the UNDP under the 'TOKTEN' program, I was offered the position of Deputy National Coordinator of the Liberia Reconstruction & Development Committee (LRDC)

at the Ministry of Planning and Economic Affairs. Of course this was not prior to Minister Amara Konneh and his senior team at the Ministry had subjected me to several rounds of rigorous testing. Prior to this encounter, our paths (Minister Konneh and I) had never crossed. I did not know Minister Konneh before May 2009 and had never met him in my life.

Very few people know this, but it shows how magnanimous Madam President is and it is worth mentioning for the public record: that though I had officially resigned from the CDC in February 2006, many in the corridors of power considered it too risky for the Government to hire me in such a critical position, entrusting me with the responsibility to coordinate the implementation of the President's development agenda: the "Lift Liberia" Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS). They did not understand my politics and therefore did not TRUST me.

It is my hope that after working tirelessly, under the leadership of Madam President and Minister Konneh, to significantly improve the implementation of the PRS agenda and ensuring that we ended implementation of that national development strategy on a positive note, those who doubted me came to appreciate that my public service is about country and not party. Too often we tend to malign sincere and well-meaning people and create false divides at a great cost to our country. I am glad that Madam President and Minister Konneh decided to wager on my professionalism and patriotism.

And I am grateful for what we have accomplished together: beginning with a strong completion of the PRS and then drafting the successor development strategy, the Agenda for Transformation (AfT); and then charting a long term aspirational goal for the country, the National Vision Liberia RISING 2030 .

Those who keenly followed those processes appreciate the hard work we put into getting them done. They know how we spent long, sleepless hours trying to ensure that our country had a national strategic road map to follow. For the saying goes, "there is no good tail wind for a sailor who doesn't know where he is going". It is always invaluable to have a "compass" when you are travelling.

I remain indebted to my senior colleagues at the Governance Commission (Dr. Amos Sawyer, Commissioner Elizabeth Mulbah, and others) and my junior colleagues the Ministry of Planning and Economic Affairs who had to endure

and tolerate my stubbornness to ensure that we completed those two (2) very important planning instruments. It wasn't always pleasant but we all meant well for our country.

While those tasks were ongoing and nearing completion, I was asked by Minister Konneh to join the re-election campaign of Madam President. I gladly accepted and went to work: doing everything I knew how to do to the best of my ability, because I knew that our country needed the stability and continuity in order to cement the progress we had made.

Colleagues and friends, I make no apologies for working to re-elect Madam President, for I believe it was the best alternative for our country at the time.

Once the dust had settled and the Liberian people had decided, I was recommended to and accepted by Madam President to perform the task of Deputy for Revenues at the erstwhile Ministry of Finance. I was to perform this task until the Liberia Revenue Authority (LRA) was established and fully functional. I am convinced that I performed this task well. However, history always has the final verdict and in my public service career, I have resolved to rely on the verdict of history because I believe that commentators will always be inadvertently bias and benefit only from limited, opaque perspectives.

Once my task of managing the affairs of the Department of Revenue was completed, in June 2014, I thanked Madam President for the opportunity to serve and offered to move into private life to continue making my contributions from that vantage point. Well it turns out that I was still needed to serve the new Ministry of Finance and Development Planning (MFDP) and again, as was the case before, I was honoured by Madam President's preferment to serve as the first Deputy Minister for Fiscal Affairs for the MFDP.

Madam President, again I was humbled and cannot stop thanking you for this preferment. From July 2014 to October 2016, I performed that role. I acknowledge that like everyone else, I am not a perfect human being but trust me, I put my very best into serving in those positions and I really hope I made an impact.

Today, Madam President, colleagues and friends, I am by no measure an authority to lecture anyone but permit me to remind us all that public service

is “theatre”: you are invited to perform on that stage. The stage is neither an inheritance nor an entitlement. You are introduced; you perform you act or scene; and then you, graciously bow and exit the stage for others to come and perform. Too often we are tempted to think the stage belongs to us and in the process, we hurt ourselves.

Madam President, let me close, by again thanking you for this life-changing opportunity. It was a delight and an honor working under your leadership.

To my colleagues and friends with whom I served, I can assure you, that God willing, our paths will definitely cross again. I cannot trade our relationship and experiences over these last few years for anything else. You have left with me memories that I will always cherish and hold dearly. We have become family. All of you have contributed to whatever small success we achieved over the last 12 years. I am grateful and highly appreciate our colleagues who cleaned the offices, those who provided protection for equipment, those who maintained our assets and serviced our equipment, those who operated the elevators, those who help us to write communication and deliver them to where they are needed, to those made sure that our guests were well received and catered to.

Madam President, on behalf of all of us who worked with you over the years; those of us who were given the life-changing opportunities to serve our country; I want to say THANK YOU! We remain grateful for the opportunity and I can, in this public manner, commit that we will continue to apply the lessons we learned under your tutelage.

Madam President, you taught us to “drink our soup when it is cold” and to “eat the humble pie.” We have learned never to react in the heat of the moment and to humble ourselves for the greater cause of the nation.

Madam President, we will miss your astute leadership.

Madam President, it is my fervent hope that despite everything, you will consider us to have been faithful to the cause and grateful to you.

As you leave office in a few hours, I want you to remember that the lessons you have taught us by your exemplary leadership will abide with us.

May God Almighty continue to bless the works of our hands and save our beloved country, Liberia!

Thank you very much, Madam President and Farewell!