



**RECOVERY AND HOPE IN HAITI:  
EXPECTING AUDACITY FROM OBAMA AND US**

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In the midst of our joyous and rightful celebration of the inauguration of President Barack Obama, I turned to thoughts about Haiti. not only because this is the month of Haitian Independence (January 1, 1804), one of the most glorious moments and models of liberation struggles in African and human history, but also because I draw parallels, make links and extract lessons. There is also this lesson and value I learned in the house of my father and mother. For whenever we were about to celebrate or enjoy a special good, they would call us together to bow our heads, give thanks for our special and regular blessings, remember those less fortunate, and request that they too be blessed with happiness and satisfaction of their needs. And we also would ask that we may be generous, just, caring and committed to making whatever efforts we could to ease and end suffering of others around us and in the world. And this too caused me to think of Haiti.

Also, Haiti came to mind because I know Black history extends in motion and meaning beyond the U.S., that Washington is not the world, and that we must always be actively concerned for and committed to the freedom, well-being and flourishing of other Africans and peoples of the world. And Haiti clearly requires such commitment and concern for a host of historical and ethical reasons. In the midst of the Holocaust of enslavement, in the most terrible times of our history as African people, Haiti rose up as a lighthouse and island from the depth of a rough and ruthless sea of enslavement, colonialism and imperialist rampage to become the first Black Republic in the Western Hemisphere. For the first and only

time in history, an enslaved people defeated their enslavers and created a realm of freedom for themselves, a country called Haiti, whose very name was once outlawed and unspoken in the U.S. Congress. In fact, it was a symbol of freedom thru struggle for oppressed Africans and others in the world which gave them not only the audacity to hope, but also the audacity to work, sacrifice and struggle for freedom and the sense of dignity, possibility and promise that come with it.

And so, as I watched the celebration in Washington of the impressive achievement of our people in expanding the realm of freedom in this country and the world, I thought too of Haiti and its singular contribution to African and human freedom. I thought of what Frederick Douglass called “the glory of her bravely won liberty and her blood-bought independence”. Indeed, he called on us and the world to “respect Haiti for her services to the cause of liberty and human equality throughout the world and the noble qualities she exhibited in all the trying conditions of her early history”.

And here I thought of the reversal of the Revolution; the constant attempts by France, the U.S. and others to humiliate, break and destroy the will of the people to be free; how internal oppressors and collaborators emerged, as in other struggles, to feed and prey on the people; and how even their great victory gave them no rest, no time for depthful enjoyment of their achievement. For the fight was never finished.

But I was uplifted by the thought of the resiliency and resistance of the Haitian people and how after a long list of

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bloodletting dictators, of U.S. invasions, occupation and imperialist exploitation, there emerged the Lavalas Movement of the Haitian people determined to regain power over their destiny and daily lives, push their lives forward, and forge a good future for their children. And to do this, they sought to build democracy, electing for the first time in a democratic election their president, Father Jean Bertrand Aristide. Overthrown by reactionary military and corporate forces, President Aristide went into exile, returned but was again overthrown and kidnapped by the U.S. government, rescued by a delegation headed by Congresswoman Maxine Waters and Attorney Randall Robinson, and now given political asylum by South Africa.

I thought how the Haitian people felt brutally deprived of their democratically-elected president in comparison with how we might feel if the beloved president we elected were overthrown, kidnapped, injured or worse, or even denied a chance to win, which many of us feared. What do you think we would have thought, felt and imagined doing? Indeed, such a turn of events is for most of us too frightening to face and too unnerving to imagine. Yet too many of us show little or no evidence of concern for the feelings and future of the Haitian people.

Hope for Haiti lies in our organizing and building a constituency of support for the Haitian people in their ongoing struggle to achieve several basic goals: (1) end of the military occupation under the cover of the U.N. Forces, MINUSTAH, and use of the \$601.58 million per year paid them for

Haiti's human services and development; (2) securing Temporary Protected Status (TPS) and work permits for Haitian nationals in the U.S. to prevent added suffering and continue aid from remittances; (3) increase international humanitarian aid; (4) establish fair and reciprocal trade policies; (5) foster internal development directed toward food security, rebuilding infrastructure, poverty reduction, restoration of agriculture, reforestation and water projects; (6) cancellation of the unjust and debilitating international debt; and (7) the return of democracy, the rule of law and the return of Haiti's democratically-elected leadership.

In a statement on the need for humanitarian assistance following four devastating hurricanes, rains and floods of 2008, then Sen. Obama expressed empathy and concern for the loss of Haitian lives and the devastation of the country and called for U.S. and international partnership with the Haitian people to "assemble a task force on reconstruction and recovery". He affirmed that "Together, we can help Haiti recover from this terrible series of storms and renew efforts to bring hope and opportunity to the people of Haiti". It is our responsibility to remind him of this noble sentiment and help him anchor it in a policy and practice which supports the Haitian people in their work and will to overcome oppression, poverty and underdevelopment and return to the upward paths to freedom and flourishing which they forged in 1804 against all odds and the underdeveloped imagination of others.

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