

THE U.S. IN HAITI: A CENTURY OF DOMINATION AND MISERY

In the wake of the earthquake, the U.S. is posing as the greatest friend of Haiti. But the whole history of the U.S. in Haiti shows just the opposite.

The native people of the island of Hispaniola (what is today Haiti and the Dominican Republic) were exterminated by the Spanish conquerors in the 1500s and 1600s. In the 18th century, the French colonialists who took over Haiti set up a system of slavery so harsh it was assumed new slaves would die from overwork. The blood of slaves poured into the capitalist world markets of coffee and sugar, making Haiti the most profitable colony in the world.

In 1791, Toussaint L'Ouverture led a slave rebellion which over 13 years defeated, in succession, the slave-owners of Haiti, armies from Spain and Britain (who saw the revolt as an opportunity to seize Haiti for themselves), and then the army of Napoleon, the French leader who at that time had conquered most of Europe. Toussaint was captured after agreeing to negotiate a peace with the French, and taken back to France in chains, where he died in prison. But the rebellion flared up until Haiti was independent, and slavery abolished. This was the first and only successful slave revolution in history.

The Haitian Revolution set off a *panic* among the rulers of the U.S. and the European powers, who refused to recognize the new Haitian Republic. The French navy imposed a total embargo on Haiti. In 1805 the French foreign minister wrote to U.S. Secretary of State James Madison that "The existence of a Negro people in arms, occupying a country it has soiled by the most criminal acts, is a horrible spectacle for all white nations." The U.S. honored the embargo and refused to recognize, assist or trade with Haiti.

The embargo had a crippling impact on the island nation, whose agriculture had been devastated by warfare. It remained in effect until 1825, when France agreed to end it, in return for a Haitian commitment to "compensate" them for the loss of their "property"—i.e., their SLAVES. This "debt" was set at 150 million francs—roughly the annual French budget. Haiti was forcibly enmeshed in a network of debt and deep poverty. In the late 1800s, debt payments amounted to 80% of the Haitian budget.

In the 20th century, the U.S. asserted itself as the dominant power in its "backyard." In 1915 it invaded and occupied Haiti. U.S. Marines went straight to the Haitian national bank and removed its gold reserves to Citibank in New York City. The Haitian constitution was rewritten to allow foreign ownership of Haitian property; land was seized from small peasants to create large plantations; the economy reorganized so that 40% of Haiti's gross domestic product flowed to U.S. banks.

The Haitian people fiercely resisted the occupation in a series of revolts which the U.S. military ruthlessly crushed, murdering leaders, burning villages to the ground and killing 15-30,000 Haitians. The occupiers did not leave until 1934; leaving behind the brutal, U.S.-trained, Haitian National Army to repress the people.

In 1957, François "Papa Doc" Duvalier came to power in a fraudulent election and set up his own army of thugs—the *Tontons Macoutes*. The Duvalierist reign of terror—supported and backed by the U.S.—killed roughly 50,000 people.

When Papa Doc died in 1971, U.S. warships were stationed just off the coast of Haiti to oversee a smooth transition of power to Duvalier's son, Jean-Claude ("Baby Doc"). Baby Doc was closely associated with the "American Plan," which explicitly aimed to cut the ground out from under peasant agriculture by large-scale imports of cheaper U.S. goods, driving hundreds of thousands of peasants into the cities and shantytowns, desperate for work in U.S.-owned assembly plants being set up by the likes of Disney and Kmart, which paid workers 11 cents an hour to make pajamas and t-shirts.

In 1985-86 a powerful uprising swept Haiti, forcing the U.S. to rescue Baby Doc and fly him to the French Riviera, in order to preserve their basic control of the country through the Haitian Army. A series of military governments followed, known to Haitians as "Duvalierism without Duvalier." In 1991, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, a radical priest and a leader of the *Ti Legliz* ("Little Church," the Haitian expression of the Liberation Theology movement) and of the anti-Duvalierist movement, was elected president. Though Aristide did not have a plan to break out of the framework of U.S. domination, he was not totally *subservient* to it nor to the pro-U.S. local ruling classes and repeatedly clashed with them over both foreign and domestic policy. Haitian reactionaries hated him, the U.S. saw him as "unreliable" and from even before his inauguration worked to overthrow him. On September 30, 1991, after just nine months in office, the CIA collaborated with local military forces to stage a bloody coup d'etat, and in ensuing waves of repression unleashed soldiers and Macoutes to rip up the networks of mass organization, especially in slums like Cité Soleil, that were Aristide's base of support. Thousands of his supporters were killed, up to 300,000 went into hiding, and another 60,000 fled the island in makeshift boats.

But this did not quell resistance or establish a "stable environment" for the U.S., so in 1994 the U.S. brokered a deal to restore Aristide to office, returning him from exile on a U.S. warship, accompanied by 20,000 U.S. troops who proceeded to *protect* the violent paramilitaries from the people and allow them to keep their arms, while they reorganized the army to more effectively suppress the people. The troops remained for over a year. The terms of a deal (known as the Governors Island accords) was that Aristide abandon all resistance to the U.S. plan for Haiti and to the Haitian army and ruling class.

Aristide largely honored this agreement but continued to fight for whatever concessions he could find, which the U.S. found unacceptable. On February 29, 2004, after many months of political and military preparation in which the U.S. was directly involved (through the CIA and the International Republican Institute—IRI) a second coup was carried out. The U.S. military literally kidnapped Aristide and his family and put him on a plane to the Central African Republic, where he was kept as a new regime consolidated. By March 1, hundreds of U.S. Marines again controlled the capital, and new waves of attacks, often by U.S. soldiers, were unleashed on the people. In June they were replaced by a force of 7,000 UN troops (mainly Brazilian) who have been cited by Human Rights groups as widely practicing "Summary Executions."

From that time until the earthquake, there has been no serious challenge to U.S. economic, political and military control of Haiti.



October 1994, Port-au-Prince. A man holds up a machete taken from the headquarters of FRAPH, the murderous paramilitary group, after mass upsurge forced the U.S. to remove the military junta of Raul Cédras.



U.S. Marines in Haiti, 1919. The U.S. military occupied Haiti from 1915 until 1934.



November 2006, Cité Soleil, a slum in Port-au-Prince. Protesters chant anti-United Nations slogans during a demonstration demanding the withdrawal of the UN from Haiti.



November 2007, Port-au-Prince. A Haitian woman makes cookies from dried yellow dirt mixed with salt and vegetable shortening to ease hunger pains.



Port-au-Prince, September 1994.

All photos: AP, except top right: The National Archives