

American Help for Ailing Haiti

By STEVE CHARNOVITZ

Sooner or later, the current team of thugs who rule Haiti will be ousted. There will be a temptation in Washington to declare the crisis over and wish President Jean-Bertrand Aristide Godspeed. Instead, the U.S. government should undertake a major initiative to foster the economic development of Haiti.

Do Americans care enough about Haiti to support a large increase in foreign aid? We should. The histories of our two countries are intertwined. A squadron of 800 Haitians fought under the French to help America win its independence from Great Britain. Several years later, Haiti liberated itself from France. But the idea of a black republic 600 miles away was discomfiting to pro-slavery Americans. No president until Abraham Lincoln was willing to grant official recognition.

Haiti is a web of contradictions. Once France's richest colony, Haiti has become the hemisphere's poorest country. Its growth rate is -4%. Unlike other Latin nations with a small class of elites, Haiti has already tried the remedy of land reform. (in 1804). Despite the inspiration of U.S. democracy, Haiti suffered a long string of despotic governments. It may have the worst governance of any nation.

This dire situation calls for assistance on the order of the Marshall

Plan. There are vast needs for health clinics, sanitation, reforestation, food production and pollution control. The life expectancy is a shockingly low 45 years. Haiti's main resource, its people, need education and vocational training. Transportation and communications infrastructure also must be upgraded. With these programs, Haiti could again attract investment in labor-intensive manufacturing for export. After a few years of stability, the once-prosperous tourist sector could be re-established.

A lengthy police effort will also be required to eradicate the terrorists and cults that have always been part of Haitian life. A United Nations or all-Caribbean security force would work in the short run, but Haitian nationalism is too entrenched to permit that as a long-term solution. Another source of instability is the Haitian military. Taming it will be difficult. Ideally, Haiti could abolish its army, as Costa Rica did 45 years ago. Unfortunately, this is unlikely.

Haiti has had little experience with democracy. But the democratic urge is strong. In the national election of 1987, people stood in line for hours in the hot sun waiting to vote. Many voting areas were disrupted with drive-by shootings. Yet, once the terrorists were gone, the voters, heroically, got back in line.

The Haitian people elected Mr. Aristide in 1990. His leadership virtues are not obvious. Perhaps his sojourn in the United States has broadened his understanding of the need for presidents to respect lawmakers and delegate to competent administrators. Maybe he now recognizes the importance of gaining the confidence of the business community. Surely he has learned how negatively Haiti is viewed.

Haiti's problems run very deep. But because of its small size (population 6 million), external aid is feasible. Given its \$2 billion gross domestic product, a redevelopment program of \$1 billion a year could transform the country over a decade. It is interesting to note that the much-maligned U.S. occupation of Haiti, from 1915 to 1934, provided much infrastructure, including 1,000 miles of roads, 11 hospitals, nine wharves and a telephone system.

In addition to the required physical investment, Haiti needs assistance in mending its torn social fabric. Private organizations could help Haiti establish civic and cultural institutions. The Inter-American Development Bank could promote entrepreneurship. The Peace Corps could institute a very large program. This could provide a dual benefit by offering inner city American youths a billet for adventure and meaningful work experience.

Rwanda lies very far away. Bosnia seems intractable. Russia's economic problems persist on a huge scale. Yet it is hard to argue that the United States should remain aloof from the problems of a newly democratic Haiti. At a time when America's fortitude is being questioned, a major investment in Haiti would show resolve. At a time when Americans have lost their global idealism, a new effort at nation building may melt away some isolationist tendencies.

In discussing the social conditions in Haiti and Santo Domingo, President Andrew Johnson told the Congress that "too little has been done by us...to lend even a moral support to the efforts they are so resolutely and so constantly making to secure republican institutions for themselves." That assessment still rings true. If the new Haiti is to have a peaceful future, the United States will have to undertake concerted efforts over a generation or two. The Clinton administration should prepare a bold plan for growing the Haitian economy. Then the president should ask the American people and the Congress to rise to this challenge.

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