

# United States crushes hopes for Haitians seeking freedom

New Clinton administration brings optimism for refugees



David Badders/DN

The Statue of Liberty, in all her glory and splendor, would have sought some other shore to stand on when the Haitian refugees were turned away by the Bush administration. The very principles for which she stands were dispelled and ignored.

A military coup turned a Haitian democracy into a totalitarian state. This led refugees to flee from persecution to the so-called land of liberty, the United States.

However, what refugees found was an administration geared toward repatriation. This response was hypocritical and only caused more suffering. But with the change of the administration, a new light of hope shines through the narrow crack in liberty's door.

Sept. 30, 1991, was the beginning of the worst nightmare for many Haitian people. What started off as a wonderful dream of democracy and free elections turned into a nightmare of totalitarianism. It was on this day that the military, aided by the elite, staged a coup and ousted the first democratically elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

This militia began carrying out campaigns of terror and intimidation against Aristide supporters. Aristide won the election by 67 percent of the vote. Aristide directed his campaign toward the poverty-stricken areas of the Haitian country.

Haitians had very limited choices. They could either stay and face persecution, or leave their home and country. If they stayed, they would face death directly from the hands of the militia or by starvation — no health care and apathy from the indirect effects of the new government. If they left, they would leave behind all their possessions and the people they knew. They would have to risk their own lives for an uncertain future. And if caught, they would face death.

They had to decide if leaving

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and possibly dying before, during, or after their escape was worth everything, or if living in fear of persecution and enslavement by remaining was better.

Haitians fleeing their country sold everything they had and bribed military officers to look away as they escaped in handmade boats barely able to float. They left their homeland in search of help, safety and survival. Many Haitians drown on their way to the United States. But some made it safely.

Haitian refugees were happy to step foot in America. The United States had come to the rescue of Kuwaitis who feared oppression by Saddam Hussein, and so Haitians hoped to also be rescued by the United States as they escaped political asylum from a government-turned chaotic after efforts of seeking democracy there.

But these Haitian refugees were not met with open arms. Instead they were met with barbed wire camps and containment facilities. It appears that there was and still is a decade-old policy of sending Haitian refugees back to Haiti.

The Bush administration could not immediately enforce this policy because human rights organizations, United States citizens, as well

as Immigration Naturalization Service officials, acted quickly to counteract this policy.

The Refugee Act of 1980 stated that the United States would not return potential refugees to their home country if they had a fear of persecution.

Under the Bush administration, the United States government said Haitians were fleeing economic, not political, conditions as asylum requires. But Bush called the new Haiti state a totalitarian state, and the United States ambassador to Haiti was recalled because of the violence there. Refugees who were returned to Haiti told of beatings and killings of others who returned.

In October 1992, the Supreme Court announced they would review the Bush administration's policy of repatriation. The court cited concern for the massive flow of Haitians to this country and the risk of further loss of life as the necessity of the order. Every action taken by the United States government during the Bush administration offered no solutions. Many suggest racism as a basis for many of the subsequent policies.

Now we turn to the Clinton administration to correct Bush's errors.

Although this administration has not been active for very long, it has offered hope to many refugees. Clinton's administration has promised to enact changes allowing not only these refugees temporary asylum, but it has pledged to change policies concerning the refugees who are HIV positive. Clinton stated that he would try to keep the Haitian refugees where they are until democracy can be restored.

With the Clinton administration, there is hope. Clinton is trying to change policies and he has made negotiations possible. Let's just hope Clinton keeps his promise.

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