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US-Haiti

Noam Chomsky

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Those who have any concern for Haiti will naturally want to understand how its most recent tragedy has been unfolding. And for those who have had the privilege of any contact with the people of this tortured land, it is not just natural but inescapable. Nevertheless, we make a serious error if we focus too narrowly on the events of the recent past, or even on Haiti alone. The crucial issue for us is what we should be doing about what is taking place. That would be true even if our options and our responsibility were limited; far more so when they are immense and decisive, as in the case of Haiti. And even more so because the course of the terrible story was predictable years ago — if we failed to act to prevent it. And fail we did. The lessons are clear, and so important that they would be the topic of daily front-page articles in a free press.

Reviewing what was taking place in Haiti shortly after Clinton “restored democracy” in 1994, I was compelled to conclude, unhappily, in *Z Magazine* that “It would not be very surprising, then, if the Haitian operations become another catastrophe,” and if so, “It is not a difficult chore to trot out the familiar phrases that will explain the failure of our mission of benevolence in this failed society.” The reasons were evident to any-

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one who chose to look. And the familiar phrases again resound, sadly and predictably.

There is much solemn discussion today explaining, correctly, that democracy means more than flipping a lever every few years. Functioning democracy has preconditions. One is that the population should have some way to learn what is happening in the world. The real world, not the self-serving portrait offered by the “establishment press,” which is disfigured by its “subservience to state power” and “the usual hostility to popular movements” – the accurate words of Paul Farmer, whose work on Haiti is, in its own way, perhaps even as remarkable as what he has accomplished within the country. Farmer was writing in 1993, reviewing mainstream commentary and reporting on Haiti, a disgraceful record that goes back to the days of Wilson’s vicious and destructive invasion in 1915, and on to the present. The facts are extensively documented, appalling, and shameful. And they are deemed irrelevant for the usual reasons: they do not conform to the required self-image, and so are efficiently dispatched deep into the memory hole, though they can be unearthed by those who have some interest in the real world.

They will rarely be found, however, in the “establishment press.” Keeping to the more liberal and knowledgeable end of the spectrum, the standard version is that in “failed states” like Haiti and Iraq the US must become engaged in benevolent “nation-building” to “enhance democracy,” a “noble goal” but one that may be beyond our means because of the inadequacies of the objects of our solicitude. In Haiti, despite Washington’s dedicated efforts from Wilson to FDR while the country was under Marine occupation, “the new dawn of Haitian democracy never came.” And “not all America’s good wishes, nor all its Marines, can achieve [democracy today] until the Haitians do it themselves” (H.D.S. Greenway, Boston Globe). As New York Times correspondent R.W. Apple recounted two centuries of history in 1994, reflecting on the prospects for Clin-

ton's endeavor to "restore democracy" then underway, "Like the French in the 19th century, like the Marines who occupied Haiti from 1915 to 1934, the American forces who are trying to impose a new order will confront a complex and violent society with no history of democracy."

Apple does appear to go a bit beyond the norm in his reference to Napoleon's savage assault on Haiti, leaving it in ruins, in order to prevent the crime of liberation in the world's richest colony, the source of much of France's wealth. But perhaps that undertaking too satisfies the fundamental criterion of benevolence: it was supported by the United States, which was naturally outraged and frightened by "the first nation in the world to argue the case of universal freedom for all humankind, revealing the limited definition of freedom adopted by the French and American revolutions." So Haitian historian Patrick Bellegarde-Smith writes, accurately describing the terror in the slave state next door, which was not relieved even when Haiti's successful liberation struggle, at enormous cost, opened the way to the expansion to the West by compelling Napoleon to accept the Louisiana Purchase. The US continued to do what it could to strangle Haiti, even supporting France's insistence that Haiti pay a huge indemnity for the crime of liberating itself, a burden it has never escaped – and France, of course, dismisses with elegant disdain Haiti's request, recently under Aristide, that it at least repay the indemnity, forgetting the responsibilities that a civilized society would accept.

The basic contours of what led to the current tragedy are pretty clear. Just beginning with the 1990 election of Aristide (far too narrow a time frame), Washington was appalled by the election of a populist candidate with a grass-roots constituency just as it had been appalled by the prospect of the hemisphere's first free country on its doorstep two centuries earlier. Washington's traditional allies in Haiti naturally agreed. "The fear of democracy exists, by definitional necessity, in elite groups who monopolize economic and political

power,” Bellegarde-Smith observes in his perceptive history of Haiti ; whether in Haiti or the US or anywhere else.

The threat of democracy in Haiti in 1991 was even more ominous because of the favorable reaction of the international financial institutions (World Bank, IADB) to Aristide’s programs, which awakened traditional concerns over the “virus” effect of successful independent development. These are familiar themes in international affairs: American independence aroused similar concerns among European leaders. The dangers are commonly perceived to be particularly grave in a country like Haiti , which had been ravaged by France and then reduced to utter misery by a century of US intervention. If even people in such dire circumstances can take their fate into their own hands, who knows what might happen elsewhere as the “contagion spreads.”

The Bush I administration reacted to the disaster of democracy by shifting aid from the democratically elected government to what are called “democratic forces”: the wealthy elites and the business sectors, who, along with the murderers and torturers of the military and paramilitaries, had been lauded by the current incumbents in Washington, in their Reaganite phase, for their progress in “democratic development,” justifying lavish new aid. “The praise came in response to ratification by the Haitian people of a law granting Washington ‘s client killer and torturer Baby Doc Duvalier the authority to suspend the rights of any political party without reasons. The referendum passed by a majority of 99.98%.” It therefore marked a positive step towards democracy as compared with the 99% approval of a 1918 law granting US corporations the right to turn the country into a US plantation, passed by 5% of the population after the Haitian Parliament was disbanded at gunpoint by Wilson’s Marines when it refused to accept this “progressive measure,” essential for “economic development.” Their reaction to Baby Doc’s encouraging progress towards democracy was characteristic – worldwide – on the part of the visionaries

would make it possible to shift policy in a more civilized direction.

What is happening now is awful, maybe beyond repair. And there is plenty of short-term responsibility on all sides. But the right way for the US and France to proceed is very clear. They should begin with payment of enormous reparations to Haiti (France is perhaps even more hypocritical and disgraceful in this regard than the US). That, however, requires construction of functioning democratic societies in which, at the very least, people have a prayer of knowing what’s going on. Commentary on Haiti , Iraq , and other “failed societies” is quite right in stressing the importance of overcoming the “democratic deficit” that substantially reduces the significance of elections. It does not, however, draw the obvious corollary: the lesson applies in spades to a country where “politics is the shadow cast on society by big business,” in the words of America’s leading social philosopher, John Dewey, describing his own country in days when the blight had spread nowhere near as far as it has today.

For those who are concerned with the substance of democracy and human rights, the basic tasks at home are also clear enough. They have been carried out before, with no slight success, and under incomparably harsher conditions elsewhere, including the slums and hills of Haiti . We do not have to submit, voluntarily, to living in a failed state suffering from an enormous democratic deficit.

large role in creating today's third world. Meanwhile the powerful ignored the rules, except when they could benefit from them, and were able to become rich developed societies; dramatically the US, which led the way in modern protectionism and, particularly since World War II, has relied crucially on the dynamic state sector for innovation and development, socializing risk and cost.

The punishment of Haiti became much more severe under Bush II — there are differences within the narrow spectrum of cruelty and greed. Aid was cut and international institutions were pressured to do likewise, under pretexts too outlandish to merit discussion. They are extensively reviewed in Paul Farmer's *Uses of Haiti*, and in some current press commentary, notably by Jeffrey Sachs (*Financial Times*) and Tracy Kidder (*New York Times*).

Putting details aside, what has happened since is eerily similar to the overthrow of Haiti's first democratic government in 1991. The Aristide government, once again, was undermined by US planners, who understood, under Clinton, that the threat of democracy can be overcome if economic sovereignty is eliminated, and presumably also understood that economic development will also be a faint hope under such conditions, one of the best-confirmed lessons of economic history. Bush II planners are even more dedicated to undermining democracy and independence, and despised Aristide and the popular organizations that swept him to power with perhaps even more passion than their predecessors. The forces that reconquered the country are mostly inheritors of the US-installed army and paramilitary terrorists.

Those who are intent on diverting attention from the US role will object that the situation is more complex — as is always true — and that Aristide too was guilty of many crimes. Correct, but if he had been a saint the situation would hardly have developed very differently, as was evident in 1994, when the only real hope was that a democratic revolution in the US

who are now entrancing educated opinion with their dedication to bringing democracy to a suffering world — although, to be sure, their actual exploits are being tastefully rewritten to satisfy current needs.

Refugees fleeing to the US from the terror of the US-backed dictatorships were forcefully returned, in gross violation of international humanitarian law. The policy was reversed when a democratically elected government took office. Though the flow of refugees reduced to a trickle, they were mostly granted political asylum. Policy returned to normal when a military junta overthrew the Aristide government after seven months, and state terrorist atrocities rose to new heights. The perpetrators were the army — the inheritors of the National Guard left by Wilson's invaders to control the population — and its paramilitary forces. The most important of these, FRAPH, was founded by CIA asset Emmanuel Constant, who now lives happily in Queens, Clinton and Bush II having dismissed extradition requests — because he would reveal US ties to the murderous junta, it is widely assumed. Constant's contributions to state terror were, after all, meager; merely prime responsibility for the murder of 4–5000 poor blacks.

Recall the core element of the Bush doctrine, which has “already become a de facto rule of international relations,” Harvard's Graham Allison writes in *Foreign Affairs*: “those who harbor terrorists are as guilty as the terrorists themselves,” in the President's words, and must be treated accordingly, by large-scale bombing and invasion.

When Aristide was overthrown by the 1991 military coup, the Organization of American States declared an embargo. Bush I announced that the US would violate it by exempting US firms. He was thus “fine tuning” the embargo for the benefit of the suffering population, the *New York Times* reported. Clinton authorized even more extreme violations of the embargo: US trade with the junta and its wealthy supporters sharply increased. The crucial element of the embargo was, of

course, oil. While the CIA solemnly testified to Congress that the junta “probably will be out of fuel and power very shortly” and “Our intelligence efforts are focused on detecting attempts to circumvent the embargo and monitoring its impact,” Clinton secretly authorized the Texaco Oil Company to ship oil to the junta illegally, in violation of presidential directives. This remarkable revelation was the lead story on the AP wires the day before Clinton sent the Marines to “restore democracy,” impossible to miss – I happened to be monitoring AP wires that day and saw it repeated prominently over and over – and obviously of enormous significance for anyone who wanted to understand what was happening. It was suppressed with truly impressive discipline, though reported in industry journals along with scant mention buried in the business press.

Also efficiently suppressed were the crucial conditions that Clinton imposed for Aristide’s return: that he adopt the program of the defeated US candidate in the 1990 elections, a former World Bank official who had received 14% of the vote. We call this “restoring democracy,” a prime illustration of how US foreign policy has entered a “noble phase” with a “saintly glow,” the national press explained. The harsh neoliberal program that Aristide was compelled to adopt was virtually guaranteed to demolish the remaining shreds of economic sovereignty, extending Wilson’s progressive legislation and similar US-imposed measures since.

As democracy was thereby restored, the World Bank announced that “The renovated state must focus on an economic strategy centered on the energy and initiative of Civil Society, especially the private sector, both national and foreign.” That has the merit of honesty: Haitian Civil Society includes the tiny rich elite and US corporations, but not the vast majority of the population, the peasants and slum-dwellers who had committed the grave sin of organizing to elect their own president. World Bank officers explained that the neoliberal program would benefit the “more open, enlightened, business

class” and foreign investors, but assured us that the program “is not going to hurt the poor to the extent it has in other countries” subjected to structural adjustment, because the Haitian poor already lacked minimal protection from proper economic policy, such as subsidies for basic goods. Aristide’s Minister in charge of rural development and agrarian reform was not notified of the plans to be imposed on this largely peasant society, to be returned by “America’s good wishes” to the track from which it veered briefly after the regrettable democratic election in 1990.

Matters then proceeded in their predictable course. A 1995 USAID report explained that the “export-driven trade and investment policy” that Washington imposed will “relentlessly squeeze the domestic rice farmer,” who will be forced to turn to agroexport, with incidental benefits to US agribusiness and investors. Despite their extreme poverty, Haitian rice farmers are quite efficient, but cannot possibly compete with US agribusiness, even if it did not receive 40% of its profits from government subsidies, sharply increased under the Reaganites who are again in power, still producing enlightened rhetoric about the miracles of the market. We now read that Haiti cannot feed itself, another sign of a “failed state.”

A few small industries were still able to function, for example, making chicken parts. But US conglomerates have a large surplus of dark meat, and therefore demanded the right to dump their excess products in Haiti. They tried to do the same in Canada and Mexico too, but there illegal dumping could be barred. Not in Haiti, compelled to submit to efficient market principles by the US government and the corporations it serves.

One might note that the Pentagon’s proconsul in Iraq, Paul Bremer, ordered a very similar program to be instituted there, with the same beneficiaries in mind. That’s also called “enhancing democracy.” In fact, the record, highly revealing and important, goes back to the 18th century. Similar programs had a