

RUSH!

5/18/94 | 381
Number

PRESIDENTIAL COMMISSION NEEDED TO AVERT DISASTER IN HAITI

The Clinton Administration is threatening to send American troops to overthrow Haiti's military rulers and reinstate exiled President Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Moreover, the White House, with backing from the United Nations, plans to further tighten the two-and-a-half-year-old embargo this May 21. It also plans to relax the review of Haitian asylum claims from refugees by carrying them out on U.S. Navy and Coast Guard vessels in the Caribbean. The Haitian Parliament has responded to these Clinton initiatives by inaugurating a new civilian president to replace Aristide — an action the White House has labeled "criminal."

Not surprisingly, these ill-conceived efforts to restore Aristide to power have set off a firestorm of debate within the Administration and the U.S. Congress. Opponents of the use of military force in Haiti, including Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell (D-ME) and Minority Leader Bob Dole (R-KS), argue that only a negotiated solution can resolve the crisis. Those advocating an American invasion, however, contend that the Haitian military regime has no incentive to negotiate and that economic sanctions alone will take too long to achieve their objectives.

Stiffening Anti-Aristide Resolve. But several recent developments in Haiti indicate that U.S. policy toward Haiti since Aristide's ouster in September 1991 has been a failure and that a tougher policy will only worsen the situation. First, it appears that Aristide's popularity in Haiti is diminishing daily and that his enemies are determined to block his return. As columnist Robert Novak reported following a visit to Haiti this month: "The reality of tougher sanctions now and the threat of U.S. military action later have stiffened rather than diminished anti-Aristide sentiment." The Haitian business community, once counted on by the Clinton Administration, is forming a strong alliance with the anti-Aristide government.

While elected democratically, Aristide proved to be anything but a democrat during his time in office. According to the Central Intelligence Agency and the State Department, he preached class warfare and urged violence against political opponents, all the while blaming the U.S. for Haiti's problems. Unfortunately, Clinton and his advisors have linked U.S.-Haiti policy to Aristide's return, thus giving up on any negotiated solution to the crisis. The Haitian president has shown little flexibility during previous negotiations and has undermined every agreement that has been reached. His critics charge that his goal has been to polarize the crisis in Haiti in an effort to destroy that country's military, police, business community, and middle class — groups which he always has viewed as enemies of Haiti's poor.

A development casting doubt on the success of a U.S. invasion of Haiti is the so-called strategy of passive resistance practiced by military leader Lieutenant General Raoul Cedras. In the event of U.S.-led military intervention in Haiti, the U.S. will have to confront not only Haiti's military, "but also the Haitian people," who remember well the 1915-1934 U.S. military occupation of their country. While the Haitian military might be quickly defeated, a costly paramilitary or civilian guerrilla campaign would be waged against the occupying forces. A military invasion of Haiti could thus become even bloodier than those in Grenada, Panama, or Somalia.

Little Support for Clinton's New Policy. U.S. congressional leaders are not the only ones opposed to the White House's new get-tough policy. The Canadians, French, and Venezuelans have been approached, but all have balked at the idea of participating in a military intervention. Critics of the plan fear that an invasion force would become bogged down in an expensive military occupation that could last years and cost scores of American lives.

The U.S. military, in essence, would become a “palace guard” for Aristide — a man with a long anti-American track record and who will never be able to govern Haiti without fearing for his life.

Forging a Haiti Policy That Will Work. With Haiti, the Clinton Administration is demonstrating the same alarming lack of competence and foreign-policy vision it has demonstrated in Somalia and Bosnia. If the President and his advisors continue their current Haiti policy, the crisis in Haiti will only worsen and U.S. credibility and interests will suffer.

To de-escalate the crisis and to help restore democracy in Haiti, the Clinton Administration should:

- ✓ **Appoint Colin Powell to lead a bi-partisan presidential fact-finding commission for Haiti.** The White House appears to be rushing into a conflict that it will not be able to control. The Administration needs to take a step back and re-evaluate the situation in Haiti. Senator Dole has proposed the creation of a bi-partisan fact-finding commission, declaring on May 13 that “[i]t’s high time for cooler heads to prevail on U.S. policy toward Haiti. We seem to be heading for another foreign policy mistake. The administration appears to be lurching towards the use of force in Haiti, without thoroughly considering the consequences of such action and the history of U.S. involvement.”

Such a commission would give the Administration time to establish policy objectives based on U.S. interests rather than domestic politics. It should be bi-partisan and consist of several highly regarded American statesmen. An obvious choice to lead it is former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Colin Powell, who appreciates better than anyone in the Clinton Administration the need for caution and resolve when threatening the use of American force. The activities of President Clinton’s newly appointed special envoy to Haiti, William Gray III, should be subordinated to those of the commission. However, Gray should be a member of the commission.

The commission should be given a 60-day mandate to conduct a fact-finding mission in Haiti and to issue its policy recommendations. It is likely to learn that current U.S. policy is at odds with the conditions in Haiti, where Aristide is less popular than when he was elected four years ago. Lieutenant General Cedras, who has endorsed the idea of a fact-finding commission for Haiti, noted recently that “[w]hat we hope is that finally, for once, somebody may come here and understand the Haitian problem, not come with preconceived ideas instead.”

- ✓ **De-link U.S.-Haiti policy from Aristide.** The exiled Haitian president has proven time and again that he is not a U.S. ally and that he is no democrat. His support among the Haitian people is waning and it is becoming increasingly unlikely that the Haitian military and business community will tolerate his return. As former President George Bush remarked in a recent public speech, Aristide has “turned on” those trying to support him by scuttling attempts at negotiation, and he will continue to do so.
- ✓ **Lift the embargo on Haiti.** Even the Clinton Administration’s own State Department, not to mention such international relief agencies as CARE, have made it clear that the embargo only hurts Haiti’s poor and middle class. The military rulers and wealthy that the embargo is intended to pressure and punish are in fact prospering from their smuggling operations. The U.N. embargo has brought levels of famine and disease to Haiti never before seen in the Western Hemisphere. Moreover, the embargo will almost certainly increase the number of Haitian refugees seeking economic asylum in the U.S.

Enlightened Haiti Policy. The Clinton Administration’s policy on Haiti will not bring democracy or economic growth to Haiti; it will only lead to more suffering, turning the Haitian people against the U.S. while perpetuating the existence of a hostile military regime. It may even lead to a military invasion of Haiti, which would be a worse mistake. It is not in America’s interests to see Haiti become a de facto American colony led by an unpopular leader who can keep his power only at the end of a U.S. gun.

The only way out of the current policy is through negotiations with the present Haitian leadership, as objectionable as it is. A bi-partisan fact-finding commission could generate the mutual confidence that can lead to such negotiations and avoid the disastrous consequences of the present policy.

Michael G. Wilson
Senior Policy Analyst