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## Humanitarian Occupation of Haiti: 100 Years and Counting

By Mark Schuller

July 28, 2015

This Tuesday marks the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the commencement of the U.S. Occupation of Haiti. On July 28, 1915, U.S. Marines landed on the shores of Haiti, occupying the country for 19 years. Several college campuses, professional associations, social movements, and political parties are marking the occasion with a series of reflections and demonstrations. Several have argued that the U.S. has never stopped occupying Haiti, even as military boots left in 1934. Some activists are using the word “humanitarian occupation” to describe the current situation, denouncing the loss of sovereignty, as U.N. troops have been patrolling the country for over 11 years. The phrase “humanitarian occupation” may seem distasteful and even ungrateful to some considering the generosity of the response to the January 12, 2010 earthquake, however there are several parallels between the contemporary aid regime and the U.S. Marine administration. First and foremost, foreign troops are on the ground, controlling the country; the military regimes operated with complete immunity and impunity. Second, a new constitution was installed, centralizing power in the executive. Third, both occupations involved Haiti’s gold resources.

### Military Maneuvers

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The U.S. Marines invaded Haiti ostensibly to restore order, disrupted by the *kako*, an armed peasant resistance. From 1910 to the 1915 invasion of the U.S. Marines, Haiti had 7 presidents, marked with violent clashes between two factions of Haiti's ruling elites. The exploits of the occupying forces were well documented, including by soldiers themselves. Faustin Wirkus declared himself to be the "White King of La Gonave." Many troops were from Jim Crow South, and they took their racism and white supremacy with them. This racism colored how they saw elements of Haitian culture and folklore, and in turn how the rest of the world was to see Haiti. "Voodoo" and "zombies" were popularized by Hollywood, as the film industry was just taking off, announced by explicitly white supremacist *Birth of a Nation*. Haiti continued to play "boogieman," scaring foreigners through exotification.

This story is well-documented (see bibliography compiled by chair of Development Studies at the Faculté d'Ethnologie, Ilionor Louis). Apparently less understood is the current military occupation. On February 29, 2004, a multinational force led by the U.S. came to quell dissent following a U.S.-backed regime change. President Jean-Bertrand Aristide declared he was "kidnapped" aboard a U.S. military plane, to be dumped in the Central African Republic, which has had its share of violent coups and repressions. Less overtly imperialistic, under a U.N. banner, MINUSTAH, the International United Nations Mission for the Stabilization of Haiti, took over on June 1, authorized by U.N. resolution 1542. The polyglot that peaked at over 13,000 troops from 54 countries is led by Brazil, which has been pressing for a permanent seat on the Security Council. Simultaneously, Brazil had made much of its success in pacifying the most dangerous of its *favelas*, shantytowns, including in Rio. The U.S. backed this proposal by France; Washington insiders confirmed my suspicions that the failures of the mission would be seen as proof that only a powerful, established imperialist country such as the U.S. could lead a mission and thus deserve a permanent seat. People in Haiti also saw MINUSTAH as serving U.S. interests, as Haitian NGO worker Yvette Desrosiers declared: "the Americans hide their face, they send Brazilians, Argentines... he's hidden but he's the one in command!" The mandate has been renewed every year, despite the fact that Haiti has much lower rates of violent crimes (8.2 per 100,000 people) than many of its Caribbean neighbors such as Jamaica that does not have a U.N. mission (54.9), or Brazil, heading up the U.N. mission (26.4).

Why would its mandate be renewed, following the 2006 elections that brought René Préval and his ruling Lespwa party to power? Colleagues in Haiti pointed out that the keyword "stabilization" refers to keeping the leaders in office and quelling dissent. In 2008, the country erupted in protest against the high cost of living; the so-called "political class" seized this opportunity to force the Prime Minister to resign. In 2009, activists mended fences over their

conflict over Aristide to call for an increase in the minimum wage, from 70 gourdes a day (\$1.75) to 200 (\$5). Both houses of Parliament voted unanimously to approve it. In a report for which he spent only days in the country to write, Oxford economist Paul Collier outlined a strategy of tourism, export mango production, and subcontracted apparel factories and suggested Bill Clinton as U.N. Special Envoy. Clinton and newly-named U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton met with Préval in support of the Collier Report. Bill Clinton publicly questioned the minimum wage increase as undercutting Haiti's "comparative advantage," and WikiLeaks documents outlined intense pressure to keep wages low. Préval rejected the 200 gourdes increase, unconstitutionally writing in a figure of 125 gourdes (a little over \$3) for workers in overseas apparel factories. Street-level demonstrations increased their intensity, and U.N. troops responded with increasing force. Certain areas of Port-au-Prince perennially smelled like tear gas at the time, more so than any period since the 2004 ouster of Aristide. MINUSTAH played a central role in suppressing dissent, taking a lead role instead of supporting the police, as their mandate dictates.

The U.N. also lost 92 troops, including its leader, Hédi Annabi, when the earthquake leveled their headquarters at the Hotel Christopher. Some argued that it was fortunate to have over 11,000 troops on the ground to assist in logistical support in the earthquake response. Indeed, many large U.S. NGOs employed them to "keep order" during distributions. The troops engaged in only minimal logistics in rebuilding. The quality of their construction work was called into question following an outbreak of cholera in October, barely nine months after the earthquake. Infected U.N. troops stationed outside of Mirebalais spread their fecal matter in leaky sewage from the base, which ran into Haiti's major river. Within days, the outbreak spread to the entire country. In addition to this epidemiological evidence, genetic evidence pinpointed the troops from Nepal as the source. Despite this overwhelming scientific evidence, the U.N. claimed immunity for this outbreak that has killed over 8500 people in four years and continues to kill. Lawyers from the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti and the Bureau des Avocats Internationaux sued the U.N. on behalf of the victims and their families. However, in January 2015, days before the fifth anniversary of the quake, a judge confirmed the U.N.'s immunity. This was the most egregious invocation of their immunity, but it was also confirmed following several cases of sexual abuse brought against U.N. troops.

### **Constitution Maybe Paper...**

A Haitian proverb declares *konstitisyon se papyè, bayonèt se fè*: a constitution is made of paper, a bayonet of iron. In other words, the pen is not mightier than the sword. In reality during

occupations, the pen is pushed by the sword. During the 1915 U.S. Marines Occupation, a young, ambitious secretary of the Navy, Franklin Delano Roosevelt bragged to have personally written the Haitian constitution, easily scuttled through the puppet regime installed by the Marines. This constitution, formally adopted in 1918, opened up land for foreign ownership, and formalized the linguistic exclusion and hegemony of the ruling classes by naming French as only official language. This constitution paved the way for U.S. agribusiness interests such as United Fruit (Chiquita) to buy up tracts of land, and capitalist speculators such as James P. McDonald to build a railroad, asking to own the tract for 13 miles on either side, almost all of Haiti's arable land. Needless to say this was a boon for foreign investors, and the local merchants who monopolized foreign trade, while expropriating thousands of peasant farmers. This move triggered a massive *kako* rebellion, of which Charlemagne Peralte was accused of being intellectual author. Marines lay his mutilated body on display on a public square, a warning to others.

Constitutional changes were also in store during the contemporary occupation. In addition to rejecting the increase in the minimum wage, Bill Clinton and the U.N. are also credited for introducing constitutional reforms. Haiti's 1987 constitution was the culmination of what Fritz Deshommes called a re-founding of the nation. The popular movements that succeeded in forcing out the Duvalier dictatorship stood fast against the military junta and repression. Passed with over 90 percent of the vote on March 29, 1987, the constitution was based on human rights, guaranteeing both liberal political rights like freedom of press, religion, and assembly as well as social rights such as education and housing. In addition, the constitution elevated Haitian Creole as official language, shared with French. Reeling from 29 years of the Duvalier dictatorship, the public was wary of centralization of power in the executive. The office of Prime Minister, to be ratified by Parliament, was put into place. Power was also shared in the Territorial Collectivities, including 570 communal sections.

Despite advances in gender equity and dual citizenship for Haitians living abroad, many of these gains were reversed by the amendments. The amendments to the constitution lay dormant, out of public view. In fact, Parliament voted to dissolve itself to make way for the Interim Haiti Reconstruction Commission (IHRC), co-chaired by Bill Clinton, in April 2010. Importantly the IHRC was to hand over governance to Parliament and the newly elected president. When Parliament was back in session in 2011, the first task laid out for them was to ratify the amendments to the constitution. President Michel Martelly, a.k.a. "Sweet Micky," the winner from the second round of a record low voter turnout of 22%, less than half the previous 2006 elections, pushed for the ratification. He was joined by several foreign agencies, apparently keen

on naming the Permanent Electoral Council in a top-down, rushed process that gave the current government the advantage. The coverage of this was murky and confused. Like all other laws, it needed to be published in the official journal of the State, *Le Moniteur*. Following all this discussion, it was not clear what the final version was. Only the French version was published.

Despite this uncertainty, some sectors apparently considered the constitutional amendments a *fait accompli*. President Martelly faced a growing opposition, which succeeded in forcing out Prime Minister Laurent Lamothe in December 2014. It was a surprise to many university professors, NGO staff, and activists the constitutional amendments *had* apparently been accepted, and one of the changes included that the President name a Prime Minister and apparently without requiring a full Parliamentary ratification. The new constitution allows for the leaders of both houses to agree. These two individuals had the most stake in the prolongation of their mandate following the deal reached with Martelly. When Prime Minister Lamothe resigned, Martelly named Evans Paul, a.k.a. K. Plim, who had perennially promoted and positioned himself as “mediator.” The terms of the lower house, the Deputies, were set to expire the second Monday of January, which turned out to be January 12, the fifth anniversary of the earthquake. In addition, a third of the Senate’s terms were also set to expire, meaning that this house too would be below quorum. The sticking point in the conflict between Martelly and the opposition was following the electoral law and naming the representatives for the Electoral Council. As Parliament teetered toward collapse, President Martelly’s hand grew stronger, and the international pressure to “negotiate” to avoid a “political crisis” grew. In effect international agencies like the European Union, the U.S., the U.N., and the World Bank were lining up to support Martelly. These actors concerned with “democracy” said nothing when Martelly replaced all but a handful of the country’s mayors. They indicated that if a negotiated solution – Martelly’s position hadn’t changed – was not reached, they would continue to support the government of Haiti even though he would have to rule by decree. This same state of affairs, ruling by decree, was cited by many of these same international agencies in 1999 as the reason they suspended assistance to Haiti.

What could account for foreign agencies’ change of heart?

## **Gold Diggers**

The first U.S. Occupation of Haiti, in 1915, occurred while the European former colonial powers were at war with one another. One particular justification for the invasion was the threat of German influence in the Western hemisphere. In 1909, German financial interests in Haiti topped the French, which had maintained a monopoly after forcing Haiti into debt since the 1825

indemnity, a condition for France to recognize Haitian independence. German financial interests were over a million gourdes (fixed in 1924, during the Occupation, until 1986 at five to the U.S. Dollar). The U.S. was second at just over 400,000 gourdes. The National City Bank attempted to control the customs houses, one of the only sources of revenue for the government. In 1911, National City Bank's Vice President Farnham became Vice President of the National Bank of the Republic of Haiti. In December 1914, just before the U.S. occupation, U.S. warships intervened to transport half a million dollars in gold from Haiti's national reserve.

History repeated itself in this aspect as well. While the UNDP had financed a study in the 1970s, mining activities increased exponentially after the earthquake. On May 11, 2012, reports of mining contracts were unearthed in the press. With a speculated estimated value of \$20 billion, this represents a significant wealth. However, given Haiti's infrastructure, especially after the earthquake, there is insufficient in-country capacity and even technical expertise to evaluate contracts. Significantly, the "exploitation" contracts were granted without Parliamentary approval. However, in February of 2013 Parliament responded, issuing a resolution calling for a moratorium on mining in Haiti, citing the questionable legality of the Conventions as one of their main concerns. Shortly thereafter, the Martelly administration successfully recruited the World Bank to support its effort to restructure its mining laws and obtained support from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to manage mining contracts and create a national cadaster.

Communities and civil society organizations have organized to promote their interests and defend their rights. At issue was local communities' participation and approval, given the loss of agricultural land and therefore peasant livelihood, not to mention the significant environmental damage mining causes. The contracts made no provisions for environmental review or protections. Finally, the contracts expropriated the vast majority of the profits out of the country. The campaign succeeded in a parliamentary inquiry and eventually a resolution in December 2012 with these safeguards in effect. Mining activity has been on hold in Haiti as the government rewrites the law.

The political situation in 2015, without a parliament and President Martelly ruling by decree, allowed for resumption. This – in addition to other development strategies such as high-end tourism that benefit foreign capitalist interests at the expense of local communities – is the main motivation colleagues attribute to the so-called "international community's" support of the current status. In fact the facilitating exploratory law was on the books in 2005, during the "transition" following Aristide's ouster. In addition to secrecy, which seems to be the modus operandi of capital advancement, companies openly cited MINUSTAH's presence as attracting

foreign investment. And so mining activities recommenced, with the World Bank not listening to local concerns, until a partisan right-wing journalist unearthed that one of these no-bid contracts went to none other than the brother of the then-Secretary of State, current Presidential Candidate, Hillary Rodham Clinton, this April.

### **Differences in Strategy**

There are obviously differences as well. Killing with kindness is a more powerful strategy. With a humanitarian mask, NGO aid has made inroads in almost all corners of the country. While the results of foreign aid are mixed, with most of the benefits accruing to foreign aid workers and local elite groups, a nonstop humanitarian occupation has led to greater complacency, dependency, and division. Explicitly racist and imperialist foreign troops might succeed in pacification and building institutions, but they also tend to trigger a violent, nationalist resistance. Contemporary foreign aid is more far-reaching, and more effective at quelling, buying off, or dividing potential threats to the foreign-imposed order.

### **Moral Hindsight is 20/20**

Today, the 1915 U.S. Occupation is denounced for being explicitly imperialistic. At the time, however, it enjoyed tacit support and occasionally active participation from segments of the U.S. population. President Hoover invited the Tuskegee Institute to participate in an exchange, helping to set up Damien, the School of Agronomy. And troops built a network of roads leading from provincial towns to the capital, which facilitated capital accumulation and centralization in Port-au-Prince. Finally U.S. Marines oversaw the completion in 1920 of a National Palace modeled after the White House. So-called “fair” assessments of the 1915 Occupation note these contributions. However these are almost always an afterthought in the collective social memory, in direct contrast to the ways in which the contemporary humanitarian occupation is being framed by many. Accounts of external efforts, the aid, often lead particular news stories. While the humanitarian effort has been critiqued in even mainstream accounts for its lack of coordination, failures in delivery, and shortcomings – notably in a June 3 exposé of the Red Cross – the discussion usually leaves intact foreigners’ good intentions, a reflection of what French medical anthropologist Didier Fassin called humanitarianism’s “moral untouchability.” One trope that has received increasing foreign attention is the impropriety of the Clintons, and occasionally the ineptitude of the U.N., however these accounts are most promoted within partisan outlets, such as *Fox News*.



What accounts for the difference in the understanding of the 1915 Marines Occupation and the contemporary humanitarian occupation? It must first be said that there are obviously differences of opinion, then and now. French anthropologist Michel Agier has called humanitarianism the “left hand of empire.” In the interim, sensibilities have changed; the “white man’s burden” and open expressions of white supremacy are – at least rhetorically – relegated to the fringe right, or so it seemed before the June 17 shooting in a historic Black church in Charleston, South Carolina and the hedging about the Confederate flag. Justifications for intervention must now be done on universal, ‘humanitarian’ grounds. Another difference is the proliferation of media forms and especially outlets. Humanitarian agencies have greater access to shape public discussions through blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Their efforts and intentions are received by tens if not hundreds of thousands of followers.

In 1915, U.S. Empire was in its ascendancy; the Spanish-American war granted U.S. control of Panama, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines. The so-called “Dollar Diplomacy” gave way to the more erudite “*mission civilatrice*” of Wilson, whose delay into what he called “the war to end all war” allowed U.S. American might to be cloaked in obligation. Now, U.S. Empire is showing signs of faltering. The U.S. financial debt to China and Saudi Arabia thwarts principled human rights justifications, the European Union and Japan provide counterweights to the hegemony of the U.S. dollar, the majority of Latin American nations elected leftist governments who set up cooperative institutions challenging the U.S., and Bush’s failed 2003 invasion of Iraq was done without the blessing of the U.N. Haiti in 2004, 2010, and 2015 provided a stage for readjustment. Haiti in 2004 re-united France and the U.S. over the ouster of Aristide (recall the fever pitch to which U.S. neoconservatives’ anti-French sentiment with the renaming of “freedom fries” in the Capitol). The right-wing Heritage Foundation published a position paper a day after the earthquake about the latter being an opportunity for the U.S. to reassert dominance in the region eroded by the U.N. troops, Cuban medical assistance, and Venezuelan institutions like Petro Caribe.

What is necessary is a critical history of the present, following an “anthropology of the past,” clear enough to pierce the fog of ideology. Such a position requires moral courage, to be willing to suffer consequences for defending present-day *kako* such as Charlemagne Péralte or even Dessalines.