



Ensuring that Haiti remains "open for business". UN soldiers patrol a polling station during elections.

*Gunboat Diplomacy, MINUSTAH, the Clintons and Cholera*

## Unwanted Gifts: A Concise History of Harming Haiti

In October 2010, a United Nations Stabilisation Mission (MINUSTAH) base near Mirebalais polluted the Meille River with faecal matter. The excrement contained cholera bacteria.

The MINUSTAH base was manned by 454 troops sourced from Nepal. Three weeks before they were deployed, cholera broke out in Nepal. The UN did not conduct a subsequent health screening. The infected faeces were then recklessly leaked into the arteries of Haiti's main water basin.

The epidemic tore through Haitian society. To date, over one million Haitians have been infected, and close to 10,000 have died. The epidemic is far larger and has lasted far longer than the West African Ebola outbreak. The disease is not yet under control. Six years ago, cholera was unknown in Haiti. Today, it may now be endemic.

For years, the UN has dodged the blame. Last month, however,

journalist Jonathan Katz discovered that the office of Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon had conceded that the UN was at fault for the initial outbreak and must consequently do much more to alleviate the suffering. A few days earlier, Philp Alston, NYU professor and "special rapporteur" to the UN, confidentially reported that "the scientific evidence points overwhelmingly to the conclusion that the arrival of Nepalese peacekeepers and the outbreak of cholera are directly linked to one another."

These leaks mark an exciting moment in advocacy work. For years grassroots groups inside and outside Haiti have called for the UN to acknowledge its negligence, work diligently to tackle the epidemic, and provide proper compensation to the victims and their families.

Cholera, however, is but the latest in a long line of unwanted gifts Haiti has received from the so-called "international commu-

nity". The well of their unfortunate generosity springs eternal. It is vital to grasp the history of international involvement in Haiti if we are to understand the crime of UN cholera and how they have (so far) gotten away with it.

### The Indemnity

Haiti became independent in 1804, after the slaves of Saint Domingue threw off their shackles and overcame the French, British, Spanish and Napoleonic armies to claim their freedom. The first modern black republic was surrounded by slave colonies, and was within earshot of the plantations of the US South. The nation had many enemies. France refused to recognise the new state, and Haiti's early leaders feared another visit from a French expeditionary force. Henri Christophe constructed an indomitable fort at Milot, stocked with cannon, to ward off a potential French invasion.

Jean-Pierre Boyer, who succeeded Christophe, sought an alternative solution and requested French recognition. However, he was informed that France would not accept the existence of Haiti without a price. Boyer would have to buy Haiti's freedom. The president acquiesced, and so it came to pass that Haiti would pay France an indemnity of 150 million francs that drained Haiti's coffers and skewed its economy for the next century. The next time François Hollande talks vacuously about how it is impractical for France to pay Haiti reparations, think of this indemnity, and its legacy.

### The Gunboat Diplomats

As the 19th Century wore on, Haiti became enveloped in imperial competition between the Great Powers. Britain and France had regained their taste for using the Caribbean as a plaything, and were joined by

## Haiti, Cholera and the International “Community”

# Playing the Blame Game

The UN seems obsessed with the notion that the introduction of South Asian cholera into Haiti was not a deliberate act. After six years of obtuse refusal to discuss its origins and spread, this question is completely moot. The UN’s response to cholera has been a deliberate act to replace evidence with silence, allowing old stereotypes that cast Haiti as a land of disease to creep in.

### The Playbook, Well-Used

Part 1 – The omertà “No single person from the UN should say anything about cholera” (see HB70). This sounds like an implicit admission of guilt, but the refusal to dignify allegations with a response undermines the UN’s accusers, and allows the idea that cholera and Haiti are natural bedfellows to quietly gain strength.

Sounds farfetched? That leads us to Part 2 – start using phrases like “cholera emerged” whilst rejecting suggestions for preventative medicine (screening, vaccinations). Simultaneously, claim that finding Patient Zero was “no longer relevant to controlling the outbreak.” A quick look at WHO guidelines suggests that discovering the source of a cholera epidemic (extremely virulent as it is) is incredibly important to its control.

These UN comments are not all that they seem, and they subtly suggest that cholera was already in Haiti before the UN polluted the

Meille. The epidemic spread a South Asian strain – *vibrio cholerae* – so to effectively shift the blame from themselves to Haiti, this argument required an embellishment.

And this is how they did it. They claimed, according to the Alston report, that the infected faeces “could not have been the source of such an outbreak without simultaneous water and sanitation and health care system deficiencies.” The introduction of deadly diseases, we are told, is therefore just a natural product of UN peacekeeping, and Haiti should have been suitably prepared for such a circumstance.

Bill Clinton followed the party line, saying “What really caused it was that you don’t have a comprehensive sanitation system,” himself dumping verbal faeces into a clogged discursive river. Combined with the suppression of preventative policy, this forms a disturbing action whereby the UN exacerbated the crisis to twice cover its own back.

The final play, as identified by Jonathan Katz, lay in the assertion of all that the UN has (claimed to have) done in tackling the epidemic (see HB74). This serves three purposes. Its “present not past strategy” acts as a useful distraction to questions on the introduction of this disease, whilst emphasising the “good intentions” of an organisation that was, it is said, only



**Holding the UN to account. As early as November 2010, protesters began to demand justice for cholera victims. Instead, international organisations downplayed the role of the UN in causing the epidemic and instead blamed Haiti’s poor sanitation and need for rehabilitation.**

Photo: www.lexpress.fr Published on November 26, 2010.

there to help. Finally, it further discredits the existing Haitian health infrastructure as another justification for the seemingly-eternal stay of MINUSTAH and friends. The international media also helped spread these lies by making an explicit link between the earthquake and the introduction of cholera, a misconception that the UN has done nothing to correct.

### How Haiti Became Associated with Disease

This campaign of deliberate deception deletes from view the international, historical and societal context of health in Haiti. It plays on long-standing assumptions that Haiti is a land of disease, a product of its tropical environment and the supposed negligence of its own people. In 1884, the original peddler of lies about Haiti, Spenser St. John, claimed the country was a “receptacle for every species of filth.” Haiti has had

issues with health and sanitation throughout its history, but St. John and others conveniently ignored the efforts made by government and civil society to take on the challenge. Instead, Haitians were framed as the primary cause of disease, accused of negligence and an aloof attitude to personal hygiene.

The US occupation of Haiti worked extensively on Haitian public health, and framed its success in terms of both the benevolence of Haiti’s foreign wards and the incapability of existing Haitian medics to tackle the disease. To achieve this, they focused on the treatment of visually-striking and easily-overcome afflictions such as yaws and intestinal parasites, as opposed to more prevalent and deadly diseases such as tuberculosis and malaria.

In these years, Haiti also became heavily associated with syphilis, largely due to a mis-

diagnosis of yaws cases (the diseases are closely related). Occupation High Commissioner Russell once claimed that “70-80% of the population are syphilitic,” and with it came all the unfortunate stigmas attached to the sexually-transmitted diseases that cruelly combined with the white supremacist belief of compulsive black promiscuity. Although eventually this syphilis was re-diagnosed as “innocent,” the association of Haiti with syphilis endured, especially when combined with the unconfirmed rumour that this disease, first identified in the 1490s, was brought back from Hispaniola by Columbus.

### AIDS and Ostracism

Decades later, Haiti became the second country to have confirmed cases of HIV/AIDS. In lieu of actual epidemiological research, the idea quickly sprouted in US public health circles that Haiti was a likely source of the disease – one journal article claimed, blinded by the longstanding bastardisation of Vodou in US popular culture, that AIDS was contracted after a Vodou priest bit the head off a lizard and drank its infected blood.

It took ten years before epidemiological research demonstrated that the HIV/AIDS was introduced to Haiti from the USA, likely coming in with the rise of 1970s sex tourism – one of the joys of Haiti opening its borders to US interests. By this point, however, Haiti’s burgeoning tourism industry had been annihilated by the AIDS association, and in the USA, Haitians were classed as a group automatically at-risk for HIV/AIDS, banned from giving blood, and viewed as pariahs. The foreign twinning of Haiti with disease caused untold damage to Haitians home and abroad.

### Thanks for the Help, Guys

Foreign involvement in Haiti has, for decades, waxed and waned. Groups have entered Haiti with little knowledge, promising great medical reform, before quickly exiting citing Haitians as the reason they failed. Public health projects that have succeeded – such as the 1950-52 anti-yaws campaign which nearly eradicated the disease – focused on rapid top-down interventions that worked parallel to Haitian medicine and offered no long-term infrastructural benefits.

In the present-day “Republic of NGOs,” this issue is exacerbated. How is Haitian health meant to develop, competing as it is against a myriad of organisations working separately from Haitian civil society, and uninterested in reinforcing the Haitian state for needs that do not match those of their donors? (see HB69). Even if you delete all foreign actions from Haiti’s past (get redacting, it’ll take a while), the frailty of public health infrastructure can be traced to years of kleptocratic rule by the Duvaliers and the disinterest of elite society for the moun an deyò. Why, Bill Clinton, should over one million Haitians suffer for the actions of dead dictators who held them in contempt?

Sean Penn’s one-man diphtheria hysteria showed that the belief that Haiti represents a “receptacle of every species of filth” was alive and well in 2010, given new life by the panicked assumption that post-disaster landscapes are disaster zones of every sort. The UN knowingly played on these ideas as a means to nullify the suggestion that their negligent introduction of a deadly disease was a heinous act. In doing so the UN aligned itself with a history of vulgar stereotypes based upon the words and actions of a legion of racists, imperialists and hack writers who distorted Haitian life to belittle the value of black lives, or for their own gain. For the UN to act in this manner, knowing full-well the actual source of the outbreak, lends a particular horror to their crime.

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Germany and the USA in their extortions. Between 1880 and 1915, Haiti was visited by dozens of gunboats enforcing demands for disproportionate compensation for unpaid loans, slights against supposed foreign nationals, or simply chancing their hand.

The United States in particular was searching for a naval harbour that would help secure the region it now referred to as its “backyard”. The Môle St. Nicholas in Northwest Haiti, a sheltered deepwater bay, lured in the Great Powers like a siren. In 1891, US Navy Admiral Gherardi turned up on Haiti’s doorstep uninvited, demanding the Môle in the name of the US in return for debts owed by President Hyppolite to US creditors.

Port-au-Prince was up in arms at the very suggestion that even one inch of its land be ceded to the US. Gherardi was rebuffed by the skilful diplomacy of foreign minister Anténor Firmin. He was assisted by the American Minister in Haiti Frederick Douglass, for

the great anti-slavery campaigner was wary of the Admiral’s intentions, and together they sent Gherardi back to Washington empty-handed, at the cost of both of their jobs. Ten years later, the USA annexed itself a deepwater harbour called Guantanamo Bay after it had occupied Cuba.

The newly-minted German Empire paid special attention to Haiti. German merchants and financiers circumvented Haiti’s prohibition on foreign-owned property by marrying Haitian women, and used their influence in Port-au-Prince to bankroll political insurgents.

When they fell foul of the Haitian authorities, as did Emile Lüders – arrested for battery in 1897 – the gunboats rolled into the harbour. Lüders received a full pardon, \$20,000 in compensation, and the Haitian Navy was forced to salute the German flag. After the incident Kaiser Wilhelm stated that “my boys have brought to their senses those Haitian Negroes with a thin veneer of French civilisation.”

Five years later, Anténor Firmin

was attempting to secure the Presidential Palace, but ran low on ammunition. In desperation, his ally Admiral Hammerton Killick, commander of the *Crête-à-Pierrot*, seized supplies from a nearby German vessel. The Kaiser’s gunboats responded and cornered Killick’s boat, demanding not only the return of the ammunition, but the *Crête-à-Pierrot* itself. Killick ordered his men to shore and sailed out to sea. There, he lit himself one final cigar, and ignited the gunpowder stores sacrificing himself and his ship rather than see it fall into foreign hands.

Not all Haitians were as resistant as Firmin and Killick. Some actively conspired with those who wished to bleed Haiti of its resources and by 1915, Haitian society was in a state of constant insurrection. After the public assassination of President Vilbrun Guillaume Sam, Admiral William Banks Caperton put US “boots on the ground”, ostensibly to arrest the bloodletting. Thus began nineteen years of US military rule in Haiti.

### The First US Occupation of Haiti, 1915-1934

Apologists of the Marine regime argued that the occupation worked tirelessly to improve Haitian society, but that it was hampered at every step by Haitians, who they claimed were lazy, backward, stupid, insanitary, and corrupt. In some circles this attitude still thrives, and continues to encourage the annexing of Haitian affairs by foreign hands. Closer inspection, however, reveals nineteen years of abuse and injury to Haitian society, harming Haiti for years to come.

One of Admiral Caperton’s earliest moves was to seize the customs houses of the port towns, the main source of revenue for the Haitian state. The customs taken from the ports now filtered into a National City Bank account set up under the Admiral’s name.

The Marines encountered more opposition as they moved into the mountains, where rural guerrillas known as Cacos resisted the encroachment of the interlopers.

They were initially suppressed, but the Cacos rose up in earnest in 1917, after the US attempted to enforce a *kòve* (forced labour) policy for the construction of public works. Under the leadership of Charlemagne Peralte, the Cacos disrupted occupation control in the countryside, but were then subject to a brutal response from the Marines. Rural Haiti was witness to a glut of atrocities as the forests bore witness to the world’s first carpet bombing. Peralte was tricked, ambushed, and executed; his crucified body displayed as an example of what happens to those who dare question the hegemony of the Marine bayonet.

By 1921 the US was in complete control of Haiti. The subsequent redesign of the Haitian state was made to benefit US economic and strategic interests, and based on a racial paternalism that assumed black Haitians were incapable of managing their own affairs. The most damaging legacy of the occupation was the construction of the Garde d’Haiti, a modern armed

force – Michel-Rolph Trouillot called it “an army designed solely to kill Haitians” – that would be king-makers in Haitian politics for years to come.

### The Second Occupation No-One Knows About

Haiti’s woes are often illustrated by images of deserted farms and ecological devastation, but very few look at how that situation came to pass.

The Marines left in 1934, but Haiti was barely given time to breathe before the US came back. In 1941, Haiti joined the US in declaring war on Germany and Japan. The US didn’t want Haitian troops but they did want Haitian land: large swathes of it were ‘donated’ to the war effort – under the terms of an ‘agreement’ – mainly for rubber production. Thousands of Haitian farmers suddenly found themselves without their land. Don’t worry, they were told, you’ll get it back when we’re done with it.

SHADA, the Société haïtiano-

américaine de développement agricole, was created to administer this land grab and at its peak it had a larger budget than the entire Haitian government. Led by Thomas Fennell, SHADA represented a second occupation of Haiti. The cryptostegia plantations took years to become productive – fully operational only in 1944 – and the war didn’t last much longer after that. However, cryptostegia rubber has the habit of draining the land on which it sits of all its nutrients. The farmers lucky enough to get their land back often found a desert where a fertile field once sat.

SHADA’s failings were attributed to Fennell’s mismanagement and the old chestnut of Haitian “inefficiency.” The US refused to acknowledge that a reckless and negligent attitude toward Haitian agriculture caused lasting damage to Haitian society.

In the 1980s, the Kreyòl Pig Disaster demonstrated that nobody had learned this lesson. Swine flu had broken out among Haiti’s pigs, and the USA feared that the

disease would make its way to its shores. This strain was rarely fatal in pigs, but affected the quality of the meat.

The USA, playing on the subtle vicegrip in which it now held Haitian affairs, ordered the killing of the Haitian pigs to control the outbreak and promised to compensate the farmers with pink pigs. Kreyòl pigs are hardy creatures that can flourish in most environments, finding food wherever they go. Selectively-bred pink pigs, however, require special food and concrete flooring, a luxury rural Haitians could rarely afford for themselves. The pig population of Haiti was destroyed, and Haitian peasants were left in deeper poverty and dependency.

In 1986, the IMF offered Haiti a \$24.6m emergency loan to help repair the Haitian state after the flight of Jean-Claude Duvalier. With the IMF, there’s always a catch – in this instance the IMF insisted Haiti lower its tariffs on rice imports.

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A few years later President Bill Clinton, in the spirit of free market competition, offered a special subsidy for US rice companies who exported their product to Haiti. Well and truly undercut, the Haitian rice farmers abandoned their crop for other pursuits. Many left for the city in an unlikely search for work. Piling into hastily erected shelters in the capital's mushrooming shantytowns, thousands would fall victim to the earthquake of 2010.

### Bèl dan pa di zanmi

A beautiful smile does not mean he's a friend.

François Duvalier came to power in 1957, and until 1971 he held Haiti in a chokehold of terror. His enemies were disappeared, tortured inside the haunted walls of Fort Dimanche, or else chased out of the country by his paramilitary troop the Tontons Macoutes. JFK wanted him dead, but Richard Nixon affected to be fooled by Duvalier's insistence that his victims were "communists," and so Papa Doc found an ally in Tricky Dick.

When François died, he was replaced by his portly teenage son Jean-Claude, who lacked the authority of his father. *Jean-Claudisme* came to rely heavily on the assistance of the USA for its control over Haitian society. In return for a blind eye to Baby Doc's kleptocracy, the USA – not for the first time – demanded Haiti be rendered "open for business."

US companies flocked to Haiti, establishing assembly plants in the Port-au-Prince suburbs to capture the labour of the city's new arrivals for a dollar-a-day, if they were lucky. Haiti also became a leading destination for US sex tourism, and Duvalier's Minister of the Interior Luckner Cambronne (nicknamed the "Vampire of the Caribbean") found a foreign market for Haitian plasma, no questions asked.

The younger Duvalier came under increasing pressure from the Carter administration, and in the late-1970s was forced to enact moderate liberal reform. Resistance sprouted in the grassroots movement, and criticism flourished on the radio waves, pioneered by Jean Dominique's Radio Haiti Inter. Ronald Reagan, true to form, was friendlier to Jean-Claude. The Gipper cared little for liberal reform, and gave Duvalier carte blanche to crackdown on dissenting voices. Protests about by the Kreyòl Pig Disaster were brutally suppressed. Jean Dominique fled Haiti after gunmen stormed Radio Haiti Inter.

But the seas were changing. The brutality of Macoute terror was no match for the surging anger of Haitian population. Duvalier had no fear left to command, and on 7 February 1986, he

boarded a jet courtesy of President Reagan and left Haiti for a golden exile on the Côte d'Azur.

Duvalier embezzled an estimated \$300m from Haiti during his fifteen years in charge. Now routinely referred to as the "poorest country in the Western Hemisphere," Haiti could have done with a few friends in the international community. But its first (truly) democratically-elected president Jean-Bertrande Aristide lasted just nine months before he was deposed by a military coup. How dare he try to raise the minimum wage by 50 cents! Squinting, one could make out the invisible hands of Bush Snr.'s White House and the old Haitian elite guiding the actions of coupsters General Raoul Cédras and François Michel.

Clinton eventually restored Aristide to office, but on condition that he accept a whole raft of 'structural adjustment' policies so beloved of the IMF and the World Bank.

Aristide was ousted again in 2004, by a familiar alliance of right-wing domestic elites and foreign 'Friends of Haiti' (USA, Canada and France). That provided the pretext to bring in MINUSTAH to 'stabilise' Haiti once more. Twelve years later, they are still there. The locals call them Touristah, when they're being polite. Before they introduced a deadly disease, they also participated in the brutal repression of the Cité Soleil slum and have faced numerous allegations of assault, murder, and rape of minors, of both sexes (see HB68 & 70). And they were supposed to bring peace to Haiti...

### The Giver of the Blow Forgets

The Haitian political class has rarely served the needs of the Haitian people. Where it has worked towards the betterment of the nation, conservative business and military interests have combined with foreign plunderers to stifle its efforts. Yet large swathes of Haitian civil society still work in the interests of Haitians, to alleviate pain, stimulate agriculture and reform politics. Little by little, they hope, the bird may yet rebuild her nest.

But they face a daunting task: alongside the domestic "political class" of dictators, plotters, usurpers and exploiters there has always been a ready supply of foreign meddlers who have disrupted and destabilised Haitian society for their own profit – often with criminal recklessness.

And still it continues. The USA has displaced Haitian farmers once again to build its grand Caracol Industrial Park. This temple of neoliberalism is the pet project of the Clintons, who still hold firm to their belief that Haitian society will progress with the gift of

(exceedingly) low-paid manual labour – against decades of evidence to the contrary, and not just in Haiti. We should beware, wrote Jean Price-Mars in 1928, when "imperialism of every order disguises its lust under the appearance of philanthropy". Hillary Clinton's brother, meanwhile, is scoping Haiti for mining prospects, hoping to literally slice into Haiti's soil and extract its riches.

To make sure Haiti remains "open for business" President Obama sent Secretary of State Clinton to Haiti during the 2011 presidential elections, to ensure that the most acquiescent candidate for US policy, Michel Martelly, made it onto the final ballot. Fast forward five years, they are at it again (see HB80).

The tragic reality is that Haiti, as a state and a society, is still cast as a "failure" in foreign eyes, and this status is often attributed to the actions of its people. In 2010, some acrobatically found fault with the Haitians for suffering the tremors of a natural disaster. This idea is so often justified by nods to Haiti's troubled past and difficult present, and allows those such as the UN and the rest of the international community a degree of impunity for their atrocities. It is only to be expected, they argue, that a deadly disease like cholera should crop up in such a broken society. Yet for two centuries foreigners have peddled this excuse, blaming Haitians for the consequences of their own reckless actions. In this context, the deliberate refusal of the United Nations to take responsibility for its cholera crime is even greater.

Haiti needs foreign resources to rebuild public services that have barely recovered from the decades of Duvalierism. It needs assistance to respond to severe agricultural challenges greatly exacerbated by the IMF and USA. It needs help to reconstruct Port-au-Prince, and it needs support in tackling the ongoing cholera epidemic. Haiti deserves assistance because black lives matter, and the UN's cholera lies are built upon the assumption that in Haiti, they do not. Haiti deserves foreign assistance as reparation; because, Mr. Hollande, the international community owes Haiti a great debt for all it has extracted from Haiti, for all it has disrupted in Haiti. Who is responsible? We are.

It is crucial that we do not repeat the actions of our predecessors, that we challenge the racist, imperialist assumptions upon which foreigners have acted and continue to act in Haiti, and defer where necessary and wherever possible to Haitian voices and Haitian administrators so that they can take the lead in Haiti's socioeconomic reform. Why? Because *bay kou bliye, pote mak sonje* – he who deals the blow forgets, but he who bears the scar remembers.