



An Unbroken Agony: Haiti, from Revolution to the Kidnapping of a President

Randall Robinson

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From Reader Review An Unbroken Agony: Haiti, from Revolution to the Kidnapping of a President for online ebook

Michelle says

Robinson needed a better editor, but the story this book tells is one everyone should read. The US's role (along with France and Canada) in overthrowing the democratically-elected Aristide is disgusting and maddening. Totally undermines all of Bush's talk about supporting democracy and reminiscent of the US's involvement in Cuba pre-Castro (not to mention the rest of Latin America where this country has been so expert in destabilizing countries and toppling popularly-elected governments for the benefit of US business interests). If you thought all that was in the past, all you need to read is this book, describing Aristide's toppling in 2004. Also interesting, is how Robinson notes the role of the US mainstream media and contrasts Americans' sympathy for apartheid in South Africa with our basic disinterest in Haiti.

Ben says

The undoing of Haiti: author documents the great power's enmity against Aristide.(An Unbroken Agony: Haiti, From Revolution to the Kidnapping of a President)(Book review)
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AN UNBROKEN AGONY: HAITI, FROM REVOLUTION TO THE KIDNAPPING OF A PRESIDENT
By Randall Robinson Basic Civitas Books, 288 pages, \$26

For all the justifiable vilification the Bush administration has received for invading Iraq and advancing the agendas of right-wing corporate power and fundamentalist Christian theocracy, Bush's support for the 2004 coup in Haiti is usually forgotten in books detailing his administration's crimes. (Impeach the President, a collection of essays enumerating reasons to give Bush/Cheney the heave-ho, is one of the few recent exceptions. It contains a chapter by journalists Lyn Duff and Dennis Bernstein on the 2004 ouster of the democratically elected Haitian government of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.)

Randall Robinson's new book An Unbroken Agony: Haiti, from Revolution to the Kidnapping of a President is hence much-needed and right on time. Mr. Robinson, founder and former president of TransAfrica, an organization that aims to "promote enlightened, constructive U.S. policies toward Africa and the Caribbean," has since the beginning of the 1990s worked to support Mr. Aristide and his progressive vision.

Mr. Robinson puts Haiti's long struggle in historical context, emphasizing that the 1804 war of liberation against Napoleon was the only successful slave revolution in history. It served as an inspiration for abolitionists and freedom-loving people around the world. It also earned Haiti the enmity of slave owners and colonial powers who did not want to see this example succeed.

As Mr. Robinson makes clear, that attitude from the "great powers" continues to the present day. So much disinformation has been spread about Mr. Aristide in the years since Jesse Helms notoriously branded him a "psychopath" that even allegedly "progressive" elements in the United States have been reluctant to say anything about Haiti without qualifications that give credence to various unproven smears against the exiled president. As Congresswoman Maxine Waters has pointed out, the Haitian president negotiated a gang truce and talked with gang leaders in the same way that she engaged gangs in Los Angeles. Although Mr. Aristide

always stressed the importance of nonviolent struggle, just having communication with gangs was twisted into something more sinister.

Barraged by sloppy, ill-informed media recycling talking points from the U.S. embassy in Port-au-Prince, people in the States have too rarely heard of the concrete achievements of Mr. Aristide and the Lavalas movement. Lavalas, which carried then-Fr. Aristide from priesthood to the presidency, was one of the more effective progressive projects of the late 20th century, putting into office an entire government dedicated to popular education, building parks, which the poorest never had access to before, and forcing the superrich to finally pay taxes. It still commands support from the majority of the Haitian people. But given that Lavalas (which means "flood" in Creole) was always about helping the masses of desperately poor Haitians who constitute the majority of the population of that beleaguered land (witness Mr. Aristide's doubling of the minimum wage), it was soon targeted for destruction by both Haitian and U.S. elites.

As Mr. Robinson writes, "From the start, Aristide tried to establish an authentic democracy that could put a dent in the country's wide socioeconomic divide. From the start, the United States, France, the European Union, the Haitian bourgeoisie, the Macoutes, FRAPH, Convergence and the American-armed rebels employed every imaginable tactic to violently defeat the new democracy's overarching goal."

In April 2003, Mr. Aristide announced that in the bicentennial year of Haitian independence, France should reimburse the 90 million francs that Haiti had been forced to pay between 1825 and 1947 as compensation for France's lost "property"--the ex-slaves. Mr. Aristide calculated that the sum was now equivalent to \$21 billion. The demand resonated throughout Africa and Latin America, and rattled the French government. "Before bringing up claims of this nature," President Jacques Chirac warned in the summer of 2003, "I cannot stress enough to the authorities of Haiti the need to be very vigilant about--how should I put it--the nature of their actions and their regime."

Macoutes were killers in the employ of the U.S.-backed dictatorships of Francois "Papa Doc" Duvalier and his son Jean-Francois "Baby Doc." After the younger Duvalier's regime was finally ousted in 1987, years of extreme military brutality and a number of coup regimes followed, but in 1990 Mr. Aristide emerged as a surprise candidate who swept internationally monitored presidential elections. After U.S.-backed rightists forced him from office, the CIA-funded FRAPH (Haitian Creole for "hit") carried on the Macoute legacy, killing upwards of 4,000 civilians and raping untold numbers of women. Six years after the end of that reign of terror, Mr. Aristide won his second overwhelming presidential victory in 2000. The Bush administration responded by funding the "Convergence," a coalition of elite groupings with no popular base in Haiti, via the International Republican Institute.

Mr. Robinson's description of the January 2004 bicentennial celebration of Haiti's independence illustrates the class bias of Mr. Aristide's opposition. As thousands of poor Haitians assembled in front of the Presidential Palace at the festivities, Mr. Robinson was seated on a dais next to Luigi Einaudi, the Organization of American States point man on Haiti policy who helped pave the way toward the coup. Mr. Robinson describes the following exchange after the Italian diplomat expressed concern to him that the surging masses were "going to riot":

"I leaned over and said to him: 'Look at this outpouring of love and support for the president. No one can say he does not have the support of the people.' Mr. Einaudi said, 'Well he does not have the support of the real people. It is just these types of people here who support him' (pointing dismissively to the hundreds of thousands massed before him).

"I then asked him: 'What percentage of the population do these people represent?' He answered, 'Well 80 to 90 percent, but they're not the ones who matter.'"

The "real people" Mr. Einaudi refers to are the same people Langston Hughes was thinking of in this passage

Mr. Robinson quotes: "Certainly the upper-class Haitians I observed at a distance seemed a delightful and cultured group. No doubt, many of the French slave owners were delightful and cultured too--but the slaves could not enjoy their culture."

In presidential elections conducted with the "help" of the United States, France and Canada in 2006, the one candidate with a legitimate connection to Mr. Aristide, his former prime minister, Rene Preval, was elected by the majority of Haitian voters. But the "people who matter" to Washington still control Haiti. The police and most ministries are still dominated by individuals who seized power during the 2004 coup, and as Mr. Robinson observed in a recent interview, "The supreme court has been replaced, in large part, by the interim government that was installed by the United States. So Preval's government has no control over the judiciary. We don't have an authentic democracy."

Like so many other countries subjected to the bitter medicine of U.S. foreign policy, Haiti deserves better.

[Freelance writer Ben Terrall lives in California.]

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William says

My fellow college classmate, Randall Robinson, has written another informative and provocative account of America's influence to destabilize an island country and Haiti's determination to stand up for itself.

Ferentz says

a very quick read. i made my way through this in one day. the connections robinson draws between the conditions in haiti and us/european involvement are keen, but he does not probe these with much depth. he is also resistant to critique the legacy actions of his friend Aristide and appears disconnected from the pulse of most haitians living in haiti and the diaspora. he has a good handle on the extremists on both sides, but not those in the middle.

Steph says

Starts with a good review of Haitian history. Then becomes a collection of facts pointing to CIA/US involvement in Haitian coups. Would rather just read the story than a collection of facts. Interesting though.

Elaine Nelson says

This was not the book I was hoping for -- I think I was looking for more of an overview of Haitian history, and this was almost exclusively about the 2006 coup against Aristide. And unfortunately, I couldn't even get into that aspect. The narrative style is roundabout and discursive, cutting back and forth over time, which made it hard to get a good sense of what was happening when.

Additionally, there's only so much "Americans are racist thugs" that I can handle being lectured about. Not that he was wrong in the particulars, of course, but the repetitiveness started to get on my nerves.

Between the lecturing and the confusing narrative, I couldn't finish it. There are a few bits and pieces that were intriguing, but mostly that makes me want to seek out another book on Haitian history.

SpaceBear says

A disappointing and poor book, considering that it was the only book I could find on Haiti prior to going there. The book asserts that American policy is dominated solely by racism, that white people are unable to understand black mentality, and that Haiti's myriad of problems are part of some kind of conspiracy. Why believe in conspiracies when the truth is bad enough? Also; the title is misleading. The book only briefly discusses Haiti's history, and focusses mainly on the ouster of President Aristide.

Nicole says

Again, excellent research and first hand experiences of witnessing U.S. (and France) treatment of Haiti, especially during the George W. Bush's Administration. Readers will learn the contemporary history of Haiti. The U.S. had its American Revolution against a European colonizer (England) but Haiti was the first to win a revolution against a European colonizer (France), but race plays a role in how the story is told. Readers will also get insight and learn about the difference in the quality of news reporting in the U.S. and outside the U.S. Contemporary account, and a lot of it remains true to this day, about Haiti.

Sarah Rigg says

The most valuable thing about this book is that about 90 percent of the material regarding the events of February through March 2004 are based on the author's personal eye-witness or interviews Robinson did with firsthand eyewitnesses to the departure of President Aristide from his country. Robinson does give some of the history of Haiti, helping to put Aristide's departure in context. I recommend it as a really riveting non-fiction read, but not as a comprehensive or objective history of the nation. Robinson is a master at building tension.

Alexa Poeter says

A play by play of the events leading up to the ousting of President Aristide and the events that followed, this book is extremely informative for those interested in a detailed account of the 2004 coup d'etat in Haiti.

Randall Robinson writes of the internal emotional anguish suffered during this time by the Aristides and those close to them, as well as the details of communication between concerned parties. He analyzes the role of US political officials and US media in implementing and covering up the kidnapping of Aristide and his wife.

I learned who the major players on all sides of the 2004 coup d'etat were, including Maxine Waters who played an integral role in getting the Aristides out of the Central African Republic, where they had unwittingly been taken following the coup.

There is a brief explanation of Haiti's history as the first and only successful slave revolution leading to independence in the first few chapters.

For people who want a more general or comprehensive look at Haiti since 1804, I recommend Paul Farmer's "The Uses of Haiti".

Why not 5 stars?

Generally speaking the book could have been edited better. The author jumps around a bit chronologically which, though effective at times, sometimes led to confusion or lack of cohesion as I read. Some points seem to get a bit too repetitive as well - OK so Lydia Polgreen of the NY Times effectively dismisses Haitian national pride and political potential when she grossly downplayed the numbers celebrating Haiti's 200 years of independence on 1/1/2004- it was over 500,000 not the "small, but enthusiastic crowd" she describes in her article in the NY Times. But must it be mentioned 5 times throughout the book? That said I will remember Lydia Polgreen. And the scene of her running up to Robinson in the airport is cinematic. (I won't give it away...)

As someone with very little knowledge of the politics of Haiti or the major players in Haitian politics, I found the book hard to follow at times. Sometimes organizations or major political players are referred to without clear introduction, leaving those of us new to Haitian politics feeling a little lost. For example "Convergence is referred to on p. 94 but not properly explained until p. 101"

For people in a similar predicament, I recommend watching "Aristide and the Endless Revolution", a documentary on the same topic, before or while reading "An Unbroken Agony" - it helps to clarify some of the major players (i.e. Andy Apaid, Group 184, Convergence Democratique, Guy Phillippe, the Steele Foundation, Caribbean Community (Caricom), Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), Organization of American States (OAS), etc....)

All in all - the first hand account of the days surrounding the coup are well written and the book, though not always easy to read - is certainly a must read for anyone interested in this topic.

Kristina says

A trust-breaking account of the USA's role in ousting the first peasant-approved, democratically-elected president of Haiti (Aristide) and instigating/arming rebels to terrorize the Haitian countryside in the surrounding months. This event was portrayed very differently in the media at the time (2004), viewed more as a black vs black dispute in an unstable country.

" It would seem that little of consequence has changed in the way that they white world behaves towards our countries. It cannot be gainsaid that "Independence" for them is little more than a mere fiction..."

" Clearly the Americans, the French, the Canadians, the British, the Australians, and all the world's other while people regard our Presidents, whether they are democratically elected or not, as toy presidents and our countries as toy countries" -pgs 250-251

Though the repetition of American (and white) evils does get tiresome, and the chronology jumps from time to time and is confusing, this book did make me think. Are our Western governments truly manipulating the governments and economies of developing nations to keep them poor and powerless? Even when we have people such as Michaelle Jean in prominent places of power at the time? How can I be a responsible citizen to keep informed of true world events in such a complicated political and economic landscape - especially if our own governments are not trustworthy in all these matters?

Jennifer says

This is the March selection for the bookclub at the Malcolm X Library (San Diego). I chose to read it because it offers an great history of haiti and an excellebnt first person account of the events around the kidnapping of president Aristide. January andf February selections are by Edwidge Danticat and since she is from haiti, I thought it would be nice to have some background.

Andalusia says

I learned how much the Western World hated Haiti once they gained their independence and how France tried to charge Haiti millions of dollars for their boats that were still docked their after they gained their freedom.
More to follow once I finish it.

Shanta says

I learned so much from this book and Randall Robinson. This book is an expose on the history of Haiti from the revolution to the present day. It outlines in great detail the American governments role in the illegal deployment of Aristed and and our role in corrupting the Hatian political system. Randall Robinson is an honest and factual writer and leaves no stone unturned. Every person of color in America should read An Unbroken Agony. It is an eye opening experience.

David Clayton says

This book jumps around an awful lot (an obvious attempt to create tension, which didn't really work for me), and repeats itself even more. The verbatim repetition of certain phrases had, by the end if the book, come to remind me of Alan Carr's easy way to give up smoking, and indeed I wondered if this was the application of some kind of cognitive therapy technique. This would be particularly apt given the doctrinal preconceptions that the author seeks to disabuse.

On balance, this is a passionate denunciation of a particularly craven episode in the developed world's long history of hypocrisy and democratic double-speak, and an episode of which the author has close personal experience. Names are named and liars called out. A readable book, and worth reading.
