

"Haiti: The Bicentennial Coup d'Etat"  
par Immanuel Wallerstein (15/03/2004)

In a world where many countries have sad tales to tell, Haiti is quite possibly at the top of the list. In the eighteenth century, Haiti (then known as St.-Domingue) was the jewel in the crown of the French empire. It was the leading sugar exporter in the world at the time and yielded immense profits to a small class of French plantation owners. The overwhelming majority of the population were Black slaves. There was a small intermediate group made up largely of mulattoes, poor Whites, and a few free Blacks.

Then came the French Revolution, and everyone on the island decided to profit from the turmoil. The White settlers elected representatives to the Estates-General, which then became the Assemblée Nationale, and sought autonomous authority on the island. The "free colored" in turn demanded their rights and found support among some members of the Assemblée Nationale, the *Amis des Noirs*. They succeeded in getting the Assemblée to award the vote to "propertied mulattoes," whose leader was promptly captured, tortured, and executed by the White settlers.

At this point, there began a slave revolt, and Haiti entered into a three-way civil war. The slave revolt frightened not only the White settlers and the propertied mulattoes but France, Great Britain, Spain, and not least the newly-constituted United States. Under the leadership of Toussaint L'Ouverture, the Black revolutionaries created a disciplined army and took over control of an independent state, which was then ostracized by everyone. By 1802, Napoleon had reinvaded the island and by a combination of force and deception captured Toussaint L'Ouverture and took him off to prison in France.

The story gets complicated after that. But basically the republic, officially launched in 1804 (hence this is the bicentennial year), would be under the control primarily of the mulattoes. The White planters left the island. The economy became a shambles. Nonetheless, the example of the Black slave revolt so frightened everyone that the leaders of the various independence movements in Latin America, including Simon Bolívar, would not recognize Haiti for many years. The last country to recognize Haiti was the United States, doing it only in 1854. The example of Haiti led both the Latin American revolutionaries and the United States to discourage an independence movement in Cuba, for fear of another Haiti. In the first half of the twentieth century, after multiple coups, the U.S. marines invaded and spent a lot of time in Haiti, running the show and collecting the debt.

If we fast forward to the period after the Second World War, we find ensconced in power one of the Western Hemisphere's worst rulers, François Duvalier. A doctor, a Black, he used a demagoguery of *noirisme* to establish a dictatorial regime which he enforced through an armed group of thugs known as the *tontons macoutes*. Duvalier ruled from 1957 to 1971, and on his death he was succeeded by his son, Jean Claude, known as "Baby Doc." The regime remained the same but Baby Doc was less efficacious a ruler. He finally lost the support of the United States, and was overthrown in 1986, allowed to go into golden exile to his estate in France.

Power fell back into the hands of a largely mulatto elite group, who found themselves challenged by a populist priest, champion of the Black underclasses, named Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Aristide won the presidential election in 1990 and was ousted by a coup in 1991 led by a right-wing group who proceeded to kill and repress supporters of Aristide. By now, there was some attention being paid to Haiti by world public opinion and a sense that this situation was intolerable. In 1994, Clinton sent in U.S. troops to restore Aristide to power, on condition

that he only "complete" his term of office, not run again in 1996, and carry out a neoliberal economic policy.

Aristide accepted the terms. What else could he do? Meanwhile, however, Senator Jesse Helms, then the Republican chair of the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee, fulminated against Aristide as a leftist anti-American. In 2000, Aristide ran again for President and won overwhelmingly. The opposition refused to stand, claiming that the elections were unfair. No doubt they were not pristine (but neither were those in the U.S. in 2000), but no outside observer thought that Aristide did not command the majority of the population.

When Bush came to power, the person in charge of Haitian affairs in the Department of State was Roger Noriega, previously the assistant of Jesse Helms and the one who had managed his anti-Aristide polemics. The U.S. cut off international funds promised to Aristide, forced him to empty his treasury to repay IMF loans, and (via the Republican party) poured money into those who had been ousted by Aristide in 1991 and again in 1994.

This brings us to 2004. A small group of right-wing rebels, indirectly armed by the U.S., invaded from the Dominican Republic. Aristide had been weakened by the financial squeeze, the corruption of his regime, and the fact that his supporters had been using oppressive tactics as well. The diplomatic charade now began. France called for Aristide to resign. Colin Powell said he was for a compromise - that Aristide stay but name a new Prime Minister after negotiating with the more palatable of the opposition. Aristide agreed, but the opposition refused. So the U.S. then said, quite illogically, well Aristide should resign. He refused. The U.S. then arranged that the hired security guards (from a U.S. firm) that had been protecting Aristide be withdrawn.

At this point, the U.S. emissary said to Aristide, we can guarantee your safe escape from the rebel troops only if you resign. Aristide wrote an ambiguous letter in Creole, and was then whisked off in a U.S. plane to the Central African Republic (no golden exile in France for him). He immediately told all and sundry that he had not resigned, that he had been kidnapped by the U.S. At which point, the Central African Republic authorities reminded him of their requirement that he be reserved, that is, shut up.

The U.S. Black political community are all demanding that Aristide be allowed to return and that the alleged kidnapping be investigated. This is supported by the association of Caribbean states (CARICOM) and by the African Union. But don't hold your breath. The coup (32nd in Haiti's history) has succeeded.

Why did this happen? The first question is why France played the role that it did. It is said in the press that this was a gesture of reconciliation after the fallout with the U.S. over Iraq. I don't think this is too plausible. France was not on good terms with Aristide, who had recently demanded that France pay reparations for what they did 200 years ago. But most of all, France was the ex-colonial power which had been eased out of a role in Haiti by the United States. By taking the lead, France got its foot back inside the Haitian scene, at the expense of Aristide whom they regarded as someone who had been installed by the U.S. (albeit now discarded).

As for the U.S., objectively, Aristide was not particularly bothersome. Unlike say Chavez, he was not sitting on oil, nor denouncing the U.S. But the neo-conservatives saw him as a Clinton product, a dubious type, and someone to be ousted in favor of people with whom they

had close relations. So they stage-managed the whole transfer of power. In addition, it is meant as a warning to other countries in the Americas about the readiness of the U.S. to resume "gunboat diplomacy" in their backyard. And so it is being read.

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