

Bush, Clinton and the crimes of US imperialism in Haiti

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The Obama administration has announced that former presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush will head the fundraising for relief efforts in the wake of the Haiti earthquake. In his radio speech Saturday, Obama declared: “These two leaders send an unmistakable message to the people of Haiti and the world. In a moment of need, the United States stands united.”

The message of the Clinton-Bush appointment is indeed significant, but hardly what the White House and the American media have suggested. In selecting his two immediate predecessors, those who have set US policy in the Caribbean since 1993, Obama demonstrates that the devastating human tragedy in Haiti will not bring any alteration in the rapacious role of US imperialism in that impoverished semi-colonial country.

For eight years apiece, Clinton and Bush were directly and deeply involved in a series of political machinations and military interventions that have played a major role in perpetuating the poverty, backwardness and repression in Haiti that have vastly compounded the disaster that struck that country last Tuesday. Both men have the blood of Haitian workers and peasants on their hands.

Clinton took office in the immediate aftermath of the military coup which ousted Haiti’s first democratically elected president, the populist cleric Jean-Bertrand Aristide. That coup was backed by the administration of Bush’s father, who saw Aristide as an unwanted and potentially dangerous radical.

The new Democratic Party administration undertook a tactical shift in policy. Clinton imposed economic sanctions on the Haitian junta, which destroyed Haiti’s fledgling export industries, then dispatched the Marines to Haiti—for the third time in the 20th century—to compel Gen. Raoul Cedras, the junta leader, to depart.

The US restored Aristide to the presidency, after he had given assurances that he would do nothing to challenge the domination of either Washington or the native Haitian elite, and that he would leave office in 1996 without seeking reelection.

After Aristide obediently left office on schedule, he was succeeded by René Préval, who served the first of his two terms as president from 1996 to 2001, carrying out the dictates of an International Monetary Fund “structural adjustment” program that slashed employment, cut public services, and ruined domestic rice farmers.

When Aristide’s Fanmi Lavalas party won a clear victory in the May 2000 legislative elections, the Clinton administration and the Republican-controlled Congress refused to accept the election and cut off US aid. Aristide himself returned to the presidency after winning a landslide election victory in November 2000, only to face an implacable enemy in the incoming Bush administration.

For three years, Haiti was systematically starved by the US aid cutoff and measures taken by the Bush administration to block international aid and isolate the Aristide government. Finally, in February 2004, amid protests fomented by the Haitian ruling elite with covert American backing, the US military again intervened in the country, seizing Aristide and shipping him out of the country to exile.

The Marines turned over effective control of the country to a United Nations peacekeeping force, with Brazil providing the biggest troop contingent, propping up a series of unelected Haitian prime ministers until elections in 2006, from which candidates of Fanmi Lavalas were largely excluded. René Préval was elected president for the second time, in a term scheduled to

end late this year. Once a supporter and professed political “twin” of Aristide, Préval has long since made his peace with both Washington and the Haitian ruling elite, and his second term has been characterized by slavish subservience to the economic prescriptions of Wall Street and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Throughout the Clinton and Bush administrations, US demands for adherence to IMF austerity policies were combined with a vicious program of repression against Haitians fleeing the country of their birth to seek refuge and a better life in the United States. In his first campaign for the presidency, in 1992, Clinton criticized the persecution and forced repatriation of Haitian refugees, only to reverse himself and continue those policies unaltered. For the next 17 years—and continuing with no change from Obama—hundreds of refugees have died in small boats seeking to evade the US Coast Guard blockade.

Most recently, Clinton has been the official UN envoy for Haiti, backing the corrupt Préval regime and seeking to develop Haiti as a base for a profitable US-run garment industry founded on near-starvation wages. Food riots swept the country in April 2008, but that did not stop Préval from blocking legislation that would have raised the minimum wage of \$1.72 a day for workers in the garment factories.

As for George W. Bush, his selection as co-leader of a supposed humanitarian campaign is an insult to the people of both Haiti and the United States. His appointment by Obama is in keeping with the Democratic president’s unflagging efforts since his election, the result of popular hatred of Bush and his party, to rehabilitate the Republicans.

An unapologetic war criminal who is responsible for the slaughter of a million Iraqis, Bush’s signature domestic “achievement” was the abject failure of the US government either to prevent the devastation of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast in Hurricane Katrina, or to mount an effective relief and recovery effort afterwards.

This is the record of the two men whom Barack Obama has selected as the public face of the latest US initiative in Haiti. Bush and Clinton made a series of media appearances over the weekend, including interviews on all five Sunday television news programs, during which they emphasized the need to

restore “stability” to Haiti, and the important role that the United States would have to play in that effort.

Bush and Clinton personify the pernicious and reactionary role that American imperialism has played in Haiti for the last century. It is no exaggeration to say that the policies of their administrations have caused as much death and devastation in that country as last Tuesday’s earthquake.

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