

OPINIONS

Haitian-exile army makes sense

By James Flori

If the United States decides to invade Haiti, most analysts agree that the Haitian army will be swiftly defeated. The real concern is not the risk of military defeat, it is the cost of victory and its aftermath. Americans are highly averse to casualties, even in single digits, and this aversion is sometimes allowed to dominate the national debate about whether or not we should invade Haiti. Perhaps it is time to consider new ideas.

We should ask ourselves why it must be American soldiers who hit the beaches of Haiti. I believe the invasion force can and should consist primarily of Haitians. The necessary manpower is already in Guantánamo Bay and elsewhere, sinking deeper into despair with each passing day. Since nobody seems to know what to do with the refugees, I propose we turn some of them into soldiers. They want to see the junta destroyed more than we do, but they are in no position to accomplish that destruction.

We can change that if we want to. Since any invasion will be launched at a time of our choosing, we can choose a time far enough into the future to allow us to train and equip an old-fashioned low-tech infantry force. When the time comes to pull the trigger on the junta, we would supply the air and sea power, the logistics and transportation, and the command, control, communications, and intelligence. Haiti would supply twenty or thirty thousand of its own young men to carry the battle on the ground. They speak the language, they know the country, and they have proven already in leaky boats that they are not afraid to die.

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and the national interest requires us to solve it. We can't let all these people live in Florida, but we can't let them die at sea. Therefore, as long as people continue to flee Haiti, we have only two choices. We can warehouse them in camps, which is impractical and solves nothing, or return them to Haiti, and the only realistic way to do that is to remove the junta and restore (or create) respect for human rights. A Haitian army raised and trained by the United States can help us do both.

I suggest a six to nine month policy of democratic restoration. We should fix a specific target date between January and April as the outer bound for that restoration. The world would be put on notice that if the junta is still in power by that deadline, we will invade, and if we are forced to invade, the terms will be unconditional surrender followed by criminal prosecution where appropriate of any surviving members of the junta, the police, and the other organs of repression. If we can persuade the UN, the OAS, and other Caribbean nations to endorse the plan, their support would be welcome. If not, we would move without them.

In exchange for this commitment, the United States would grant itself permission to refuse all Haitian refugees. Our message to potential refugees would be, "don't leave unless you are a young man willing and able to join the expeditionary force, because everyone else will simply be returned to Haiti." Those who have already been accepted into camps could not be forcibly conscripted, but I believe they would jump at the chance by the thousands. This policy would yield all the manpower needed.

At the same time, it would shut down the flow of refugees in a way that would be morally justified by our final commitment to restore democracy within a fixed and reasonable time frame. (Whether or not that requires the restoration of Aristide is a different question.)

This plan suffers from an obvious and unfortunate parallel with the Bay of Pigs invasion, but the circumstances are very different, and so, too, would be the outcome. Haiti is much smaller and less formidable than Cuba, and most importantly, there is no nuclear superpower hovering behind General Cedras to pose the risk of escalation. This is a fight we know we would win, and that changes everything.

The real question is, what then? The last time we invaded Haiti we were stuck there for nineteen years. We don't want to stay on the ground in Haiti forever, and no one is likely to be willing or able to step in for us. By helping to solve this long-term problem, a new Haitian army would make itself useful for the second time. To establish democracy, it is obvious that the first institution which must be reconstructed is the army. If we begin establishing a Haitian army in exile now, it can help us to secure the peace as well as to prevail in war with minimum American casualties.

Nation-building has a bad name these days, due in large part to our experience in Somalia. But just because nation-building is difficult and takes a long time does not mean that it is impossible and should never be attempted. In this case, a little nation-building in Haiti is precisely what American national interest requires, and a new Haitian army may be the place to start.

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