US Marines in Haiti: Back to colonialism

Bill Van Auken
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The US media's coverage of the catastrophe in Haiti has increasingly included articles and broadcast reports extolling the supposed humanitarian role of US soldiers and Marines in the Caribbean country. They generally describe how "combat-hardened" veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan are lending a helping hand to the survivors of the earthquake.

Some of this reporting seems aimed at countering growing international criticism of the US militarization of the response to the Haitian disaster, which has given priority to rushing in combat-equipped troops over the provision of medical supplies, food and water desperately needed to save lives.

A spokesman for Doctors Without Borders, for instance, voiced concern over "the extreme confusion of distributing food with a gun." The organization formally protested the repeated diversion of planes bringing it medical supplies after the US military seized control of the Port-au-Prince airport, saying that many of its patients have died as a result.

With hundreds of thousands dead and hundreds of thousands more injured, there is undoubtedly shock among the troops in Haiti at the scale of the devastation and sympathy for the suffering of the Haitian people.

Those in Washington who sent them there and the senior officers who command them, however, are operating on the basis of very different motives, as one recent press report on their mission makes clear.

USA Today published an article Monday headlined "Marines Studied Their Own History in Haiti," describing the country as "a major part of Marine Corps lore."

The Marines, the article states, "governed Haiti from 1915 to 1934 after an invasion force was sent to prevent an anti-American dictator from assuming power. Young, non-commissioned officers governed Haiti with little supervision."

USA Today goes on to quote Lt. Col. Gary Keim, the commander of a Marine logistics battalion, who said he and other officers had studied the history of the occupation before deploying to Haiti. "We were required to reread it," he said. "We've been here before. We've been successful before."

The Marines, the article continues, "viewed those years as a model for nation building and counterinsurgency strategy."

That the US Marines sent to Haiti by the Obama administration are consciously modeling their mission on the "success" of the 20-year occupation that ended in 1934 has unmistakable political significance.

When the Marines first invaded Haiti 95 years ago it was also presented as a rescue mission, aimed at protecting American lives and saving Haitians from German domination. Declaring martial law, the invasion force seized control of Haiti's treasury and customs houses, while armed Marines were sent into the country's parliament to ensure that it installed Washington's choice for president.

Over the next two decades, some 3,000 Haitians were killed by the occupiers, while the Marines themselves suffered just 16 fatalities.

The initial years of the occupation saw a campaign to suppress opposition from the so-called *cacos*, a peasant-based rebel movement led by a former Haitian army officer, Charlemagne Peralte. The movement gained broad support from Haiti's most oppressed layers, in large measure because of the brutal methods of the American occupiers, who seized peasants off their land and pressed them into chain gang-style labor.

As the *USA Today* article suggests, the Marines introduced innovative "counterinsurgency" tactics that would be repeated from Vietnam to Afghanistan, including the US military's first use of aerial bombardments to support ground assaults on the *cacos* and the peasant population that supported them. As in the current US wars, prisoners were beaten and tortured

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to extract information and, in many cases, subjected to summary execution.

Peralte himself was captured and murdered by the Marines in 1919. His corpse, nailed crucifix-style to a door, was placed on public display in an attempt to intimidate the population.

Washington pushed through changes in the Haitian constitution giving foreigners the right to own land for the first time since a slave revolt secured the country's independence from France in 1804.

The US set about building up a Haitian repressive force, commanded by Marine officers, known as the Garde d'Haiti. The creation of this force was part of what the press referred to at the time as the "Haitianization" of US colonial domination of the country.

It was growing popular resistance that forced the US military out of Haiti. The decision to withdraw was hastened by mass unrest sparked by the economic crisis that gripped the country in 1929, with the collapse of coffee prices. A student strike was joined by workers, and peasants staged risings in a number of areas.

In Cayes, in the southwest, thousands of peasants carrying stones, clubs and machetes confronted Marines armed with automatic weapons on December 6, 1929. The Marines opened fire, killing 24 and wounding 51 Haitians. One Marine was reported injured. The unit's commander was subsequently awarded the Navy Cross for directing the massacre.

In 1931, Smedley Butler, the Marine officer who led the initial intervention and headed the Haitian security forces for two years, provided a candid assessment of his mission: "I was a racketeer for capitalism," he declared. "I helped make Haiti…a decent place for the National City boys to collect revenue in." National City, the precursor of Citibank, controlled Haiti's railroads and largest bank. After the US invasion, it took over the Haitian treasury.

The Marine occupation left behind a powerful US-dominated military which effectively controlled the country's political life for decades, and in 1957 brought to power the Duvalier dictatorship, which would rule Haiti through savage repression for 30 years.

This deadly legacy played a decisive role in subjecting the Haitian people to poverty and oppression and creating the social and economic conditions that allowed the January 12 earthquake to claim such a staggering toll in human life.

That today's Marine commanders invoke the occupation of the early 20th Century as a precedent for their current mission constitutes a warning. Behind the humanitarian mask, Washington's intervention in Haiti is part of an attempt to assert US imperialist interests in the Americas and across the globe by use of military force.

In Haiti, the US military has been deployed to assert Washington's hegemony over the lands to its south, where American imperialism got its start and where it now faces ever greater challenges from powerful economic rivals in Europe and China.

As in the intervention that ended in 1934, US guns will inevitably be used against the resistance of Haitian workers and oppressed to poverty, starvation wages and extreme social inequality.

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