

# Haitian-Building

From the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Port-au-Prince

By Roger D. McGrath

The great rule of conduct for us in regard to foreign nations is, in extending our commercial relations to have with them as little *political* connection as possible.

—George Washington,  
Farewell Address

THE MARINES HAVE LANDED in Haiti—again. They’ve been there many times before, not in the aftermath of an earthquake, but in the chaos caused by warring factions and rulers destroying infrastructure and terrorizing the population. These interventions cost American taxpayers millions and the Marines blood and lives. In the long run, they proved entirely futile, though they did add to the heroic lore of the Corps. The three most decorated Marines in history all served tours in Haiti, with two of them earning the Medal of Honor there.

Born in revolutionary fervor, Haiti has traditionally called itself a republic, but its history has been marked by strongmen anointing themselves Emperor for Life or ruling like one while observing the title of president. Coups and assassinations have been the surest path to power. From 1908 to 1915, the Haitian government changed hands seven times, with four presidents dying violently and the other three fleeing the country. Men were tortured and mutilated and women raped. Voodoo incantations guided the masses. The country resembled nothing else in the Western Hemisphere.

During this period, American companies doing business in Haiti suffered losses, and their claims against the government mounted. Roger Farnham, a

principal of the National Railway, tangled with the government over its refusal to pay for several sections of badly constructed track. Farnham was also vice president of the National City Bank of New York City and of the Banque Nationale in Haiti. Moreover, he was chief adviser to the Wilson administration on Haiti and influenced, if not determined, State Department policy toward the country.

The result: a graphic demonstration of gunboat diplomacy. In December 1914, the USS *Machias* steamed into the harbor at Port-au-Prince and landed a party of U.S. Marines. With 1903 Springfield slung over their shoulders and Colt .45 semi-automatic pistols on their hips, they removed \$500,000 in Haitian government funds from the vault of the Banque Nationale and carried the cash to the *Machias*. The money was then transported to NYC and deposited at the National City Bank. Back in Haiti, the Banque Nationale lowered the French flag that had flown over its headquarters and raised the Stars and Stripes.

Early in 1915, the State Department sent two special commissions to Haiti in an attempt to negotiate an American receivership, which would include U.S. control of customs. Such an arrangement might have brought some measure of stability, but the Haitian government, which had a typically tenuous hold on power, knew it would be inviting a coup d’etat if it compromised national sovereignty. By the spring of 1915, the State Department ruled the situation in Haiti hopeless, deeming the Haitians incapable of governing themselves. President Wilson agreed. His advisers began laying

the groundwork for military intervention.

Meanwhile, the Haitians lived down to the State Department and President Wilson’s low opinion of them. Late in February, Jean Vilbrun Guillaume Sam ascended the presidency in a coup. He suppressed other aspirants to office, jailing and torturing hundreds of them. On July 27, he had nearly 200 political enemies executed, including former president Oreste Zamor.

As news of the executions spread, riots erupted. Sam fled to the French embassy and was given asylum. Undeterred by diplomatic niceties, a mob stormed the embassy, found Sam hiding in a bathroom, and beat him to death. His body was dragged into the street and dismembered and disemboweled. The various body parts were then paraded through the streets of Port-au-Prince while onlookers hooted and looted.

The next day, the Marines landed. The Wilson administration said they were needed to protect American lives in the wake of Sam’s death and the collapse of his government. But the Marines had been dispatched long before the assassination and had been waiting on board the USS *Washington* in the bay at Port-au-Prince. They were there to protect American business interests whether or not Sam remained in office. With World War I raging in Europe, there were also worries about possible German threats to the Panama Canal should a future revolutionary Haitian government open its ports to the Kaiser’s ships and submarines.

By midmorning on July 28, some 300 Leathernecks and several dozen sailors had come ashore. They were soon rein-

forced by more Marines from Guantanamo Bay and later from Philadelphia, until their numbers reached 2,000. "The force being sent to Haiti," declared the *New York Times*, "is much larger than is necessary for mere protection of foreign interests." This would be an occupation.

From shipboard, the Marines thought Haiti looked like a tropical paradise and believed the Haitians would welcome them as guarantors of safety and security. Once on land, they were disabused of such notions. "It hurt," remarked Private Faustin Wirkus. "It stunk. Fairyland had turned into a pigsty. More than that, we were not welcome. We could feel it as distinctly as we could smell the rot along the gutters. ... In the street were piles of evil-smelling offal. The stench hung over everything." Marines patrolling the streets of Port-au-Prince at night avoided walking under second-story windows for risk of having a chamber pot emptied on them.

Military personnel took control of all the coastal cities and ports and attempted to regularize the collection of customs. Looking through government records they found that graft was simply standard operating procedure. To change such practices, they would have to take control away from the Haitians and rule, as one Marine put it, like "the Great White Father."

But there was trouble brewing in the hills, where thousands of bandits and guerrillas had fled. The Marines, led by Maj. Smedley Butler and Gunnery Sgt. Dan Daly, gave chase. Fighting these *cacos* was not nearly as difficult as tracking them down. If they didn't have great numerical superiority, they would rarely fight. Battles usually only occurred when Marine patrols surprised large encampments or stumbled into an ambush.

On Oct. 24, 1915, Major Butler and Gunny Daly led a mounted patrol of three dozen Marines across a river in a deep ravine en route to the old French

outpost Fort Dipitie, reputed to be a *cacos* stronghold. Some 400 *cacos* opened fire, killing a dozen of the Marine horses and a mule carrying the patrol's machine gun. Butler and Daly led their men to high ground, established a tight defensive perimeter, and kept the *cacos* at bay with accurate rifle fire.

When the night turned pitch black, Daly went back for the machine gun, which had sunk into the river along with the dead mule. He slipped by most of the *cacos*, but had to silently knife three. Then he repeatedly dove into the water in the darkness until he located the mule. Unstrapping the machine gun and its ammunition, Daly hoisted the 100-pound load on his 5'6", 42-year-old frame and crept back through the *cacos*. At dawn, Butler and Daly led the Marine attack on Fort Dipitie, driving several hundred *cacos* from the fort and killing 75 of them. Daly would be awarded his second Medal of Honor.

A month later, it was Butler's turn. He led some 90 Marines to Fort Riviere, situated on the top of 4,000-foot-high Montagne Noire. Protected by cliffs on three sides, the one-time French fort was approachable only from the front. Along the west wall, Butler discovered a small drainage culvert just big enough for a man to get through. He decided that he and two others would go first and create a diversion, allowing his main body of troops to follow.

Crawling stealthily, Butler, a sergeant, and a private emerged from the culvert inside the fort, ran to another position, and began a withering fire that cut down confused *cacos* by the twos and threes. They engaged some of the guerrillas hand-to-hand, bludgeoning them with rifle butts and eviscerating them with bayonets. With the *cacos* diverted, the rest of Butler's men were able to exit the culvert without being immediately gunned down. The battle lasted only 10 minutes and left 51 *cacos* dead. Butler

and the two enlisted men who had accompanied him were awarded the Medal of Honor. He joined Daly as only the second Marine to receive our nation's highest decoration twice.

The Haitian-American Treaty, negotiated during the fall of 1915, stipulated that the U.S. would organize and provide officers for a security force, the Gendarmerie. In December, Major Butler became the force's first commander and was given the rank of major general. Marine privates became second lieutenants in the Gendarmerie, corporals first lieutenants, and so forth. The Marines were paid by the U.S. according to their rank in the Corps and by the Haitian government according to their rank in the Gendarmerie. The double pay helped compensate for dangerous and malaria-wracked duty, including months in the mountains chasing bandits. One of those Marines, a private become lieutenant in the Gendarmerie, would, like Butler and Daly, become a Marine legend—Lewis "Chesty" Puller.

The United States and the Marines would stay in Haiti until 1934, pouring millions of dollars into the country—building harbors, bridges, roads, schools, and hospitals, suppressing insurrections, and protecting American business. But within a few years of the Marines leaving, factions and strongmen were at it again. Moreover, a border war erupted with the Dominican Republic. Smedley Butler, who retired from the Corps in 1931 as a major general and the Marines' most decorated warrior, remarked with disgust that ultimately the Marines' mission resulted in not much more than making Haiti "a decent place for the National City Bank boys to collect revenues." ■

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# Speak No Evil

An al-Qaeda PR man tests America's constitutional commitment to freedom of speech.

By Kelley Beaucar Vlahos

IT'S DISORIENTING to sit across from a pair of bright, bespectacled military attorneys a metro stop away from the Pentagon talking about freeing a convicted terrorist from a life sentence. Discussions about "fundamental rights" extending to noncitizens, government overreach in the War on Terror, and the slippery slope of the Military Commissions Act—this was more like interviewing ACLU lawyers, long-haired, indignant, and ready to be jailed defending their client.

But here were two clean-cut Catholic guys who claim they are inspired by the perspicacity of the Founding Fathers and a rule of law stronger than any post-9/11 race to rid the world of Islamist evil-doers. They say their current case has as much to do with the rights of American citizens as it does with one long-term resident of Guantanamo Bay.

Army Major Todd Pierce, a Judge Advocate General reservist, and Michel Paradis, a civilian lawyer, serve on a team for the Defense Counsel of the Court of Military Commission Review. They are helping to build the appeal for Ali Hamza al-Bahlul, an al-Qaeda media man and Osama bin Laden's personal secretary, who was convicted by a military tribunal in 2008.

His work as a propagandist—and, these attorneys suspect, his loutish behavior at trial: waving a poem praising the 9/11 attacks didn't help his cause—landed al-Bahlul the heaviest sentence of the three men successfully

prosecuted under the Military Commissions Act to date. Still, they believe his conviction violated the First Amendment.

Come again?

These lawyers couldn't have picked a more repellent client. Not only is al-Bahlul a noncitizen, he admits to joining al-Qaeda, swearing allegiance to bin Laden, and writing speeches for the terror mastermind. He allegedly bunked with eventual 9/11 hijackers and reportedly provided a radio receiver to bin Laden to listen to the aftermath of 9/11 via satellite. During his trial, he played with a paper airplane. He vows to continue the fight.

This appears to be an open-and-shut case, but defense attorneys point out that prosecutors could never tie al-Bahlul—who was captured and first indicted in 2004—to a single violent act against coalition forces. Nevertheless, he was charged with conspiracy, material support for terrorism, and solicitation to commit murder.

Defense attorneys have zeroed in on the solicitation charge, saying it hinged on a single recruitment video al-Bahlul produced, "State of the Ummah." They argue that it was never proved that the video was anything more than an abomination to its American viewers, at least the ones who were brought in to testify during al-Bahlul's sentencing. The prosecution offered no evidence that the video called for, or resulted in, a specific act of murder.

"There is little doubt that Mr. Al-Bahlul is not a sympathetic defendant," read the written appeal, filed with the Military Commission Review last September. The solicitation charge, however, "conflates offensive behavior with criminal behavior. As offensive as it may be, *State of the Ummah* is speech that falls within the core protections of the First Amendment."

If this isn't acknowledged, the defense claims, the U.S. government could very well round up any foreigner in the Global War on Terror—for the battlefield is indeed global—and prosecute him for things he has said, written, or produced. If it stands, the appeal states, the conviction of al-Bahlul on solicitation charges could even pave the way for domestic politicians to start suing foreign journalists for libel. It would create a "chilling effect" on Americans' access to foreign information, including political propaganda, which is currently protected by lower court rulings.

Al-Bahlul's film "provides a valuable window into the anxieties and grievances of a substantial number of Muslims inside and outside the United States," the defense wrote. Critics tell *TAC* that censoring the propaganda's creator makes the U.S. government no better than China, deciding for its people what they can read on the Internet. ("State of the Ummah" is, however, still available via YouTube.)

In effect, the First Amendment not only protects al-Bahlul's speech but