

The long legacy of the U.S. occupation of Haiti

In 1915, the U.S. military invaded Haiti. Over the next 19 years, it executed dissidents and instigated a system of forced labor.

By [David Suggs](#)

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U.S. soldiers were dispatched to Haiti's shores in 1915, ostensibly to stabilize a country in disarray after a presidential assassination.

But over the next 19 years, U.S. forces executed political dissidents and implemented a system of forced labor that ravaged Haiti's peasant population. [Thousands of people died.](#)

The United States' two-decade occupation shaped Haiti in important, and often damaging, ways. Haitian leaders continued to use the systems developed by the United States to exploit rural farmers and silence dissidents. And significant parcels of Haitian land were sold to U.S. companies. As Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat [wrote](#) on the 100-year anniversary of the invasion: "Our désoccupation has yet to come."

And as Haiti grapples once again with instability and violence [after the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse](#), this legacy is an important reminder of the challenges of foreign intervention.

The conditions for the U.S. occupation of Haiti were decades in the making, according to Mark Schuller, an anthropology professor at Northern Illinois University.

Though Haitians declared their independence in 1804, the U.S. didn't recognize Haiti as a country until 1862, enforcing a trade embargo.

Racism played a significant role in that decision. As historian Brandon R. Byrd [wrote](#), "Haiti confronted backlash from U.S. politicians who feared that it would undermine their own systems of slavery and white supremacy." [Prominent lawmakers argued](#) that forming diplomatic relations with Haiti would be seen as "a reward for the murder of masters and mistresses by black slaves," as one senator put it.

U.S. leaders also saw Haiti as an important military asset. In 1868, President Andrew Johnson considered annexing the island of Hispaniola, consisting of Haiti and the Dominican Republic, [for strategic purposes](#). U.S. lawmakers worried that an unstable Haiti could be vulnerable to foreign intervention.

Between 1911 and 1915, the United States increased its involvement in the country to maintain its influence. As the State Department wrote in its history of U.S. foreign policy:

“Between 1911 and 1915, seven presidents were assassinated or overthrown in Haiti, increasing U.S. policymakers’ fear of foreign intervention. In 1914, the Wilson administration sent U.S. Marines into Haiti. They removed \$500,000 from the Haitian National Bank in December of 1914 for safe-keeping in New York, thus giving the United States control of the bank.”

The situation escalated on July 28, 1915, when Haitian President Vilbrun Guillaume Sam was assassinated. Hours later, President Woodrow Wilson sent hundreds of Marines to the country. Eventually, 5,000 U.S. troops would occupy the country.

Wilson claimed the invasion was focused on stabilizing Haiti. But U.S. actions tell a different story. The Haitian-American Treaty of 1915, which ended the official invasion, gave the United States control of the country’s finances. A gendarmerie of U.S. citizens and Haitians was established to protect the United States’ business and political interests. And U.S. leaders pushed Haiti’s legislature to appoint a new president — Philippe Sudré Dartiguenave — favorable to U.S. interests.

As African American writer and activist James Weldon Johnson wrote, Dartiguenave — “bitterly rebellious at heart as is every good Haitian” — was coerced into “carrying out the will of the Occupation.”

“The occupation was a land grab, a power grab and a resource grab for Haiti’s ... wealth,” Schuller said.

The Haitian rebels who opposed the U.S. invasion were subjected to brutal repression. One prominent leader, Charlemagne Peralte, was lynched in 1919. His half-naked body was bound to a door frame draped with a Haitian flag. At the end of the flagpole stood a crucifix.

“It was a visual demonstration of the lack of importance that Haitian lives were given by the military,” Schuller said.

Other Haitians have similar stories. “One of the stories my grandfather’s oldest son, my uncle Joseph, used to tell was of watching a group of young Marines kicking around a man’s decapitated head in an effort to frighten the rebels in their area. There are more stories still,” Danticat wrote of her family’s experience.

Violence and racism was rampant among U.S. forces. “Military camps have been built throughout the island. The property of natives has been taken for military use. Haitians carrying a gun were for a time shot at sight. Many Haitians not carrying guns were also shot at sight,” Herbert Seligman wrote in the Nation magazine in 1920.

“Machine guns have been turned into crowds of unarmed natives, and United States marines have, by accounts which several of them gave me in casual conversation, not troubled to investigate how many were killed or wounded,” he added.

At the time, U.S. atrocities in the region were largely kept under wraps by strict military censorship codes. But the U.S. invasion was immortalized in Haitian works produced during the 1920s and 1930s, largely influenced by a growing understanding of cultural nationalism and indignity of U.S. occupancy.

“And here we are arisen / All the wretched of the earth / all the upholders of justice / marching to attack your barracks / your banks / like a forest of funeral torches,” penned Haitian poet Jacques Roumain, the founder of La Revue Indigène.

It was one of many publications formed during the U.S. occupation, fueled by the cultural and political ideals that defined the Haitian Revolution a century prior.

Over its two-decade occupation, the United States did revamp the country's education system and bolster Haiti's infrastructure, using forced labor to construct new roads and buildings. But these projects were largely funded by extracting wealth from the countryside.

And many of the country's resources ended up in foreign hands. For example, U.S. forces rewrote Haitian laws to allow foreigners to purchase land, which had been banned. Several U.S. companies took advantage of that change to buy up land, including the North Haytian Sugar Co. and the Haytian Pineapple Co.

By the end of the U.S. occupation, even some of the U.S. military leaders had come to regret their role. "I spent thirty-three years and four months in active military service as a member of this country's most agile military force, the Marine Corps," Smedley Butler, a former general in the U.S. Marine Corps, said in 1933.

"During that period, I spent most of my time being a high class muscle-man for Big Business, for Wall Street and for the Bankers. In short, I was a racketeer, a gangster for capitalism," he said. "I helped make Haiti and Cuba a decent place for the National City Bank boys to collect revenues in. I helped in the raping of half a dozen Central American republics for the benefits of Wall Street."

The occupation officially ended in 1934, but its legacy is still felt among the Haitians. As Jonathan Katz wrote in his book on Haiti's experience with foreign aid and intervention, "After the United States left in 1934, their successors continued bolstering [Port-au-Prince's] control over rural politics, expropriating peasant land for factories that produced commodities for the United States and stifling dissent using the army the Americans created."

Many of the country's leaders — including Moïse — have been accused of favoring U.S. interests over the interests of Haiti's poor and working class.

"From the perspective of the majority of Haitian people, the people in the working-class neighborhoods, the working people, the masses of people, U.S. intervention is not something that they want or are looking for," said Chris Bernadel, a member of the Black Alliance for Peace, an antiwar and anti-imperialist organization dedicated to the Black radical struggle.

A commemorative ceremony was held in Port-au-Prince in 2015, to mark the start of the invasion 100 years earlier.

In the same place where cacos rebelled against U.S. forces, dancers twirled through the streets. Cloaked in modest brown cloths, they marched to the rhythm of the beat. Demonstrator's chants filled the air, some referencing Haiti's de-colonial past, others criticizing U.N. intervention in the present day.

"With or without boots, the Occupation is still here," they yelled.