

Haiti: The Heartbeat of Black Liberation

When most people think of Haiti they think of an impoverished country that faces many natural disasters. However, they don't think of why it's impoverished: it has suffered a history of colonial exploitation and has been paying off the debt of freedom, both financial and metaphorical, from its creation to the present. Haiti's struggle for freedom is a lesson to everyone about the struggles that Black people face around the world.

Haiti became the first free Black nation in 1804 during the Haitian Revolution. To free itself from French colonization, it had to pay over \$20 billion as a debt over the next centuries. Ever since its formation as an independent country, it seemed like Haiti couldn't catch a break. It dealt with multiple dictators, violence, and civil unrest (on top of the debt) that continue to this day. The current conversation is if the U.S. should intervene in Haiti, which is a recent topic because of the increasing instability since President Jovenel Moïse was assassinated. In 2022, the U.S. supported the government and the Haitian Police by supplying over 200 million dollars to Haiti ("Haiti: Recent Developments and U.S. Policy"). However, many people oppose this due to the US's brutal history with Haitian intervention, including an occupation from 1915-1934, as well as two coup d'états in 1991 and 2004 to overthrow a democratically elected leader. Monique Clesca, a Haitian activist and women's rights advocate, says the U.S. should be supporting the Haitian people, not the government that is run by an unelected leader trying to suppress attempts to form a democratic government.

The Haiti Action Committee is an important voice in this conversation. The Haiti Action Committee, originally called the Haiti Action Coalition, was formed in 1990. Pierre Labossiere, who grew up in Haiti and remains deeply involved in the struggle, is a co-founder of the organization. He says that the 1991 coup was the starting event that made it clear to the

grassroots movement in the Bay Area that something had to be done to address the unrest in Haiti. They called on many organizations to come together and form the Haiti Action Coalition. They had protests, demonstrations, and even hunger strikes to support Haitian refugees.

Today, though they still do demonstrations, they also educate people in the U.S. about the struggles that Haitian people face and stand in solidarity with Haitians. Haiti is important to the U.S. and all around the world because the struggles that Black people face in both countries are linked. If you stand by Haitian people you are essentially standing by the entire idea of Black Liberation.

Haiti was founded by formerly enslaved people breaking free from French colonization. An independent Black-led nation is a radical idea now, it was radical when Black Nationalism gained popularity in the U.S. in the 60s, and it was definitely radical in the 1800s. Thomas Jefferson, a slave owner himself, refused to recognize it as a country because he was scared it would inspire slaves in the U.S. to revolt. The ideals that Haiti stands for have always shocked the status quo and inspired change. The Haitian Revolution started in 1791 after a rebellion of the enslaved Africans living on the island, which was previously called Saint-Dominique. After over a decade of struggle against the French, Haiti became an independent nation in 1804. As Pierre Labossiere puts it, "They broke free of slavery. Not only did they break free of slavery, but they overturned the system completely and totally." The Haitian Revolution inspired other revolutions around the world to rebel against colonial powers. A significant example is how they've supported the struggle for freedom here in the US, such as Haitian activists leading slave rebellions.

However, this freedom came with a cost, both metaphorically and literally. To become a country, Haiti had to pay a debt to its enslavers, which amounted to 20-30 billion dollars in today's money, over the next century. It wasn't France that had to pay a debt for putting the people of Saint-Dominique through centuries of slavery, but it was Haiti who had to pay their former colonial captors. After recovering from a revolution, the last thing they needed was this massive debt crippled the economy and prevented them from rebuilding infrastructure, schools, hospitals, and investing in agriculture. This debt represents the cost of freedom especially for a Black country. Not just financial, but systemically, because Haiti has been the target of foreign intervention and invasion by other powers like the U.S. such as the U.N. and France.

Haiti has been a target of Imperialism from other countries like France and the U.S. ever since its creation. However, one of the biggest examples was the U.S. occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934. U.S. President Woodrow Wilson sent Marines to Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti in 1915 after a Haitian President was assassinated. He claimed it was to help restore order in the country, but what really happened was the massacre of thousands of Haitians, as well as the U.S. taking control of Haiti's bank. In fact, the U.S. was in control of Haiti's finances up until 1947, years after the occupation ended. The U.S. soldiers who were stationed there partook in acts of violence against the Haitians, echoing what is still happening today. There were stories of lynching, shooting at crowds, and killing dissidents, according to *The Washington Post* ("The Long Legacy of the U.S. occupation of Haiti"). The bitter memory of those 19 years of U.S. intervention continues to motivate Haitian activists to speak out against foreign intervention today.

The legacy of colonial violence is still present to this day. Students, activists, and protesters are repeatedly targeted by military gangs and police as a way to silence dissent. One

example is a student named Gregory Saint-Hilliare, who was killed by the police in 2020. A professor who joined the ensuing protest said that it was the first time a student was killed by law enforcement inside a school. A place where people were supposed to get an education turned into a battleground. The protest that followed was also met by police violence like shooting into the crowd and tear gas. The frequent tragedies in Haiti are almost too much to keep up with. This problem is only made worse by the fact that the U.S. supports the Haitian Police.

Clearly, Haitians are sick and tired of the corruption of the government and police force within their own country, but Haitian immigrants who try to escape this instability also face an uphill battle, especially when coming to the US. The Biden Administration deported 20,000 Haitian refugees in 2022 (Isaacson). While some were returned by plane, U.S. Border Patrol agents on horseback infamously chased Haitians back across the border (Debusmann). This is particularly disturbing because it conveys an image of slave owners riding horses and carrying whips. It's like history was repeating itself. Whether it's inside or outside Haiti, Haitians are always met with opposition by their own government or the governments of other countries.

Whether or not U.S. intervention should happen is such a pressing issue right now because of the current situation in Haiti. After President Jovenel Moïse was assassinated in July 2021, gang violence became more of a crisis than ever. According to a report by the U.S. Congress, there were 25% more homicides by gangs recorded the next year ("Haiti: Recent Developments and U.S. Policy"). They reported kidnappings, massacres, and gender violence against women, not to mention the ties the gangs have with the government, where they use voter intimidation and violence to help political elites gain power. In 2022, the Biden Administration gave 219.2 million dollars to support the Haitian government, including funding the police

(“Haiti: Recent Developments and U.S. Policy”). Now the question is, with what’s currently happening as well as considering the history of intervention, should the U.S. get more involved?

There are many voices in this conversation in both countries, from the administration to the people. In Haiti, the government and the people actually have opposing views on whether U.S. intervention is beneficial. Ariel Henry is the current unelected leader of Haiti, and was supposed to be in power as an interim government but continues to be the head of the country to this day. Due to the increasing gang violence, he has called for U.S. Marines to settle the situation (Katz). The Haitian government and the U.S. government are closely tied, with the U.S. government funding them and interfering with elections. It’s no surprise that the Haitian government is advocating for further U.S. intervention. To many Haitians, this recalls the darker time of the occupation. Not only that, but activists say that the U.S. should stop supporting the government of Haiti and support the people instead. Monique Clesca, a Haitian activist and advocate for women’s and girls rights, is very involved in the struggle. She wrote in a *New York Times* article about her actions in bringing people together to form a Haitian-led solution to the corrupt government. Her meetings have been shut down by armed men and she’s been met with opposition for the government. She’s frustrated that the U.S. is supporting the Haitian government so enthusiastically but not the actual people who are most affected as well as doing the most for progress. She wrote, “Perhaps the Biden administration and other foreign leaders feel they are doing what’s best for Haiti by standing behind Mr. Henry. They are actually standing in the way of what’s right: letting Haitians save our own country” (Clesca). Many Haitians who have seen their government leave them behind—even actively try to stop them—echo Chesca’s sentiments.

So, why should we even care? Why should people in the US feel like they have a stake in this issue? The truth is that Haiti's ideals and its people have been tied to Black Liberation movements around the world, even in the US. The struggles that Black people in America face and what Haitian people face go hand in hand. Many people don't realize the impact that Haiti had throughout history and around the world. Even while they were continuing the struggle for independence in their own country, they also supported movements in other countries. The reach of Haitian activists spreads far and wide. "Be it in Africa, South America, Asia, for decolonization. During the period of the decolonization and also against apartheid, Haiti stood very strong with all those forces for equality and justice," Pierre Labossiere said. Haiti is so much more than people portray it as, which is usually a country devastated by natural disasters and violence. The people who work at the Haiti Action Committee understand why it's so important to support them because of what Haiti represents, the idea of liberation for all.

Even people who didn't grow up in Haiti are influenced by it. For example, Kiyoshi Taylor is a local activist who works with not only the Haiti Action Committee, but other organizations like Justice Vanguard that fight racism locally in the Bay Area. He talks about how Haiti is important to all Black people and how Haitian struggles and U.S. struggles are connected. Taylor says, "They've stood by Black America and the struggles we're going through. So it's very important that we stand by them and help them and help them achieve what they've so desperately longed and fighting for, which is a fair living environment, true democracy, true independence from the U.S. and the BS that they continually shift to the island." He gave a historical example: Charles Deslondes, who was of Haitian descent, led a slave rebellion in the U.S. during 1811. This is another reason why Taylor believes that "Haiti has always been the heartbeat of Black liberation." This is why it's so important to understand and

stand in solidarity with the Haitian struggle, because of what it can teach everyone about building community and fighting against oppression.

Knowing the history of Haiti and why it's important around the world, now is the time to take action. The Haiti Action Committee has been committed to helping Haitians for over 30 years. Kiyoshi Taylor, who also holds events like the Juneteenth festival for Justice Vanguard, believes that education is the best way to fight racism. "With my organization and Haiti Action Committee everything is basically based around education. ... Other things we do are events such as webinars, teachings, we actually still do protests, banner droppings over freeways, a litany of things, but all based around educating people on the history of Haiti and what's going on now and the U.S. connection to the pain and suffering currently going on on the island." The best way to get started is to attend the webinars and get involved with local organizations and school clubs. Taylor says that the Haiti Action Committee can benefit from having young people care about the struggle and be knowledgeable about what's going on in Haiti. His voice is important in this conversation because he shows how much Haiti's past connects to its present, and not to mention the inherent ties between the Black Liberation movements of both the US and Haiti.

The Haiti Action Committee has stood up for Haiti in every crisis it faced. They also educate people on why it's important to support Haitian people: Haiti is connected to the larger idea of Black Liberation and freedom from oppression all around the world, even in the US. It connects to people who didn't even grow up there. It's also a lesson on U.S. Imperialism that not everybody knows or wants to talk about. Since its creation as a country, Haiti has always been a symbol of resistance in the face of racism and oppression, and everybody has something to learn from the Haitian struggle.

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