

US occupation force evacuates Haiti, leaving a country in ruins

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In September 1994, a 20,000-strong US occupation force landed on the Caribbean Island of Haiti and returned to power Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the elected president who had been overthrown three years earlier in a bloody military coup. Two weeks ago, "Operation Restore Democracy" came to an inglorious end. The remaining 300 US troops stationed in Haiti have left for home even as criminal gangs, largely comprised of personnel from the disbanded Haitian army, terrorize the populace in broad daylight and politically-motivated violence escalates in advance of next month's parliamentary elections.

When the US marines arrived in Haiti, they were welcomed as quasi-liberators by a population suffering from the combined effects of three years of military dictatorship and a US-led international economic embargo. The last US troops, by contrast, slipped away without fanfare in either Haiti or Washington. US President Bill Clinton, who once proclaimed Haiti's democratic development and economic revival one of his administration's main foreign policy goals, now seldom mentions the country.

Why are the Clinton administration, the US security establishment and the big business media so reluctant to provide a public balance sheet of what the US has wrought in Haiti?

The few articles that have appeared in the North American press on Haiti paint a devastating picture. "Sixty percent of the population in the Western Hemisphere's poorest country is still illiterate and gets by on less than \$1 a day," reported the *Washington Post* last September. Entitled "A Nation in Need: After 5-Year US Intervention, Democracy in Haiti Looks Bleak," the *Washington Post* report conceded that the US-led intervention in Haiti has failed to lay the foundations for either Haiti's economic or democratic development. "The historically corrupt and inefficient justice system remains plagued by serious problems...."

"As the international intervention mission winds down, it leaves behind a weak and financially constrained state unable to meet the basic needs of its people. Only a quarter of the population has access to safe drinking water, and most Haitians have no electricity or phone service. About half the children under the age of 5 suffer from malnutrition, and per capita annual health spending is \$21, compared with \$38 in sub-Saharan Africa."

A more recent report from the *Toronto Star* provides the following assessment of the fruits of "Operation Restore Democracy": "The misery is just as deep, the garbage piled as high, the people as sick and the political situation as tenuous as it was, say, five years ago.... On the crucial issues, things keep getting worse. There is no military junta, true, but there are political repression, fear, the emergence of a new-style Tonton Macoutes—the old killing machine of the Duvalier dictatorship—and relentless political turmoil." The article raised the pointed question: "Why haven't conditions improved despite a high level of foreign assistance and involvement?"

Insofar as US, Canadian and other Western politicians and diplomats provide any answer to this question, it is to blame the Haitian people themselves. According to Michael Duval, Canada's permanent UN

representative, "The responsibility for rebuilding Haiti ... and maintaining a safe, stable political environment lies chiefly with the people and government of Haiti."

These cynical homilies are aimed at effacing the historical record. Over the course of the twentieth century, the US used its military and economic might to prevent radical socioeconomic change in Haiti. Repeatedly Washington gave its support to dictatorships that preserved the privileges of a tiny indigenous elite, while maintaining the mass of the Haitian people in squalor.

The three-decades-long Duvalier family dictatorship was a key US Cold War ally in the Caribbean and Central America. The Haitian army that was disbanded during "Operation Restore Democracy" had been created by the US during an earlier US military occupation that lasted from 1915 to 1934.

To make sense of the outcome of the most recent US intervention in Haiti, it is first necessary to consider the real motives behind it. At the outset, it must be recalled that much of the US political elite was opposed to removing Haiti's military regime, preferring to exercise US domination over Haiti through traditional means.

The Republicans denounced Aristide as a demented radical, and continued to oppose his restoration to the presidency even after he had accepted a US army of occupation and agreed to implement the dictates of the IMF. The Republicans' vehement opposition to Aristide indicates that there is much to the rumor that the CIA, if not the Bush administration itself, gave the green light to his ouster in 1991.

There were multiple reasons why Bush's successor, Bill Clinton, decided to move against, or, more precisely, set aside, Haiti's military government. However, the central issue running through all of them was how best to maintain US economic and geopolitical domination in the post-Cold War world.

In the aftermath of the 1991 coup, Clinton's Democratic Party had criticized the Bush administration for turning back Haitian refugees attempting to flee to Florida. Upon coming to power, Clinton could not continue this ruthless practice without damaging his credibility both at home and abroad. A change in Haiti's political landscape was therefore needed, if not to stem the flow of Haitian refugees into US waters, at least to provide the new US administration with a pretext for sending them back.

The Clinton administration turned to Aristide, who by this time was living in Washington and devoting his energies to convincing Congress and the White House that he represented no threat to US interests. While the likes of Republican Senator Jesse Helms continued to condemn the ex-Catholic priest as a communist and apostate, the US State Department increasingly warmed to the idea that Aristide and his advisors, who by now were largely drawn from the Haitian exile community in the US, could better serve US ends than the shaky military regime in Port-au-Prince.

In 1993 the US brought Aristide and the leaders of the military regime

together at Governor's Island for face-to-face negotiations. While junta leader Cédras was willing to give vague assurances that the military would ultimately relinquish power, he and the other generals rankled at any suggestion that Aristide be restored to power. An agreement was purportedly reached, but the military regime soon reneged on it. When a US naval vessel, the USS Harlem County, docked at the Port-au-Prince Harbor, US personnel were chased away by a mob organized by the military junta.

This turn of events resulted in a strengthening of the White House's resolve to be rid of the generals. The Haitian junta's defiance threatened to undercut the new administration's international credibility. This occurred at a time when US attempts to take advantage of the collapse of the USSR and use US military prowess to police a new world order had already suffered a blow from the failure of the US intervention in Somalia. As in Somalia, a US intervention in Haiti could be given a democratic facade, thus helping legitimize the use of US military power among Americans and world public opinion.

Two other factors undoubtedly played a major role in the Clinton administration's decision, following the unraveling of the Governor's Island agreement, to intensify the pressure on the junta and prepare a wholesale occupation of Haiti.

First, there were the very real fears that the military was losing its grip on Haiti and the country would soon be rocked by social unrest.

Second, there was the role of Aristide himself—his popularity among the Haitian people, due to his outspoken opposition to the Duvalier dictatorship and its successors, and his manifest subservience to Washington.

Aristide's transformation into a US pawn, who gave his blessing to Haiti's occupation by the foreign power that had been the principal backer of the Duvalier dictatorship, was the logical outcome of his previous policy. At the time of the 1991 coup, Aristide had ordered his followers in Haiti, above all in the working class neighborhoods, to abstain from "violence", in other words, to accept the military's seizure of power.

Instead, he advised them to place their faith in the United Nations and the "international community," above all Canada, France and the US, to press for a return of democracy. Thus, from the beginning, Aristide's hopes of a return to power were bound up with the intrigues of great power diplomacy. This meant he had to prove to imperialism he could be a better guarantor of social order than his military opponents.

During the negotiations and maneuvering that ultimately resulted in his restoration to power, Aristide made still further concessions, agreeing to serve as an instrument for breaking the control of the Haitian state—i.e., the military and the Cédras-led government—over much of the economy. This would allow foreign investors to have greater access to Haitian markets and resources.

In 1993, during the Governor's Island negotiations, Aristide accepted an IMF-dictated program which called for maintaining low wages, privatization of state enterprises, and the elimination of tariffs and other controls on imports. A year later he was forced to give an even more detailed undertaking. This quid pro quo was no secret. In April 1995, then-Prime Minister Smarck Michel explained that his government's economic policies were not defined by the cabinet, but rather by "two precise documents ... that were part of all the negotiations that assured the return of the president."

That "Operation Restore Democracy" had nothing to do with its moniker is further demonstrated by the lengths to which the US went to protect the coup leaders and appease their supporters in Haiti's elite. As a condition for his return to power, Aristide had to agree that the three years of military rule would count as part of his term of office. (He was already barred from running for a second term by the country's constitution.)

Washington, meanwhile, did everything to placate the military leaders. Before any US troops actually landed in Haiti, former US President

Jimmy Carter flew to Port-au-Prince to work out a deal to ensure that no confrontation took place between US and Haitian soldiers. He also arranged an orderly, and profitable, departure for coup leader General Cédras and his accomplices. Not only was Cédras allowed to go unpunished into exile in Panama, the US unfroze his bank accounts and even agreed to pay him thousands of dollars a month to rent his Port-au-Prince mansions during the occupation.

The very first operation conducted by the US occupation force was to capture the headquarters of FRAPH, a paramilitary force established by the coup leaders. The US military promptly seized more than 150,000 pages of documents detailing FRAPH's operations.

These documents, which catalogue the terror committed by FRAPH in collaboration with the military, were then transferred to the US embassy, where they remain to this day. Washington has rejected all requests from Haitian and UN authorities that they be handed over to the Haitian government. Nevertheless, it has emerged that the head of FRAPH, Emmanuel Constant, was an "asset" of the CIA.

For its part, the US State Department has conceded a US tie to FRAPH, saying that it would be willing to turn over the FRAPH documents if it were allowed to eliminate references to a "small number" of US citizens.

Much has been made by supporters of "Operation Restore Democracy" of the dissolution of the Haitian army and its replacement by a new National Police. But a significant section of the army has been incorporated into the new force.

Just as importantly, the US occupation force proved unwilling to disarm the decommissioned soldiers, and Aristide, as part of the deal that restored him to power, was committed to opposing any attempt to mobilize the masses against the armed supporters of reaction. According to the Agence Haïtienne de Presse, "Many reproach the multinational force for not having taken adequate measures to disarm members of the old army [and] the paramilitaries."

The *Toronto Star* article quoted above reports: "The 6,000-member Haitian National Police, initially trained by [Canadian] Mounties under the auspices of the US, has been problematic, involved in beatings, extrajudicial killings, corruption and drug trafficking.... This past May, former police chief Jean Coles Rameau was arrested after the police handcuffed 11 men, lined them up against a wall in the outlying Carrefour-Feuilles area of the capital and killed them with shots to the head. Three were suspected gangsters, the others were bystanders.... A report by the National Coalition for Haitian Rights describes endemic police arrogance. Officers strut around the island like the Tonton Macoute militias of François Duvalier and his son Jean-Claude 'Baby Doc,' or the storm troopers of coup leader Gen. Raoul Cédras."

Last month's coup in Ecuador has raised the specter of a return to military dictatorship in Latin America. In this regard, a significant comment appeared in one of the major Haitian weekly newspapers, *Haiti en Marche*: "Five years after the abolition of the Haitian armed forces and under conditions where one begins to hear from all directions the noise of [army] boots, we can still say: 'happily we don't have a military.' Yes, but beware. It's not that we've plugged the hole. The ship of state is leaking everywhere."

The economic policies pursued by Aristide and his successor, René Préal, on the orders of the IMF are antithetical to genuine democracy. Not only have they perpetuated the control of the Haitian economy by a tiny elite, they have increased poverty and social inequality, and this in a country already marred by a vast chasm between the rich and poor.

A comprehensive 1997 review of Haiti's economy, written by Lisa McGowan and entitled *Structural Adjustment and the Aid Juggernaut in Haiti*, documents the ruinous impact of the IMF's dictates on the mass of the Haitian populace. "The high level of compliance by the Aristide [and Preval] Administration with IMF and donor demands," reports McGowan "has brought almost no benefit to the Haitian people, while yielding little

in the way of private investment.”

On privatization, she writes: “Before President Aristide even returned to Haiti, donor aid was explicitly conditioned on his agreement to privatize nine entities out of a list of over 40 state assets. The priority list included the telephone and electricity companies, a cement plant and flour mill, the nation's airport and sea ports, a cooking oil plant and two state banks.”

“Many Haitian citizens,” continues McGowan, “see ... state-owned enterprises ... as a key source of actual (in the case of the phone company and the ports) or potential income generation for their resource-strapped country.... This belief clashed with donor timetables and priorities.”

In September 1995 popular and parliamentary resistance to privatization was such that the Cabinet balked at signing a letter of intent with the World Bank which committed Haiti to putting still more state assets up for sale. This caused the government of Prime Minister Smarck Michel to fall.

But in September 1996, following a visit to Haiti by Michel Camdessus, the managing director of the IMF, a privatization law was passed by Parliament. Aristide's successor as president, his former prime minister and so-called political "twin," René Prével, has carried out the fire sale of the cement plant and the flour mill, at the cost of hundreds of jobs. The telephone company, the airport and Haiti's seaports, which between them employ over 7,500 workers, are next in line. The Prével government has also cut thousands of government jobs through early retirement—although the real unemployment rate in Haiti is well over 50 percent.

To appease the IMF, the state electricity company slashed its staff and raised tariffs by 21 percent in November 1994. Then, two months later, the Aristide government announced a package of special incentives to attract foreign investment to Haiti, which included a reduction in corporate telephone and electricity rates and customs fees.

But Haiti's biggest drawing card in attracting foreign investment is low wages. Explains McGowan, “At US\$2.40 a day, the real minimum wage is worth 40 percent less today than it was in 1980 and is the lowest in the hemisphere.”

But for the IMF even this pittance was too high. It had Article 137 of the Haitian Labor Code, which required that the minimum wage be raised every time inflation reaches more than 10 percent annually, repealed. “The wage-freeze bill mandated by the IMF means that, in order to increase the wages of its employees, the government would first have to fire other staff,” writes McGowan.

Despite these measures, investors continue to shun Haiti, because of its lack of infrastructure, uneducated workforce and fears of political unrest. At the same time, the IMF reforms have had a devastating impact on the peasantry, which make up two-thirds of Haiti's population. According to McGowan, the removal of tariffs on food crops has placed Haitian peasants “in direct competition with subsidized, mechanized farmers from other countries, a battle that they simply cannot win.”

“Ten years ago,” continues McGowan, “rice farmers produced virtually all of the rice consumed in Haiti. Over the past decade, however, they have been dealt blow after blow by trade, currency-exchange and fiscal policies under structural adjustment frameworks.... The result is that Haiti now produces only about 50 percent of its rice needs.”

Summing up the impact of IMF “structural adjustment”, McGowan states: “Rather than helping to straighten out Haiti's distorted economy, the combined effect of IMF and other adjustment policies has been to put a financial straitjacket around it that constrains overall economic activity. These policies continue to serve the interests of a few creditors, some foreign investors and consumers, and a small class of Haitian elites at the expense of the Haitian people.” (The full text of her report can be found at www.igc.org/dgap/haiti97.html.)

If the conditions of the Haitian masses only further deteriorated during the US-led Operation Restore Democracy, it is because the aims of this enterprise—preventing a popular insurgency aimed at radically restructuring economic life, revamping and bolstering a state apparatus

that upholds the domination of a tiny indigenous elite, and opening Haiti's economy to the unfettered domination of international capital—are incompatible with genuine democracy and economic development.

Real democracy will only be established from below, through a movement that articulates the masses' need for sweeping democratic and socioeconomic change and, under the leadership of the Haitian working class, conceives and organizes its struggle as part of an international offensive of the working class against global capital.



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