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A Fresh Start for Haiti?

Charting Future U.S. Haitian Relations

JAMES DOBBINS

CT-219

March 2004

Testimony presented to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Peace Corps, and Narcotic Affairs on
March 10, 2004

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Statement of James Dobbins¹
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Before the Committee on Foreign Relations
Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Peace Corps, and Narcotics Affairs
United States Senate

March 10, 2004

I would like to thank you and the Committee for inviting me to testify today on Haiti. It is said that history repeats itself, first as tragedy and then as farce. Haiti, sad to say, goes only from tragedy to tragedy. American Marines are engaged in our fourth intervention in Haiti in ninety years. Jean Bertrand Aristide is the thirty third Haitian President to be driven from office, in his case for the second time.

Those of us who worked to organize the last American intervention, in 1994, thought we had given Haiti the opportunity to break this cycle of misrule, poverty and instability. Our hopes have been disappointed. More importantly, so have those of the Haitian people.

Even as America reluctantly launches upon another round of nation-building in Haiti, it is worth examining what went wrong with the last effort and why those hopes were disappointed.

The short answer is that President Aristide failed to avail himself of the multiple opportunities he was provided, from 1994 onward, to set Haiti on the path to democracy and prosperity. He blocked the economic reforms that would have made Haiti more attractive for foreign private and public investment. He refused to disassociate himself from supporters with records of corrupt or abusive behavior. He never worked sufficiently to create a level electoral playing field, even when his own overwhelming popularity would have assured him and his party ultimate victory.

President Aristide is preeminently responsible for his and Haiti's current plight. While there may be a good number here and in Haiti that regret the manner of his going, fewer, I expect, regret that he has gone, and even fewer would like to see him return. Given Haiti's penchant for cyclical tragedy, however, such a turn of events cannot be excluded.

To blame Haiti's current crisis exclusively on President Aristide is to miss an opportunity to learn from our own mistakes over the past decade. Even against the

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background of Aristide's intractability, different American decisions at multiple points over the past decade would have produced different and better results. Personally, I draw the following lessons from this decade.

1.) Exit strategies and departure deadlines are incompatible with enduring reform of failed states. In the wake of the Somalia fiasco, nation-building became a term of derision. In 1994 the Clinton Administration's political margin for another such operation in Haiti was exceedingly narrow. President Clinton felt constrained to promise that the American troop commitment would last no longer than two years. Worse still, when the time came, he still felt constrained to keep that commitment. Two years is too short a period to fix a society as profoundly broken as Haiti.

2.) Institution building in failed states requires significant resources applied over extended periods. American and international assistance to Haiti, even at the peak of the Clinton Administration's interest, was, in comparison with subsequent more successful efforts, very low. Only two years later Bosnia received seven times more assistance on a per capita basis. Kosovo received four times more. Today, Iraq is receiving more than thirty times more American assistance, on a per capita basis, and one hundred times more in absolute terms than Haiti received in the immediate aftermath of the last US intervention. None of these other societies is remotely as needy as is Haiti, and none of them lies on our very doorstep.

3.) Haiti is too polarized to conduct its own elections. Since 1995 each Haitian election has been worse organized than the last. How much of this was due to incompetence and how much to willful manipulation has been hard to establish. Opposition parties were never willing to give the Haitian electoral authorities the benefit of the doubt in these matters. One must anticipate that the political forces associated with Aristide will be equally suspicious of any election organized by his successors. As it has done in Bosnia, Kosovo, Cambodia and East Timor, the international community needs to do more than support Haitian authorities in organizing the next elections. The UN or the OAS should organize and oversee the balloting and be the final authority in adjudicating any disputes that arise.

4.) Provide significant assistance directly to and through the Haitian government. Donors have long preferred to provide the bulk of their aid to Haiti through NGO's in order to ensure accountability and appropriate use of their funding. The result is to simply apply band-aids, as foreign experts and organizations temporarily provide what should be government services to individual Haitians, without doing anything to build up the capacity of the Haitian government.

5.) Push through basic economic reforms while US and international leverage is at its maximum. It is natural to focus initially upon matters of security and politics, which seem to offer the keys to an early exit. The most difficult reforms to introduce in Haiti, however, will be economic ones, putting badly mismanaged state monopolies, like the electric and telephone monopolies, and the port on a sound commercial basis. The earlier

these steps are embarked upon, the likelier it is that progress can be made before international interest and influence begins to wane.

6.) Security is more than police. Rebuilding the Haitian National Police is the easiest of the reconstruction tasks before us today, because it is the institution that was adequately funded in the mid 1990's. This time around, equal attention and adequate funding should be given to judicial and penal reform.

7.) Don't cut off assistance to Haiti unless you are willing to send troops. In the early 1990s the imposition of sanctions on the Cedras regime led to large-scale refugee flows and the 1994 US intervention. A decade later the international communities' decision to cut off assistance to the Haitian government again after the flawed 2000 Senate elections was perfectly justified but quite unwise. Unable to deliver even minimally on his electoral promises, Aristide's popularity waned, and his reliance on force increased, just as had that of the Cedras regime in similar circumstances a decade earlier. Without formal and legitimate instruments through which to govern, Aristide was forced to rely, even more than he otherwise might, on informal and illegitimate sources of power. Absent international support, Haiti's already weak institutions disintegrated to the point where a few hundred armed criminals credibly threatened to take over the country. Haiti's next government will come to power through a similar reliance, however unwilling, upon criminal and abusive elements in the society. This cycle can be broken only through a long term US and international effort to develop Haitian institutions for governance.

8.) Reconciliation in Haiti must begin in Washington. All of America's nation-building missions have been controversial at home, but none more so than Haiti, and none in so partisan a manner. Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq have had critics and supporters in both parties. With Haiti, the debate has been the bitterest, and conducted most along party lines. American influence has been less effective as a result. Haitian political leaders have learned that if you do not like US policy, just wait till the next election. Haitian factions often listen more to their advocates in Washington than the American Ambassador. Against the background of the last decade, it is fair to say that neither the distinctly different Democratic or Republican approach to Haiti have yielded great results. The time has come to construct a bipartisan effort to help Haiti break its endless cycle of misrule, poverty and chaos.

It would be wrong to suggest that we did nothing right in Haiti a decade ago. There were aspects of the 1994 intervention that were successful and should be emulated. Nearly one thousand international police were introduced in 1994 along with the military peacekeepers, an innovation in international peace operations. The transition from the US led multinational coalition to the UN run peacekeeping mission six months after the arrival of US troops was well prepared and nearly seamless. US troops continued to serve in Haiti under UN control. An American General commanded the UN force. The US and the UN collaborated closely and without friction.

Only the United States has real influence in Haiti. The more united we are at home, the more decisive that influence will be. The UN is the appropriate institutional framework through which the US can bring that influence to bear. The UN is in no sense an alternative to American leadership and engagement. As we look toward the transition from US to UN control over peacekeeping in Haiti, therefore, we should not view this as an opportunity for American disengagement, but rather a means to share the burden more broadly and to secure full international and local legitimacy for the sustained efforts, which must ensue.