Impact of September 11 on U.S. Haiti Policy

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I. Overview

For Haiti, September 11 has contributed to a hardening of U.S. refugee policy, but has not yet brought about a significant change in overall policy inherited from the Clinton administration. A qualitative change in Haiti policy at this point would entail a disengagement from the Aristide regime and the shifting of U.S. support to Haiti’s civil society and political opposition leadership. Washington, as of March 2003, lacked sufficient confidence in the opposition to make such a move, and so it continued a policy of unsuccessfully cajoling the regime for a minimum standard of governance. The disengagement option was being suggested by some leading voices outside the administration, but official policy remained, in Georges A. Fauriol’s striking words, “married to Jean-Bertrand Aristide.”

Post–September 11 concerns clearly registered in one realm, that of refugee policy. The boats interdicted in the fall of 2001 and especially the one that made it to the coast in December 2001 alarmed U.S. security planners. From December 2001 the administration began routinely detaining Haitian refugees who arrived by boat, a harsh policy applied to refugees of no other
nation. In 2002 the political price the administration was paying for such rank discrimination was climbing, as even the notoriously disorganized and passive Haitian-American community protested more and more vociferously.

September 11’s greatest impact on Haiti policy may lie in the future. Just as it contributed to a politically unpalatable decision on the refugees, so it may convince the administration that Haiti’s threat to border security cannot merely be fenced out, and a more proactive policy is needed toward Haiti itself. It is only nine years since President Clinton was driven to the same conclusion.

II. The Basic Policy, and How it Has So Far Resisted Revision by September 11

A. U.S. Interests in Haiti

U.S. interests in Haiti focus on the creation of a stable, legitimate government that would provide a predictable environment in which economic development could take place and so relieve the pressure of illegal emigration. For the United States, preventing illegal migration has long been the “most direct and potentially most explosive specific interest,” a leading former ambassador to Haiti has written.² A Haiti in chaos poses a difficult challenge to U.S. border control.

A second, related U.S. interest, also heightened in the aftermath of September 11, is blocking Haiti’s role as a narcotics transhipment country, an interest that is again crucially concerned with governance and official incapacity, if not collusion, with the drug trade.

There is also an economic interest but it is so small, less than one-tenth of 1 percent of U.S. exports, as to be insignificant.³

B. U.S. Policy Options in Haiti

While these interests have remained relatively constant for several decades, the policy instruments to attain them have oscillated in reaction to the rapidly shifting situation in Haiti and also to its ramifications in U.S. domestic politics. The general policy preference is to work with the existing government despite its warts, but the glaring abuses of successive regimes have sometimes made this impossible. This was the case during some periods of the Duvalier dynastic rule, the succession of military regimes following 1986, and the coup d’état regime of 1994-94. Temporary cutoff of aid to the government was the most frequent policy tool, but the first Bush administration resorted to an embargo against the 1991 military regime and the Clinton administration escalated this sanction into a U.N.-approved military intervention.

The Clinton intervention was a courageous effort to resolve the problem at the source. It came after intensive, high-level negotiations were sabotaged by both U.S. and Haitian actors.⁴ It might have succeeded, too, with adequate follow-through. But two months after the invasion, the Republicans captured both houses of Congress and perceived Clinton’s exposure in Haiti as a
tempting political target. Clinton responded by getting the U.S. troops out as quickly as possible and reducing his profile there in every conceivable way.

The majority of Haiti experts and aid agency heads, meeting for example in January 2002 at a U.N.D.P.-International Peace Academy conference in New York, have said that this U.S. departure from Haiti after 1994 was too precipitous and brought on the subsequent policy failure. The United States was driven by an exit strategy rather than a vision of reconstruction. It brought a one-year strategy for a ten-year problem. That left too much dependent on the hope that a charismatic leader, not the painstaking construction of durable political institutions, could lead to democratic governance. Deprived of international protection, the promising beginnings of institutional reform were overtaken by this leader’s drive for a monopoly of power in the traditional Haitian fashion.

“The operation became a fiasco because of a refusal on the part of the United States to assume its attendant responsibilities,” a Le Monde writer has observed. “In the absence of internationally-supported nation-building, internecine quarrels, driven by the thirst for power, found fertile ground.”

The Republican administration inherited from Clinton a policy of extracting promises from Aristide by presidential envoy and changed it to a policy of extracting promises by the assistant secretary-general of the OAS. In neither case were any of the promises carried out, to the point that in Haiti today there is a quickening pace of violence against the news media, opposition groups, and independent judges and no realistic prospect of free and fair elections. As a result the pressure for illegal emigration is increasing and Haiti has become a haven for drug traffickers. As of the writing of this paper, the Bush administration planned one more trip, with both presidential envoy and OAS assistant secretary-general, to warn Aristide “one last time.”

C. Policy Before and After September 11

Georges A. Fauriol has provided an invaluable snapshot of Bush administration policy on the eve of September 11. He warned that negotiations with the regime were going nowhere, and that the regime was using them to avoid power-sharing with the domestic opposition and civil society. The Bush administration shared the fatigue with Haiti and so was overly eager to reach a deal, any deal, with Aristide. And while the Bush administration had indeed replaced the swarthy personal relationship between U.S. presidential envoys and Aristide with a more correct diplomatic relationship through the OAS, it had yet to achieve a policy stance and leadership that in any way differentiated it from the Clinton administration. “The arrival of the Bush administration should enable Washington to start fresh, yet so far it has not really done so.”

September 11 was bracketed by two notable spasms of violence in Haiti occasioned by alleged coup attempts, one in July and the other in December 2001. These provided the rationale for widespread crackdowns on the opposition. The assaults and arson by the paid gangs of the regime against the opposition leaders, who played no role in either coup attempt—if indeed they were that—threw up a new and nearly insuperable barrier to negotiations. These negotiations had
first been mediated by a domestic civil-society group, with some success, and then by the OAS, with no success.

Yet neither September 11 itself, nor the intensification of repression, brought any move other than rhetorical by the Bush administration to disembarrass itself of the troublesome regime in Haiti. On the contrary, by August 2002 it agreed to lift even the mild sanctions that President Clinton had imposed in a vain attempt to correct rigged elections. It now followed a futile policy of dangling the prospect of renewed direct financial assistance to the regime in an attempt to modify its behavior. The answer has been such a crescendo of threats and violence against the independent press that Reporters Sans Frontières has now placed President Aristide in its gallery of “press predators.”

The initial impact, then, of September 11 on U.S. Haiti policy was almost nil as the attention of top policy-makers was riveted elsewhere. The object of those tending Haiti policy was not to fix the problem but merely to keep a lid on it so as not to distract top policy-makers from more important things. This has meant a continuation of the Clinton policy of basing U.S. policy on Aristide: the devil you know is better than the one you don’t. In a longer historical perspective, it is merely another oscillation of U.S. policy back toward toleration of the regime such as the Johnson, Nixon, and Reagan administrations found expedient in earlier decades. Working with Aristide also relieves some of the political pressure brought by his astute, lavish public-relations campaign in the United States, which has brought into existence a special interest devoted to the regime’s fortunes rather than generalized U.S. and Haitian interests.

D. Dilemma of Stability

The problem with the approach of basing policy on Aristide is that it diverts from the primordial U.S. goal of stabilization and legitimation of an effective government in Haiti and ties the United States to an inherently unstable regime. The essence of the Aristide presidency is to resurrect and project into the twenty-first century the traditional Haitian model of the winner-take-all presidency which has been a formula for instability for nearly two centuries. It requires a monopoly of control of government institutions such as the parliament, police, judiciary, and electoral machinery totally at variance with the 1987 constitution and is focused on the perpetuation of personal presidential power, traditionally through repeated terms or life presidencies, although circumstances may now require use of a family member or other stand-in. The model of power has throughout Haiti’s history provoked numerous uprisings and coups, relieved only by periods of severe repression such as the Duvaliers’. But in a Haiti that has tasted of democracy and sees the progress registered by relatively democratic regimes all around it, this model, always inappropriate, is today a gross anachronism and a recipe for endemic instability. As Jacky Dahomay writes, “The nature of the current crisis is there: a government that strives to be above the law at the same time that current historical conditions demand the democratic exercise of power.”

The Bush administration is then torn between its desire for temporary stability, which binds it to the regime, and a growing realization that no stability is possible with this regime.
President Aristide has boasted that no one else can govern Haiti. But it is becoming painfully apparent that he is not governing Haiti either, in any meaningful sense of the word.

Before turning, however, to the potential of September 11 to transform the current unsuccessful policy, we consider the areas in which September 11 has already had an impact.

III. Existing Impacts of September 11

A. Refugee Policy

In the months after September 11, the Bush administration imposed a policy of routinely detaining all Haitian refugees who arrived by boat. It made no public announcement of this policy change. Nevertheless, the change was dictated both by traditional refugee policy and by the heightened security climate following September 11.

According to traditional refugee policy, which is based on considerable historical evidence, Haitian boat emigration is entirely driven by the pull factor. Once potential migrants believe they have a chance to remain, they are encouraged to take to the boats. "INS contends that to release the group into the community would send a wrong signal back to Haiti that could trigger a mass migration into Florida," a spokesman of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, Mario Ortiz, said in defending the jailing of refugees. Hence a policy of making arrival on U.S. shores as unattractive as possible is fully consistent with the traditional approach. Nevertheless, September 11 played a role in reinforcing this decision. September 11's heightening of security concerns made the politically-difficult choice to discriminate against the Haitian boat people an easier one for the administration to take.

The arrival last October of a boatload of 211 Haitians in Key Biscayne was an indicator that the detention policy was not working sufficiently to deter new emigrants. The onset of favorable winds and weather conditions this month and next, coupled with intensified repression that will give many emigrants a colorable case for political asylum, will be a further test of the policy.

These Haitian arrivals alarmed U.S. security planners to an extent not yet publicly revealed. "If two hundred Haitian refugees could make it to the Rickenbacker Causeway in downtown Miami, could two hundred al-Qaida terrorists make it to the Rickenbacker Causeway in downtown Miami?" Florida senator Bob Graham asked last October. While no one believes that Haitian migrants are violent, the penetration by the boat of U.S. borders is a matter of serious concern post-September 11. Another boat could be carrying weapons.

As Robert L. Bach and Robert Maguire have pointed out, the real security problem runs much deeper. When President Clinton was in the throes of indecision over Haiti policy in 1994, the boatlift of twenty thousand hopeful Haitian emigrants was temporarily housed at Guantanamo until Clinton made up his mind. The existing mass migration emergency plan for Florida still relies on Guantanamo as the holding center. But Guantanamo is no longer available.
Now used as a military prison for al-Qaeda members, it is off limits to other civilians. A mass migration would strain the resources of the U.S. government.

There are no alternatives to Guantanamo. The search for regional partners to house these refugees failed in 1994 and is futile today as other countries, including even France and Canada, consider Haiti to be America’s problem. A mass boatlift today would divert extensive military and law-enforcement resources that are currently dedicated to homeland security. During the 1994 migration emergency, seventeen Coast Guard cutters, five navy ships, and nine aircraft were used for detection and transport. These resources are now overstretched by the existing traffic of thousands of cargo ships and recurring terrorist-threat conditions. Yet Haiti is capable of launching hundreds of small boats. From Jan. 2 to Oct. 26, 2002, the National Migration Office recorded more than 19,778 cases of forced repatriations by U.S., Bahamian, Cuban, and Dominican authorities.

For it is not merely pull, as the administration believes. There is also a new push factor that will interact with and reinforce the pull: mounting repression. Beginning last November, the previously scattered opposition of small political parties and civil-society groups was increasingly joined by thousands from the slums. The crackdown on the demonstrators by the regime’s armed thugs was nationwide and brutal, and this year Haiti will be capable of generating an unending stream of both economic and political refugees. According to a recent poll, fully 67 percent of the Haitian population would emigrate if they could. Many of the political refugees will be eligible for asylum by a plain reading of U.S. law. In the past five years, immigration courts have received more than twenty-one thousand asylum applications from Haitians but have approved just over 5 percent. But as immigration judges in the United States acknowledge the growing volume of reports of repression, more and more asylum applicants stand to win their cases or have them continued. Combined with the inexorable push effect, word of these court victories would reinforce the pull effect, generating a new wave of applicants, many of them bearing whatever affidavits or news stories they can bring.

The Bush administration in 2001 believed that September 11 security concerns justified a detention policy that was flagrantly discriminatory against black Haitian migrants. Such an operationally racist policy rightly incensed leaders of the African-American community and Haitian-rights advocates in 1994, and will again. The only check on the justified indignation of this community is some of its members’ morally compromised relationship with the regime of Jean-Bertrand Aristide. In the same breath as they advocate political asylum for the refugees, they maintain that Aristide’s regime is democratic—a contradiction in terms. Once the baleful effect of this special interest is overcome, however, continued discrimination could exact a high political cost for the Bush administration. “The United States is treating Haiti as if it were a state that sponsored terrorism,” a popular National Public Radio reporter noted, but “the real motive has more to do with race than homeland security.”

“The Bush administration tightened an already inhumane policy that indefinitely detains all Haitians who arrive by boat,” the Miami Herald editorialized. “No other nationals, except Haitians, are systematically subjected to such bogus asylum proceedings.”
Such criticism impelled Governor Jeb Bush to intervene seeking a moderation of the policy. So politically sensitive is this question that some Haitians claimed, without proof, that Aristide himself sent the boat that reached Key Biscayne last October in an attempt to embarrass the Bushes and pressure them to release unconditional funds to the regime.\textsuperscript{22}

The high political cost of a flagrantly discriminatory policy could combine with September 11's heightened border security concerns to impel President Bush to the same conclusion that President Clinton reluctantly reached: that the problem has to be dealt with at the source.

\textit{B. Border Policy}

Another post–September 11 impact on policy has been heightened U.S. military cooperation with the Dominican army. It was reported last December that the United States planned to hand out twenty thousand M-16 assault rifles to the twenty-three-thousand-member Dominican army. The United States also rotates as many as nine hundred soldiers every fifteen days as part of joint military training exercises with the Dominican army.\textsuperscript{23} The purpose is to seal off the border.

As Kathie Klarreich has written, “The United States is trying to put an iron seal around Haiti to make sure that there is no mass exodus.” U.S. security planners also fear that terrorists will use the unprotected border to enter the United States through Haiti.

The attempt to make the three-hundred-mile Dominican border a militarized zone conflicts with the reality of routine travel and migration, in which Haitians cross the border in search of work that Dominicans no longer wish to do, or in order to buy and sell goods. In Dajabon, the Dominican Republic’s northwestern border town, about twelve thousand Haitians cross over twice a week for market days.

Klarreich warns of a potentially “explosive situation,” in which the United States exploits the Dominicans’ historic fear of the “black Haitian” by offering joint exercises, military training, and free weaponry.

Thus both in Florida and on the Dominican border, post–September 11 policy actions have dealt harshly with Haitian refugees, creating the appearance of racism, threatening a deterioration of Dominican-Haitian relations, and removing the safety valve within Haiti of emigration. This attempt to seal in the problem could make the eventual explosion even greater.

\textbf{IV. Future Impact of September 11 on Basic Policy}

It is in the realm of providing a new ideological justification for a difficult policy change that September 11 may have its greatest impact on Haiti policy. Its contribution to a hardening of refugee policy has been noted.
The vast potential it has to change policy is now before our eyes in the impending war in Iraq. For the situation on the ground in Iraq was no different after September 11 than immediately before; it was the cataclysmic events of that day that made the Bush administration decide that Saddam Hussein could no longer be tolerated. Similarly, if the situation in Haiti continues to deteriorate to the point of threatening a major boatlift or other threat to U.S. borders, September 11 could provide the final rationale for a decision to seek an alternative to the present ineffective regime.

As Stephen Johnson, an analyst well attuned to the conservative Republicans atop the policy hierarchy, has written, if the few existing jobs vanish and the state dissolves amidst violence and chaos, “another full-scale intervention may become inevitable.”

Previously, the Bush administration would have ideologically resisted any such decision as the scorned “nation-building” that candidate Bush denounced during the campaign. But with the September 11–driven choice of regime overthrow in Iraq, and the promise to replace it with a democratic Iraqi regime, the administration has already committed itself to the most ambitious nation-building program in U.S. history. This power of September 11 to overcome the ideological aversion to nation-building could have major effects on administration psychology in Haiti as well. Should a breakdown in public order in Haiti draw deeper U.S. involvement, nation-building will be seen in a new light. Rather than fuzzy liberal idealism it could become a necessary measure to secure U.S. borders.

To be sure, the Bush administration to date has given no sign of considering deeper involvement in Haiti, and the most qualified observers and officials discount the possibility that it would. "The Bush administration is not going to get involved in an intervention in Haiti," Prof. Henry F. Carey has said. Although a Canadian official recently floated the idea of tutelage at a brainstorming session attended by U.S. officials, there was no response from any other officials present, especially American, and this official has not been sustained by his own government. A recent series of interviews of top U.S. officials confirms that it is not part of their discourse.

The concept nevertheless has traction outside official circles. A former high international official in Haiti raised it at a conference, noting the tension between Haiti’s formally sovereign status and the need for members of the United Nations to devise new methods to aid stricken countries in this category. Similarly Alain Tourraine has noted that it is a case where the United Nations should help create the basic conditions for democracy.

Thus as the erosion of public security makes Haiti a refugee factory and a haven for international drug traffickers and criminals, September 11 might provide the rationale for a decision that this administration could take in no other way.

Endnotes


3. Ibid., p. 82.


16. Ibid.


