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Recommended Citation

Ira Kurzban, *A Rational Foreign Policy Toward Haiti and How the Media Shapes Public Perception of Haiti*, 56 U. Miami L. Rev. 405 (2002)

Available at: <http://repository.law.miami.edu/umlr/vol56/iss2/8>

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A Rational Foreign Policy Toward Haiti and How the Media Shapes Public Perception of Haiti

IRA KURZBAN

I. \$2 BILLION, THE MEDIA, AND HARD FACTS

The public perception created by the media in the United States regarding Haiti is that since 1991 the United States has spent over \$2 billion seeking to make Haiti a democratic country with a viable economy and that all of those efforts have been unsuccessful.¹ Even sympathetic members of Congress and the public question what went wrong in Haiti and how we could have spent so much money and introduced a United States military presence into that country with so little progress.² One could hardly get any other impression after reading and seeing the barrage of negative articles and stories in the media, in Congress, and in journals that are aimed at Haiti.

Without deviation, this media barrage repeats the same themes: Haiti is a country of economic calamity, ecological disaster, political paralysis, and national doom, combined with the specter of a refugee flotilla headed for Florida.³ The presidential election in the United States has only emboldened the economic elites and their allies among the former military and anti-democratic forces in Haiti to disregard Aristide's election and to attempt to undermine democracy further. The economy in Haiti is clearly stalled and some in the tiny political opposition opposing Aristide and Preval are bent upon destroying the remainder of the political fabric.⁴ If the United States' policy has been a failure, then we need to examine what went wrong and what policies we should pursue in the alternative. We also need to examine the media's role in that failure.

In my view, there is little doubt that our policies in Haiti have

1. See United States General Accounting Office, GAO-01-24, Foreign Assistance: Any Further Aid to Haitian Justice System Should Be Linked to Performance-Related Conditions 1 (2001); United States General Accounting Office, GAO/NSIAD-96-38, United States Costs in Support of Haiti, Former Yugoslavia, Somalia, and Rwanda. App. I (1996).

2. See *Keep Pressure on Haiti*, USA TODAY, Nov. 29, 2000, at 1, available at 2000 WL 5796788; *Hapless in Haiti*, WASH. POST, Aug. 30, 1999, at 1, available at 1999 WL 23300704.

3. See *id.*; see also JACK LULE, DAILY NEWS, ETERNAL STORIES: THE MYTHOLOGICAL ROLE OF JOURNALISM 244 (2001).

4. See Joseph E. Baptiste & Bob Maguire, *Intransigence is a Nonstarter*, FT. LAUD. SUN SENT., June 11, 2001, at 25A, available at LEXIS, Newspaper Stories, Combined Papers.

failed. I differ, however, with the general wisdom seen in media analysis of American policy in Haiti regarding the source of that failure and the standards to determine policy failure. Haiti has not failed the United States. Rather, the United States has failed Haiti. In order to determine the nature and the measurement of that failure, some of the media's assertions that are claimed as "facts" regarding our actions in Haiti need to be examined. For example, it is not true that we have spent \$2 billion dollars on or in Haiti despite what the media has claimed. Over \$250,000,000 of that money went toward the interdiction of Haitians seeking to leave Haiti during the most repressive stage of the military coup in that country. These funds cannot fairly be included in any calculus regarding our assistance to Haiti. Nor can we count as "aid" to Haiti the hundreds of millions of dollars that were spent by the United States military in corporate giveaways to American companies, such as Brown and Root, for everything from laundry for our troops to communications systems which were ripped out and probably discarded when the United States troops left Haiti.⁵ Included in the \$2 billion figure is the vast psychological operations program (pys-ops) that was performed on the Haitian people by our men in green during Aristide's return.⁶ This is not to say that the presence of American troops during the first days before and immediately after Aristide's return did not perform an important function by stopping the massacres and permitting Aristide's government to destroy the hated Haitian army once and for all. Nevertheless, the excessive costs and the lavish nature of spending by American companies and the United States military in Haiti should hardly be attributed by the media as some form of "aid" to Haitians.

Nor should we ignore the fact that the remainder of the hundreds of millions of dollars in American aid that went to Haiti as part of that \$2 billion figure mostly went to beltway companies to do studies that generally have little impact or no effect, long or short-term, on the Haitian people.⁷ It is typical of United States Agency for International Development (AID) officials to go back to Capitol Hill and boast about how our foreign aid dollars "are returned to the United States" because they go mostly to United States companies conducting studies or overseeing programs.⁸ These boasts are then reported on by the media, helping to fuel

5. See generally Lieutenant Colonel Nicholas J. Kolar, Jr., *Logcap: Providing Vital Services to Soldiers*, ENGINEER, Mar. 1997, available at <http://www.wood.army.mil.ENGRMAG/PB5971/logcap.htm>.

6. See generally Douglas Waller Washington, *Onward Cyber Soldier*, TIME, Aug. 21, 1995, available at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/archive/1995/950821/950821.cover.html>.

7. See Catherine Orenstein, *The Roads Built in Haiti Only Go So Far*, WASH. POST, Jan. 30, 2001, at B5.

8. Neil Elliot, *Capitalism Seems to Rule U.S. Policy Toward Haiti*, STAR TRIBUNE (Minneapolis, MN), June 13, 1992, at 17A.

and spread the misconceptions.

It is not simply that most aid is returned to the United States that results in little impact on Haiti, it is that the aid programs themselves are generally designed to have little impact on the vast majority of Haitians, who are without basic care, live in rural areas, and are engaged in agrarian pursuits.⁹ Rather than directing our aid to the 70% of the population that lives in poor agrarian areas, the majority of AID funds are spent to bolster the "private sector," assist in the "privatization process," further the goals of the International Monetary Fund program, or develop and bolster the opposition to the government.¹⁰ For example, in 2000, the United States government allocated \$3 million to the International Republican Institute and other organizations not simply to help opposition parties in Haiti, but to "develop" opposition parties.¹¹ In light of the outrage in the United States following the revelations that the Chinese government may have attempted to provide contributions to United States candidates, it is nothing short of bizarre that our government would spend money in a foreign country to create an opposition to the government we are supposed to be supporting. This, of course, does not include covert funds spent in Haiti to accomplish the same ends. Again, the media is not accurately reporting these facts. By misrepresenting this information, the American public's notion that United States aid in Haiti has been a failure is reinforced.

II. COMMON MEDIA MISCONCEPTIONS REGARDING HAITI

If we are to pursue a rational policy of assistance in Haiti, we must see Haiti as it is and not what we hope it to be.¹² This requires more accurate and careful reporting by the press. I would like to highlight some important facts about Haiti that tend to be omitted in news reports. First, Haiti is an agrarian country.¹³ Most of its population lives in rural areas and most people make whatever meager living they can off of the land.¹⁴

Second, a small elite has prevented the development of a free market economy in Haiti.¹⁵ This small elite ruthlessly competes for the

9. Letter from Melinda Miles, Coordinator, Haiti Reborn/Quixote Center, at <http://www.waronwant.org/cointreau/privitization.htm> (last checked Jan. 1, 2002).

10. CENT. INTELLIGENCE AGENCY, *THE WORLD FACTBOOK* 216 (2000); Douglas Farah, *Aristide Turns to Privatization*, WASH. POST, Mar. 6, 1995, at A1.

11. *GOP Agency is Accused of Aiding Haiti's Right Wing; Building a Party System Threatens 'Political Order,' Aristide Loyalists Charge*, ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH, Aug. 14, 1998, at A15.

12. CHETAN KUMAR, *BUILDING PEACE IN HAITI* 33 (1998).

13. CENT. INTELLIGENCE AGENCY, *THE WORLD FACTBOOK* 216 (2000); IRWIN P. STOTZKY, *SILENCING THE GUNS IN HAITI: THE PROMISE OF DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY* (1997).

14. *Id.*

15. See Farah, *supra* note 10, at A12; see also STOTZKY, *supra* note 13.

scarce markets in the country and has no desire to develop Haiti into a true market economy.¹⁶ They both fear and hold in contempt the masses in Haiti.¹⁷ Although they are well thought of in the United States because they speak English well, have attended American schools, are bright, persuasive, and charming, the masses see them as part of the system that maintains the poverty and misery that surrounds most Haitians.

Third, the assembly or manufacturing sector in Haiti has never been more than of marginal assistance in alleviating the country's massive unemployment.¹⁸ Fourth, the *Lavalas* movement and Jean Bertrand Aristide are widely popular in Haiti because they represent the hopes and aspirations of the vast majority of Haitians.¹⁹ The Haitian population, although largely uneducated, is highly intelligent, highly motivated, and very aware of its own self-interest.²⁰ This is not a country where false consciousness prevails.²¹

Fifth, democracy in Haiti, as in every other place in the world, including the United States, takes many years to fully develop.²² The belief that somehow Haitian history and culture has prevented democracy from taking root, as claimed by some in the media, is silly and ignores reality.²³ Haiti has been a democracy for less than seven years since the end of the military coup. During the first twenty years of democracy in the United States, we had an armed rebellion (Shays Rebellion), we completely redesigned our form of government (from the Articles of Confederation to the Constitution), and we took one presidential election away from the people and gave it to Congress to decide (Jefferson's election). It took us almost another 170 years before non-landowners, women, and people of color could truly vote in an election.²⁴ Haiti's democracy is vibrant, flourishing, and will only become stronger in the future if we refrain from interfering with it or micro-managing it.

Sixth, Haiti, like all developing democracies that ended brutal,

16. *Id.*

17. *Id.*

18. See letter from Melinda Miles, *supra* note 9.

19. See *Tale of Two Haitis: One Real, One Virtual*, HAITI PROGRÉS, Feb. 7-13, 2001, available at <http://www.haiti-progres.com/2001/sm010207/XENG0207.htm>; ΣΤΟΤΖΚΥ, *supra* note 13.

20. See KUMAR, *supra* note 12, at 34-35.

21. See *id.*

22. See Hugh Byrne & Rachel Neild, *Success in Haiti is Possible, but not 'Overnight,'* CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR, Nov. 28, 1997, at 18.

23. See KUMAR, *supra* note 12, at 51-59 (describing in detail Haiti's struggle for a democratic government).

24. U.S. CONST. amend. XV, §1; U.S. CONST. amend. XIX, §1.

authoritarian regimes, has had a substantial increase in crime and, therefore, insecurity. When insecurity is coupled with impunity, crime rises dramatically. Haiti is not unique in this respect.²⁵ Seventh, the scourge of drug trafficking plagues Haiti with insecurity, corruption, and threat to true national security.²⁶

III. A RATIONAL FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS HAITI

How does a rational foreign policy address this Haiti instead of the one invented by our country? Clearly, our short term interests in Haiti are to prevent drugs and refugees from entering the United States. Our long term interests, however, are to create conditions where Haitians may not only survive, but flourish in Haiti. It is in our long term interest to have a stable economy in Haiti that assists the massive poor and that brings them, as President Aristide often says, from misery to poverty with dignity. The following suggestions are an outline of how we may move in that direction.

A. STOP INTERFERING IN THE INTERNAL POLITICS OF HAITI

We should not waste our limited resources in creating parties to oppose the government that we are working with. Current policy of the United States is nothing more than an effort to paralyze the Haitian economy and to drive Aristide from office. The full scale international embargo, through the IDB, World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund, that has been driven by the United States is morally repugnant, willingly sacrifices the people of Haiti to economic destruction and utterly fails to move true democracy forward. There is no serious opposition to the Lavalas movement in Haiti at the present time; Jean Bertrand Aristide will remain a revered figure for many years to come. Perhaps that will change over time and people will see other alternatives. Our policy, however, is simply counterproductive and creates greater paralysis within Haiti. Our efforts to curb Aristide's authority or popularity, to support the opposition and thereby force some type of coalition government, and to put pressure on him to make various concessions is unproductive. These efforts will not create greater stability in Haiti and are likely to embitter the masses of people against the United States, since they view these efforts as an attempt to re-establish the elite's control over Haitian political and economic life and to nullify the previous elections that have widespread support in Haiti.

25. See, e.g., *Crime and Disorder Increase in Shadow of Free Elections*, CRIME & JUST. INT'L., Vol. 9, No.1, Feb.-Mar. 1999.

26. See Michelle Faul, *Caribbean Island is Becoming a Hot Spot for Smuggling Narcotics*, ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH, May 17, 2000, at A4.

B. *Ask the Haitian Government What They Need To Help The Economy*

We consistently make the same error in believing that we know what is best for Haiti. The Haitian government should be treated with the dignity and respect that any democratically elected government deserves. Whether we agree with the policies of *Lavalas* or not, we need to find constructive ways to help the government on its own terms, not ours. This means that we must become good listeners. We need to assist the government in what it believes will spark development and provide assistance to its people. We need to stop listening to the small elite who have *de facto* controlled United States policy toward Haiti. We need to begin to listen to a government that represents the broad interests of all Haitian people.

C. *Provide Haiti With the Technical Expertise and Financial Resources to Transform Agrarian Life*

The United States possesses the world's greatest expertise on eliminating agrarian and rural poverty.²⁷ We have the most successful rural electrification program in the history of the world.²⁸ We have the most advanced farming facilities and agricultural techniques.²⁹ These would help Haiti move toward self-sufficiency in food production. We have the ability to provide millions of dollars in micro-credit programs for farmers in rural Haiti.³⁰ The rural areas of the United States have the world's most extensive public school networks.³¹ We have developed wind, solar, and other reusable forms of power that we could bring to Haiti.³² Aid in this form should go through farming collectives, other rural collectives, and to the government of Haiti. We should assist the farmers, as do groups, such as Oxfam. We should assist in breaking the hold that the small elite has over the export of crops. Instead of assisting the

27. See generally Strategic Plan for FY 2000-2005, United States Department of Agriculture (Sept. 2000), available at <http://www.usda.gov/ocfo/sp2005/sp2005.pdf>.

28. See Joel A. Youngblood, *Alive and Well; The Rural Electrification Act Preempts State Condemnation Law: City of Morgan City v. South Louisiana Electric Cooperative Association*, 16 ENERGY L.J. 489 (1995); see also United States Department of Agriculture, Rural Utilities Service, Rural Electric Program, at <http://www.usda.gov/rus/electric/index.htm> (last checked Jan. 1, 2002).

29. See generally Strategic Plan for FY 2000-2005, United States Department of Agriculture (Sept. 2000), available at <http://www.usda.gov/ocfo/sp2005/sp2005.pdf>.

30. See generally Paul Lewis, *Micro-loans for the Very Poor*, N.Y. TIMES, Feb. 26, 1997, at sec. 4, p.1.

31. See generally National Center for Educational Statistics, Navigating Resources for Rural Schools, at <http://www.nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/about.asp> (last checked Jan. 1, 2002).

32. United States Energy Production, Country Energy Data (1999), available at http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/world/country/cntry_US.html.

existing private sector, we should help to create other free markets for the distribution of agricultural products.³³ Additionally, the United States has great expertise in rural health programs.³⁴ The government of Cuba, with few resources, has been able to transform rural health in Haiti by placing many doctors at an extremely low cost in the most rural areas of the country.³⁵ The United States has the capability through our rural health programs and our technical expertise to develop health care programs where none previously existed.³⁶ We need to provide, however, as has Cuba, the medical programs themselves, rather than the design for a program that may never be used.

D. Assist Haiti to Fight Crime and Drug Trafficking

Our country has enormous resources that we can provide to assist the Haitian National Police.³⁷ We can provide the Haitian National Police with the technological capability to fight drug trafficking as well as other crimes.³⁸ We have the physical equipment (e.g. “go fast” boats, sophisticated listening devices, AWACs) to dramatically transform Haiti’s ability to stop drugs from entering Haiti.³⁹ We have the ability to provide advanced forensic techniques and intelligence gathering.⁴⁰ These would be of substantial assistance to the Haitian government in its effort to fight crime and drug trafficking. We can provide consistent, sustained training to the Haitian police. With the help of the United States, the Haitian police departments could develop an internal command structure, an oversight and anti-corruption process, and a facility

33. See generally Douglas E. Matthews, *Economic Sanctions and Economic Strategies: Towards Haiti’s Integration Into the World Economy*, 6 ST. THOMAS L. REV. 281, 298-99 (1994).

34. Press Release, HHS Secretary Tommy G. Thompson Announces New Initiatives for Rural Communities (July 25, 2001), available at <http://www.hhs.gov/news/press/2001pres/20010725b.html>.

35. *South African Health Authorities Call Cuban Solidarity An Inspiring Gesture For The South African People* (Radio Havana Cuba broadcast, Dec. 16, 1998), available at http://www.radiohc.org/Distributions/Radio_Havana_English/1998/98_dec/rhc-eng-12.16.98.

36. Press Release, HHS Secretary Tommy G. Thompson Announces New Initiatives for Rural Communities (July 25, 2001), available at <http://www.hhs.gov/news/press/2001pres/20010725b.html>.

37. See generally *Military Strategy Requirements: Hearing Before the Senate Armed Services Comm.*, (Mar. 7, 2000) (statement of General Charles E. Wilhelm, United States Marine Corps Commander in Chief, United States Southern Command), available at 2000 WL 11068965.

38. See generally *Drug Interdiction Efforts: Hearing Before the Comm. On Government Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy, and Human Resources*, (May 1, 2001) (statement of Donnie R. Marshall, Administrator, Drug Enforcement Administration), available at 2001 WL 2007762. See also *Military Strategy Requirements: Hearing Before the Senate Armed Services Comm.* (Mar. 7, 2000) (statement of General Charles E. Wilhelm, United States Marine Corps Commander in Chief, United States Southern Command), available at 2000 WL 11068965.

39. *Id.*

40. *Id.*

to train more entry level police. We also have the ability to provide technical assistance concerning community policing, citizen participation, and other methods of community participation in fighting crime.⁴¹

IV. CONCLUSION

These suggestions represent just the beginning of a rational approach to assist Haiti. They are premised, of course, on our sincere desire to assist Haiti.⁴² Our goal must be economic development for all Haitian citizens, not the promotion of a narrow agenda that assists the economic elites. The media should focus on what is really occurring in Haiti and not focus on generalized themes or misconceptions. Only if the American public is truly informed can we have a rational foreign policy towards Haiti.

41. *Id.*

42. See ΣΤΟΤΖΚΥ, *supra* note 13, for an extensive discussion on the development of democracy in Haiti.