

Stop Invading Haiti

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What to do about Haiti?

Its government barely exists, lacking both legitimacy and authority. Gangs have taken over the streets. Food and fuel are in short supply: gas stations only just reopened, two months after criminals seized a critical fuel terminal. The country is suffering from a cholera epidemic. A desperate driver told ABC News: “You don’t have anyone to turn to.”

Once the richest colony in the Western Hemisphere, the brutally oppressed slave population won both freedom and independence in 1804, just a couple decades after the American colonies became a nation. The United States, embarrassed by former slaves ruling themselves, recognized Haiti only in 1862, when slavery was literally under fire in America.

The only other country where slavery was overthrown violently, Haiti found neither peace nor stability. America didn’t help. In 1914 U.S. troops arrived to empty the national bank and returned a year later after the Haitian president was assassinated. American troops finally left in 1934, after having “dissolved Haiti’s parliament at gunpoint, killed thousands of people, controlled its finances for more than 30 years, shipped a big portion of its earnings to bankers in New York and left behind a country so poor that the farmers who helped generate the profits often lived on a diet ‘close to starvation level’.”

In 1994 the Clinton administration went retro, again playing colonial hegemon. The U.S. invaded, ousting the ruling junta and reinstating the demagogic president, who had encouraged his followers to “necklace” opponents with flaming tires filled with gasoline. Such was the restoration of “democracy,” with American control giving way to the United Nations, which ended its peacekeeping mission in 2000. Under U.S. and French pressure to step down, President Jean-Bertrand Aristide was ousted in another coup in 2004, which a former French ambassador indicated was effectively orchestrated by Washington and Paris. (The new government conveniently dropped Aristide’s claims for reparations from France.)

A U.N. mission was established, which ran until 2017. Interrupted by a terrible earthquake in 2010, the occupation was supposed to establish law and order, but instead the outside forces added to the Haitians’ hardships. The occupiers caused a cholera epidemic that killed more than 10,000 people. Sexual abuse, including that of children, also was pervasive.

In July 2021 Haitian President Jovenel Moise was assassinated. The country was left almost leaderless, with four claimants to his job, including two competing prime ministers, two different

constitutions, a largely empty legislature for which elections were long overdue, and a supreme court whose head had recently died.

The interim (and wholly illegitimate) government is pushing for allied intervention in some form. U.N. Secretary General António Guterres advocated an international force to back the Haitian National Police. In October America's U.N. Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield announced U.S. support for a U.N. resolution proposing "a limited, carefully scoped, non-UN mission led by a partner country." The administration, she added, "will work with partners and other Council members to set defined and specific parameters for the mission, and the United States will consider the most effective means to directly support, enable, and resource it."

Apparently, it would be an unofficial project of the willing, authorized but not managed by the U.N. Who would contribute? America's role in developing such a resolution suggests the willingness to back it with force. The usual foreign policy suspects in Washington want to send in the U.S. military. In an editorial published the day of Moise's murder, the Washington Post insisted: "Swift and muscular intervention is needed."

The editorialists admitted that the previous peacekeeping mission "was a far cry from perfect." But at least the U.N. brought "a modicum of stability to Haiti.... At this perilous moment, a modicum of stability would be preferable to most other plausible scenarios."

Only hinted at by the safely P.C. publication was the requirement that such a mission be staffed by...well, you know...people from, uh, countries...whose troops could be trusted. The earlier mission "involved forces from Brazil, Uruguay and other nations," including the Nepalese, the *Post* curiously specified, and we know how that turned out. So just make sure the next mission is made up of Americans, French, and Canadians, whom the *Post* named as obligated to push for such a force. Indeed, the Biden administration reportedly wants Ottawa to take the lead; Canada's prime minister declared that intervention is necessary "in one way or another."

Recognizing there is likely to be little public support for the idea, the Post offered an argument of last resort. Sending U.N. troops to Haiti would be worrying, admitted the paper, "But does anyone have a better idea?" A profound and persuasive argument for forcibly occupying another nation, whether its people like it or not.

Other than government officials and commercial elites, most Haitians are skeptical of the proposal. NPR's Eyder Peralta wrote that "many Haitians express deep distrust of an international troop presence after a history of troubled foreign intervention." In contrast to the enthusiasm of *Post* editorial writers, leading Haitians oppose another foreign intervention. Writer and blogger Daniel Larison pointed to an "umbrella coalition of Haitian organizations, The Commission for a Haitian Solution to the Crisis, also known as the Montana Accord, [which] rejected the government's call for outside military assistance."

Haitian writer Monique Clesca said, "We do not want U.S. troops, U.S. boots, U.S. uniforms, none of that." This view is shared by many Haitians who lived through the last foreign deployment and have less than fond memories of the experience. Two *Post* reporters concluded

that the proposal for another foreign intervention “is a divisive and delicate subject here, where the shadow of a long history of destabilizing foreign interventions, including the U.N. mission that introduced cholera, looms large.”

A new peacekeeping mission would not likely be peaceful. Conditions in Port-au-Prince, especially, are shocking. For instance, Max Boot of the Council on Foreign Relations labeled Haiti “a Hobbesian state of nature—Somalia in the Caribbean.” Even as it advocated military intervention, the Post acknowledged: “With gun battles raging in the capital, Port-au-Prince, and cutting off main roads to provincial towns, relief groups have often been stymied in their distribution efforts. Meanwhile, thousands of people, terrified by the gang warfare and an epidemic of kidnappings for ransom, have fled their homes to the countryside.”

Violent but irregular resistance from criminal gangs and other disaffected groups would be likely. Several analysts from Just Security warned: “The gangs are heavily armed and have been fighting street battles in Port-au-Prince neighborhoods regularly for four years. If they decide to engage, they will be doing so on terrain they know, and while they almost certainly will be outgunned in the long run, they can inflict tremendous damage on intervening forces and civilians.”

Indeed, the previous U.N. force engaged gang members, causing substantial civilian casualties. Former human rights lawyer Pooja Bhatia, who investigated the U.N. mission, observed: “We concluded that rather than promoting peace and justice, UN troops helped the police terrorize the poorest quarters of the capital Port-au-Prince, bastions of support for Aristide. Many civilians alleged that [UN] troops, many of them Brazilian soldiers with experience in ‘cleaning operations’ in Rio de Janeiro’s favelas, perpetrated the atrocities themselves.”

Another occupation looks good only compared to the country’s current chaos. Haitians judge proposals by the results of past interventions, though. Last time the U.N. stayed for 13 years, yet four years later public order had entirely dissolved.

Observed Larison:

The long history of failed and destructive outside interference in Haitian affairs shows that neither the United States nor the UN has the solution to Haiti’s political problems. Each time that outside forces have meddled in the name of helping Haiti, they have reliably made things worse.” In September 2021 the Biden administration’s Special Envoy for Haiti, Daniel Foote, resigned in frustration. His critique of U.S. policy was devastating, contending that “our Haitian friends” need “the opportunity to chart their own course, without international puppeteering and favored candidates.

Indeed, outside intervention bears much of the blame for current circumstances. Explained Larison: “The current crisis is itself the product of ongoing interference on the part of the U.S. government, which backed former President Jovenel Moïse when he was alive and has been instrumental in keeping Henry in power despite his lack of democratic legitimacy and the broad coalition of Haitians opposed to his continued rule.”

Bhatia related that Henry “has never had any sort of constitutional authority and indeed is implicated in Moïse’s assassination. The people he claims to speak for revile him. His only constituency is outside the country. Over the past 15 months, the US has insisted that the opposition, a remarkably broad-based coalition of civil society leaders, activists and popular organizations, negotiate with him.”

The civic group coalition wrote the Biden administration earlier this month:

We encourage your administration to reflect on the long history of international interventions in Haiti, and how those actions have served to undermine state institutions, democratic norms, and the rule of law. Previous interventions have had a costly human toll, including through rape, sexual exploitation, and extrajudicial killings. As Doctors Without Borders has warned, such an intervention would mean "more bullets, more injuries and more patients".

Journalist Jonathan M. Katz also highlighted the “vacuum that a century of U.S. invasions, occupations, and interference has left in its wake. Sending an armed force to do battle with one Haitian gang and its sponsors...will do nothing to make Haiti a safer or more stable place for its people to live in the medium or long term.”

Foote concluded: “The hubris that makes us believe we should pick the winner—again—is impressive. This cycle of international political interventions in Haiti has consistently produced catastrophic results. More negative impacts to Haiti will have calamitous consequences not only in Haiti, but in the U.S. and our neighbors in the hemisphere.”

Of course, failing to act comes with a cost. The focus of U.S. foreign policy, however, is not just whether Haiti would be better off. It is whether *Americans* would be better off. The solution for neither is another occupation, even if motivated by the best of intentions. In fact, Haiti’s civil society organizations offered the administration a list of measures to “support peacebuilding and equitable development.” That would be a much better approach than continuing to treat Haiti as another social engineering experiment for the U.S. military.

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