

## **COMMENT: Don't fall for Washington's spin on Haiti**

By Jeffrey Sachs Financial Times March 1, 2004

The crisis in Haiti is another case of brazen US manipulation of a small, impoverished country with the truth unexplored by journalists. In the nearly universal media line on the Haitian revolt, President Jean-Bertrand Aristide was portrayed as an undemocratic leader who betrayed Haiti's democratic hopes and thereby lost the support of his erstwhile backers. He "stole" elections and intransigently refused to address opposition concerns. As a result he had to leave office, which he did at the insistence of the US and France. Unfortunately, this is a gravely distorted view.

President George Bush's foreign policy team came into office intent on toppling Mr Aristide, long reviled by powerful US conservatives such as former senator Jesse Helms who obsessively saw him as another Fidel Castro in the Caribbean. Such critics fulminated when President Bill Clinton restored Mr Aristide to power in 1994, and they succeeded in getting US troops withdrawn soon afterwards, well before the country could be stabilised. In terms of help to rebuild Haiti, the US Marines left behind about eight miles of paved roads and essentially nothing else. In the meantime, the so-called "opposition", a coterie of rich Haitians linked to the preceding Duvalier regime and former (and perhaps current) CIA operatives, worked Washington to lobby against Mr Aristide.

In 2000, Haiti held parliamentary and then presidential elections, unprecedented in their scope. Mr Aristide's party, Fanmi Lavalas, clearly won the election, although candidates who won a plurality rather than a majority, and who should have faced a second-round election, also gained seats. Objective observers declared the elections broadly successful, albeit flawed.

Mr Aristide won the presidential election later that year, in a contest the US media now reports was "boycotted by the opposition" and hence, not legitimate. This is a cruel joke to those who know Haiti, where Mr Aristide was swept in with an overwhelming mandate and the opposition, such as it was, ducked the elections. Duvalier thugs hardly constituted a winning ticket and as such, did not even try. Nor did they have to. Mr Aristide's foes in Haiti benefited from tight links with the incoming Bush team, which told Mr Aristide it would freeze all aid unless he agreed with the opposition over new elections for the contested Senate seats, among other demands. The wrangling led to the freezing of \$500m in emergency humanitarian aid from the US, the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

The tragedy, or joke, is that Mr Aristide agreed to compromise, but the opposition simply balked; it was never the right time to hold elections, for example, because of "security" problems, they said. Whatever the pretext, the US maintained its aid freeze and the opposition maintained a veto over international aid. Cut off from bilateral and multilateral financing, Haiti's economy went into a tailspin.

All this is being replayed before our eyes. As Haiti slipped into deeper turmoil last month, Caribbean leaders called for a power-sharing compromise between Mr Aristide and the opposition. Once again, Mr Aristide agreed but the opposition merely demanded the president step down - reportedly rejecting even US Secretary of State Colin Powell's requests to compromise. But rather than defending Mr Aristide and dealing with opposition intransigence, the White House announced the president should step down.

The ease with which the US thereby brought down another Latin American democracy is stunning. What has been the CIA's role among the anti-Aristide rebels? How much US money went from US institutions and government agencies to help foment this uprising? Why did the White House abandon the Caribbean compromise proposal it endorsed just days before? These questions have not been asked. Then again, we live in an age when entire wars can be launched on phony pretences with few questions asked.

What *should* happen now is unlikely to pass. The United Nations should help restore Mr Aristide to power for his remaining two years in office, making clear that yesterday's events were an illegal power grab. Second, the US should call on the opposition, which is largely a US construct, to stop the violence immediately and unconditionally. Third, after years of literally starving the people of Haiti, the long-promised and long-frozen aid flows of \$500m should start immediately. These steps would rescue a dying democracy and avert a possible bloodbath.

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