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## RIGHT-HAND MAN DEPT.

### THE PERSUADER

by William Finnegan

SEPTEMBER 1, 2003

Charles Taylor, having laid waste to Liberia, has been trying to set the record straight about who persuaded him to surrender his Presidency and go into exile in Nigeria. “I will say that 99% of [the credit] goes to Dr. K. A. Paul alone,” he wrote on August 16th, in a letter to the *Times*. Since Taylor was on the verge of losing a civil war, and three African heads of state went to Liberia to usher him out of the country—and since President Bush made his exit a precondition of American peacekeeping help—this is no small nod to Dr. K. A. Paul.

But the *Times* has declined to publish Taylor’s letter.



(Taylor fled Liberia on August 11th, declaring, before he boarded the plane, “I want to be the sacrificial lamb” and “I may have stepped on a few toes, but I don’t care” and, finally, “Dr. Paul, I’m out of here.”)

Who is Dr. K. A. Paul, and what can he do about this erasure of his place in history? He is a hyperactive Christian evangelist from southern India, now living in Houston, and he can (indeed, he did) hire Rubenstein Associates, the publicity firm, to get out the word about his good works and, while they’re at it, circulate Taylor’s letter.

And so Dr. Paul was in town the other day, installed in a midtown conference room, under rows of framed magazine covers featuring other Rubenstein clients: Rupert Murdoch, David Letterman, Fergie. He is a small, dark, bright-eyed fellow, thirty-nine, with thinning hair and a thick but neatly trimmed mustache. He wore an immaculate cream-colored Nehru suit, brocaded at the collar, and, though he smiled a great deal, he seemed pretty furious with the *Times*. He told Juda Engelmayer, his handler at Rubenstein, that he had left a message for a *Times* reporter whom he had previously helped get an interview with Taylor, saying, “I will never do interview with New York *Times* again as long as I live!”

“Oh, don’t say that,” Mr. Engelmayer murmured.

“The man is risking his very life,” Dr. Paul cried. He meant that Taylor’s letter could perturb his host, Nigeria’s President, Olusegun Obasanjo, who believes that *he* deserves much of the credit for getting Taylor out of Liberia, and who is under some international pressure to hand Taylor over to Sierra Leone, where he has been indicted for war crimes. What’s more, President Obasanjo apparently dislikes Dr. Paul because, according to Dr. Paul, he is jealous of the great crowds and the great press that Dr. Paul gets in Nigeria for his evangelical crusades.

O.K. How did Dr. Paul gain such influence over Taylor? They only met, after all, in mid-July. “Oh, he watched me on some television program,” Dr. Paul said. “The leadership in Africa, it’s hard not to hear about me. We are in forty or fifty countries.” By “we” he meant Gospel to the Unreached Millions, a missionary organization that he founded. Or perhaps Global Peace Initiative, a more recent effort. Or both. “We have huge rallies. We had seven million people in Lagos, Nigeria, in November, 2001.”

Seven million people?

“Three million in one night,” Dr. Paul confirmed.

This July, again in Nigeria, he was approached by ten Liberian bishops, who asked him to intervene in their nation’s crisis. He went to Monrovia and met with Taylor in a chapel attached to the President’s house. The two men ended up spending eighteen hours together, “one on one,” over the next couple of days. “At first, he was arrogant—a lot of strong leadership qualities,” Dr. Paul recalled. “But when it comes to prayer and spirituality he’s very humble. He kneels, he *cries*. Before God, before me. So I have seen two personalities. Sometimes I grabbed him by the head, with both hands, shaking him up—‘Tell me the truth!’ I asked him questions nobody has ever asked. I confronted him about his three wives. How



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"Stop me if you've heard this one before."

could he call himself a Christian? I asked him, Do you follow Jesus? He brought in one of his Muslim wives." In the end, Taylor started calling Dr. Paul "my religious leader." He even confessed to his crimes, in a general sort of way. And he left Liberia.

But this feat did not actually rank, in Dr. Paul's own estimation, as his greatest peacemaking achievement. That came last year, when Dr. Paul organized a vast peace rally in India—"two million people"—which he believes averted a major war between India and Pakistan. Indian politicians, he says, have learned the hard way to respect him. "When the local officials don't show up at my rallies, I ask, 'Where's the mayor? Where's the governor?' And if he's not there I

say, 'You need a new mayor.' And *boom*—he's gone in the next election." Dr. Paul grinned, and he grew more animated as he described the obeisances of various Asian and African leaders.

He has called himself "the Billy Graham of India," and he certainly has a nose for the spotlight. He threw himself into the middle of the Elián González affair (testifying before the Senate Judiciary Committee) and the Florida recount (testifying to Fox News). He has developed a special line in endangered dictators. He met, he says, with Slobodan Milosevic during the war in Kosovo. Dr. Paul even claims that he arranged, late last year, for Saddam Hussein and his two sons to leave Iraq. But the Bush White House blew it. "I called Karl Rove and left a message. I waited two weeks, but I heard nothing."

To increase his clout in Washington, Dr. Paul recently hired a dozen defeated American political candidates, including four former congressmen, as lobbyists and consultants. They should be helpful, he has said, with fund-raising—and so, presumably, should Nelson Bunker Hunt (of what Dr. Paul calls "the Hunt brothers silver deal"), who is on the board of directors of Global Peace Initiative. Dr. Paul also recently acquired a refurbished 747 jetliner, which he christened Global Peace One. Dr. Paul giggles when he mentions the plane. This, it should be remembered, is someone who was born and raised in rural India and spent, by his own testimony, much of his early adulthood homeless, too poor to rent even a cowshed. (He emigrated to the United States in 1993.) You'd giggle, too.

Liberia has a large Christian population—indeed, the country's devastation has inspired a new wave of born-again evangelism, even among some of its most notorious warlords. Still, its recent deliverance into a fragile ceasefire had, according to Dr. Paul, an important geo-religious dimension: he was told by the ten Liberian bishops that the rebel group which was threatening to overrun the country had a secret plan to convert Liberia into a Muslim fundamentalist state. And so Dr. Paul was fighting for the faith, as well as for peace, in Liberia.

Juda Engelmayer, game publicist, tried to suggest just how down-and-dirty a fight it was. At the very end, he said, when Taylor was finally boarding the plane to leave, Dr. Paul was physically prevented from accompanying him, apparently on the orders of the jealous Nigerian President. "They kept showing it on CNN," Engelmayer said. "Taylor getting on the plane and then this burly guy shoving Dr. Paul, who was

not identified, out of the plane and down the stairs. Dr. Paul just wanted to go to Nigeria with Taylor to insure his safety.” Engelmayer shrugged. “But he seems to be O.K. where he is.”

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