

Why US troops are occupying Haiti

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The *World Socialist Web Site* has received several letters from readers asking why the Bush administration has deployed US troops to occupy Haiti. Typical were the following two comments:

“I don’t dispute your reporters’ overall fact finding and analysis on Haiti,” wrote GW. “But what I can’t fathom, digest or whatever, is why France, the US, etc. would go to such lengths on this hapless, resourceless country, when the imperialists have so much bigger fish to fry at this moment?”

Wrote a second reader: “In Iraq it is obviously the oil, not love of humanity, which guides US policy. But what does Haiti have?”

That oil was a key motivation for last year’s invasion of Iraq is a basic truth that the US political establishment and corporate media have sought to hide with a litany of lies about weapons of mass destruction and Saddam Hussein’s ties to al-Qaeda. From its first days in office, the Bush administration began searching for a suitable pretext for military action aimed at seizing control of the world’s second largest oil reserves.

Haiti, by contrast, did not figure high on the Bush administration’s list of foreign policy concerns, let alone targets for military action, in January 2001 or even January 2004. The prevailing attitude of US business and political leaders toward Haiti has been one of callous indifference as exemplified in Secretary of State Colin Powell’s talk of Washington’s “Haiti fatigue.”

The small Caribbean island-republic has been so decimated by decades of imperialist oppression—much of the population is illiterate and malnourished and what little infrastructure exists is crumbling—that despite far and away the lowest wages in the Western hemisphere, Haiti has failed to attract significant foreign investment over the past two decades and most of the off-shore assembly operations that were established in the early and middle 1980s have closed down or moved elsewhere.

The basic truth that US foreign policy expresses the predatory interests and ambitions of Wall Street should not be taken to mean, however, that the drive to secure natural resources and markets are its only determinant. Even in the case of the invasion of oil-rich Iraq, other factors were at play. These included, US imperialism’s attempt to bolster its position *vis a vis* its European and East Asian rivals by securing a stranglehold over the world’s oil resources and the Bush administration’s attempt to use the war as a means to divert the attention of the American people from mounting social and economic problems at home.

As we shall show below, the current US military occupation of Haiti is aimed at upholding the US’s role as the principal economic, military and geo-political power in the Caribbean region; ensuring that the turmoil in Haiti does not cut across the Bush administration’s agenda; and establishing a government in Port-au-Prince even more pliant to Washington and Wall Street.

The greater Caribbean region, with its geographical proximity to the United States and major assets like the Panama Canal and Venezuelan oil, has long been pivotal to US foreign policy—from the turn of the last century when it became the launching pad for America’s ascent as an imperialist power, to the Cold War conflict with the Stalinist Soviet bureaucracy over Cuba in the 1960s, and the bloody counter-insurgency

interventions in Central America in the 1980s.

Here is not the place to retrace the bloodstained history of US-Haitian relations. But it is impossible to understand the reasons for the current US occupation or why the country has been reduced to such wretched poverty without recognizing that Haiti has been in US imperialism’s grip since at least 1915, when Marines invaded the island-country. That occupation, which lasted till 1934, had three principal objectives: to thwart German designs on Haiti; to bolster the US’s hold on the Panama Canal; and to reorganize Haiti’s state and political economy so US companies could benefit from its agricultural resources and cheap labor. (For much of the eighteenth century, Haiti was arguably the world’s most profitable colony).

US troops would return in the 1990s, but throughout the intervening six decades Haiti remained in the US’s shadow. For more than a quarter-century Washington sustained the bloody Duvalier dictatorship. Indeed, the Duvaliers and the Somoza family dictatorship in Nicaragua were viewed by Washington as pillars of its Cold War strategy in the Caribbean region.

Containing the fallout from the collapse of the US-sponsored Duvalier dictatorship

Since 1986, the pivot of US foreign policy toward Haiti has been to try to contain the fallout from the collapse of the Duvalier dictatorship and above all prevent any challenge to the country’s socio-economic order—the markets and investments of US firms, but also the property of their allies and clients, the Haitian bourgeoisie.

Initially, Washington hoped to accomplish a surgical removal of Duvalier, creating a new pro-US regime that would both enjoy greater popular legitimacy and support the dismantling of the state-owned companies, state-licensed export and import monopolies, and tariff barriers the Duvaliers had used to promote a thin layer of “crony capitalists.”

But Washington’s attempt to find a new stable political basis for maintaining the prevalent conditions of abject poverty foundered in the face of the popular ferment unleashed in the toppling of the Duvalier regime. The first four post-Duvalier years saw a series of military strongmen and civilian figureheads come and go as the working class and peasantry resisted state repression and kept pushing for a better life.

In 1990 Washington insisted that Haiti’s next government be chosen through elections. US policy-makers felt confident that they could manipulate the process to the benefit of their preferred candidate, former World Bank official Marc Bazin, and thereby give Haiti’s new-made-in-the-US government greater legitimacy in the eyes of the Haitian masses and world opinion. But the more Washington touted Bazin, the more Haiti’s poor, who had not forgotten the thirty years of American support for the hated Duvaliers, grew suspicious of him.

It is within this context that Jean-Bertrand Aristide, a former priest who

had emerged in the mid-1980s as a leading figure of the struggle against the crumbling Duvalier regime and the following military juntas, abruptly reversed his previous calls for a boycott of the “US-made elections.” He ran as the presidential candidate of a broad coalition of business leaders and grassroots organizations known as Lavalas (flood in creole), coupling promises of wide-ranging social reforms with appeals to the private business sector and calls for a “marriage” between the people and the army. Aristide’s landslide victory took Washington completely by surprise.

Undoing the results of the 1990 elections

The next fourteen years of American policy toward Haiti can be summarized as an unrelenting attempt by Republican and Democratic administrations to undo—not without bitter divisions within the US ruling elite over the appropriate means—the results of the 1990 elections, the first time a Haitian president had been chosen not by Washington or the country’s venal bourgeois elite but by Haiti’s poor majority.

The first attempt came in September 1991, a mere eight months after Aristide took office, in the form of a bloody coup led by General Raoul Cédras which enjoyed de facto support from the Bush senior administration. A wave of terror was then unleashed by the military and CIA-backed paramilitary death squads in the poor neighborhoods of the capital where support for Aristide remained strong. Thousands of Haitians tried a desperate escape on board overcrowded boats sailing for Florida, only to be denied refuge on US soil by American officials. Rather they were incarcerated en masse in makeshift refugee camps at the US base of Guantanamo, Cuba.

In the initial period after the 1992 US elections, the new Democratic administration took no serious steps against Haiti’s military junta and, notwithstanding Clinton’s previous criticisms of the inhumane treatment of Haitians fleeing the Cédras dictatorship, even maintained the refugee policy of Bush Sr. A 1993 attempt to bring in unarmed United Nations “peace keepers” on board a US Navy ship was prevented by rock-throwing mobs of Cédras supporters in the harbor of Port-au-Prince. This, coupled with the Somalia fiasco the same year, convinced the Clinton administration that the continuation of the Cédras regime was damaging the international prestige of the United States and subjecting the Clinton administration to ridicule from its domestic opponents.

Even then, it took another full year for the Clinton administration to push Cédras out. The intervening time was used to extract further pledges of loyalty from Aristide, who had responded to the 1991 coup by proclaiming that the only force to which the Haitian masses could turn in opposing Cédras and his supporters in Haiti’s traditional political and economic elite was Washington.

In exchange for the Clinton administration’s restoring him to power, Aristide firstly agreed there should be no extension of his five-year presidential mandate even though he had spent three years of it in exile; secondly promised to incorporate leading members of the business elite and the old Duvalier political machine into his government and thirdly gave a written pledge he would carry out IMF-mandated privatizations of state companies and cuts in social spending.

In other words, Aristide was flown back in September 1994 in the baggage of a 20,000-strong US occupation force as little more than a political reincarnation of Marc Bazin, the “US candidate” he had defeated in the 1990 elections.

Nevertheless, Aristide’s return was bitterly opposed by the Republican Party. Its far right elements such as Senator Jesse Helms, for many years the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, denounced

Aristide as a mentally deranged communist. This expressed most crudely the sentiments of those elements of the US ruling elite who would capture the White House in the 2000 elections. For them any infringement on the right to pile up obscene levels of private wealth by plundering the planet is tantamount to high treason. If such elements couldn’t be reconciled to an administration headed by such a proven defender of US imperialism as Bill Clinton, they certainly weren’t about to tolerate US support for a defrocked priest who had gained a mass following among Haiti’s poor by denouncing US imperialism.

Aristide managed to survive longer than the Clinton administration probably planned for. He maneuvered to have his protégé René Préval chosen as his party’s presidential candidate in the 1995 election campaign. Préval won, then went on to impose a sweeping program of privatizations, mass layoffs in the public sector and the abolition of state subsidies on food and transportation.

While Haiti’s constitution bars two consecutive presidential terms, Aristide was eligible to run again in December 2000, which he did successfully, a reflection not so much of continuing popular enthusiasm for his Lavalas party as the deep popular hostility to the traditional ruling elite.

This elite, for its part, was incensed at its continued political marginalization. Because of Haiti’s poverty and backwardness, control of the state apparatus has long been the principal source of enrichment and thus the focus of the most intense power-struggles. But the vehemence of the traditional elite’s opposition to Aristide was also rooted in his previous association with a popular challenge to their privileges—the call for a redistribution of wealth in favor of the country’s poor.

The Republican Party establishment likewise remained bitterly hostile to Aristide. It considered his restoration to be one of Clinton’s “crimes” and held Haiti up as the number one exhibit in its campaign against the so-called folly of US-led “nation-building.” Aristide’s promotion of warm bilateral relations with Cuba and subsequently the Venezuelan government of Hugo Chavez, also incensed the Republican right, as well as Florida’s anti-Castro Cuban exile community, which has come to exert such a disproportionate influence in the formulation of US government policy toward Latin America and the Caribbean basin.

The Clinton administration responded to Lavalas’ sweep of the May 2000 elections by once again trying to force Aristide to include representatives of the traditional elite in the government, so as to make it even more subservient to Washington. Some relatively minor violations of democratic procedure were declared gross electoral fraud and steps taken to block hundreds of millions of dollars in loans and aid to Haiti.

Bolstered by this move and by Bush’s theft of the 2000 elections, Haiti’s right-wing opposition forces—with political and financial backing from the International Republican Institute—tried to take the offensive. Soon after Bush came to power they initiated a campaign to unseat Haiti’s newly elected president, going so far as to designate their own “president” of Haiti, as part of a scheme to win international recognition for a parallel government.

But to their dismay, the expected support from Washington didn’t materialize. Bush administration officials doubted that opposition had sufficient popular support to topple Aristide, an assessment confirmed by the opposition’s decision not to stand a candidate against him in the 2000 elections. More importantly, Washington had other more pressing concerns: first among them, its plans to invade Iraq and the need to fabricate a suitable pretext.

The Bush administration, therefore, chose to contract out the task of regime change in Haiti to US-dominated regional bodies such as the OAS (Organization of American States) and Caricom (the Caribbean Community). To tie Aristide’s hands and push him further right, aid to Haiti was tied to his ceding opposition leaders key positions in the government. Aristide repeatedly bowed before the OAS’s demands. For

example, he quickly agreed to annul the contested election of nine Lavalas senators. But the right-wing opposition refused these concessions and the OAS responded by demanding that Aristide do more to facilitate a “power-sharing” agreement.

The toppling of Aristide and the US occupation of Haiti

By the end of 2003, the Aristide government was mired in corruption and presiding over a deepening economic and social crisis—a crisis exacerbated by the cut-off of foreign aid and for which it had no solution except state repression and the mobilization of lumpen-criminal elements based in the slums of Port-au-Prince.

Emboldened by Aristide’s mounting unpopularity and the rallying to its side of sections of the professional middle class that had previously supported the government, Haiti’s traditional business and political elite launched a new drive to bring down the government. Although claiming majority support, they refused to cooperate in the organization of new legislative elections and instead mounted a destabilization campaign aimed at pressuring the Bush administration to intervene.

Initially, the Bush administration resisted the opposition’s appeals for it to invade Haiti and maintained the previous policy of pressing for a power-sharing agreement. Not only were US military forces stretched thin due to the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, the administration was increasingly under threat from the unravelling of the lies it used to justify the Iraq war and by mounting economic problems.

But whilst it viewed the Haitian crisis as an unwanted distraction, the Bush administration could not ignore the political turmoil that its longstanding campaign to subvert Aristide’s government and restore the unfettered domination of its Haitian clients had produced in the island-republic.

Two weeks after Defence Secretary Rumsfeld declared that there were no plans to deploy US troops to Haiti, Bush ordered the third US military occupation of the country in the past century.

Why this reversal?

The administration feared chaos in Haiti could lead to a mass exodus of impoverished and terror-stricken Haitians that would destabilize the Caribbean region as a whole. Their first concern was the impact a refugee exodus would have on Florida, a key battleground in the coming presidential elections. But Washington also feared a further shock to the Dominican Republic. An important site of US assembly operations, the Dominican Republic has been rocked over the past year by an economic crisis, including the failure of the country’s third largest bank, and mounting social struggles.

An even more important reason to dispatch US troops to Haiti was to ensure that the anti-Aristide coup gave rise to a government tailored to Washington’s specifications.

The Bush administration’s readiness to use a rebel force led by thugs of previous dictatorial regimes to oust Aristide’s government was causing considerable international dismay and further undermining the Bush administration’s claims to be acting on the world arena, and especially in Iraq, as a force for democracy. By dispatching US troops to Haiti when the rebels were at the gates of Port au Prince, but after Aristide had been hustled from the country, the Bush administration could claim to be overseeing a constitutional handover of power. Moreover, Washington wanted to ensure that the rebels did not unleash a reign of terror so horrific as to fatally undermine the new regime or at the very least strip it any international legitimacy. In pressing for Aristide to quit Haiti, US diplomatic and military personnel themselves repeatedly invoked the threat of a rebel bloodbath.

A further reason for the dispatch of US troops was the need to reassert US predominance in the Caribbean, if only to calm criticism from within the US foreign-policy establishment. Alarm bells had been set off in many a Washington think tank and New York editorial office when the French government took the initiative in demanding that Aristide resign and announced its readiness to deploy French troops once he was forced from office. The French soon made clear that their aim was to assist and placate Washington, not cut across US interests. Nevertheless, there was pointed commentary in leading papers and journals that the Bush administration was failing to give proper attention to minding the US’s traditional “backyard.”

Last but not least, the US military intervention in Haiti must be seen within the context of growing concern in Washington over the growth of opposition to Wall Street and to IMF-imposed “liberalization” across Latin America. Last week, in testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, General James T. Hill, the head of the US military’s Southern Command, observed: “The security picture in Latin America and the Caribbean has grown more complex over the past year. ... Some leaders in the region are tapping into deep-seated frustrations over the failure of democratic reforms to deliver expected goods and services. By tapping into these frustrations, which run concurrently with frustrations caused by social and economic inequality, the leaders are at the same time able to reinforce their radical positions by inflaming anti-US sentiment.”

There is now a debate in Washington over the objectives and duration of the current US military occupation of Haiti. The Bush administration is eager to contract out the job of propping up the new pro-US government, and may well be willing—now that international attention has been turned elsewhere—to see the rebels incorporated into Haiti’s security forces.

However, the nature of imperialist oppression is that it repeatedly produces “failed states” to which US troops must be dispatched to ensure US economic and geo-political domination and the perpetuation of a grossly unjust and outmoded social order.



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