

MEDIA ALERT: BRINGING HELL TO HAITI - PART 1

MEDIA LENS: Correcting for the distorted vision of the corporate media

March 1, 2004

Introduction – Anyone Here Feeling Stupid?

Have you noticed how stupid you feel when you watch the news? Hands up anybody who understands what's going on in Haiti?

The media is good at repeatedly broadcasting footage of armed gangs roaming in trucks, and of quoting senior officials. But the absence of meaningful context and informed analysis – and above all the unwillingness to question the official version of events – means that it is often literally impossible for viewers to make sense of what is happening. For all their satellite communications and computer-generated studios, the news media often do not give us news at all ^ they give us noise.

Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere and the fourth poorest country in the world – 50% per cent of the country's wealth is owned by 1% of the population. Life expectancy is 52 years for women and 48 for men. Unemployment is about 70%. Some 85% of Haitians live on less than \$1 US per day. (Source: Yifat Susskind, 'Haiti – Insurrection in the Making', www.zmag.org, February 25, 2004))

The United States is Haiti's main commercial 'partner' accounting for about 60% of the flows of exports and imports. Along with the manufacture of baseballs, textiles, cheap electronics, and toys, Haiti's sugar, bauxite and sisal are all controlled by American corporations. Disney, for example, has used Haitian sweatshops to produce Pocahontas pyjamas, among other items, at the rate of 11 cents per hour. Most Haitians are willing to work for almost nothing.

The US Network For Economic Justice reports:

"Whereas corporations receive vast incentives to set up plants in Haiti... returns to the Haitian economy are minimal, and working and living standards of Haitian people, whose wages are generally below the minimum of thirty cents an hour, steadily decline... Decades of public investments and policy manipulation by the World Bank, the IMF, and the US government have deliberately created an environment where the exploitation of workers is hailed as an incentive to invest in Haiti." ('50 years is enough: Corporate Welfare in Haiti', www.50years.org)

The US, in other words, is +not+ a disinterested spectator of events in Haiti.

Cruelty Never Seen Before - Conquering Paradise

When Cristobal Colon (Columbus) first arrived on Hispaniola – today's Haiti and Dominican Republic – in October 1492, he found something close to an earthly paradise. Of the Taino people he encountered, he said:

"They are the best people in the world and above all the gentlest... All the people show the most singular loving behaviour and they speak pleasantly... They love their neighbours as themselves, and they have the sweetest talk in the world, and are gentle and always laughing." (Quoted, Kirkpatrick Sale, *The Conquest of Paradise*, Papermac, 1992, pp.99-100)

Colon did not allow sentiment to stand in his way for long. Formal instructions for the second voyage to Hispaniola in May 1493 were significant, historian Kirkpatrick Sale writes, in that they constituted "the first statement of the colonial strategies and policies of empire that were eventually to carry Europe to every cranny of the earth". Colon's plans were almost entirely concerned with "establishing the means of exploitation and trade, providing no suggestion of any other purpose for settlement or any other function of government". (Ibid, p.127)

The rights of the Taino people were not an issue – the concern was simply to steal their gold.

Las Casas, a Spanish eyewitness, described how the invaders were motivated by "insatiable greed and ambition," attacking the Tainos "like ravaging wild beasts... killing, terrorizing, afflicting, torturing, and destroying the native peoples" with "the strangest and most varied new methods of cruelty, never seen or heard of before". (Quoted Noam Chomsky, *Year 501*, Verso, 1993, p.198)

The idea seems to have been to utterly crush the spirit of the Tainos. Las Casas comments:

"As they saw themselves each day perishing by the cruel and inhuman treatment of the Spaniards, crushed

to the earth by the horses, cut in pieces by swords, eaten and torn by dogs, many buried alive and suffering all kinds of exquisite tortures...[they] decided to abandon themselves to their unhappy fate with no further struggles, placing themselves in the hands of their enemies that they might do with them as they liked." (Ibid, pp.198-9)

Near-identical horrors are documented under the subsequent French rulers of Haiti, who shipped in hundreds of thousands of African slaves to work their plantations. From that time to this, the logic of Western exploitation of the Third World has remained fundamentally the same: dreams of a better life must be crushed by violence and grinding poverty so extreme that local people will accept any work at any rate, and abandon all notions of improving their lot.

This is why death squads, tyrants and torturers are such a standard feature of the Third World ^ hope is always being born and is always being killed by local thugs serving Western elites. This is also why weapons consistently flow from the rich West to the world's worst human rights abusers. In the 1980s, the leading academic scholar on human rights in Latin America, Lars Schoultz, found that US aid, including military aid, "has tended to flow disproportionately to Latin American governments which torture their citizens... to the hemisphere's relatively egregious violators of fundamental human rights". (Schoultz, Comparative Politics, January 1981)

Terror was required, Schoultz added, "to destroy permanently a perceived threat to the existing structure of socioeconomic privilege by eliminating the political participation of the numerical majority". (Schoultz, Human Rights and United States Policy toward Latin America, Princeton, 1981)

Haiti And The Racketeers For Capitalism

Between 1849 and 1913, the US Navy entered Haitian waters 24 times to "protect American lives and property". The US invasion of 1915 brought back slavery to Haiti in all but name and imposed a US-designed constitution giving US corporations free rein. After ruling for 19 years the US withdrew leaving its wealth in the safe hands of the murderous National Guard it had created. In November 1935, Major General Smedley D. Butler explained the logic of intervention:

"I spent thirty-three years and four months in active service as a member of our country's most agile military force – the Marine Corps... And during that period I spent most of my time being a high-class muscle man for Big Business, for Wall Street, and for the bankers. In short, I was a racketeer for capitalism.

"Thus I helped make Mexico and especially Tampico safe for American oil interests in 1914. I helped make Haiti and Cuba a decent place for the National City boys to collect revenues in. I helped purify Nicaragua for the international banking house of Brown Brothers in 1909-1912. I brought light to the Dominican Republic for American sugar interests in 1916. I helped make Honduras 'right' for American fruit companies in 1903. In China in 1927 I helped see to it that Standard Oil went its way unmolested." (Sidney Lens, The Forging of the American Empire, Pluto Press, 2003, pp. 270-271)

In the 1950s, with firm US support, the Duvalier dictatorship took over. Anthropologist Robert Lawless comments:

"The United States would support the continuation of the Duvalier dynasty, and Jean-Claude, when he came to power, would support a new economic programme guided by the United States, a programme featuring private investments from the United States that would be drawn to Haiti by such incentives as no customs taxes, a minimum wage kept very low, the suppression of labour unions, and the right of American companies to repatriate their profits... Largely because of its cheap labour force, extensive government repression, and denial of even minimal labour rights, Haiti is one of the most attractive countries for both the subcontractors and the maquilas." (Quoted, Paul Farmer, The Uses Of Haiti, Common Courage Press, 1994, p.114)

This is the Guardian editors, version of Haiti's history:

"The US ignored [Haiti's] existence until 1862. Later, beginning in 1915, it occupied Haiti for 19 years and then abruptly left. Years of dictatorship and coups ensued." ('From bad to worse', Leader, The Guardian, February 14, 2004)

Years of dictatorship merely "ensued" – no mention is made of the dictatorship +under+ occupation. There is also no hint that the following years of dictatorship were imposed by the US in order to maximise returns on investments.

On the rare occasions when US support for terror is admitted, the motivation ^ maximised profits ^ is out of sight. Thus Lyonel Trouillot writes in the New York Times of how "the United States's automatic backing of the Duvalier dictatorship because it was anti-Communist" resulted in terror. (Trouillot, 'In Haiti, All the Bridges Are Burned', The New York Times, February 26, 2004)

Haiti's Big Surprise – Aristide

Terror-backed exploitation continued in an unbroken line until December 1990 when Jean-Bertrand Aristide, a Catholic priest, won national elections with 67.5% of the vote, beating the US candidate, former World Bank official Marc Bazin, into second place with 14.2%. The grassroots movement that swept Aristide to power took the West completely by surprise. Aristide took office in February 1991 and was briefly the first democratically elected President in Haiti's history before being overthrown by a US-backed military coup on September 30, 1991. The Washington-based Council on Hemispheric Affairs observed after the coup:

"Under Aristide, for the first time in the republic's tortured history, Haiti seemed to be on the verge of tearing free from the fabric of despotism and tyranny which had smothered all previous attempts at democratic expression and self-determination." His victory "represented more than a decade of civic engagement and education on his part," in "a textbook example of participatory, bottom-up, and democratic political development". (Quoted, Chomsky, op.cit., p.209)

Aristide's balancing of the budget and "trimming of a bloated bureaucracy" led to a "stunning success" that made White House planners "extremely uncomfortable". The view of a US official "with extensive experience of Haiti" summed up the reality beneath US rhetoric:

"Aristide – slum priest, grass-roots activist, exponent of Liberation Theology – “represents everything that CIA, DOD and FBI think they have been trying to protect this country against for the past 50 years”" he said. (Quoted, Paul Quinn-Judge, Boston Globe, September 8, 1994)

Before deciding to run for office, Aristide had observed: "Of course, the US has its own agenda here", namely: maximising its returns on investments. "This is normal, capitalist behaviour, and I don't care if the US wants to do it at home... But it is monstrous to come down here and impose your will on another people... I cannot accept that Haiti should be whatever the United States wants it to be." (Chomsky, op.cit., p.211)

A Haitian businessman told a reporter shortly before the September 1991 coup: "Everyone who is anyone is against Aristide. Except the people." (Quoted, Farmer, op., cit, p.178)

Following the fall of Aristide, the Haitian army "embarked on a systematic and continuing campaign to stamp out the vibrant civil society that has taken root in Haiti since the fall of the Duvalier dictatorship," Americas Watch noted. At least 1,000 people were killed in the first two weeks of the coup and hundreds more by December. The paramilitary forces were led by former CIA employees Emmanuel Constant and Raoul Cedras – Aristide was forced into exile from 1991-94.

In response to the coup, the Organisation of American States announced an embargo and sanctions. The US immediately declared 800 of its firms "exempt". As a result levels of US trade increased by around 50% under the embargo. Noam Chomsky summarises the situation:

"Well, as this was going on, the Haitian generals in effect were being told [by Washington]: 'Look, murder the leaders of the popular organisations, intimidate the whole population, destroy anyone who looks like they might get in the way after you're gone,... And that's exactly what Cedras and those guys did, that's precisely what happened – and of course they were given total amnesty when they finally did agree to step down.'" (Chomsky, Understanding Power, The New Press, 2002, p.157)

Writing in The Nation in October 1994, US journalist Allan Nairn quoted paramilitary leader Emmanuel Constant as saying that he had been contacted by a US Military officer, Colonel Patrick Collins, who served as defence attaché at the United States Embassy in the Haitian capital, Port-au-Prince. Constant said Collins pressed him to set up a group to "balance the Aristide movement" and to do "intelligence" work against it. Constant admitted that, at the time, he was working with CIA operatives in Haiti. Constant and other paramilitary leaders were trained in Ecuador by US Special Forces between 1991-1994.

One phone call from Washington would have been enough to stop the generals, Howard French noted in the New York Times. But "Washington's deep-seated ambivalence about a leftward-tilting nationalist" prevented action. "Despite much blood on the army's hands, United States diplomats consider it a vital counterweight to Father Aristide, whose class-struggle rhetoric... threatened or antagonized traditional power centres at home and abroad." (French, New York Times, September 27, 1992)

In 1994, the US returned Aristide in the company of 20,000 troops after the coup leaders had slaughtered much of the popular movement that had brought him to power. The title of a 1994 article by Douglas Farah in the International Herald Tribune summed up the horror: "Grass roots of democracy in Haiti: all but dead." (May 10, 1994)

The day before US troops landed, the Associated Press reported that American oil companies had been supplying oil directly to the Haitian coup leaders in violation of the embargo with the authorisation of the Clinton and Bush administrations at the highest level. Although the world's media were intensely focused on Haiti at the time, the revelations were met with near-total silence in the US press.

Human Rights Watch describes “disappointing” aspects of the US military intervention:

“The United States, notably, showed little enthusiasm for the prosecution of past abuses. Indeed, it even impeded accountability by removing to the US thousands of documents from military and paramilitary headquarters, allowing notorious abusers to flee Haiti, and giving safe haven to paramilitary leader Emmanuel ‘Toto’ Constant.” (‘Recycled soldiers and paramilitaries on the march’, Human Rights Watch, February 27, 2004)

Kenneth Roth, Executive Director of Human Rights Watch, wrote about the documents seized by the US in a letter to the New York Times:

“The Clinton Administration refuses to return these documents without first removing the names of Americans. The Administration’s apparent motive is to avoid embarrassing revelations about the involvement of American intelligence agents with the military regime that ruled Haiti.” (‘US Must Release Evidence on Haitian Abuses’, New York Times, April 12, 1997)

Crucially, Aristide’s return was permitted only when he accepted both the US military occupation and Washington’s harsh neoliberal agenda. His government was to implement a standard “structural adjustment” package, with foreign funds devoted primarily to debt repayment and the needs of the business sectors, and with an “open foreign investment policy”.

The plans for the economy were set out in a document submitted to the Paris Club of international donors at the World Bank in August 1994. The Haiti desk officer of the World Bank, Axel Peuker, described the plan as beneficial to the “more open, enlightened, business class” and foreign investors. The Haitian Minister in charge of rural development and agrarian reform was not even told about the plan. (Quoted Noam Chomsky, ‘Democracy Restored’, Z Magazine, November 1994)

Aristide also agreed to dismiss his Prime Minister and to replace him with a businessman from the traditional elite who was “known to be opposed to the populist policies during Aristide’s seven months in power” and was “generally well regarded by the business community.” (Boston Globe, July 27, 1993)

Now consider the ‘free press’ version of these events:

First, the Times:

“Mr Aristide, a former Roman Catholic priest, won Haiti’s first free elections in 1990, promising to end the country’s relentless cycle of corruption, poverty and demagoguery. Ousted in a coup the following year, he was restored to power with the help of 20,000 US troops in 1994.” (‘Barricades go up as city braces for attack’, Tim Reid, The Times, February 26, 2004)

Not a word about the long, documented history of US support for mass murderers attacking a democratic government and killing its supporters. No mention of the limits imposed on Aristide’s range of options by the superpower protecting its business interests.

The Guardian writes:

“To a degree, history repeated itself when the US intervened again in 1994 to restore Mr Aristide. Bill Clinton halted the influx of Haitian boat people that had become politically awkward in Florida. Then he moved on. Although the US has pumped in about \$900m in the past decade, consistency and vision have been lacking.” (‘From bad to worse’, Leader, The Guardian, February 14, 2004)

In reality there has been great consistency and vision in exploiting the people of Haiti for Western gain. Ignoring mountains of evidence, the Guardian reports: “The US [was] at one time a staunch ally” of Aristide. (‘Haitian rebels continue advance on capital’, Agencies, Guardian Unlimited, February 27, 2004)

Ross Benson writes of the Haitian boat people in the Daily Mail:

“It was to stem that flow and keep what the former American presidential candidate, Pat Buchanan, colourfully if disgracefully called ‘the Zulus off Miami Beach’ that, three years later, 20,000 US Marines invaded and restored Aristide to his white-domed palace that looks as if it might have been built for Saddam Hussein...” (Benson, ‘The Land of voodoo’, The Daily Mail, February 28, 2004)

No mention of Aristide’s achievements or of the US determination to destroy them. We note that Buchanan’s “colourful” language was disgraceful enough to merit repetition.

The BBC reports:

“Months later [Aristide] was overthrown in a bloody military coup, but returned to power in 1994 after the new rulers were forced to step down under international pressure and with the help of US troops.” (‘Country

profile: Haiti', 14 February, 2004; news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/country_profiles/1202772.stm)

Again, not a word about the double game being played by the US at the expense of the Haitian people and their democracy. Indeed in the mainstream reports we have seen we have found almost no mention of US commercial interests in Haiti.

Part 2 will follow shortly...

SUGGESTED ACTION

The goal of Media Lens is to promote rationality, compassion and respect for others. In writing letters to journalists, we strongly urge readers to maintain a polite, non-aggressive and non-abusive tone.

Write to the editor of the Guardian, Alan Rusbridger:

Email: alan.rusbridger@guardian.co.uk

Write to the New York Times editors and letter,s page:

Email: executive-editor@nytimes.com

Email: managing-editor@nytimes.com

Email: letters@nytimes.com

Write to the BBC's director of news, Richard Sambrook:

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