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The U.S. Occupation of Haiti, 1915-1934

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Summary

In 1915, the United States undertook a military occupation of Haiti to preempt any European intervention, to establish order out of civil strife, and to stabilize Haitian finances. During the nineteen-year occupation, U.S. military and civilian officials, numbering less than 2500 for the most part, supervised the collection of taxes and the disbursement of revenues, maintained public order, and initiated a program of public works. The Haitian government remained in place, but was subject to U.S. guidance. The Haitian people benefitted from the end of endemic political violence and from the construction of roads, bridges, and ports as well as from improved access to health care. The U.S. occupation was, nonetheless, deeply resented throughout Haitian society, and many of its accomplishments did not long endure its termination in 1934.

Background

In the early twentieth century, Haiti suffered from a tumultuous political life and from chronic financial mismanagement. Eighty percent of the Haitian budget went to debt service, and U.S. government officials were concerned that financial obligations to its own citizens might not be met. There was greater fear, also, that one among the warring European countries — especially France or Germany — might establish a position of influence in the country, leading to naval bases that could endanger access to the newly constructed Panama Canal. These concerns were heightened after the outbreak of World War I, when Haitian authority collapsed into bloody factional struggles in the summer of 1915; the Administration of Woodrow Wilson determined to take action. In July 1915, Admiral William B. Caperton, then embarked on the battleship *Washington*, was directed to land forces to establish order and assume responsibility for administering the customhouses.

With virtually no resistance, a landing party of some 330 sailors and marines took control of the capital within a few hours. (There were only two U.S. fatalities, and these may have resulted from friendly fire; Haitian fatalities were also minimal.) Admiral Caperton called upon additional U.S. forces to take control of other coastal areas; resistance by guerrilla bands in the more mountainous areas of the country was temporarily put down, ending with the capture of Fort Rivière in mid-November. By the

end of 1915, the marine presence was reduced to 100 officers and some 1,600 enlisted men. Although the Marine Brigade was extensively deployed to help put down resurgent guerrilla activity in 1918-1920, for most of the rest of the occupation, the 1,200-1,400 marines were assigned garrison duty, with some patrolling of the countryside.

Establishing Control

Once firmly established in the major population centers, U.S. officials quickly ensured the election by the Haitian National Assembly of an amenable president, Philippe Sudre Dartiguenave, who had served as the president of the Haitian Senate. As a result of continuing unrest, Admiral Caperton also established censorship and promulgated martial law. These emergency measures were not rescinded for over ten years. In another move to ensure an orderly government, the United States presented the Haitians with a treaty that permitted a U.S.-nominated official to collect taxes and make debt repayments and other disbursements. The treaty,¹ ratified by Haiti in November 1915 and by the U.S. Senate the following February, also created a constabulary (or gendarmerie) composed of native Haitians under American direction to serve both as Haiti's military and police force. The treaty was to remain in force for ten years and could be extended for another ten "if the purpose of this treaty has not been fully accomplished." In March 1917, the duration of the 1915 treaty was officially extended to twenty years.

Despite the treaty, the Haitian National Assembly was uncooperative in its relationship with U.S. officials. The State Department drafted a new Haitian Constitution which would have validated the occupation and allowed foreigners to own property in Haiti. The assembly, unwilling to ratify the document, was dissolved when Lt.Col. Smedley D. Butler, a U.S. Marine officer serving with the Haitian Gendarmerie, entered the capitol in June 1917, to read a dissolution order that Dartiguenave had been pressured to sign. Unwilling to risk the election of another Assembly, U.S. authorities effected the approval of the new constitution by plebiscite (only 769 votes out of 100,000 were negative) in June, 1918. The new constitution created a Council of State, whose members were appointed by the Haitian president, to perform all legislative functions until an Assembly could be reconstituted at a time to be determined.

Although the United States occupied the principal towns of the country, guerrilla bands remained in the mountainous interior of the country. Known as *cacos* (named after a Haitian bird of prey), these bands had long played a significant role in Haitian politics, fighting at times on behalf of one or more factions within the dominant francophone elite. Renewed attacks by guerrillas commenced in October 1918, and persisted for a number of months (including a raid on Port-au-Prince in October 1919), until the marines and the Gendarmerie were able to neutralize them by frequent patrolling, paying bounties for weapons turned in, and by eliminating their leaders. After 1920, there were only occasional outbreaks of *caco* violence.

¹ Treaty Between the United States and the Republic of Haiti, signed September 16, 1915 (39 Stat. 1654), reprinted in *Treaties and Other International Agreements of the United States of America, 1776-1949*, comp. Charles I. Bevans (Washington: Department of State, 1971) Vol. 8, pp. 660-664.

The Gendarmerie, whose name was changed in 1928 to the Garde d’Haiti, became an essential part of the administrative structure of the country. Officered at first by Americans — largely enlisted marines — who were paid both by the U.S. Marine Corps and by Haiti, the Gendarmerie, numbering 2,000-2,600 members, was deployed throughout the country and became largely responsible for maintaining law and order, settling disputes, and supporting public works projects. It also served as Haiti’s military force. Gradually, U.S. officers were replaced by Haitians, a process that was accelerated after 1929. Historians, otherwise critical of the occupation, acknowledge that Haitians had more security in their persons and property than they had ever previously known and that the Gendarmerie, during the occupation, functioned as an effective and impartial agency. (After U.S. forces departed in 1934, Haitian officers would become much more involved in political activities.)

Throughout the occupation, U.S. forces suffered minimal casualties, totaling 10 killed and 26 wounded (with 172 other casualties). Complaints of brutality against native Haitians led the U.S. Congress to conduct hearings on Haiti and the Dominican Republic in 1922.² The special committee rejected the more serious charges and concluded that most of the abuses occurred during the effort to put down the *caco* insurrection in 1918-1919. The counterinsurgency effort resulted in the deaths, by some estimates, of over 2,000 *cacos*.³ Although affirming that cruelty was not officially countenanced, the committee noted that there were at least ten instances of illegal executions by Americans. Once the *caco* rebellion was suppressed, there were virtually no physical attacks by Haitians on U.S. marines or civilians.

After the 1922 congressional investigation criticized lack of coordination among U.S. officials in Haiti, U.S. civilian and military authority was consolidated. The senior U.S. representative from 1922 to 1930, General John H. Russell, USMC, served both as the senior marine in Haiti and as the U.S. High Commissioner, responsible to the State Department. Reporting to him were U.S. officials (technically appointed by the President of Haiti) dealing with finance, public works, sanitation, and agriculture, as well as the chief of the Gendarmerie. General Russell, described as a conscientious and somewhat imperious officer, became the most powerful figure in the country. He was later appointed Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps.

End of the Occupation

The onset of the Great Depression and declining markets for Haitian products, especially coffee, produced economic hardships and contributed to increased unrest among a population long denied a political role. December 1929 riots in Les Cayes threatened to spread throughout the country. A detachment from the Marine Brigade in Port-au-Prince was sent to restore order, but a confrontation led to the deaths of at least 12 Haitians. Subsequent incidents were ended without loss of life, but the Hoover Administration was concerned that it might become involved in hostilities that U.S. public opinion would not support.

² Conducted by the Select Committee on Haiti and the Dominican Republic, chaired by Senator Medill McCormick of Illinois.

³ U.S. Congress, Senate, 67th Congress, 2d session, Select Committee on Haiti and the Dominican Republic, Report, S. Rep. 794, April 20, 1922.

In early 1930, President Hoover appointed a bipartisan commission headed by W. Cameron Forbes, formerly the Governor General of the Philippines, to investigate conditions in Haiti.⁴ After several weeks in the country during which testimony was taken from all sectors of the society, the commission submitted a report that argued that the United States could not relinquish its responsibilities for ensuring the financial stability of Haiti, but made several proposals for changes, especially the separation of civil and military responsibilities, increasing the number of Haitians in the government, and, in general, for less intervention in Haitian domestic affairs.⁵ In November, General Russell was replaced by a State Department official, Dana G. Munro, who was appointed Minister rather than High Commissioner. An Executive Agreement was negotiated in 1932 providing for the complete Haitianization of the Garde by October 1934 and for the withdrawal of the Marine Brigade, two years prior to the expiration of the extended 1915 Treaty.

Washington was nonetheless determined to pull out of Haiti at an earlier date. Arrangements were made for the election of a temporary Haitian president and the subsequent holding of national elections in October 1930 that returned a strongly nationalistic majority. The complete Haitianization of the Garde was completed. President Franklin Roosevelt paid an official visit to Cap-Haitien in July 1934 and the last marines departed the following month. Nonetheless, a U.S. financial adviser would remain until 1941 to oversee payments on the Haitian debt.

Accomplishments and Shortcomings of the Occupation

The U.S. occupation in large measure accomplished its goals of stabilizing Haitian finances. Security for investors was a key concern of the U.S. Government and to a large extent became the justification for the occupation once the potential threat of European intervention disappeared with the conclusion of World War I. A \$16-million U.S. loan was negotiated in 1922 to consolidate Haiti's outstanding foreign debts. Efficient collection of duties and prompt, even advance, payment of debts owed to U.S. banks soon restored the country's financial standing.

Eventually, some 60% of Haitian revenues were expended under U.S. supervision, the greatest percentage going to debt repayment. Some critics, including the Forbes Commission, argued that monies used for advance repayment of debts could have been more usefully allocated to domestic projects. There is consensus, however, that Haitian finances were honestly handled during the occupation and that steps were taken to insure

⁴ The President's Commission for the Study and Review of Conditions in the Republic of Haiti, appointed by President Hoover in February 1930, included, in addition to Forbes, Henry P. Fletcher, an experienced diplomat; Elie Vezina, a prominent Roman Catholic layman who spoke French; James Kerney, a New Jersey editor and an adviser to Woodrow Wilson; and William Allen White, a widely respected liberal Republican known to be sympathetic to the Haitian people.

⁵ The report of the Forbes Commission was reprinted in U.S., Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States* 1930, Vol. III, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1945), pp. 217-237.

that foreign interests did not take advantage of the country.⁶ In the 1920s, annual Haitian government revenues of \$8-10 million were double that of the pre-occupation period; coffee production and small businesses grew significantly, but little progress was made in establishing a sound permanently economic base for the country.

The occupation also resulted in the completion of a significant number of public works projects, mostly after 1920. Most important was the construction of roads and bridges throughout the country (some of which was completed through a highly unpopular system of forced labor or *corvée*). Although most of the 800 miles of roads were not hard-surfaced, they greatly facilitated transportation between coastal areas and the rural uplands at a time when automobiles and trucks were being introduced into Haiti in significant numbers. A number of port facilities were erected, lighthouses were constructed, and a number of harbors were dredged. Efforts to improve agricultural productivity were complicated by the small size of land holdings and a lack of accurate legal titles.

The United States undertook a major effort to provide access to modern health care to the mass of the Haitian population that in some cases had never come into contact with trained doctors and nurses. A National Public Health Service was created with a network of some 153 rural clinics and 11 hospitals supervised by U.S. Navy doctors, and efforts were made to provide basic medical instruction to the population. This effort was financed by the Haitian government at U.S. encouragement.

The United States did not assume a responsibility to “build democracy,” and U.S. officials did not devote significant efforts towards the encouragement of local self-government. Prior to the occupation, the Haitian government had been largely the province of a narrow elite consisting of about 5 percent of the population. The Haitian presidents who served during most of the occupation, Dartiguenave (1915-1922), Louis Borno (1922-1930), and Eugene Roy, who served as temporary President from May-November 1930, were elected by the Council of State at the instigation of U.S. authorities. They, in turn, appointed members of the Council of State. There were no national elections held until October 1930, and local elections that produced unsuitable winners were invalidated. Newspapers were censored, and offending editors jailed.

Inattention to efforts to promote democracy stemmed, in part, from a knowledge that any election might produce results hostile to U.S. interests and probably from racial attitudes that considered Haitians unsuited for self-government. The years of the Haitian occupation coincided with widespread racial segregation in the United States and opposition by a majority of U.S. whites to a political role for blacks. These attitudes, brought to Haiti by the occupation, led to social as well as political discrimination against Haitians, even the educated and politically active elite, that was bitterly resented and undercut well-intentioned development projects. To a large extent, U.S. racial attitudes

⁶ The 1930 Forbes Commission noted that financial transactions had been described in reports published annually in English and French and that the U.S. Comptroller’s Office had made a thorough analysis of financial transactions without finding significant problems. *Foreign Relations*, 1930, III, p. 228.

ensured that there was no significant element of the Haitian populace that supported the U.S. presence.⁷

Education was also largely neglected during the occupation. Schooling in Haiti had been traditionally divided between francophone instruction for the elite and a very few rudimentary elementary schools for others. Little effort to change this situation was undertaken. The mass of the population remained illiterate, and the elite continued to seek an education that did not lead to careers in commerce and industry. Efforts to provide technical training to develop the agricultural and industrial potential of the country (the *Service Technique*) were not warmly received and did not reach a large number of students.

⁷ A modern reader is struck by the derogatory terms used in correspondence by senior American officials in describing Haitian people for whose government and welfare they had responsibility. See Hans Schmidt, *The United States Occupation of Haiti, 1915-1934* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1971), pp. 79, 135-153.

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