

# The history that “binds” the US and Haiti

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In his statement on the Haitian earthquake Wednesday, President Barack Obama referred to the “long history that binds us together.” Neither he nor the US media, however, have shown any inclination to probe the history of US-Haiti relations and its bearing on the present catastrophe confronting the Haitian people.

Rather, the backwardness and poverty that have played a substantial role in driving the death toll into the tens, if not hundreds, of thousands are presented as a natural state of affairs, if not the fault of the Haitians themselves. The United States is portrayed as a selfless benefactor, ready to come to the aid of Haiti with donations, rescue teams, warships and Marines.

In a cynical and dishonest editorial, the *New York Times* Thursday began, “Once again the world weeps with Haiti,” a country which it goes on to describe as characterized by “poverty, despair and dysfunction that would be a disaster anywhere else but in Haiti are the norm.”

The editorial continues: “Look at Haiti and you will see what generations of misrule, poverty and political strife will do to a country.”

In a background article on the Haitian disaster, the *Times* adds that the country “is known for its many man-made woes—its dire poverty, political infighting and proclivity for insurrection.”

In a shorter and even more dismissive editorial, the *Wall Street Journal* celebrates the fact that the US military will play the leading role in Washington’s response to the earthquake as “a fresh reminder that the reach of America’s power coincides with the reach of its goodness.”

It goes on to draw an obscene comparison between the Haitian earthquake and the one that struck southern California in 1994, in which 72 people died. “The difference,” the *Journal* declares, “is a function of a wealth-generating and law-abiding society that can

afford, among other things, the expense of proper building codes.”

The message is clear. The Haitians have only themselves to blame for the hundreds of thousands of dead and injured, because they failed to create sufficient wealth and lacked respect for law and order.

What is deliberately obscured by this comparison is the real relationship, which has evolved over more than a century, between “wealth generation” in the United States and poverty in Haiti. It is a relationship built on the use of force to pursue US imperialism’s predatory interests in a historically oppressed country.

If the Obama administration and the Pentagon carry through with reported plans to deploy a Marine expeditionary force in Haiti, it will mark the fourth time in the past 95 years that the US armed forces have occupied the impoverished Caribbean nation. This time, as in the past, rather than aiding the Haitian people, the essential purpose of such a military action will be to defend US interests and guard against what the *Times* refers to as the “proclivity for insurrection.”

The roots of this relationship go back to the birth of Haiti as the first independent black republic in 1804, the product of a successful slave revolution led by Toussaint Louverture, and the subsequent defeat of a French army sent by Napoleon.

The ruling classes of the world never forgave Haiti for its revolutionary victory. It was subjected to a worldwide embargo that was led by the United States, which feared the Haitian example could inspire a similar revolt in the southern slave states. It was only with southern secession and the outbreak of the Civil War that the North recognized Haiti—nearly 60 years after its independence.

From the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Haiti fell under the domination of Washington and the US banks, whose interests were defended by sending Marines to carry out an occupation that continued for nearly 20

years, maintained through the bloody suppression of Haitian resistance.

The Marines left only after carrying out the “Haitianization”—as the *New York Times* referred to it at the time—of the war against the Haitian people by building an army dedicated to internal repression.

Subsequently, Washington backed the 30-year dictatorship of the Duvaliers, which began with the coming to power of Papa Doc in 1957. While tens of thousands of Haitians died at the hands of the military and the dreaded Tontons Macoute, US imperialism saw the murderous dictatorship as a bulwark against communism and revolution in the Caribbean.

Since the mass upheavals that brought down the Duvaliers in 1986, successive US governments, Democratic and Republican alike, have sought to reconstruct a reliable client state capable of defending the markets and investments of US firms attracted by starvation wages, as well as the property and wealth of the Haitian ruling elite. This entails preventing any challenge to a socio-economic order that keeps 80 percent of the population in dire poverty.

This effort continues today under the tutelage of Bill and Hillary Clinton—respectively the UN’s special representative to Haiti and the US Secretary of State—who together have Haitian blood on their hands.

Washington has backed two coups and sent US troops back into Haiti twice in the past 20 years. Both coups were organized to overthrow Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the first Haitian president to be elected by popular vote and without Washington’s approval. Together, the coups of 1991 and 2004 claimed the lives of at least 13,000 more Haitians. In the 2004 overthrow, Aristide was forcibly transported out of the country by US operatives.

Needing them in Iraq, the US withdrew its troops in 2004, contracting the job of repression out to a United Nations peacekeeping force of 9,000 under the leadership of the Brazilian army.

Despite Aristide’s capitulation to the demands of the International Monetary Fund and his willingness to compromise with Washington, the mass support he attracted with his anti-imperialist rhetoric made him anathema to the ruling elites in both Washington and Port-au-Prince. On the orders of the Obama administration, he is barred from returning to Haiti and his political party, Fanmi Lavalas, remains effectively

outlawed.

This is the real and continuing history that, as Obama put it, binds Haiti to US imperialism, which bears overwhelming responsibility for the desperate conditions that have compounded the carnage inflicted by the earthquake.

There are, however, other ties that bind and are deeply felt, as the immensity of the tragedy in Haiti unfolds. There are over half a million Haitian Americans officially counted in the US and undoubtedly hundreds of thousands more who are undocumented. Their presence concretizes the class interests and solidarity that unite Haitian and American workers. Together, it is their task to sweep away the conditions of poverty and devastation in both countries, along with the capitalist profit system that has created them.

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