

EXPLORING
THE HAITIAN
AMERICAN
EXPERIENCE

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FREE

Obama!

What his election
means for us

By State Rep. Linda Dorcena Forry

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President-elect Barack Obama looks out over the crowd of thousands inside Grant Park in Chicago on Nov. 4, 2008. (AP Photo/David Guttenfelder)

How could this happen?

A horrific scene unfolds in Petionville as hundreds of children and teachers are trapped beneath the rubble of a school. With close to 100 dead already, the grim search continues at this hour. The demand for answers has only just begun. *Page 8*

Fireman Nathaniel Lasseur carries a child who was rescued from under the rubble of a school that collapsed in Petionville, Haiti, Friday, Nov. 7, 2008. The 'La Promesse' school, where roughly 500 students crowded into several floors, collapsed during classes killing at least 47 people and injuring many more. (AP Photo/Ramon Espinosa)



Commentary

Launching a new era of US-Haitian relations

BY STATE REP. LINDA DORCENA FORRY

The election of Barack Obama and Joe Biden this month marks a milestone in American history. I believe it can also serve as a watershed event in the history of US-Haitian relations.

In the summer of 2007, when it came time to make a final call on my own presidential preference, I sat down with my husband and we talked. Mostly, our thoughts turned to the two people who matter most: Our two young children, ages 4 and 1 at the time.

What kind of world would they inherit from us when they come of age? The world as George W. Bush prepares to leave office is one in which America's reputation has been tarnished by misguided and seemingly unending war. I want my next president to restore our country's position in the global community through smart diplomacy, the prudent use of military strength and the renewed good works of that "shining city on the hill" that has inspired the world in years past.

Senator Obama, I concluded, offered a unique opportunity to reach out to our allies — and potential enemies — in a novel and transformative way. While I believe that this is particularly important in some of the world "hot spots", including the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, I also want our next president to be pro-active and more aggressive in building productive relationships with other emerging nations in Africa, Latin America and Asia. We must act in good faith now — in times of peace with these nations — to protect our long-term national interests and compete with other emerging superpowers like China.

Of course, as a first-generation American, my thoughts so often turn to the plight of my cousins, friends and extended family who are citizens of Haiti. Of all of the world's troubled corners, perhaps no single place demands more compassionate attention from our government than this island nation, just 600 miles off of our coast.

The great majority of Haitians live in desperate circumstances that Americans can barely begin to imagine. Homegrown corruption and centuries of international meddling have conspired to hold the people of Haiti hostage. And, in recent years, the consequences of environmental neglect and poor planning have compounded natural disasters, turning tropical storms that would be minor events here into ruthless killers.

The situation in Haiti has become dire. From the American perspective, Haiti's present reality is striking evidence of our own failed foreign policy in the region and a symptom of a larger failing of our nation. It has become an imperative, both morally and from the vantage point of our own strategic interests, to make the stabilization of Haiti a top regional priority.

We are at a unique moment in history. The world community has taken notice, yet again, of America's greatness through the milestone election of Barack Obama. His election — and the peaceful transition that now follows — is something that has sent a clear message about the promise of our nation. In many parts of the world — particularly emerging democracies in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean — the people and governments look upon Obama and — for the first time ever in the likeness of an American president — see themselves.

There is an abiding sense that we must capitalize on this moment and Haiti is a perfect place to start.

Here are some of the fundamental points about



Rep. Linda Dorcena Forry with Sen. Barack Obama, now president-elect, at a 2006 meeting at UMass-Boston.

US-Haitian relations that I intend to stress to the new administration.

First, President-Elect Obama, Vice-President-Elect Biden and their emerging team should acknowledge — at the outset of their administration — that Haiti is a foreign policy priority. It is true that, in the context of the two wars that we are now engaged in Iraq and Afghanistan, Haiti is not the most pressing agenda item for the American military. Nor should it be one.

However, given its proximity to the United States mainland, its historic ties to our shores now and in the past, and the potential for mass migration, Haiti presents an urgent and persuasive argument for aggressive and thoughtful policy-making. Perhaps most importantly, it is clearly in the national security interests of the US to protect our economic flank in what has become a high-stakes competition with China and other rivals, including Venezuela.

I would advise the Obama-Biden administration to appoint a task force — commissioned through the US Department of State — to convene at the earliest possible time to review past, present and future policy positions and make recommendations within a short time frame — before the end of 2009 — for a new plan. I envision a far more robust US diplomatic mission on the ground in Haiti, with a diplomatic corps that should have as its aim — among other things — the careful administration and review of all foreign aid on the ground; the potential for securing and encouraging sensible US investment in Haitian industry, infrastructure and agriculture, particularly for entrepreneurs from the American diaspora; and technical assistance in helping to halt and reverse the erosion and destruction of Haiti's environment.

Analysis

Obama changes could test Castros' grip

BY ANITA SNOW

ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

HAVANA — Cuba's communist leadership has long cast itself as David standing up to the U.S. Goliath and the crippling force of America's punitive trade and travel embargo.

Now they have a problem: If Barack Obama follows through on campaign promises to ease restrictions on the island, he could chip away at the Castro brothers' best case for staying in power. And if a new Democrat-dominated Congress takes Obama's moves even further, Cuban leaders may have a hard time maintaining their tight control over Cuban society.

"They'd have to throw out the whole script about American imperialism," said Phil Peters of the Lexington Institute, a Washington-area think tank.

Top Cuban ideologues are already worried. "We have before us the immense challenge of how to face a new chapter in the cultural struggle against the enemy," Armando Hart, 78-year-old patriarch of Cuban communists, warned last week in Granma, the party newspaper.

If Cuban-Americans are allowed to visit more frequently and send more money to the island, it could spark "a new chapter in the ideological war between the Cuban revolution and imperialism," Hart wrote.

The U.S. government's Cuba policy has been frozen in time since 1962, when it imposed the embargo with the aim of bringing down Fidel Castro's government at a time when U.S.-backed exiles mounted the failed Bay of Pigs invasion and Soviet missiles in Cuba

Our policy towards Haiti should be one that respects and values Haitian autonomy and self-government in all ways. Our policy posture towards Haiti should be consistent with other American objectives in the region, including the creation of a more open and democratic society in neighboring Cuba. The goal of our policies should be mutually beneficial: By working in partnership with the government and people of Haiti to assist them in rebuilding their nation and paving the way for future investments and economic growth, we can — over time — develop a more robust trading relationship with a close neighbor. By encouraging better living conditions and insisting upon universal human rights, we can discourage and reduce the potential for uncontrolled migrations, while always leaving the door open for a sensible and healthy immigration policy.

None of this will happen overnight. But, as the dawn breaks on a new American administration, there is hope that a US policy that puts a value on mutual respect, economic partnerships and compassionate relief for our immediate neighbors in Haiti can replace an era marked more by crisis management and a growing mistrust between our countries.

Finally, a note on the role that we — as Haitian-Americans — must endeavor to play in this new day for US-Haitian relations. Each of us who are American citizens must recast ourselves as individual US ambassadors to Haiti, rather than as Haitian ambassadors to the US. Many of us have long viewed our role in impacting American decisions as one in which we are on the sidelines, without a voice beyond that of dissidents, voicing our dismay over the latest outrage to befall Haiti. We must dedicate ourselves in a more concerted way now towards having a direct role in engaging our government's positions before they take shape — and adjusting them when they do not adequately meet our expectations for progress. This government — the United States of America — is the one which we must focus on to effect change in Haiti. The people of Haiti — our cousins, brothers, aunts and uncles and friends — must do their part to effect change and progress on their end.

I know many of us have longed for the day when we can do our part to make a difference in Haiti. I think that moment is at hand. I ask all of us to join together — not as partisans in a political contest — but as Americans who care deeply about the land that our relatives still call home.

Working together, I believe it is possible for us to help drive our nation's leadership towards a more responsible, progressive and sustainable relationship with Haiti.

In the words of our next president: "Yes we can."

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