

# Maryland law professor advised Liberian Nobel Peace laureate

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## ABSTRACT

Ellen has paid her dues and deserves this honor, said Gibson, whose work on Sirleaf's campaign was the culmination of decades of crafting campaign strategies for candidates that vaulted them to victory. Since 1968, Gibson has directed local, state and national political campaigns -- including those of former Mayor Kurt L. Schmoke -- and served as associate deputy attorney general during the Carter administration.

## FULL TEXT

When University of Maryland law professor Larry Gibson was asked to become involved with the Liberian presidential campaign of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, he initially declined. But she ultimately won him over, and his efforts helped her become Africa's first elected female head of state in 2005.

Gibson was therefore elated when he heard that Sirleaf had become one of three recipients of this year's Nobel Peace Prize, along with fellow Liberian activist Leymah Gbowee and Yemeni activist Tawakkul Karman. The Norwegian Nobel Committee said on the Peace Prize website that the three women were chosen for their struggle for nonviolence, women's rights and peace.

"I am bursting with pride. Ellen has paid her dues and deserves this honor," said Gibson, whose work on Sirleaf's campaign was the culmination of decades of crafting campaign strategies for candidates that vaulted them to victory.

Since 1968, Gibson has directed local, state and national political campaigns -- including those of former Mayor Kurt L. Schmoke -- and served as associate deputy attorney general during the Carter administration. He has also been campaign consultant and political adviser to former Madagascar President Marc Ravalomanana.

"He is a good student of people. He doesn't come in with preconceived notions," said Schmoke, who is dean of the Howard University School of Law in Washington.

Gibson said he had traveled to Liberia during the 1970s and had forged deep ties in a country that had been marred by decades of bloody conflicts stemming from political and ethnic strife. For years he had seen many of his friends either killed or exiled, including foreign minister Cecil Dennis, who was executed after a coup in 1980.

At one point, Gibson stopped traveling to the country and vowed never to set foot there again.

Then along came Sirleaf, a longtime Liberian politician who briefly went into exile during the country's unrest and came to the U.S., where she served as a senior loan officer at the World Bank. She returned to the country, re-established herself in politics, and began considering the presidency after embattled President Charles Taylor stepped down in 2003 and went into exile in Nigeria.

She writes at length about Gibson's role in launching her presidency in her autobiography, "This Child Will Be Great: Memoir of a Remarkable Life by Africa's First Woman President," saying that a mutual friend asked Gibson to help her in her bid for the presidency. When Gibson refused, the friend implored his wife, Diana, to persuade him.

"I agreed ultimately to meet with her, but even then I was determined that I was not going to go back there," Gibson said. So Sirleaf traveled to Baltimore.

"I was very impressed," he said. "She asked if I would at least go to Liberia and assess if she could win and give her

some thoughts as to what she should do to win. I agreed to make one trip for two weeks."

In her book, Sirleaf says that before Gibson began canvassing the country to gain an idea of where Liberians stood with regard to their next leader, he asked if he was permitted to tell her if he discovered she couldn't win.

"I told him I expected nothing less," Sirleaf wrote.

Gibson said he interviewed nearly 400 people throughout the country and concluded that the nation would elect a woman to its highest office. He drew up a strategy for her and then sought to end his involvement with her campaign.

But Sirleaf kept seeking his services, and Gibson ultimately took over all aspects of her campaign, working on it in both Liberia and Baltimore.

Ultimately, he put together a campaign organization, then stayed to ensure that it ran smoothly.

"I watched Larry Gibson sit in the office next to mine and hatch ideas for electing the first woman in a continent that had never had a woman president as if he were running the Schmoke campaign," said Ron Shapiro, a prominent Maryland attorney and founder of the Shapiro Negotiations Institute.

"He had an uncanny ability to size up situations and know what ... approach was needed to lead a candidate to victory."

Sirleaf wrote that Gibson was instrumental in helping her resonate with Liberian voters as a "modern African woman, connected to the past and tradition but not bound by them."

She wrote, "Larry had me change into four different outfits -- some Western, some African -- and strike a series of poses, including -- fortuitously -- one with my fist raised triumphantly in the air."

Gibson said he also knew that with a presidential field of two dozen candidates, none would likely win on the first ballot. His strategy was to ensure that Sirleaf got enough votes for a runoff.

He added, "It was very important to negotiate arrangements with other candidates to get mutual support for the second round, to say, 'If I am in the second round and you're not there, will you support me,' and vice versa. In the first round [of elections] she came in second, but because of the arrangements we had negotiated with the other camps, she was able to win."

Schmoke said Gibson has a knack for communicating with people from varied backgrounds, which is what enabled him to help forge the presidencies of two African leaders.

Schmoke had served as counsel for Ravalomanana's mayoral campaign and suggested Gibson to him when Ravalomanana ran for president. Gibson became a chief consultant for Ravalomanana's presidential campaign.

"He spent time going around both Madagascar and Liberia on his own, without the candidates, and just got a feel for the concerns and the hopes of the people," Schmoke said. "And then he drafted a strategy."

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Credit: The Baltimore Sun

### Illustration

Photo(s); Caption: Photo: Ellen Sirleaf and Larry Gibson discuss Liberian political circumstances.

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