



The Tragedy of Haiti: Washington Should Keep Its Troops at Home

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Haiti took a sharp turn toward chaos with the dramatic assassination of its president. Almost immediately proposals for another U.S. occupation were advanced. The Biden administration should resist the temptation to repeat past failures.

Indeed, Haiti offers a larger foreign policy caution. In recent years Washington seemed to take the Monroe Doctrine worldwide. America acted like it was entitled to intervene everywhere on earth and treat the entire globe like the Western Hemisphere. Hence the almost fanatical obsession with nation-building and regime change, no matter how unsuccessful previous attempts.

That US involvement in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq were disasters should surprise no one. Social engineering gets harder as differences in history, religion, culture, geography, and politics grow. Yet Washington had ample warning nearer home, having failed to do much better in its own neighborhood.

Like in Haiti.

In a plot apparently involving two Haitian-Americans and nearly 30 Colombians, the country's president, Jovenel Moise, was assassinated. Exactly who wanted him dead and why remains yet unknown. It was a terrible crime. Yet it was a minor blip in the disastrous state of Haitian politics.

Over the decades the country has suffered under horrific dictators (the infamous "Papa Doc" and "Baby Doc" Duvaliers being the best known), violent populists (Jean-Bertrand Aristide, backed

by the Clinton administration, praised the gasoline-filled tire "necklace" placed on opponents' necks), military juntas (Raoul Cedras, who launched the most recent coup, in 1991, was ousted by a threatened US invasion), and a series of weak, unstable, and barely legitimate elected presidents (of whom Moïse was the latest).

The assassination added more poison to an already toxic political miasma:

- Haiti suffers from pervasive corruption, criminal gang activity, violence, and poverty;
- President Moïse faced almost daily demonstrations protesting his policies and practices;
- Criminal gangs, often used by politicians against their opponents, have killed more than 400 people over the last three years;
- The president was serving past his term, based on dubious legal authority;
- He was ruling by decree and had cracked down violently on opponents;
- He was pushing a new constitution that would increase presidential power;
- His government failed to hold elections for the Chamber of Deputies last year, allowing its members' terms to expire;
- Only ten of 30 senators remain in office;
- Moïse illegally forced several supreme court justices from office;
- The high court's top judge recently died of COVID-19;
- Foreign Minister Claude Joseph, interim prime minister, claims to be acting president and in charge of the security services;
- So does Ariel Henry, appointed by Moïse to be the new prime minister, but not sworn in before Moïse's death;
- Neither Joseph nor Henry has been approved by parliament, as required;
- As Joseph and Henry squabbled, the depleted senate nominated its head as interim president;
- There are two constitutions, one approved in French and Creole, the other, later one only in French, with conflicting provisions governing presidential vacancies;
- The country has received \$13 billion in foreign "aid" over the last decade, with little impact other than fueling corruption;
- Horror at the assassination only temporarily brought together a badly divided country.

A Spanish and then French colony, Saint-Domingue showcased a particularly vile and brutal slave system. Barely ten percent of the population was white and it prospered. Slavery was big business. Wrote Harvard's Paul Farmer, the colony "was the leading port of call for slave ships: on the eve of the French Revolution, it was supplying two-thirds of all of Europe's tropical produce. A third of new arrivals died within a few years."

A slave revolt broke out in 1791 which the French military proved unable to suppress. Haitians finally achieved independence in 1804. However, Haiti has been in crisis and its politics has been tempestuous for most of its existence. The country split in two for a time. Haiti later made multiple attempts to conquer the Spanish share of the island of Hispaniola, now the Dominican Republic. Authoritarian rulers came and went.

After the president was lynched in 1915 in retaliation for his murder of 157 political prisoners the US invaded, suppressing armed opposition. American forces didn't leave until 1934. A

succession of strongmen and coups followed until the 1957 election of Francois Duvalier. Seven years later he proclaimed himself "president for life." His staunch anti-communism charmed Washington, which rewarded him with US aid. He died in 1971, to be succeeded by his son, Jean-Claude, who was ousted in 1986.

Then the usual political instability returned. Military rule. Elections. Coups. Political conflict. Violence. In 1994 the Clinton administration threatened to invade Haiti and depose Cedras and his junta, which then ceded power. Alas, the purported return of democracy yielded more instability and violence. A few years later the Haitian people elected Aristide, both antagonist of the country's rapacious elites and noted advocate of "necklacing," as president. Then he was forced from office by a popular revolt. A United Nations stabilization mission followed. In 2006 new elections were held.

Over the last decade, an election was delayed by an earthquake, a president was forced from office over fraud allegations, an interim president was chosen, another election was delayed, in part due to a hurricane, and Moise was elected. The latter's chaotic reign, governing abuses, and authoritarian approach were fully in line with Haitian political experience. So was the perception of his critics that Washington was meddling and helping prop him up. Only the assassination was a break from the past. Many Haitian presidents left office unwillingly, but they normally survived the experience.

Haiti's travails have been constantly exacerbated by outsiders. France attempted to reconquer the island, before finally giving up (in return for a financial indemnity!). The US refused to recognize the former slave colony's government until 1862, when America was engulfed in the Civil War and battling another slave state. Conflict with the Spanish colony of Santo Domingo and later country of the Dominican Republic persisted for years. The latter remains hostile, in recent years expelling tens of thousands of ethnic Haitians, some economic migrants and others lifelong residents.

America's early intervention did not yield a sustainable democracy, while aid to the Duvaliers strengthened a brutal dictatorship. Since then US and UN occupations had no long-term impact. Nor did the serial interventions in Haitian politics by the George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton administrations – the first mostly hidden, the second open – against and for Aristide. Washington's more recent efforts in the Mideast and Central Asia provide no evidence that it is any better prepared today to effect the internal transformation that Haiti desperately needs.

Poverty, too, is endemic to Haiti. The poorest nation in Latin America, its per capita GDP last year was less than \$1200. Six out of every ten Haitians live on less than \$2 a day. Long among Latin America's worst economic performers, its poor economic policies and endemic corruption discourage growth.

The country comes in at number at 104 in the world in the latest *Economic Freedom of the World* survey. The *Wall Street Journal's* Mary Anastasia O'Grady observed: "The state is a predator and the rule of law remains elusive. A narrow cartel of special interest controls most of the economy." Political instability and violence also discourage local economic development and

foreign business investment. Only the bravest risk-taker or nostalgic émigré would put their money into Haiti.

Misnamed foreign aid may make it harder for Haiti to address its problems. The availability of foreign money creates perverse incentives. The *New York Times*' Maria Abi-Habib called Haiti an "aid state," which ekes out "an existence by relying on billions of dollars from the international community." Although the cash is justified as a human lifeline, it leaves "the government with few incentives to carry out the institutional reforms necessary to rebuild the country, as it bets that every time the situation worsens, international governments will open their coffers." Alas, the pattern regularly recurs.

Add to the human carnage natural disasters, particularly the 2010 earthquake, which devastated a country ill-equipped and -prepared to respond. Tens of thousands of people died, hundreds of thousands of buildings, both residential and commercial, were badly damaged or destroyed. Among the many killed were leading officials including the chief and deputy chief of the UN mission and the police commissioner. Important infrastructure was ravaged, including the airport and port.

Now Moise's dramatic murder. Especially curious was the apparent lack of resistance from his security detail and failure of the assassins to flee. Some observers theorized that Washington might be behind the attack since running an operation with so many people would not be cheap. Although always a possibility, given past US behavior, America has nothing obvious to gain from Moise's death. Moreover, these days Washington prefers to engage in ostentatious regime change.

Instead, the causes most likely are internal. One theory is that the murder was gang-related. Organized crime has expanded in the relative political vacuum: some 13,000 people have fled Haiti as a result since the beginning of June. Drug gangs have entered Haiti and local criminals have been used as political enforcers. Last month a leading criminal called on the people to steal from businesses. However, gangs likely would do their own killing and assassinating the president would be a dramatic step into the unknown. More important, he was an unlikely gang target, having been accused of employing them against protesters.

Moise had plenty of political enemies. He said a million people wanted to kill him because of his policies. Worsening repression also could have radicalized political opponents. After his death a Brooklyn radio host, Dahoud Andre, stated: "There will be celebrations on the streets of New York. We believe it is a good thing for the Haitian people that Jovenel Moise is dead. He was a criminal, who never had any legitimacy." Andre contended that "The only people mourning will be those who were helping him to steal." (Moise had many friends too, of course, who believed "he was a man who was trying to change the power dynamics," said Leonie Hermantin, a Miami Haitian-American community leader.)

Still, more than abstract antagonism would be necessary to organize a military-style hit. As noted before, assassination has never been a feature of Haitian politics.

Irrespective of the reason for the murder, with 1.2 million ethnic Haitians in America the Biden administration will face pressure to act. But to do what? Already Haitian opposition leader Pierre Reginald Boulos has hired a lobbyist, he said, "to give me access to the US administration so I can promote my vision of the new Haiti." No doubt to entangle Washington in Haiti's affairs on his behalf.

President Joe Biden should focus on America's interests. After the assassination he issued a boilerplate statement: "We condemn this heinous act." He added that he was "shocked and saddened" by the killing, which was "very worrisome." Sure, but what does he plan to do in response?

Calls immediately began for US intervention. The administration said that it will send officials from the FBI and Department of Homeland Security to assess how to assist in the investigation of Moise's killing. The interim premier, Claude Joseph, requested US troops to support the Haitian police, reestablish security, and guard important infrastructure, such as the airport and port.

A number of other ideas are being bandied about. For instance, Bloomberg News made an urgent but relatively simple call: "The immediate, achievable goal should be to help avoid an accelerating collapse. For Haiti's sake, and their own, the US and its regional partners should step up." To do exactly what, however, the editors did not specify.

The *Washington Post* advocated "swift and muscular international intervention." In its view, "global intervention" was necessary to "prevent a meltdown that could have dire consequences." The purpose would be to "maintain a modicum of stability" and organize new elections. The *Post* suggested a peacekeeping mission, most likely through the UN, backed by other states (Canada, France, and America, naturally) and the Organization of American States. Of course, "swift and muscular" usually means U.S.-dominated.

The American Enterprise Institute's Ryan C. Berg urged Washington toward an even more expansive role: "The short-term emphasis for the US and the rest of the world should be on supporting Haiti's political leadership, untangling the constitutional questions likely to arise and maintaining order while ensuring that the Haitian armed forces remain confined to their proper constitutional role. The international community, and in particular the US, should push for an investigation into the assassination and make resources available for bringing the perpetrators to justice – lest they benefit from the impunity that is all too common in Haiti. In the long-term, the international community has a key role to play in encouraging political and institutional reforms that will advance a national dialogue, generate economic opportunities for all and bring greater stability to Haiti's turbulent domestic politics." But how to achieve any of this?

Another round of foreign intervention is unlikely to solve much. Aiding in the investigation is unobjectionable, but the US should avoid taking sides in Haitian political disputes. Washington would risk being drawn into what could become a political maelstrom, given the vacuum that has developed with multiple claimants to power.

So far the Biden administration appears wary of any military involvement, but has not closed the door to the idea. The official response from Pentagon spokesman John F. Kirby was: "We are aware of the request and are analyzing it." An unnamed administration official told Reuters that there were "no plans to provide US assistance at this time."

Military intervention would be a very bad idea. The US remains more than a little busy in the world. Once in place American forces could not easily leave: new tasks for them would be constantly proposed. There would be an election to run, a new government to protect, a political system to stabilize, an economy to develop, and ever more tasks of the sort proposed by Berg to complete.

Hoping for the most, Haiti's ambassador to the US, Bochit Edmond, argued: "A stable Haiti is in the interest of the United States." That may be an axiom of sorts, given Haiti's proximity to America. However, that interest is limited.

In traditional security and economic terms, Haiti is neither vital nor even important. Almost 30 years ago Sen. Joe Biden was asked about Haiti, which the Clinton administration had just occupied to "restore democracy." He admitted that it was "a God-awful thing to say," but "If Haiti just quietly sunk into the Caribbean or rose up 300 feet, it wouldn't matter a whole lot in terms of our interest." He's right: that was "a God-awful thing to say," but it also was true.

For America Haiti is a human tragedy rather than a geopolitical outpost. Still, the country matters in both moral and practical terms. A half century ago desperate Haitians began fleeing their country for America, creating an erratic human tide seeking sanctuary that triggered an immigration crackdown with tougher procedures which persist today. A more complete economic or political collapse could easily spur another exodus, and in turn spark another round of nationalistic blowback and forced repatriations in the US

Washington should focus on the threat of social collapse. Humanitarian aid would help, though it remains best delivered privately, especially by NGOs and expatriates, and delivered outside of the Haitian government's control. The US also should honor its immigrant heritage by offering sanctuary to those in danger or distress.

As for larger political tasks, Washington should back efforts by the United Nations and Organization of American States. France also should lead in light of its historical interest in Haiti. A multilateral investigation into Moise's murder might be helpful. More critical would be delivering enough stability to allow *Haitians* to restore a functioning government. Only then would they have an opportunity to transcend their nation's latest political catastrophe.

Haiti has been a tragedy for centuries. The assassination of its president adds to the enormous, accumulated misery of its people. They deserve so much better.

International support could prove useful, but the past is filled with failures. The US should play a supportive role, no more. Ultimately Haiti's many problems will only be solved in Port-au-Prince, not Washington.

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