

An Open Letter to David Brooks on Haiti

Dear Mr. Brooks,

In your January 15, 2010 opinion piece in *The New York Times*, "The Underlying Tragedy," you present what you seem to believe is a bold assessment of the situation in Haiti and what you certainly know is a provocative recommendation for Haiti's future. You also offer some advice to President Obama. In order to successfully keep his promise to the people of Haiti that they "will not be forsaken" nor "forgotten" the President, you say, has to "acknowledge a few difficult truths." What follows, however, is so shockingly ignorant of Haitian history and culture and so saturated with the language and ideology of cultural imperialism that no valuable "truths" remain. Please allow us, therefore, to present you with some more accurate truths.

First, Haiti is not a clear-cut case of the failure of international aid to achieve poverty reduction. For almost its entire existence Haiti has been shouldered with a load of immense international debt. The Haitian people had the audacity to break their chains and declare independence in 1804 but were later forced by France to re-purchase their freedom for 150 million Francs, a burden that the country has had to carry throughout the twentieth century.

What's more, the "aid" Haiti has received from its powerful neighbor to the North has never been the sort that would help the country reduce poverty or achieve meaningful development. In the early-twentieth century the principle "aid" Haiti received from the United States came in the form of a brutal military occupation that lasted from 1915 to 1934. After "Papa Doc" Duvalier ascended to power "aid" meant assistance to a ruthless (but conveniently anti-communist) dictator. The U.S. gave Duvalier \$40.4 million in his first four years in power, briefly suspended military and economic assistance to the dictator in 1963, but resumed shortly thereafter, restoring full military and economic aid to Duvalier by 1969. In the early 1970s and 1980s when "Baby Doc" Duvalier was at the helm, the "aid" the United States and other international agencies contributed failed to reduce poverty but did enrich foreign investors in the newly constructed assembly industry. Economic policies that the U.S. forced upon Haiti decimated its agriculture for the benefit of American farming while driving Haiti's peasants into Port-au-Prince and other cities where they found few jobs and scarce housing. Four years after Baby Doc's departure the Haitian people decided to help themselves by democratically electing a new leader, but the United States aided Jean-Bertrand Aristide's domestic opponents in the coup of 1991 and did so again in 2004. It is no wonder then that that such "aid" from the United States has failed to lift Haiti out of poverty.

Equally unconvincing is your argument about "progress-resistant cultural influences," which brings us to important truth number two: Haitian culture is not "progress-resistant" as anyone familiar with the examples you yourself provide can attest to. If Vodou or "the voodoo religion" as you put it, "spreads the message that life is capricious and planning futile," how do the majority of Haitians manage to survive on scant resources and less than two dollars-a-day? How do so many Haitians manage to travel abroad, find and maintain difficult jobs, and send money back home if not through careful planning and a fierce defense of precious life? How do the nationwide customers of Fonkoze, the Haitian banking operation that teaches literacy and business practices to curbside marketers to whom it makes small loans, achieve such strong records of loan repayment? In fact, it might be Haitian culture itself (and even Vodou) which allows Haitians to persist. After all, the Vodou spirit Ogou (St. Jacques) is honored as a clever

planner and master of skills. So was the champion of Haiti's war of independence, General Toussaint L'Ouverture, a onetime slave who entered history as a military and diplomatic genius.

The third important truth we have to offer (and we hope President Obama is listening as well) is the opposite of your call for "intrusive paternalism" as the solution to Haiti's woes: Haiti does not need nor does it want the paternalism of the United States. Haiti is literally dying of cultural imperialism.

Whenever America's leaders and pundits speak of subordinate peoples, the ideology of imperialism shines through. As it does in your words, Mr. Brooks, so it has done for far too many earlier Americans. President William McKinley, for example, facing the difficult question of how he was to govern the newly-conquered Filipinos worried that

left "to themselves they are unfit for self-government-and they would soon have anarchy and misrule . . . [So] there was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them, and by God's grace do the very best we could by them."

Closer to home, those who worried about an earlier form of "progress-resistant cultural influences" decided it was better to remove the children of Native American families than to let them absorb the backwardness of their pagan and uncivilized parents and community. A common refrain by these "reformers" was "kill the Indian, save the man." And now, Mr. Brooks, you propose to save the Haitians from themselves by replacing Haitian cultural values and institutions with "middle-class assumptions, an achievement ethos and tough, measurable demands." Imperialism, whether economic or military, is the primary reason for the conditions that so worsened the impact of the earthquake on January 12. Haitians need less imperialism, not more.

During the Vietnam War an American officer famously stated that "it became necessary to destroy the village in order to save it." Today Haiti is virtually destroyed. The earthquake having done the hard part, Mr. Brooks, you think "intrusive paternalism" will save it. Lacking a foundational understanding of Haitian history and culture, and bearing the familiar colors of American imperialism you and your ilk will do vastly more harm than good.

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