

10/29/96

Number
282

SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT ON HAITI

(Updating *Backgrounder Update* 241, "Democracy a Casualty of Aristide's Bid for Power," February 28, 1995.)

The Clinton Administration claims that its military intervention in Haiti has been one of the greatest foreign policy successes in American history. During the vice presidential debate on October 9, 1996, Vice President Albert Gore said that Operation Restore Democracy is "one of the most deft uses of diplomacy and military force in combination that you will find anywhere in the annals of the history of this country."

The truth, however, is that two years after Jean-Bertrand Aristide was restored to the Haitian presidency under the protective umbrella of 23,000 American soldiers—and at a cost of \$3 billion to America's taxpayers—Haiti remains a cauldron of barely contained violence. Despite this ill-advised intervention in domestic Haitian politics, democracy has not come to Haiti.

Instead, a one-party government controlled by Aristide's Lavalas party has shut out most of Haiti's genuine democrats. An Aristide puppet, Rene Preval, now rules Haiti as president. Economic reforms are stalled. There are no property rights. The judicial system does not function. An inexperienced and weak U.S.-trained Haitian police force has been unable to stop political killings, and is outnumbered by more than 6,000 armed members of rival left-wing gangs and right-wing demobilized soldiers who are responsible for growing urban and rural violence. Economic and political pressures to migrate from Haiti to the U.S. remain high. Finally, despite massive amounts of U.S. aid, about 70 percent of the people are illiterate, and 60 percent remain unemployed.

President Preval: Aristide's Puppet. Aristide would still be president of Haiti today if the Clinton Administration had not pressured him strongly in 1995 to step aside and allow a democratic transition of power to a new elected president. Aristide chose Rene Preval as his successor. On December 17, 1995, Preval, a lifelong friend and close supporter of Aristide, was elected President of Haiti.

However, turnout was light as 21 Haitian political parties boycotted the elections to protest what some opposition leaders called Aristide's "use of the cloak of democracy to justify the installation of a dictatorship."¹ More than 70 percent of the country's 3.7 million eligible voters stayed home, many of them intimidated by supporters of Aristide who systematically harassed and murdered his political opponents throughout 1995 in advance of the presidential elections.

1 Jorge A. Banales, "Haitian Criticizes Electoral Climate," United Press International, December 8, 1995.

Some two dozen democratic Haitian leaders opposed to Aristide were murdered during 1995 while Aristide was still in power—and while American troops were still stationed in large numbers on Haitian soil. Members of Aristide's hand-picked, U.S.-trained palace security unit in Port-au-Prince were implicated directly in many of these killings. Nonetheless, Aristide rejected private entreaties by U.S. Ambassador to Haiti William Swing, Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, and other U.S. officials that he fire the suspects and order police investigations.

Clinton: Unable to Stop the Killing. On September 24, 1996, White House counsel Jack Quinn notified Representative Benjamin Gilman (R-NY), Chairman of the House Committee on International Relations, that President Clinton had invoked executive privilege to deny a request for key documents that might shed some light on whether the Administration has tried to conceal the fact that U.S. officials have known since early 1995 that "death squads" loyal to Aristide are operating out of the presidential palace.

Representative Gilman says that the Clinton Administration "has been aware since early 1995 that death-squads were operating under the direction of top security aides to President Aristide."² Ambassador Swing reported the first killings in a cable to the State Department dated February 18, 1995; he also admitted in a September 1995 cable to the State Department that the Aristide government had stonewalled an FBI investigation of these political assassinations. In fact, not one of the Clinton Administration officials who testified before or briefed the House Committee on International Relations on ten separate occasions in 1995 ever revealed any information about these specific reports of palace death squads. The first such acknowledgment did not occur until public testimony before the committee on January 4, 1996.

When Preval became president in 1996, Aristide's palace guards—trained in Virginia by American security experts at a cost of more than \$5.5 million to U.S. taxpayers—remained at Preval's side. Moreover, killers assigned to the presidential security unit continued to gun down Aristide's opponents. The Clinton Administration, for example, has information implicating members of the palace guard in the August 20, 1996, political assassinations of the Reverend Antoine Leroy and Jacques Fleurival, leaders of the opposition Mobilization for National Development (MDN), in Port-au-Prince. Deputy Secretary of State Talbott, however, did not tell the House committee, in sworn written testimony submitted on September 9, 1996, that Haitians implicated in the 1995 political killings of Aristide's opponents remained in the Haitian palace guard.

On September 13, 1996, the Clinton Administration rushed 22 armed bodyguards from the State Department's Bureau of Diplomatic Security (DS) to Port-au-Prince to guard the life of President Preval. This group of American security officials was reinforced by 22 Navy and Air Force civilian guards and contractors, in addition to 70 Canadian soldiers who were deployed in a security perimeter surrounding the presidential palace. The day before the U.S. bodyguards arrived in Port-au-Prince, Preval transferred the head of the palace guard (Joseph Moise) and his deputy (Milien Romage) to other security functions within the Haitian government. As many as a dozen political assassins loyal to Aristide may still hold their jobs in the palace guard, working alongside U.S. government bodyguards assigned to protect Preval.

Haiti's rising violence and political instability reportedly have prodded Pentagon planners to revisit contingency plans for the possible reintroduction of U.S. troops. These troops would be in addition to the 160 U.S. soldiers of the 82nd Airborne Division that were deployed briefly in July 1996 after the Clinton Administration learned of credible assassination threats against Aristide and Preval, and 50 U.S. Marines that were sent to Port-au-Prince on August 20, 1996, following the commando-style executions of opposition leaders Leroy and Fleurival. Although Clinton Administration officials have explained the rotation of American combat troops through Haiti as "training exercises," Ambassador Swing acknowledged to Con-

2 News release, "Statement of Chairman Benjamin A. Gilman, Full Committee Hearing on Administration Action and Political Murders in Haiti: Part II." Committee on International Relations, U.S. House of Representatives, September 27, 1996.

gress on September 27, 1996, that these small U.S. troop deployments are intended to augment security and keep the lid on Haiti.

Stuck in Haiti. Prominent Members of Congress suspect that the Clinton Administration is misleading both Congress and the American people about Haiti. Congressional efforts to overcome the Administration's stonewalling on Haiti should be intensified. In an October 22, 1996, press release issued by the House International Relations Committee, Representative Gilman said that "Enough evidence exists to justify a further inquiry into the possible existence of a conspiracy to withhold this information from Congress."³

The House and Senate should challenge President Clinton's use of executive privilege to hide the failure of Operation Restore Democracy. They can do this by holding hearings on Haiti and by compelling the appearance—as witnesses under oath—of top Administration officials involved in Haiti policy.

If the Administration balks at disclosing the truth about Haiti, Congress should take steps to block all financial aid to Haiti from the Agency for International Development (AID) and multilateral lenders such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Inter-American Development Bank. Congress also should block further U.S. funding for the Canadian-led U.N. security mission in Haiti and compel the withdrawal of all remaining U.S. troops and other American security officials from Haiti. Finally, the U.S. should make it clear to Haiti's government and people that all Haitian immigrants caught trying to enter America illegally will be repatriated immediately and without appeal.

Congress needs to get to the bottom of what is going on in Haiti. U.S. personnel in Haiti are in danger of becoming not guarantors of democracy, but a palace guard for a corrupt and bloody regime.

John P. Sweeney
Policy Analyst

3 News release, "Gilman Releases Staff Report on Political Killings in Haiti," Committee on International Relations, U.S. House of Representatives, October 22, 1996.

