

Restorative Powers

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Ten years ago, U.S. forces invaded Haiti and restored President Jean-Bertrand Aristide to power. Yesterday, rebels undid our handiwork, forcing Aristide into exile and throwing Haiti's future into uncertainty. In 1994, Aristide duped the White House into believing he was a Caribbean Mandela; he was, in fact, a megalomaniacal demagogue. After his return to power, he presided over the disintegration of democracy in Haiti; by any standard, the remaining years of his presidency were a disaster. All of which might appear to call into question Bill Clinton's decision to invade Haiti and install Aristide in 1994. In fact, far from casting doubt on his decision, history has vindicated Clinton's intervention. Aristide may have been a thug, and Haiti may now be better off without him, but restoring him to power was the right thing to do.

Overthrown in a military coup just seven months after winning his country's presidency with two-thirds of the vote, Aristide spent his exile stumping across the United States and attracting admirers on Capitol Hill. He said all the right things to his American hosts--about cultivating the rule of law, about building a middle class, and about adhering to a constitution. He was modest, too. Though his Washington backers argued that he should get three extra years in office to compensate for his exile, he vowed not to stay on past 1995, because doing so might appear to prolong Haiti's tradition of dictatorship. "I think there is more grandeur in stepping down," he told *The New Yorker*. "It's the constitutional thing to do and it's the statesmanlike thing to do."

But his supporters--Clinton among them--ignored evidence that Aristide was not the voice of reason he proclaimed to be. As a populist clergyman, he had already shown a tendency to rely on mobs. In 1993, the director of Human Rights Watch pointed out that during his brief stint as president, Aristide had refused to condemn 25 lynchings perpetrated by his followers, and that "he condoned threats of popular violence against the judiciary and the legislature." In a memoir released that same year, Aristide said that representative democracy was not an "indispensable corollary" to human rights.

Turns out Aristide was merely saying what his American hosts wanted to hear. He never nurtured the civil institutions that form the cornerstones of democracy--such as a market economy, an independent judiciary, and a functional bureaucracy. Meanwhile, he started arming militias loyal to his party, Lavalas. He had to be persuaded by several heads of state to leave office at the end of his term in 1995, which he did reluctantly and only after anointing a successor (and surrogate) in René Préval. When the constitutional liberals of Lavalas grew frustrated with his puppetry of Préval, Aristide formed his own political faction whose singular ideology was fealty to him. In 2000, he rigged 14 of 19 legislative elections; he soon rigged his own return to power. He has completely undone what modest democratic traditions Haitians struggled to build in the early 1990s.

Given this history, how can one defend Clinton's decision to restore Aristide to power? In 1994, Clinton faced an immediate human rights crisis in Haiti. The military junta of

Raoul Cedras, who had overthrown Aristide three years earlier, was perhaps the Western hemisphere's most brutal regime; ending his dictatorship was alone ample cause for action. Cedras's minions hunted, beat, extorted, and killed thousands of Aristide loyalists, functioning as the apparatus of a police state, much as Francois Duvalier's Tonton Macoutes--gangsters accountable to the president alone--had in previous decades. In Haiti, where most of the citizens are illiterate, Lavalas partisans carried wallet-sized photos of Aristide to express their solidarity and remind them of their democratic aspirations. During Cedras's rule, those found with photos of Aristide were often executed. As a result, an entire class of rank-and-file Aristide devotees was forced into hiding.

Moreover, the Haiti intervention demonstrated that on matters of foreign policy, the Clinton administration would (at least sometimes) back up its words with action. Clinton had promised "to make it clear in the strongest possible terms that we will not now or ever support the continuation of an illegal government in Haiti." Later, he endorsed the 1993 Governors Island agreement, which offered amnesty to members of the Cedras government in exchange for Aristide's return. By toppling Cedras, Clinton showed that his administration meant what it said on foreign policy. After all, if the United States was willing to fight in Haiti--the poorest country in the Western hemisphere, and one with virtually no strategic importance--then presumably it would back up its words anywhere.

Many conservatives, who expressed disdain for the Haiti intervention at the time, should in fact credit Clinton for acting on a foreign policy principle that George W. Bush now holds dear: the idea that following through on credible threats increases the power of future American diplomacy. *The Wall Street Journal*, for example, which complained last week that Haiti was "supported lock, stock, and machete by the U.S. liberal foreign policy establishment" has also attributed Muammar Qaddafi's WMD about-face to the strong message sent by Bush's invasion of Iraq.

No one talks much about the success of the message President Clinton sent to Latin America by ousting the Haitian junta. To be sure, quantifying the benefits of such messages is always an inexact science. But consider that between 1960 and 1990, there were 44 successful military coups in Latin America; since Haiti invasion in 1994, there have been almost none. The United States sent a message to Latin America that military coups--which our government had tolerated, and often encouraged, for decades--were no longer to be the norm on the continent. Moreover, the United States signaled a major shift in our priorities in the Americas. During the cold war, the United States cared little whether leaders brutalized their own people as long as they demonstrated fealty to Washington. Now, Clinton was saying, Latin American leaders would be judged first and foremost by whether they delivered democracy to their people. Aristide was a dubious character--but he was a *democratically elected* dubious character. He was, morally and practically, far preferable to a military junta. His restoration represented a show of confidence by the United States in the then-nascent democracies that were taking root all across Latin America.

The message Clinton sent was not just intended for Latin America, however; it was also intended for the world. Clinton's administration had begun with two foreign policy disasters--our weak exit from Somalia in 1993 and our shameful decision to ignore the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. The United States was in danger of putting the world on

notice that our post-cold war foreign policy would consist of two guiding principles: run and hide. Somalia, our first attempt at humanitarian intervention after the end of the cold war, had concluded in disaster. Had we shirked confrontation in Haiti just one year after fleeing Somalia, the idea of humanitarian intervention as a cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy in the 1990s might not have lived to see another day. Who knows whether Clinton would have had the moral courage to face down Slobadan Milosevic over Kosovo had he waited another five years to try his hand at liberal interventionism.

Conservatives and realists have a troubling tendency to view Third World countries as the home of cyclical evil--evil so endemic that it is somehow beyond the repair of human action. One can understand how they would be tempted, given the last month's events, to view Haiti as Exhibit A for this worldview. After the billions of dollars the United States spent there, after the hard work of U.S. marines who fought there, what have we to show for our efforts? Just another poor, troubled country where all the good intentions in the world seem to have netted so little gain. And this is true, in a way. But if our 1994 liberation of Haiti failed to democratize the country, it also put an end to the brutalization of a people by a military junta. And it sent a message that, however timidly, the United States had begun to rethink how it would use power in the post-cold war world. Which is why, despite the complexities of the unfolding situation in Haiti, two things can be said with certainty: Haiti is better for the fact that Jean-Bertrand Aristide is now in exile. And the world is better for the fact that we put him in power ten years ago.