

# St. Petersburg Times

## Anatomy of a ragtag rebellion; [SOUTH PINELLAS Edition 1]

DAVID ADAMS. *St. Petersburg Times*. St. Petersburg, Fla.: Apr 12, 2004. pg. 1.A

### Abstract (Article Summary)

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Critics accuse the institute of harboring longstanding anti-Aristide sympathies because of his radical left-wing views. They say the "political party training" sessions were part of the institute's efforts to undermine Aristide by helping organize the anti-Aristide coalition.

### Full Text (1596 words)

Copyright Times Publishing Co. Apr 12, 2004

Clarification, Section A (4/17/04): In a front page story April 12, businessman Andre Fils-Aime was identified as a representative of the Ponte Vedra Beach company, Paige Electric. Although Paige Electric invited Fils-Aime to join a Florida Trade Mission to the Dominican Republic last October, he is not an employee of the company.

When exiled Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide was forced from power in late February by an armed rebellion, his departure was met with mixed emotions.

While some celebrated the end of a corrupt and lawless regime, others cried foul, claiming he had been illegally ousted in a U.S.-assisted coup.

A month after Aristide's whirlwind exit, questions still linger about Aristide's ouster. Was there U.S. complicity in his removal? And who was behind the seemingly all-powerful rebel army?

In recent days, the answers to those questions have become clearer. And the truth that is emerging contains some surprises.

More Keystone Kops than White House-orchestrated covert operations, the events of February were a largely home-grown affair, according to interviews with some of the rebel plotters and their allies, who included the septuagenarian representative of a Ponte Vedra Beach electrical company, and a 36-year-old Republican lawyer from Winter Park.

Far from being a well-equipped army with sophisticated lines of communication and logistics, like the U.S.-backed Nicaraguan Contras of the 1980s, the Haitian rebels were a ragtag bunch of former soldiers and opportunists who begged and borrowed to raise the money for their guns.

With the backing of a small group of Haitian dissidents in the Dominican Republic, a few dozen weapons and a handful of cash, the rebels were extraordinarily successful. In less than a month they toppled the government and in the process forced Washington into a major shift in policy.

"I was kind of amazed that it happened like it did, because I didn't think they had a chance," said Ometrias Deon Long, the Winter Park lawyer who serves as chairman of the St. Johns River Water Management District covering northern and east central Florida.

Long accidentally ran into some of the rebels' political allies on a trade mission last October to the Dominican Republic led by Gov. Jeb Bush. One of the businessmen who joined the mission was Andre Fils-Aime, a passionately anti-Aristide Haitian activist who represented Paige Electric, a Ponte Vedra Beach firm specializing in electrical cables.

The rebels were eager for contacts who could introduce them around Washington. But they weren't having much luck. Fils-Aime latched onto Long.

"They asked me for a meeting with the governor," said Long, who declined to make the call. "I wasn't going to compromise him and get him involved," he said. "To be honest I didn't take them too seriously. From what I could tell, amazing as it seems, this was just a group of seven or eight guys."

But Long promised to stay in touch. On a second trip to the Dominican Republic in December he met with more dissidents. They took him to a political meeting at a church on the outskirts of the capital, Santo Domingo. He was introduced to Guy Philippe, a dashing former Haitian police chief who fled Haiti in 2000 after being accused of ties to drug traffickers.

Long had little idea about Philippe's past, or the prominent future role he would play in the uprising. But the more he learned about the rebels, and their plans to overthrow Aristide, the more their determination impressed him.

They enjoyed the tacit support of the Dominican armed forces. Ever since Aristide had done away with the military in Haiti in 1994, some Dominican generals were worried about their own job security. Without an army next door in Haiti, the traditional enemy of the Dominican Republic, calls were growing in Santo Domingo to slash the size of their own notoriously bloated and corrupt armed forces. The Dominican generals believed that recreating the old military threat next door would boost their relevance.

The rebels, led by two former army officers, Ernst Raviks and Clothaire Jean-Baptiste, exploited this to the full. They set up a small guerrilla base at Perenal, near the border. In 2001 they made two attacks on the national palace. In 2002 and 2003 they launched several sabotage attacks at targets across the border.

Aristide loyalists believe this was all part of a plan laid in Washington to undermine Aristide's government. "This was, in my view, done at the direction and request of the U.S., using the Dominicans as surrogates," said Ira Kurzban, a Miami attorney who represents Aristide.

U.S. officials acknowledge they were keeping a close eye on the rebels, but say they declined to provide assistance because they viewed them as revolutionary has-beens.

Still, Aristide's enemies in Washington "were happy to accept contributions from all corners," said Robert Maguire, a Haiti expert at Trinity College in Washington. "But I don't think in their wildest dreams that they thought the deck of cards would collapse the way it did."

Long and others point out that the Bush administration was at the time still backing Aristide, and was concerned about keeping up democratic appearances.

"At that time the Washington game plan was to stick with Aristide, while holding your nose," said James Morrell, at the Washington-based Haiti Democracy Project, a group critical of Aristide.

The rebels deny receiving any money from Washington. Other analysts stress that the rebels lacked modern weapons and equipment, including radios. At their peak, the rebels numbered no more than 200 armed men, mostly carrying World War II-era M-1 carbines.

When he met his rebel contacts in December, Long said they still hadn't made contact with Washington. They asked Long to make calls to his friends in the Republican Party. Well connected in Tallahassee, Long had been to Nigeria as an election observer in 1999 with Colin Powell, then a retired general and now secretary of state. The trip was sponsored by the International

Republican Institute, a private, federally funded prodemocracy group in Washington.

Though not affiliated directly to the Republican Party, they are closely tied. The institute's chairman is Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz.

The institute has lately been a lightning rod for suspicion about the U.S. role in Aristide's downfall. That is because for the last two years it organized a series of "political party training" sessions in Santo Domingo, attended by Haitian political parties and student organizations linked to the anti-Aristide opposition coalition.

The sessions were held in the neighboring Dominican Republic after the institute was forced to close its offices in the Haitian capital, Port-au-Prince, because of threats against its staff.

Critics accuse the institute of harboring longstanding anti-Aristide sympathies because of his radical left-wing views. They say the "political party training" sessions were part of the institute's efforts to undermine Aristide by helping organize the anti-Aristide coalition.

But one institute official described the program as "Democracy 101," covering issues that should be no threat to an open society. "Violent regime change was not part of the picture," said vice president George Fauriol, who ran the Haiti program.

The institute provided the Times with a list of 25 courses offered between December 2002 and January 2004, and most appear innocuous, focusing on subjects such as polling, campaign management, party structure and political communication. Others, though, bore titles such as "Organizing Youth in Politics," offered in October 2003, and "Coalition Building," offered in January 2004.

On Dec. 5, 2003, several weeks after attending the youth course, students at the University of Haiti began major street protests, albeit only after pro-Aristide thugs had attacked their campus.

"The events of Dec. 5 were not random," Kurzban said. "It was a triggering event."

But Aristide appeared impervious to the street protests. It was only when armed anti-Aristide opponents rebelled Feb. 5 in the port city of Gonaives that the balance of power shifted.

Long returned to Santo Domingo soon afterward to find his rebel friends newly energized. Philippe and the military men had crossed into Haiti after the fall of Gonaives. But Washington remained a problem. In fact, the Bush administration was publicly labeling the rebels as drug traffickers with questionable human rights records.

Long decided to make some calls to Washington. He won't say whom he phoned. The response was not encouraging.

"They kind of at first found it incredible," he said.

As the rebels advanced, and one town after another fell under their control, Long was getting excited calls from Philippe and the rebel leaders. When was Washington going to listen to them, they asked?

"They wanted to get a message to the U.S. that they were not bad people," Long said.

Long sent a couple of letters to Chris Barton, an official at the National Security Council. In the letter sent Feb. 27, two days before Aristide's departure, Long urged the Bush administration to "allow the Haitians to rid themselves of Aristide," and not "to automatically categorize the rebels as thugs, criminals and drug dealers."

It was at that moment that the Bush administration, following the lead of France, decided it was time to ditch Aristide. His armed gangs, known as the chimeres, were loose on the streets of Port-

au- Prince creating havoc.

The rebels had won. On Feb. 29, Aristide fled. The next day the rebels marched into the capital. Long got a phone call from the rebels as they reached the presidential palace. "Where are the Americans?" they wanted to know. "Tell them we're here."

Suddenly, the Bush administration began taking Long's calls.

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**[Illustration]**

Caption: President Jean-Bertrand Aristide; Jean-Bertrand Aristide speaks.; Photo: PHOTO;  
PHOTO, JOHN PENDYGRAFT

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People: Fils-Aime, Andre, Aristide, Jean-Bertrand, Bush, Jeb, Philippe, Guy

Companies: Paige Electric

Dateline: MIAMI

Section: NATIONAL

Text Word Count 1596