

Tires & Tribulations: A Moral Evaluation of Firestone's Actions in Liberia's Civil War

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This study provides a moral assessment of Firestone—a multinational rubber manufacturer—and its operations in Liberia during the Liberian civil war. It examines Firestone's history, especially as it pertains to Liberia, and traces key developments in the Liberian conflict and Firestone operations. Examining journalistic reporting and criticism of the company's actions, the author argues that Firestone's actions during the Liberian civil war were, to a great degree, immoral.

"It is a mistake to assume that the law should always enforce morality."

— Peter Singer¹

Liberia's first civil war, from 1989 to 1997, resulted in the deaths of over 200,000 and the displacement of over one million Liberians. The conflict was shaped by underlying tensions involving differing ethnic memberships and included a popular rebellion against the Liberian government, led by Samuel Doe. When Doe became the first non-Americo-Liberian president and established a repressive regime, Charles Taylor responded by organizing a force of 100 rebels, known as the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), and orchestrated a plot to assassinate Doe.² The would-be assassin, however, disagreed with Taylor's vision for the future of Liberia, so he turned on Taylor. This only aggravated the violence. Eventually, due to the fear and exhaustion of Liberian citizens, Taylor succeeded in his insurrection and was elected president in 1997, thus ending the first Liberian civil war. Unfortunately, due to a failure to disarm and reform after Taylor's election, the country's second civil war began just two years later. The conflict between rebel groups remained constant until Taylor's exile in 2003, and the fragile country's narrative became one of widespread torture and sexual assault.³

It is indisputable that the warlords and their rebel armies committed atrocities—including but not limited to hacking off limbs, gouging out eyes, raping and killing daughters in front of their families, slaughtering five American nuns, and placing bets on the sex of a fetus before "opening up [the mother] with a bayonet to see."⁴ Without question, these are all horrifyingly brutal and immoral actions. And while it is paramount to investigate the morality of these direct perpetrators in the study of crimes against humanity, it is also important to take a look at the *unlikely actors*—those the media tends to overlook—in the discussion of ethics and guerrilla warfare. In the case of Liberia's civil war, that unlikely actor was Firestone—a multinational rubber-manufacturing corporation known for its automobile tires.

Despite the lack of literature surrounding the morality of Firestone's actions and the international community's failure to effectively address it, I will provide a moral assessment of Firestone's behavior during the Liberian conflict. First, I will summarize Firestone's history, particularly as it pertains to Liberia, then transition to a summary of key developments in the Liberian conflict and Firestone operations. Next, I will delineate reporters T. Christian Miller and Jonathan Jones' criticism of Firestone's actions, followed by Firestone executive John Schremp's support for his company's decisions. Lastly, I will analyze both sides' claims, abiding by their corresponding frameworks,

1 Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (3rd ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 130.

2 An Americo-Liberian is a Liberian of African-American origin or descent.

3 Sarah Left, "War in Liberia," *Guardian*, August 4, 2003.

4 Firestone and the Warlord, PBS Frontline, November 18, 2014.

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and ultimately demonstrate that Firestone's actions during the Liberian civil war were, to a great degree, immoral.

In order to evaluate the ethics of Firestone's decision to continue operations in the conflict-affected country, one must first examine Firestone's history, especially as it pertains to Liberia. Firestone Tire and Rubber Company was founded on August 3, 1900, in Akron, Ohio. Twenty-five years later, the corporation began to operate a one-million-acre plantation in Harbel, Liberia, exporting liquid latex and crepe rubber. This marked the beginning of the subsidiary Firestone Natural Rubber Company, LLC, otherwise known as Firestone Liberia Inc. and the primary focus of this paper. With this subsidiary granting Liberia access to world trade, over the course of two decades, Liberia's net foreign trade increased from \$3 million a year to \$45 million.⁵ The rubber plantation became the largest contiguous one in the world. With the increase in government revenue through duties on trade and direct taxation came reliance on the American business. Compounding Liberia's dependence, Firestone operated "a hospital, a hydroelectric power plant, a botanical research division, and a transatlantic radio service" as well as maintained "roads, housing, schools, and a literacy program" in west-central Liberia.⁶

Narrowing in on the company's operations during the civil war, Suzanne McCoskey describes both sides of the debate in "The Firestone Tire & Rubber Company and Liberia's Civil War: Evaluating Firestone's Intent to Operate During Chaos." She offers a neutral frame of Firestone's actions, imparting the following summary of the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report: "With its longer narratives of the history of Liberia and the conflict, Firestone was criticized for specific actions including (1) paying Taylor for protection and (2) allowing a military base for Taylor's siege on Monrovia, called 'Operation Octopus.'"⁷

Reporters T. Christian Miller and Jonathan Jones are much more fervent in their exposé. In their ProPublica article "Firestone and the Warlord," they weigh Firestone's hierarchy of obligations as they pertain to the consequences that ensued. The reporters conclude that Firestone had a moral obligation to avoid deals that might legitimize the guerrilla leader as the ruler of Liberia. We can lay out their argument as follows:

1. If Firestone supported an unjust actor in conflict, then Firestone shares culpability.
2. Firestone supported an unjust actor in conflict.
3. Therefore, Firestone shares culpability.

The reporters qualify the support Firestone provided, writing that the company "served as a source of food, fuel, trucks, tools, and cash." Taylor's rebel army also used Firestone's plantation for housing and to store weapons, ammunition, and communications equipment.⁸ These resources provided Taylor "with the political capital and recognition he needed as he sought to establish his credentials as Liberia's future leader."⁹ Miller and Jones also qualify the unjust actor, Charles Taylor, writing that his forces were "publicly denounced as violent, vicious, and rapacious by the U.S. government and human rights groups."¹⁰ Thus, according to the reporters, regardless of Firestone's true intent or justification for doing business with Taylor, the American corporation was morally wrong in consequently helping the warlord obtain international legitimacy and thereby commit more violations of human rights.

By way of contrast, in his letter to the Interim Government of National Unity (IGNU), John Schremp, a Firestone corporate executive who oversaw the Liberian rubber operations, stresses how Firestone Liberia's agency was

5 "Colonial Rule," Encyclopedia Britannica, October 16, 2014.

6 "Harbel," Encyclopedia Britannica, October 16, 2014.

7 Suzanne Kathleen McCoskey, "The Firestone Tire & Rubber Company and Liberia's Civil War: Evaluating Firestone's Intent to Operate During Chaos," *Business & Professional Ethics Journal* 33:2/3 (2014): p. 271.

8 T. Christian Miller and Jonathan Jones, "Firestone and the Warlord," ProPublica, November 18, 2015.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

constrained and how it, therefore, acted in a way corporate believed was best.¹¹ According to Schremp, Firestone operated in a way it could best assure “the personal security of [its] employees, and the economic security of [its] investment.”¹² He claims that Firestone’s actions were centered around its impact on employment in Liberia and, by extension, the country’s overall economy. Schremp focuses on the fact that corporate “had no viable choice” and “Firestone very much needed to begin to generate some revenue to meet the heavy social, operational, and capital costs it was incurring.”¹³ As it stood, according to Schremp, there were no practical alternatives for Firestone’s economic decision to pay taxes to Taylor, and more, Firestone leaders knew “absolutely nothing about the military plans or activities of the NPFL.”¹⁴ Schremp argues that Firestone Liberia was merely an “innocent party caught in a tragic civil conflict.”¹⁵ We can lay out his argument as follows:

1. To merely submit to the power and authority of an unjust actor is not an offense.
2. Firestone only submitted to the power and authority of an unjust actor.
3. Therefore, Firestone did not commit an offense.

Schremp argues that Firestone merely “submit[ted] to the power and authority of the NPFL over its assets.”¹⁶ He emphasizes that Firestone did not willingly allow the NPFL to militarize its plantation, especially since Firestone’s “own economic objectives in Liberia [could] only be advanced under ... [peaceful] conditions.”¹⁷ According to Schremp, there was no deliberate cooperation with Charles Taylor. Firestone simply lacked the ability to stop the warlord from militarizing its plantation. Following this rationale, Firestone’s actions were morally permissible, as corporate only submitted to the power and authority of the NPFL over its assets. Firestone, as maintained by Schremp, is therefore innocent of any wrongdoing vis-à-vis the Liberian civil war.

The aforementioned arguments utilize different fundamental modes of rationalization. In *Doing Ethics*, Lewis Vaughn provides a lens for us to investigate these modes respectively, qualifying the ethical landscape by describing several major moral theories of obligation, which he elaborates are “concerned with the rightness or wrongness of actions.”¹⁸ Vaughn describes a consequentialist theory as “a theory asserting that what makes an action right is its consequences” and a non-consequentialist theory as “a theory asserting that the rightness of an action does not depend on its consequences.”¹⁹ This begs the question: If consequences are negligible, how can one determine the rightness of an action? Vaughn answers the hypothetical by means of deontological ethics, using Immanuel Kant and his categorical imperative as the bedrock. Deontology specifies that the morality of an action depends on whether it is right or wrong under a series of rules, or categorical imperatives—rules “that we should follow regardless of our particular wants and needs.”²⁰

The deontological approach is central to Schremp’s argument since his premises evaluate whether Firestone’s actions were intrinsically offensive. He believes corporate’s actions ought to be gauged by the connatural ‘rightness’ or ‘wrongness’ of the acts themselves, as opposed to the consequences of those same actions. Instead of arguing against deontology, I will accept the theory in the context of his argument and target the institutions—the normative

11 An interim government, or provisional government, is formed to look after the internal and external affairs of a country until a new government is elected. The IGNU, specifically, was a faction governing the capital, Monrovia, with the help of a West African multilateral peacekeeping force. Liberia’s interim government did not have an army. See “ECOWAS Decisions on the Liberian Crisis - Special Supplement of the Official Journal,” *Official Journal of ECOWAS* 21 (1991).

12 John Schremp, “Letter from John Schremp to Francis T. Karpeh,” July 8, 1993, available via “Exclusive Documents from Firestone and the Warlord” by ProPublica.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

18 Lewis Vaughn, *Doing Ethics: Moral Reasoning, Theory, and Contemporary Issues* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), p. 65.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 69.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 141.

rules—that enable his end-state justification.

As it stands, Schremp's argument is nested within the scope of international law, which maintains that multinational corporations (MNCs), unlike other non-state actors, have minimal obligations. In other words, companies are essentially treated as private entities in the International Criminal Court and "there is no hard law to regulate MNCs."²¹ Schremp evaluates Firestone's actions on this basis of privatized legality. He argues that since Firestone is a private company, it cannot recognize insurgent regimes, such as the NPFL. Schremp elucidates that private companies therefore ought to "deal with those exercising local authority just as private individuals would in the same circumstances."²² Thus, if I can prove that MNCs have an elevated moral obligation—one over that of the private individual—then Schremp's argument, even under his deontological framework, completely unravels.²³ It would qualify Firestone Liberia's submission to the NPFL as intrinsically wrong, as opposed to intrinsically neutral or right.

Miller and Jones, however, have a much stronger argument. Their premises are comprised of empirical evidence, such as the specific resources Firestone provided Taylor, and the implications of that evidence. In its entirety, their contention is consequentialist: If Firestone's actions resulted in additional violations of human rights, then its actions were morally wrong. Accordingly, to evaluate Miller and Jones' line of reasoning, alternative options and their outcomes must be compared to Firestone's decision to continue business with Liberia and, more specifically, with Charles Taylor. Furthermore, if either argument can be strongly refuted within their own framework—using deontological reasoning with Schremp and consequentialist rationale with Miller and Jones—then their conclusions ought to be rejected. In the end, I find that Schremp's argument cannot withstand scrutiny, while Miller and Jones' remains intact; ergo, I conclude that Firestone's actions were largely immoral. Regardless of whether a consequentialist or deontological framework is accepted, the verdict stands.

First, I will assess Firestone's actions from a deontological standpoint. Schremp specifically focuses on intent, emphasizing that "Firestone lacked the criminal intent required by law because it acted while subject to the authority and compulsion of an armed force, the NPFL."²⁴ He explains that Firestone was desperate to generate revenue and did not intend for its facilities to be used for military operations, arguing that the company wanted to preserve the plantation, not "expose it to destruction as a staging base for military operations."²⁵ Moreover, he writes that "all required work permits were obtained" and that, overall, there was no "specific intent to defraud or evade" the interim Liberian government.²⁶ Thus, Schremp claims that Firestone did not commit any criminal law violations and, therefore, did not behave immorally by acquiescing to a hostile armed force that declared itself the government of Liberia.

Granted, while there is little literature on entrepreneurship in conflict-affected countries, evaluating actions based on cagey rationale—whether or not the action is *technically* legal—is palpably inadequate. Just because it is not codified into law that a private corporation ought not to engage with a warlord does not make it morally permissible. In Schremp's case, it boils down to the wording of international law, as opposed to true ethics. Hence, it is imperative that if we are looking at Firestone's actions through the lens of deontology, we should use the correct institution to frame its conduct—one that can withstand not only legal scrutiny but also moral scrutiny.

As it stands, the underlying rule of Schremp's argument stems from international criminal law, but in "Business under Fire: Entrepreneurship and Violent Conflict in Developing Countries," the authors explain that "destructive entrepreneurship can go beyond criminality to spill over into violent conflict."²⁷ Moreover, principles of corporate

21 Adefolake Adeyeye, "Corporate Responsibility in International Law: Which Way to Go?" *Singapore Year Book of International Law* 11 (2007): p. 146.

22 Schremp, p. 10.

23 Multinational Corporations are business organizations that are registered and operate in more than one country at the same time.

24 Schremp, p. 13.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Tilman Bruck, Wim Naude, and Philip Verwimp, "Business under Fire: Entrepreneurship and Violent Conflict in Developing Countries," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 57:1 (2013): p. 4.

social responsibility have been created and fine-tuned to handle these exact cases. For instance, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) provides a progressive set of rules called Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Supply Chains.²⁸ First adopted in 2010, this guidance includes a list of “specific actions that responsible businesses might take to prevent or mitigate the risks posed by conflict-affected countries,” especially as they pertain to “sourcing minerals or metals.”²⁹ This—unlike the institution of international law, which was written with state actors in mind—perfectly aligns with the situation at hand, as Firestone was sourcing natural rubber in conflict-affected Liberia.

As such, the OECD’s guidance should be used when assessing the morality of Firestone’s operations. On that account, the OECD highlights the requisite of “going beyond legal compliance” and instructs MNCs to “carry out due diligence on business partners in conflict-affected countries to a level commensurate with the risk of engaging with partners with a history of human rights violations.”³⁰ Firestone’s decision to conduct business with Taylor clearly violates this policy and thereby immediately disproves Schremp’s first premise and, by extension, the rest of his argument.

In light of Miller and Jones’ consequentialist claims, as opposed to investigating intent and adherence to rules, the effects of the corporation’s decision to continue business must be evaluated. By the same token, in *Corporations and Counterinsurgency*, the authors explain that even the unintentional actions of MNCs “can reinforce the dominance of particular elites or ethnic groups [and] change the local balance of power.”³¹ According to one of Taylor’s top advisers, John Toussaint Richardson, “[they] needed Firestone to give [them] international legitimacy ... [and] credibility.”³² And that is exactly what Firestone did; the American company helped pave Taylor’s path to the presidency.

By way of illustration, Firestone’s storage centers stored Taylor’s guns. Firestone’s houses housed Taylor and his top ministers. And more, Firestone’s communications equipment was used “to broadcast messages to his supporters, propaganda to the masses and instructions to his troops.”³³ Since MNCs can be used in these ways—as counterinsurgency tools—they are morally obligated to consider the consequences of their actions, as opposed to just their intent. MNCs must act carefully and consciously to avoid exacerbating armed conflict by means of finance, ethnic favoritism, or other conflict accelerants.

We can appraise the extent of Firestone’s impact based on an explanation by Charles Taylor, the terrorizing warlord himself. When he was on trial for war crimes at The Hague, Taylor explained that when they captured Harbel, Firestone “became at that particular time [the NPFL’s] most significant ... source of foreign exchange.” He further testified that “his dealings with Firestone netted \$1 million to \$2 million every six months.”³⁴ Even if that money was not paid *directly* to Taylor’s NPFL, it not only legitimized Taylor as having de facto sovereignty but also funded his rebel army. Ultimately, Firestone’s actions represent “a stunning example of a transnational arrogance in the pursuit of profit, heedless of the human cost of its actions,” speaking toward both the intrinsic and instrumental assessment of its conduct.³⁵

Of course, a consequentialist case can be made by the opposition. We must first examine the most obvious of Firestone’s options—continue business in Liberia by engaging with conflict actors or pull out of Liberia entirely, or as

28 “OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Supply Chains of Minerals from Conflict-Affected and High-Risk Areas: Second Edition,” Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, March 20, 2013.

29 Human Rights and Business Dilemmas Forum, “Doing Business in Conflict-Affected Countries,” Verisk Maplecroft in Partnership with the United Nations Global Compact, n.d.

30 Ibid.

31 William Rosenau, Peter Chalk, Renny McPherson, Michelle Parker, and Austin Long, *Corporations and Counterinsurgency* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2009), p. 23.

32 Miller and Jones.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 “Preliminary Report: Bridgestone/Firestone’s Role in the Liberian Civil War,” United Steelworkers of America, September 1996, p. 4.

Schremp qualifies, “generate some income or abandon [its] employees and mothball the plantation.”³⁶ As previously explicated, Firestone’s continuation of business in Liberia was devastating, but would it have been any better for Firestone to completely evacuate? To this day, Firestone is *still* Liberia’s largest private employer.³⁷ Considering this, abandoning its rubber plantation during the conflict would have removed a fundamental fuel for Taylor’s insurgency, but it also would have set Liberia’s economy aflame. The American corporation remains critical “to the lives of the tens of thousands who depend on it for wages, healthcare, housing and education.”³⁸

The next level of options concerns which faction Firestone chose to do business with. In hindsight, however, there were no ‘good,’ conflict-free Liberian actors to facilitate profitable business in order to maintain the plantation. Firestone would have simply been making a deal with a different “devil.”³⁹ On the other hand, Human Rights Watch recalls that “only the interim government led by Amos Sawyer ... has not been responsible for human rights abuses.”⁴⁰ If only Liberia’s interim government had been as strong as Taylor, perhaps Firestone could have contributed to the rise of a state actor that would not have facilitated widespread killing and brutality.

Regardless of whether viable, money-making alternatives existed, Firestone’s “agreement to do business with Liberian warlord Charles Taylor indirectly and perhaps directly contributed to mass death and destruction in Liberia and prolonged the Civil War by providing Taylor with badly needed revenue and a base of operations.”⁴¹ Given this, it is unlikely any of the aforementioned alternative options’ consequences would have been worse than, let alone amount to, the outcome of Firestone’s actions. Indeed, corporate existence is secondary to avoidance of “mass death and destruction.”

Altogether, both the consequentialist and the deontological vantage points produce the same conclusion. In the scope of consequentialism, Firestone’s actions enabled Taylor’s forces and, therefore, played a role in perpetuating the mass atrocities against civilians that occurred during Liberia’s civil war. Firestone’s actions, albeit unintentionally, resulted in more mass killing, more mutilation, more rape, more torture, and other violations of human rights. Under the deontological framework, when applying the moral lens of the OECD to evaluate Firestone’s cooperation with Charles Taylor, John Schremp’s argument collapses. As Firestone did not carry out due diligence on business partners, Schremp’s argument could not withstand both legal and moral scrutiny. Thus, Firestone’s actions during Liberia’s civil war were largely immoral.

So, where do we go from here? For starters, we can implement international institutions that apply specifically to non-state actors and their conduct in conflict-affected countries. While it might be “a mistake to assume that the law should always enforce morality,” in the case of mass atrocities, principles of morality are indispensable to the law.⁴² The cries of ‘Well, it’s not illegal’ are simply not enough. It is too late to constitutionally hold MNCs, such as Firestone, accountable for past failures, but it is never too late to hold policymakers accountable for shaping the future. MNCs must be held to a standard, and when that standard is not upheld, there must be a process to hold them accountable.

36 Schremp, p. 2.

37 “About Us,” Firestone Natural Rubber Company website, accessed January 18, 2023.

38 Sarah Childress, “Firestone Responds,” PBS Frontline, November 18, 2014.

39 Miller and Jones.

40 “Human Rights Watch World Report 1992 – Liberia,” Human Rights Watch, January 1, 1992.

41 “Preliminary Report: Bridgestone/Firestone’s Role in the Liberian Civil War,” p. 3.

42 Singer.



WPJPS