

Ottawa's "Secret Memo": Canada's Role in Haiti's February 2004 Coup d'Etat

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Declassifying Canada in Haiti: Canadian officials planned military intervention weeks before Haitian coup

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Part I . Canadian officials planned military intervention weeks before Haitian coup

Classified memos obtained by The Dominion through Access to Information Act request raise new questions about the extent of Canadian participation in the 2004 coup against Haiti's democratically elected President Jean Bertrand Aristide.

Nine days before the February 29 coup that removed Aristide and thousands of elected officials, then-minister Denis Coderre told the Canadian Press that "it is clear that we don't want Aristide's head; we believe that Aristide should stay."

In the same report, then-Foreign Affairs Minister Bill Graham claimed that Canada was seeking to pressure Aristide to adopt a series of measures to give the opposition more power in government.

Nine days earlier, on February 11th, Canadian Ambassador Kenneth Cook sent a memo marked "Confidential" to the Privy Council Office and Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, with a subject heading "Meeting with US Ambassador." Its contents suggest that Canada was planning for the removal of the Aristide-led government while officials publicly claimed to be attempting to reach a peaceful agreement.

Cook wrote:

The situation we face is not only one of a struggle for power, it involves a humanitarian crisis and the potential to permanently change the course of Haitian history. President Aristide is clearly a serious aggravating factor in the current crisis and unless he gives dramatic early signs that he is implementing the CARICOM road map then the OAS, CARICOM and possibly UN will have to consider the options including whether a case can be made for the duty to protect.

Large portions of the memo, which discusses specific plans for military intervention, are

blacked out. Of the period requested, February 5 to March 15 2004, Feb 20 to March 15 were omitted without explanation.

The “duty to protect” is another term for the controversial Canadian- sponsored “responsibility to protect” (R2P) doctrine, which was adopted as international doctrine without a vote by the UN General Assembly at the UN World Summit in September 2005. Countries like Cuba and Venezuela have strongly opposed the doctrine, saying that it gives powerful countries freedom to intervene when they determine a state to have “failed.”

Notable Canadians involved in the drafting of the R2P doctrine were Michael Ignatieff and Lloyd Axworthy. In his writings, academic- turned-politician Ignatieff has praised the US as an “Empire Lite,” and supported the US-led war on Iraq. Axworthy was Canada’s foreign affairs Minister in 2000 when economic sanctions were levied against Haiti’s democratically elected government.

The R2P doctrine developed a framework for “threshold criteria for military intervention,” under the guise of “humanitarian intervention for human protection.” Under the core principles devised in this doctrine, “the principle of non-intervention yields to the international responsibility to protect.”

Two “precautionary principles” of R2P stand out. First, that “the primary purpose of the intervention...must be to halt or avert human suffering,” and second, that military intervention must only be used as a last resort, “Military intervention can only be justified when every non-military option... has been explored.”

In this case, substantial evidence suggests that the crisis that Ambassador Cook used to invoke the R2P was itself instigated by the US State Department and other US and Canadian agencies. The US, Canadian, and European Union-funded “civil society organizations” though lacking in popular support, continually demanded that Aristide step down and that their representatives be granted key positions in government. US, Canadian and French diplomats insisted on opposition support for any power-sharing agreement. Some critics claim that the three governments knew that the opposition would not accept any agreement other than one that gave them control.

According to many reports, the intervention itself, justified in memos by the R2P doctrine, had the effect of multiplying and aggravating the humanitarian crisis. An April 2004 human rights report prepared by the National Lawyers Guild (NLG) found that “the multinational force of 3,600 soldiers... was not functioning to protect supporters of President Aristide or prevent killings, kidnappings, and arsons directed at this supporters.”

The NLG met with the Director of the State Morgue in Port au Prince, and reported that “The Director admitted that 800 bodies were ‘dumped and buried’ by morgue on Sunday, March 7, 2004, and another 200 bodies dumped on Sunday, March 28, 2004. The ‘usual’ amount dumped is less than 100 per month.”

A March 2005 Harvard University Law School report, “Keeping the Peace in Haiti?” contended that the UN military force, MINUSTAH, “has effectively provided cover for the police to wage a campaign of terror in Port au Prince’s slums.” Having discovered evidence of a mass grave, the human rights delegation found MINUSTAH officials aware but unwilling to investigate the “clandestine gravesite.” Canadian UN police (UNPOL) Commissioner David Beer, while acknowledging such that grave sites were “a point of contention” said that the

grave found by “was not an active case being investigated.”

According to other government documents acquired by The Dominion, Denis Paradis organized a January 2003 meeting “in the spirit of the responsibility to protect.” The secret, high level roundtable was dubbed the Ottawa Initiative on Haiti. Details of this meeting were leaked in a March 15, 2003 edition of *l’Actualité*, by reporter Michel Vastel. Vastel wrote then that the theme of “Aristide must go,” along with the possibility of a “Kosovo-model” trusteeship over Haiti, were discussed by members of the Canadian, French, and US governments, along with representatives from the Organization of American States (OAS).

In an effort to control the damage of the media leak, the Canadian government issued a release denying that regime change or a trusteeship were discussed at this meeting.

Part II. Did Canada have plans to support another military coup in Haiti?

According to classified memos obtained by The Dominion through an Access to Information Act request, Canadian officials speculated about working with Haiti’s dreaded former military in the weeks before the coup d’état that removed elected President Aristide and thousands of elected officials.

Eighteen days before the military intervention, Canadian Ambassador to Haiti Kenneth Cook wrote of the paramilitary groups that had entered the country days earlier from the Dominican Republic:

There is clearly a military hand in the planning of current anti-government insurrectional events but it is very difficult to say [what] the potential for bringing together a significant force based on the former armed forces [is]. To date it is not considered likely but if someone like Senator (former Major) Dany Toussaint with support of Col. Himmler Rebu were to intervene the scenario would be quite different.

The heavily censored memos acquired by The Dominion leave some doubt as to Cook’s intent. In the context of Cook’s other comments blaming Aristide for the crisis, however, the Ambassador seems to be suggesting that Haiti’s former military, led by Dany Toussaint, could be used to put an end to the crisis. The subsequent (post-coup) integration of former military personnel and officers into the Haitian National Police under the oversight of Canada’s RCMP lends further credence to this interpretation.

Various, Toussaint had been alleged to have involvement in narcotrafficking, ties to the CIA, and a possible role in the murder of radio journalist Jean Dominique. In the 1980s, he received training at the Fort Benning, Georgia “School of the Americas.” In 2001, then Republican Congressman Porter Goss wrote to Secretary of State Colin Powell that Toussaint is “credibly linked by a number of US government agencies to narcotics trafficking in Haiti.”

Interviewed two days after the coup against Aristide, Toussaint referred to paramilitary leader Guy Philippe as “a brave man who has worked for his country.” Phillipe is known for his own ties to narco-trafficking, his alleged involvement in murders and at least two previous coup attempts against Aristide, as well as his affinity for former President Ronald Reagan and Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet.

Both Philippe and Toussaint would run for President in 2006, garnering few votes. Both Toussaint and Himmler Rebu agitated with the US- and European-funded “Democratic Platform,” demanding the ouster of Aristide.

The former military that Cook refers to is widely acknowledged to be responsible for massive human rights violations, including murder, torture, political repression, and overthrowing a previous democratically elected government. The Haitian military was created during an American military occupation of Haiti during WWI, and disbanded by then-President Aristide in 1994.

Again invoking the “responsibility to protect” (R2P, see part I) theme, Cook describes the situation in Northern Haiti. According to his intelligence sources, “Cap Haitien has become the scene of much violence, stores and banks are closed as are gas stations. The city is for all practical purposes isolated... A solution will have to be found to avoid a humanitarian crisis.” Several paragraphs are then censored, followed by: “This is a complicating factor in any consideration of options for a stabilizing police presence here.”

Extensive censorship raises as many questions as are addressed by the documents. 25 days of requested documents—from Feb 20 to March 15—were simply omitted without explanation.

Cook’s references to the use of military force to remove Aristide, however, fly in the face of the official story. Nine days after Cook’s memo, Canadian ministers Graham and Coderre were telling the press that Canada was seeking a peaceful settlement to the crisis, which was largely instigated by Canadian-, US- and European-funded groups within Haiti. Those countries backed the unelected government after it was imposed, and avoided acknowledging evidence of widespread political repression and human rights abuses.

The limited historical perspective available two years after the coup also raises serious questions about the use of the “responsibility to protect” doctrine. Rather than avert a crisis, foreign military intervention in Haiti became the backdrop for a major escalation of atrocities, with thousands killed, hundreds jailed for their political views, and thousands more forced into hiding after the coup.

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