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RUSH!

AVOIDING THE U.N. TRAP IN HAITI

Congress is considering several resolutions which establish deadlines for ending the U.S. occupation of Haiti. On September 28, the House Foreign Affairs Committee passed a non-binding resolution urging President Bill Clinton to withdraw U.S. troops from Haiti by March 1. The Administration is opposed to any deadline. It plans instead to "internationalize" the military occupation of Haiti at some undetermined future time, replacing the 20,000 U.S. soldiers now in Haiti with 6,000 United Nations troops, half of which would be American.

This would be a mistake. It would make any congressional deadline on a troop withdrawal meaningless. Thousands of U.S. soldiers would remain behind, trapped in a poorly organized U.N. force, and committed to a military mission that is misconceived and ill-defined. To avoid this trap, Congress should establish a December 31 deadline for U.S. withdrawal that would ban all U.S. military involvement in a U.N. peacekeeping force for Haiti.

Nation-Building, Not Peacekeeping. The military occupation of Haiti, whether led by the U.S. or the U.N., will have broad responsibility for the political, social, and economic reconstruction of Haiti. Despite President Clinton's assurances that this form of "nation-building" would be the responsibility of the international community, the Administration's plans call for committing U.S. troops to a U.N. operation that would have nation-building at the top of its agenda.

In fact, despite the protestations of the President, America already is in the nation-building business in Haiti. U.S. troops in Haiti now exercise primary responsibility for maintaining civil order. Indeed, U.S. Lieutenant General Hugh Shelton, the senior commander in Haiti, is being referred to as "the President" by the Haitians because he, and not General Raoul Cedras, is the man in charge. U.S. forces have had to intervene to stop civil violence and unrest. In cities outside the capital of Port-au-Prince, U.S. military officers even distribute food and water to the population. Over time U.S. troops are sure to be dragged even deeper into the political and economic turmoil of Haiti. It is only a matter of time before American casualties occur.

U.N. Peacekeeping: The Lessons of Somalia. The risks to American troops only will get worse when the Haiti mission is turned over to the U.N. Many developing countries will contribute troops that are poorly equipped and trained. Haitians who opposed the U.S. occupation will threaten these peacekeepers with violence to discredit the U.N. operation. This is precisely what happened in Somalia last year. American troops were forced to come to the aid of Pakistani peacekeepers targeted by Somali warlords. Thus began the chain of events that led directly to the death of 18 U.S. Rangers on October 3, 1993. American lives surely will be lost in this manner once the U.N. takes over the Haiti operation.

Adding to the danger to American troops will be the confused command structure of U.N. peacekeeping operations. Congress rightly was distressed when U.S. troops were put under foreign command in Somalia. Given the tragedy that occurred there, the Clinton Administration will try to maintain as much control as possible over the U.N. peacekeeping operation in Haiti. But trying to keep political and command control will only deepen U.S. involvement in the nation-building of Haiti, which will be the U.N.'s long-term goal. The U.S. will end up trying to achieve a mission that is impossible. And, as happened in Somalia, it will find itself gradually taking over the U.N. definition of the mission as its own. The result will be even more confusion and even greater risks to American lives.

With Confused Objectives, A Deadline Is Needed. To be sure, normally it is not a good idea to impose a deadline on a military operation. But the Clinton Administration's mission in Haiti is not a classic military operation. If Clinton's objective of nation-building were to be achieved, it would take years and cost many American lives and billions of dollars. A similar effort earlier this century lasted nearly two decades and cost over 200 American lives—and Haiti was no closer to democracy afterward. As should be well known to the Clinton Administration, those who ignore the lessons of history are condemned to relive them.

To avoid yet another tragic failure in nation building, Congress should establish a deadline of December 31—and not March 1—for ending American military involvement in Haiti. This deadline should apply also to U.S. participation in a U.N. peacekeeping operation. American troops would probably still be in Somalia today were it not for the congressionally imposed deadline established in the wake of the American deaths there last October. The Congress should not wait for a similar tragedy to occur needlessly in Haiti.

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