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Where "Freedom" Talk Rings Hollow: The Attack on Democracy in Haiti

By Neil Elliott

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Since his inaugural address in January 2005, President Bush has been talking about "freedom" and "liberty" as if he had copyrighted the words. During March, as popular demonstrations rocked Beirut and pressed the Syrian government to reconfigure its military footprint in Lebanon, *Newsweek* published an encomium by Fareed Zakaria on "what Bush got right," giving the president a good deal of the credit for "freedom's march" (March 14).

It's what such gushing editorials leave out that worries me. Yes, protesters thronged the streets of Beirut to demonstrate against Syrian influence, but an even larger crowd turned out days later in support of Hezbollah, showing that the Lebanese aren't any happier with U.S. interference in the region. Meanwhile, neoconservative crowing about elections in Iraq and (soon, we're told) Afghanistan conveniently omits the forceful insistence from the U.S. that no democratically-elected coalition would ever determine the timetable for the withdrawal of U.S. troops, even though (as [Naomi Klein observed](#) in *The Guardian*) that's precisely what "a decisive majority" of Iraqis thought they were voting for.

And now the headlines tell us "Bush pushes democracy" in a speech before the Organization of American States (OAS), in which he contrasted "competing choices" for Latin America and the Caribbean. One choice, he declared, offered a "vision of hope," founded on "representative government" and participation in the U.S. version of "free markets." "The other seeks to roll back the democratic progress of the past two decades by playing to fear, pitting neighbor against neighbor, and blaming others for their own failures to provide for their people."

Those of us still clinging stubbornly to the "reality-based community" can readily determine to which of those two options the Bush administration is committed by looking to an exemplary "test case" nearby. As [Ben Terrall reports in Democracy's Death](#), a superb article for *In These Times*, the U.S. embassy in Haiti readily concedes that "if there were an election held today, Lavalas" -- the political party of deposed President Jean-Bertrand Aristide -- "would win." What makes that concession really impressive is that it comes after a year-long assault on the poor communities that supported Aristide, by masked National Police and death squads, which has left hundreds dead in the streets or stacked in the capital city's morgues. Through it all, the U.S. government has lavished support on a "de facto" government that a Bush administration team

assembled from Aristide's enemies, while heavily armed men (toting brand-new U.S.-made automatic weapons) go about "systematically repressing" Aristide supporters.

So much for the "proud march of freedom."

The Coup in Haiti

In February, 2004, the Bush administration pulled off a remarkably efficient *coup d'état* in Haiti. Armed U.S. commandos entered the residence of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who had been democratically elected, as even our own State Department concedes, by a margin of which President Bush can only dream. They forced him to board a plane that was bound, unknown to him, for the Central African Republic.

For months before the coup, Haiti observers at the Washington, D.C.-based Council On Hemispheric Affairs and others had been reporting that administration officials who had once managed Reagan's illegal "*contra*" wars in Nicaragua were again working their peculiar magic in Haiti. Shuttling back and forth to the neighboring Dominican Republic (DR), they'd reportedly met with former officers from the disbanded Haitian army, including men convicted of notorious murders and massacres during the previous U.S.-sponsored coup regime (that of Lt. Gen. Raoul Cedras, 1991-94). (The curious coincidence that the guerrillas would emerge, well armed, from the Dominican jungle soon after the Bush administration promised 20,000 automatic weapons to the DR has prompted Sen. Christopher Dodd to call for an investigation into just how the U.S. Agency for International Development has spent \$1.2 million earmarked for "democracy enhancement," and just what sorts of "training" former Haitian military have received in the DR.) A few observers managed to get the word out, though not in the "mainstream" media: the courageous Kevin Pina (already in 2003!) in *The Black Commentator*; Canadian journalist Anthony Fenton in *Z Magazine online*; Pomona College political scientist Heather Williams in *Counterpunch*; the indefatigable Dr. Paul Farmer, interviewed by Amy Goodman on "DemocracyNow" radio as the coup was taking shape, who published an incisive analysis of the coup in the *London Review of Books* a few weeks afterward. (I tried to do my part at The Witness online, two days before the coup.)

Last February, those newly "trained" criminals emerged at the heads of heavily armed and well organized columns, with names like "the Cannibal Army" and "the Orphans' Army." Their forces swept from city to city, systematically torching the offices of the woefully understaffed and ill-equipped Haitian National Police, killing police officers and civilians by the score, and marching on Port-au-Prince. Secretary of State Colin Powell presented Aristide with a thinly veiled threat: leave office or face the "cannibals." After U.S. commandos whisked Aristide out of the country, Powell produced an alleged letter of resignation by the president, which Aristide denounced as fraudulent as soon as he was able to communicate with the outside world.

In another disturbing echo of Reagan's *contra* wars, the man the U.S. installed in Aristide's place, Florida businessman Gerard Latortue, hailed the criminals who had helped remove the

democratically elected government as Haiti's "freedom fighters."

Getting at the Truth

Though none of the major human rights groups has attempted a systematic investigation into the coup or its bloody aftermath, resourceful attorneys and journalists have amassed evidence of a devastating campaign of assassination, massacre, and false imprisonment on sites like the San Francisco-based Haiti Action Network (www.haitiaction.net), and the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti (www.ijdh.org), run by attorney Brian Concannon, Jr., who prosecuted some of the most infamous murderers from the 1991-94 coup period. When, on the first anniversary of the coup, Concannon spoke to a Twin Cities audience of activists gathered by the Haiti Justice Committee of Minnesota, he and Bruce Nestor of the National Lawyers' Guild described the widespread violence in poor sections of Port-au-Prince and the countryside alike as the "systematic consolidation of the coup." Their observations were borne out weeks later by journalist Kevin Pina, also brought to the Twin Cities by the Haiti Justice Committee, who was an eyewitness to violence perpetrated by the Haiti National Police.

The silence from the international community (with occasional exceptions like the African National Congress) and from the mainstream media remains deafening, however. Twice, U.N. peacekeepers have stood by as Haitian National Police have fired into nonviolent demonstrations, killing unarmed people, but without consequence to the police. (A March 2005 report by the Harvard Law Student Advocates for Human Rights declares the peacekeepers' failure to intervene when police are committing abuses before their eyes "simply incomprehensible.") Kevin Pina's "Haiti Information Project" reports increasing police violence against the poor communities that provided Aristide much of his popular support.

Meanwhile, true to form, the "respectable" press skew what limited attention they give to Haiti, conforming it to the State Department line (as when the BBC and the Associated Press suppressed elements of human-rights reports that placed the burden for the violence squarely on the National Police). Part of the problem is that Western media rely, overwhelmingly and unjustifiably, on U.S. State Department releases and the predominant Haiti media outlets, which the elite have bought up over the last five years using money from the (U.S.) International Republican Institute.

It's hard to imagine a more efficient propaganda mechanism for what President Bush might call "disassembling." The word he wanted (as he sniped at Amnesty International's damning report on Guantanamo Bay) was "dissembling," of course, but the disassembly of Haitian reality in the U.S. press is as evident as the "dismantling" of democracy in Haiti itself (to borrow a phrase from Rep. Maxine Waters). As Brian Concannon told *In These Times*, "Latortue can say that Aristide is backing violence in Port-au-Prince" -- surely an impressive reach, given that Aristide is in exile in South Africa -- "without presenting any proof, and it's presented as gospel in the newspapers. But when people talk to our lawyers in Haiti about the interim government's persecution of dissidents, they have extremely credible, consistent and corroborated information.

That information will not get into the mainstream media."

"Democracy" and the "Culture of Life"

In November, another particularly damning report was published by the Center for the Study of Human Rights at the University of Miami School of Law. Their report laid responsibility for violence against the Haitian poor at the feet of "rich businessmen," who "appear to be fueling the fire"; the newly reorganized Haitian National Police, who "backed by U.N. forces, routinely carry out indiscriminate and unprofessional killing operations"; and reconstituted elements of the outlawed army, who continue their traditional mission of "protecting the rich and attacking the poor." In the words of the report's conclusion, the U.S. government's "investment" has been "in firepower," and "the observable returns on the investment are bodies left in the street."

So much for attempts to blame the violence on remnants of "Aristide's supporters."

While Bush and Republican powerbrokers in the U.S. Senate took the spotlight to grandstand for a "culture of life" in the case of Terri Schiavo, a woman lying in a "persistent vegetative state" in Florida, 14 U.S. House representatives wrote a joint letter to the president and Secretary of State Rice calling for the administration to intervene on behalf of Yvon Neptune, the prime minister constitutionally appointed by Aristide, who had languished in a Haitian prison for 11 months without facing a judge (as the Haitian Constitution mandates within 48 hours of arrest). Neptune had begun a hunger strike to protest his illegal imprisonment, and his internal organs had begun to fail; he was in desperate need of medical attention, and observers feared his imminent death. There was no direct response from the Bush administration, though one must wonder whether unrelenting activism from Rep. Maxine Waters (D-CA) and her colleagues, along with ordinary citizens, might have brought enough pressure to get Neptune an appearance in court -- though not his long-overdue release.

So much for the administration's concern for a "culture of life."

In October 2004, Father Gerard Jean-Juste -- one of the champions of the nonviolent democratic movement in Haiti -- was arrested by masked Haitian policemen as he was feeding hungry children at his church. No one in the Haitian government ever produced an arrest warrant during the five weeks he was imprisoned. The U.S. State Department accepted the burden of reassuring the world that Jean-Juste was being "lawfully held."

So much for the rule of law.

It would be nice to believe President Bush's earnest talk about working for freedom and democracy. Unfortunately for the Haitian poor, the facts don't bear out the rhetoric of good intentions. Haiti simply cannot be spun as yet another case of noble American efforts thwarted by the stubborn incapacity of the "natives" to govern themselves.

To the contrary, some of the best covert warfare strategists in our government have carefully

planned and executed the catastrophe that is Haiti today.

For further reading:

Noam Chomsky, Paul Farmer, and Amy Goodman, *Getting Haiti Right This Time: The U.S. and the Coup* (Common Courage, 2004)

Alex Dupuy, *Haiti in the New World Order: The Limits of the Democratic Revolution* (Westview, 1997)

Paul Farmer, *The Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor* (University of California, 2003)

Paul Farmer, *The Uses of Haiti*, 3d edition (Common Courage Press, 2005)

Robert Fatton, Jr., *Haiti's Predatory Republic: The Unending Transition to Democracy* (Rienner, 2002)

C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 2d ed. 1963 (Vintage Books Edition, 1989)

Tracy Kidder, *Mountains Beyond Mountains: Healing the World: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer* (Random House, 2003)

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