

GREAT DECISIONS, KATONAH CHAPTER
MEETING SUMMARY, April 12, 2011
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REBUILDING HAITI

Timeline

1500-1800 French Slavery
1800-1900 Elites Dominate
1900-1950 U.S. Manifest Destiny
 Economic Imperialism
1915-1934 Occupation
1950-1990 Anticommunism
 Duvalier, Mercantilism
1990-2011 Struggle for Democracy

In 1804, Haiti became the first black republic and one of the first independent nations among postcolonial countries.

How did people expect Haitians to cope without experience? It was a former French colony, and France didn't prepare its possessions for independence. Like Spain, France sent over few of its people as administrators and no families. So there was a lot of intermarriage, and a mulatto class grew up that formed its own culture. It was not an especially large group. There was no structure around which a group could coalesce. The development of structure is not always popular; consider the Weimar Republic.

The first political party [Party of National Unity] that received any notice was that of François Duvalier (Papa Doc), who was president from 1957 until his death in 1971. He created the Tonton Macoutes in 1959 to keep himself in power (named after a creole bogeyman who kidnaps unruly children). They encouraged voodoo. The army was mulatto, but the tonton macoutes were black. Through them, Duvalier ruled with an iron fist.

Early violence by slaves was extremely violent and was responsible for many deaths in the upper class. The violence of these slave rebellions became a factor in U.S. race relations, and probably was partly responsible for Jim Crow laws in the U.S. U.S. failed to establish diplomatic relations with Haiti because of these fears.

Why didn't Haiti develop its agriculture? Sugar was its only crop. When slaves became free, they wouldn't go back to work on the plantations. French masters had been too cruel. There's little industry in Haiti. It has the lowest GDP in the hemisphere, second-lowest in world. At one point it developed an upper-class tourist industry and a place on the cruise-ship routes. Eventually the cruise ships stopped stopping.

Haitian constitution forbade foreigners from owning land until FDR wrote a new constitution for them.

Not much commerce between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, except for drugs. Some day laborers came from Haiti to work in the Dominican Republic, but they brought in AIDS.

Why did we bother with Haiti? What was in it for us?

During World War II, Haiti protected us from Hitler in the Caribbean and protected the Panama Canal.

What war we doing there now? A lot of humanitarian work, but after 1990. Aristide did a lot of good; graduate of School of Americas. He doubled the minimum wage, built schools and hospitals. Opponents edited his speeches to make it seem that he encouraged necklacing. We deposed him twice.

School of Americas from Internet

[School of Americas founded in Panama by U.S. in 1946 to train Latin American and Caribbean military officers to “subvert and democracy and kill hope in their own countries” say its foes. In 1984, it was kicked out under the terms of the Panama Canal Treaty and moved to the army base at Fort Benning, GA. Its instructors and students are recruited from the cream of the Latin-American military establishment. It trains 700-2,000 soldiers a year. It has been called “the biggest base for de-stabilization in Latin America” and “The School of Assassins.”

The conditions of the Haitian people leaves them open to Al Qaeda.

Death rate on the plantations was severe, so that French had to bring in more and more slaves. The Creole that developed was more an African language than a French-derived language. Napoleon sold the U.S. the Louisiana Purchase to the U.S. because the French reasoned that if they couldn't manage Haiti, they certainly couldn't manage Louisiana. Louisiana was the breadbasket for Haiti, so it took Haiti's food supply with it.

After Haiti freed itself from France, they were forced to pay reparations to “buy the freedom of their slaves.” By 1900, it was spending 80% of its national budget on reparations. In 1947, it paid off the original reparations and interest, leaving it destitute, corrupt, lacking in investment, and politically volatile.

During the 19th century, U.S. foreign policy was based on manifest destiny. It was the belief behind our war on Mexico and the Spanish-American War. It also sparked our occupation of Haiti.

U.S. occupied Haiti from 1915-1934. Using a trumped up concern for U.S. financial interests and the "concern" with approaching anarchy in Haiti, the U.S. occupied Haiti in 1915. Germany controlled about 80 percent of the international commerce and the major utilities, as well as the main wharf and tramway in the capital and a railroad. We had to dominate the Caribbean so no one else could—especially Germany. Wilson sent in the marines “to protect American and foreign interests” and “to re-establish peace and order.” The legislature was suspended, and a client president ran the country with the Americans under a new constitution. Plantations were put back together under American agribusiness, and Citibank got the Haiti National Bank. The occupation served American political,

military and economic interests. U.S. remained in control of Haiti until 1934, with financial and political hegemony continuing long after the end of the official occupation. In many ways it still continues today.

In the early 20th century, American and Republican foreign policy was equally bad.

What is in store for Haiti? Today U.N. troops (mostly Belgian) are in Haiti, keeping order.

What is the first priority: health, food and housing, in that order.

Money has to come from somewhere. In what form? From the Haitian diaspora, which is mostly professional class? From Brazil? When Poland became free, a significant portion of Polish businessmen went back. About a quarter of the Irish went back. Some of the Haitian might go back.

How do you prioritize the good things we want to do in Haiti? The fact that Haitians are black has paid a major role in our disinterest in the country. Its demography is African; the French heritage has been wiped out.

Should we prioritize Darfur over Haiti? Lots more people in Darfur.

We have a legacy in Haiti, therefore we have a responsibility to Haitians.

African nations have a rich family life; they have a rich culture. Haitian culture has broken down.

We think of blacks and slaves as synonymous. If we took Europeans from all different ethnic groups, threw them together on an island, would they develop a vital culture?

The independence won by Haiti in 1804 gave them no advantage. Haiti is a dysfunctional state. In 2004 Clinton wanted to stop the boat people fleeing from a dictator

What do you do to put a bandaid on the Haitian disaster? Is that better than just letting them move wherever? If Brazil manages to find a way to make money out of Haiti, would they—and we—move in?

As for the Roman Catholic Church, the last (Polish) pope was so scarred by communism and so influenced by its opposition to birth control that it withdrew its support from Haiti.

You can't impose structure from the outside.

But Haiti can't do this. Will Lulu (Brazil) take the lead? Or will Clinton? How about NGOs? How about support for NGOs from other countries. CARE is now raising money in India to support its programs. A lot of wealth is developing in other countries. China has as much interest in such aid. Funds for international charity from Americans come to only 2% of our giving.

It's incumbent on us to help others. But we cannot impose a solution. Can't say, "This is what we should do." We have to help them help themselves."

Even before the earthquake, thousands of NGOs were operating in Haiti.

The Muslim Brotherhood is an NGO.

Up to this point, there has been no vital interest in Haiti for the U.S. or any other country.

Understanding the human condition is an important goal.

As a result of budget cuts, hundreds, thousands of people will be hurt, maimed or killed in our own country. Among those making up budgets, American exceptionalism is a sine qua non. It's so pervasive that it gets in the way of any realistic thinking about the world.

This is leading to an abandonment of the needy. In the longer term, we're all in the same lifeboat. There are lots of scam NGOs, and a lot of Christian NGOs are doing a lot of damage in Africa with their anti-homosexual, anti-abortion, and prevention of condom distribution.

Every discussion we have seems to come down to: it's useless. What happened to the Peace Corps? It's active; in the U.S. and well as internationally. Still doing a lot.

Haiti is 200 years of a failed state. Can anybody accomplish anything in Haiti without a strong central government? Does it have to be democratic?

Does Haiti have any government structure? It just elected a new president Michel Martelly. Will France allow him to do anything? Will the U.S. allow him to do anything?

Maybe we need incentives to persuade Haitians to go back. Should we cut the new president loose and let him do it on his own? Should we work with him?

The World Bank says establish a strong government first, then apply money.

Bring Haitians here, educate them, send them back. Unless we have a signed-three year contract to go back, they'll go elsewhere.

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