

## Case study

### United States Ambassador, John Blaney (Retired)

In late 2002, *The Economist* magazine declared that the world's worst place in 2003 would be Liberia.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, by the midpoint of that year, two ferocious rebel armies closed in on Liberia's capital city of Monrovia and its infamous warlord President Charles Taylor. With a million fleeing Liberians crammed into Monrovia, the city came under siege. Heavy rebel assaults attempting to overrun the downtown area and indiscriminate mortar fire became the norm. Most foreigners had long evacuated except for the lightly staffed U.S. Embassy. With the populace virtually out of food and water and Taylor's bloodthirsty fighters low on ammunition, it looked like the rebels would take the fight downtown into a vulnerable sea of refugees.

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"The 21<sup>st</sup> Century is characterized by more complex and chaotic situations that defy logical approaches and lead quickly to the unexpected. Strong leaders should seek every edge they can to respond to difficult situations and better anticipate the future. War gaming exposes leaders to thoughts they would not have themselves and provides a painless way to explore a broader range of scenarios."

The Honorable John Blaney  
U.S. Ambassador to Liberia (Retired)

Ambassador Blaney's chosen course of action was to negotiate his way through "no man's land" and deal directly with General Cobra. Many in Washington thought the mission far too dangerous, but he had confidence they could develop a plan to cross lines and that his staff could negotiate an acceptable deal.

The surreal trip of Ambassador Blaney's tiny convoy across an open river bridge through "no man's land" was harrowing. They traversed the most hotly contested battle space of the war, with hundreds of opposing armed fighters on edge, in an eerie silence. After several such passages, and rancorous negotiating sessions with General Cobra, the rebels agreed to the proposed ceasefire and withdrawal, permitting the insertion of African peacekeepers. The agreement also made it possible to offload and deliver food and medicine to Monrovia's starving and sick.

There were many isolated firefights and other incidents thereafter, but the war was essentially over. The U.S. Embassy and its annex had been badly shot up, bombed, and sustained losses, but the flag still flew. After a number of months, United Nations peacekeepers arrived as the follow-on force and added strength to the badly outnumbered African peacekeepers. Soon thereafter, the disarmament and demobilization of the three armies began, eventually topping over 100,000 combatants.

With the support of the U.S. Senate, the ambassador and his staff devised fast-breaking projects to restart a stagnant Liberian economy and prevent the country from slipping back into war. Among those projects was a program modelled after the Civilian Conservation Corps of the 1930s. Known informally as "The Blaney Brigades", thousands of former combatants from all sides were employed to fix the

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<sup>2</sup> *The Economist*, 2002,

roads and bridges they had previously destroyed and the schools and hospitals they had burnt down. Ambassador Blaney knew that without this pay, the fighters would return to pillaging and the industry of war. Finally, the ambassador insisted (against opposition on both sides of the Atlantic) that a free and fair election take place in 2005. The outcome was the victory of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, the first democratically elected female President in the history of Africa.

Over the next decade, Liberia recovered, with strong GDP growth and progress on virtually all social metrics. Tragically, in 2014, the mostly deadly Ebola outbreak in history hit Liberia and West Africa hard. Faced with the epidemic, Liberia showed resilience and bravery, and with outside help, has contained the disease in Liberia. One big reason for that success was the commendable and responsible performance of the Liberian army and police force, which created the stability and security necessary to allow medical personnel to do their jobs.



### Relation to war gaming

Without the time or resources for a highly structured war game, the small staff of the U.S. Embassy Monrovia did its best to think through in advance the steps they were about to take to negotiate peace. Ambassador Blaney encouraged open, critical, and horizontal analysis in a management situation that is normally hierarchical. Even passing through “no man’s land” to end the war was not as outlandishly dangerous as originally perceived, because embassy staff had conceptualized a detailed and flexible risk mitigation plan. It included delegating the ability to abort the mission to the embassy’s Defense Attaché, a plan which very nearly became necessary. The pre-planning also developed the concept that, once peace was secured, there must be an action plan in place to set the country on the road to recovery.

Not only should an enterprise be prepared to deal with the immediate crisis, but its leadership must constantly try to keep one eye on the horizon, scanning for the next indicator or disruptor, as well as envisioning their strategy for recovering and maintaining market position, post-crisis. A war game is an excellent vehicle for assessing immediate and future crisis response capability. In carefully scripted scenarios based on in-depth data gathering and stakeholder involvement, participants are able to explore whether or not their own enterprise is able to ensure the continuity of operations, physical security of valuable property and information, and safety of employees or staffs. By engaging in a purposely contentious simulated environment designed to evaluate and assess existing capabilities, players are able to experience first-hand if their current continuity plan includes all the right components; if there are succession plans to account for primary responders being unable to perform their assigned tasks; or if decision-makers have the right “asks” in place to help ensure they will be receiving the necessary type and pace of information to form coherent operating pictures. Strong crisis leaders use war gaming as a tool not only to model the response phase of a crisis, but also the recovery and rebuilding phases.