
From His First Day in Office, Bush Was Ousting Aristide

If the circumstances were not so calamitous, the American-orchestrated removal of former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide from Haiti would be farcical.

According to Aristide, American officials in Port-au-Prince told him that rebels were on the way to the presidential residence and that he and his family were unlikely to survive unless they immediately boarded an American-chartered plane standing by to take them to exile. The United States made it clear, he said, that it would provide no protection for him at the official residence, despite the ease with which this could have been arranged.

Indeed, according to Aristide's lawyer, the U.S. blocked reinforcement of Aristide's own security detail. At the airport, Aristide said, U.S. officials refused him entry to the airplane until he handed over a signed letter of resignation.

After being hustled aboard, Aristide was denied access to a phone for nearly 24 hours, and he knew nothing of his destination until he and his family were summarily deposited in the Central African Republic. He has since been kept hidden from view. Yet this Keystone Kops coup has apparently not worked entirely according to plan: Aristide has used a cellphone to notify the world that he was forcibly removed from Haiti at risk of death and to describe the way his resignation was staged by American forces.

The U.S. government dismisses Aristide's charges as ridiculous. Secretary of State Colin L. Powell has offered an official version of the events, a blanket denial based on the government's word alone. In essence, Washington is telling us not to look back,

only forward. The U.S. government's stonewalling brings to mind Groucho Marx's old line, «Who are you going to believe, me or your own eyes?»

There are several tragedies in this surrealistic episode. The first is the apparent incapacity of the U.S. government to speak honestly about such matters as toppling governments. Instead, it brushes aside crucial questions: Did the U.S. summarily deny military protection to Aristide, and if so, why and when? Did the U.S. supply weapons to the rebels, who showed up in Haiti last month with sophisticated equipment that last year reportedly had been taken by the U.S. military to the Dominican Republic, next door to Haiti? Why did the U.S. cynically abandon the call of European and Caribbean leaders for a political compromise, a compromise that Aristide had already accepted? Most important, did the U.S. in fact bankroll a coup in Haiti, a scenario that seems likely based on present evidence?

Only someone ignorant of U.S. history and of the administrations of George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush would dismiss these questions. The United States has repeatedly sponsored coups and uprisings in Haiti and in neighboring Caribbean countries.

Ominously, before this week, the most recent such episode in Haiti came in 1991, during the first Bush administration, when thugs on the CIA payroll were among the leaders of paramilitary groups that toppled Aristide after his 1990 election.

Some of the players in this round are familiar from the previous Bush administration, including of course Powell and Vice President Dick Cheney. Also key is U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Roger Noriega — a longtime aide to Jesse Helms and a no-

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torious Aristide-hater — widely thought to have been central to the departure of Aristide. He is going to find it much harder to engineer the departure of gun-toting rebels who entered Port-au-Prince on Wednesday.

Rarely has an episode so brilliantly exposed Santayana's famous aphorism that «those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.»

In 1991, when Congressional Black Caucus members demanded an investigation into the U.S. role in Aristide's overthrow, the first Bush administration laughed them off, just as this administration is doing today in facing new queries from Congressional Black Caucus members.

Indeed, those who are questioning the administration about Haiti are being smeared as naive and unpatriotic. Aristide himself is being smeared with ludicrous propaganda and, most cynically of all, is being accused of dereliction in the failure to lift his country out of poverty.

In point of fact, this U.S. administration froze all multilateral development assistance to Haiti from the day that George W. Bush came into office, squeezing Haiti's economy dry and causing untold suffering for its citizens. U.S. officials surely knew that the aid embargo would mean a balance-of-payments crisis, a rise in inflation and a collapse of living standards, all of which fed the rebellion.

Another tragedy in this episode is the silence of the media when it comes to asking all the questions that need answers. Just as in the war on Iraq's phony WMD, wherein the mainstream media initially failed to ask questions about the administration's claims, major news organizations have refused to go to the mat over the administration's accounts on Haiti. The media haven't had the gumption to find Aristide and, in failing to do so, to point out that he is being held away from such contact.

With a violence-prone U.S. government operating with impunity in many parts of the world, only the public's perseverance in getting at the truth can save us, and others, from our own worst behavior.

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