

**The Impact of French and American Foreign Policy on Haiti's Development in the 19th
and 20th Centuries**

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Introduction

Natural disasters and political instability have frequently befallen the Caribbean nation of Haiti. In July of this year, President Jovenel Moïse was assassinated and in August the country experienced a magnitude 7.2 earthquake. These events and the poor economic conditions in the country led tens of thousands of Haitian refugees to flee the country and seek asylum in the United States in September of this year. The humanitarian crisis that has unfolded following these instances reflects Haiti's dire situation and has led many to wonder how the country arrived at this predicament. These complex and interconnected challenges for Haiti, however, are not new phenomena. As the poorest nation in the Western hemisphere, improving Haiti's economic conditions and political stability have been of paramount concern for decades, so why has the country continued to lag behind other nations in the region?

This paper explores the degree to which foreign interference and exploitation have shaped Haiti's development by analyzing the following research question: To what extent have French and American foreign policy affected Haiti's growth and development in the 19th and 20th centuries? The research question is analyzed by utilizing a historical approach to examine the effects of the study's independent variable: French and American foreign policy, on the study's dependent variable: Haiti's economic growth and the establishment of democratic institutions and norms.

Literature Review

To understand the challenges that modern-day Haiti faces, it is important to examine the country's origins as the French colony of Saint Domingue and the hierarchical race-based regime under which it was governed. This section analyzes existing literature and reflects on Haiti's

evolution from a colony to its revolutionary overthrow of French rule as it became the first Black-led republic.

Origins of Saint Domingue

After Christopher Columbus' expedition to the island of Hispaniola (modern-day Haiti and the Dominican Republic) in 1492, the indigenous population was decimated by European diseases and harsh, forced labor conditions (Britannica, 2020). By the end of the 16th century, Hispaniola's indigenous population was virtually nonexistent. Following Columbus' expedition, the Spanish Crown declared dominion over the island and exploited its resources. The Spanish later agreed to divide Hispaniola with the French into Saint Domingue and Santo Domingo through the Treaty of Ryswick of 1697 (Obregón, 2018). The Spanish and French used the labor of imported African slaves to economically power their empires' conquest and colonization in the Americas and the Caribbean.

As Obregón (2018) explains, Europeans believed that empire was a "necessary and virtuous form of government," wherein the so-called advanced hegemons would bring civilization to barbaric places around the world in exchange for their economic growth. However, the control of indigenous and non-European peoples through land seizure and resource extraction was not just the by-products of empires but was foundational to their legal and social structures. Robinson (1983) reveals that the economic system that powered these empires evolved—capitalism and feudalism were infused, and racialism was integrated into the fabric of the economic system. This resulted in an economic order that was dependent on slavery, violence, imperialism, and genocide. This ideology and the imperial practices of European nations in this era to sustain racial capitalism shaped the creation and governance of Saint Domingue.

French Imperial Rule of Saint Domingue

Saint Domingue became the most productive colony in the Western hemisphere and by the eve of the Haitian revolution, the colony was the most lucrative in the world—producing more than the Spanish and British combined (Obregón, 2018). This was fueled by three centuries of the Atlantic slave trade. The island was governed under the *Code Noir*, which controlled a century of relations between plantation owners and those they enslaved. This strict race-based regime established and legitimized different social, legal, and economic standings for the various segments of the population (Obregón, 2018). The deeply fragmented nature of Haitian society based on skin color, class, and gender became a focal point of the revolution. By 1789, the population of Saint Domingue was estimated to be 556,000—of which 500,000 were enslaved Africans, 32,000 European colonists, and 24,000 *affranchis* or free people of mixed African and European heritage (Britannica, 2020).

After a series of conflicts in the 1790s that included the mounting frustration of the *affranchis* with the hierarchical structure of colonial society, the implications of the French Revolution, and the unyielding brutality of slave owners, an atmosphere of revolution on the island began to foment (Britannica, 2020). In 1791, fighting began between the *affranchis* and the Europeans. By August, slaves began to rebel. Numerous battles between French forces and the island's enslaved population ensued. With the conclusion of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 and France's attention shifting toward Britain following renewed tensions in the same year, French withdrawal appeared to be imminent (Britannica, 2020). On January 1, 1804, the island declared its independence.

Haiti's Quest for Recognition

The French heavily influenced Haitian society from its inception as a colony. However, what role did the French play in Haitian political and economic development following Haiti's declaration of independence in 1804? This section will examine the role that the French had in shaping Haiti during the 19th century that continues to have implications for the Caribbean nation today.

After declaring its independence and defeating the French, Haiti was able to successfully lay claim to a territory—one of the four key characteristics of modern states in comparative politics. However, Haiti lacked legitimacy and external sovereignty. The new nation sought external recognition but in an era where white supremacist ideology was the status quo, Haiti proved to be a dangerous symbol of a successful slave revolt to surrounding colonies (Obregón, 2018). Therefore, existing global superpowers like Britain, France, and the regional hegemon, the United States, were reluctant at best to recognize the country. Without recognition, Haiti's economy would be severely underdeveloped and trade opportunities would be limited.

After years of negotiating with the French to recognize their independence, Haiti was ultimately forced—militarily and economically—to agree to a debt repayment plan for the loss of the colonial commercial enterprise and property losses of slave owners. The indemnity totaled 150 million French francs (21 billion USD today), an amount five times France's total budget and ten times the amount the United States paid for the Louisiana Purchase (Obregón, 2018; Sperling, 2017). To pay the exorbitant cost, Haiti took loans from French and American banks, including the City Bank of New York, and ended up borrowing over F166 million to pay the indemnity. In 1910, almost a century later, Haiti made its final payment. The power that the French exerted over the fledgling island nation represents a key theme in comparative politics, namely, what Lukes (1974) called the first dimension of power. In the first dimension of power

one person or entity coerces another to do something it otherwise would not do. In this instance, France coerced Haiti to pay the large indemnity.

The Impact of the Indemnity on Haiti's Development

When France forced Haiti to repay millions after the war, it debilitated the Caribbean nation's economic prospects during its most formative years. What would a future without crippling debt have meant for Haiti? Sperling (2017) argues that the indemnity payments over decades rendered the Haitian government "chronically insolvent" and have perpetuated the economic and political instability with which the country still struggles. While France remains one of the world's wealthiest nations, Haiti remains the poorest nation in the Western hemisphere. The nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita is extremely low at \$1,176 compared to \$63,543 in the United States (World Bank, 2020a). Nearly 60 percent of Haitians currently live in poverty (Choi, 2021). Despite these troubling statistics, Haiti has received international attention throughout the 20th century. However, the extent to which these actions were a net benefit or loss for the country remains the subject of debate.

The American Occupation of Haiti: 1915-1934

This section discusses the role that American foreign policy has had on Haiti's development, particularly its development of political institutions, and evaluates whether the American occupation improved the stability of the island's democracy.

American marines landed in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, in July 1915 and placed the country under martial law (Smith, 1995). The deployment marks one of many instances in which the United States has attempted to assert control in the Caribbean, in line with the Monroe Doctrine. The assassination of President Jean Vilbrun Guillaume Sam that year justified American intervention (Jefferies, 2001). Others have argued that the threat to American life, investments,

and shipping lanes through the Caribbean were also part of the calculus. During the occupation, the United States armed forces squashed all Haitian insurrection attempts and placed in office numerous puppet presidents. The country was ruled through a military high commission (Jefferies, 2001). In the first several years of the occupation, Haitians had little influence on the governance of their nation (Plummer, 1992). There were also repeated postponements of the presidential elections leading to widespread dissatisfaction with the “Yankee” invasion as some called it (Jefferies, 2001).

Between 1922 and 1925, National City Bank loaned over \$23 million to Haiti (Krenn, 2006). However, under American control of Haiti’s finances, only a small portion of the funds was invested in public works or productive enterprises, and repaying the loan became a significant drain on the Haitian economy (Schmidt 1971; Jefferies, 2001). The United States maintained fiscal control of Haiti until 1947 when the loan was repaid.

In the subsequent years of the occupation, the United States improved public services and sanitation. By 1930, American policy changed following findings of political stability in Port-au-Prince, and Haitians were finally empowered to elect their leaders. In October, Haitians elected a national assembly for the first time in nearly 12 years. In November of that year, the assembly elected a new president, Sténio Joseph Vincent, a vehement critic of the American occupation (Schmidt, 1971; Jefferies, 2001). Scholars disagree about the extent to which the occupation improved Haiti’s political stability. Smith (1995) argues that the occupation accomplished little in the way of strengthening Haiti’s democratic institutions. Reports by the United States during the time contradict that claim. It is well known that before the occupation, Haiti faced a variety of economic and political challenges. After the occupation, a Congressional Committee reviewing the United States’ policy found the following: (1) peace had been

established throughout the island, (2) the sum of internal revenue collected increased threefold, (3) the foreign debt had been reduced by one-third, and (4) the currency had been stabilized (Brown, 1922). Additionally, sanitation had improved and a highway system was constructed.

To analyze the impact that the American occupation had on Haiti's political stability, one must examine Haiti's progress after the occupation ended in 1934 when President Franklin D. Roosevelt withdrew American forces as part of his "good neighbor" policy of nonintervention (Smith, 1995). Following the American withdrawal, the Caribbean nation experienced numerous chaotic, corrupt, and anti-democratic regimes. President Sténio Joseph Vincent, for example, exhibited authoritarian tendencies such as imprisoning outspoken critics and dissidents. The US State Department even described him as dealing with his political opponents in "Hitlerian fashion" (Caribbean Elections Biography, 2019). A plebiscite in 1935 extended Vincent's term to 1941 and amended the constitution to elect future presidents by popular vote (Ferguson et al., 2021). Vincent did, however, peacefully transition power to his successor, Élie Lescot in 1941.

In the decades that followed, Haitian political leadership became more corrupt and harmful towards its citizens. Under the despotic rule of President François Duvalier (Papa Doc) beginning in 1957, murder, corruption, intimidation, and poverty were rampant (Jefferies, 2001). Duvalier's manipulation of assembly elections in 1961 to extend his term to 1967 and other authoritarian measures resulted in the termination of American aid to Haiti (Britannica, 2021). When Duvalier died and power was transferred to his son, Jean-Claude (Baby Doc), the violence and poverty continued. The brutality of the regime led to an influx of Haitian refugees to the United States in the 1980s (Jefferies, 2001). The political turmoil that has consumed Haiti following the American occupation in 1915 demonstrates that the intervention did not result in fundamentally improved democratic institutions or a strong civil society.

Discussion of *The Farming of Bones*

In Edwidge Danticat's fictional novel, *The Farming of Bones* (1998), Danticat tells the story of a young Haitian woman, Amabelle Désir, who serves as a domestic worker in the home of an affluent Dominican family. The story takes place in 1937 when Amabelle and her lover, Sebastien Onius, are both connected by tragedy after losing their parents in natural disasters. The first half of the novel reveals that tensions are on the rise between the Haitian migrant workers and the Dominicans. In the city of Alegria where Amabelle and Sebastien work and live, these tensions reach a fever point after the death of Joël, a Haitian migrant worker who labored in the cane fields with Sebastien. Throughout the story, the characters allude to the "Yankee" invasion, or the American occupation discussed earlier in the paper. Additionally, the Dominican Republic's dictator, Rafael Trujillo, often referred to as the Generalissimo in the book, is an almost omnipresent figure who symbolizes the deep nationalism that several of the Dominican characters have.

Joël's death begins to highlight deep divisions in the society with Haitian cane workers feeling marginalized and expendable as they labor for their Dominican bosses. This connects to the notion of relative deprivation, the idea in comparative politics that certain groups feel worse off or less supported compared to those around them. This tension is also felt in Sebastien and Amabelle's relationship. Sebastien never trusted the Dominicans, including Señor Pico and Señora Valencia, the Dominican family that Amabelle works for and whose land the couple lives on. Sebastien's distrust only increases after he learns that Señor Pico, who was rushing home to be with his wife who had just gone into labor, was responsible for the automobile accident that struck and killed Joël. Amabelle, however, is more trusting of Señor Pico and Señora Valencia, after all, Señora Valencia's father, Don Ignacio (Papi), was the one who invited Amabelle to

work for the family after the death of her parents. By the latter half of the novel, tragedy and bloodshed strike the city of Alegria and the entire nation as Dominican soldiers carry out the Generalissimo's order and kill tens of thousands of Haitian migrant workers in the Parsley Massacre. While Amabelle is able to escape, Sebastien is unable to leave and is killed by Dominican soldiers.

Most Similar Systems Design: Haiti and Trinidad and Tobago

To understand Haiti's economic and political standing today, it is helpful to compare the country to similar countries in the region. According to Steinmetz (2019), the comparative method is useful because it analyzes the relationship between variables that are different or similar to one another. Other scientific methodologies are difficult to employ on the scale that would be necessary when comparing two or more countries. The Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD) model compares two very similar countries that differ in their outcomes. For this study, I have selected Trinidad and Tobago as the country of comparison to Haiti using the MSSD model.

Like Haiti, Trinidad began as a European colony—first under Spanish rule and later under British rule. Trinidad and Tobago later gained independence from the British in 1962. Both island countries are located in the Caribbean. The countries differ slightly in their demographic composition. While Haiti's population is 95 percent of African descent largely due to the African slave trade (Omondi, 2017), Trinidad's population is one of the most diverse in the Caribbean (Watts et al., 2021). In the 1840s the immigration of indentured workers from the Indian subcontinent began resulting in a high percentage of Indo-Trinidadians. Immigrants from China, Madeira, Syria, Lebanon, Venezuela, the United Kingdom, other British Caribbean colonies, and freed Africans rescued from slave ships also came to the island. Today, 34.2 percent of the

population of Trinidad and Tobago is made up of individuals of African descent, second to those of East Indian descent (Watts et al., 2021).

In the mid-1970s, the oil boom brought prosperity to most of the population, and Trinidad and Tobago began a period of industrialization. The country used petroleum profits to create comprehensive social welfare programs (Watts et al., 2021). This marked the beginning of an era that has continued to this day with economic growth and relative political stability in the country. Trinidad and Tobago's path toward economic growth connects to what Huntington (1971) describes as the five goals of development: autonomy, equity, stability, economic growth, and democracy. These goals are conflictual and countries often must sacrifice one or more of the goals in pursuit of others. Trinidad and Tobago prioritized economic growth and equity. Even though there are many similarities, Trinidad and Tobago's GDP per capita is \$15,384, roughly fifteen times that of Haiti (World Bank, 2020b). The table below charts these similarities and differences.

Table 1.

MSSD Model Comparing Trinidad and Tobago with Haiti

Positive Case: Trinidad and Tobago	Negative Case: Haiti
Former European Colony (British)	Former European Colony (French)
Located in the Caribbean	Located in the Caribbean
% of Population of African Descent is 2nd Largest Ethnic Group	Large % of Population of African Descent
Social welfare programs pursued in the 1970s	Corruption & Murder Rampant in the 1970s
Oil Boom helped economy	Indemnity payment slowed economic growth
Outcome: High GDP per capita (\$15,384)	Outcome: Low GDP per capita (\$1,176)

Conclusion

When Haiti declared its independence in 1804, it became a trailblazer for many majority-Black nations that would throw off the yoke of colonialism to chart their paths. Unfortunately, however, as one of the first to do so, Haiti paid a hefty price and was robbed of nearly a century's worth of nation-building, strengthening political institutions, and growing its economy. A review of existing literature and historical events from its days as a colony to the late 20th century reveal that the island nation was deeply affected by French and American foreign policy. The indemnity that the Caribbean country was forced to pay by the French and upheld by other European powers at the time left the country alone with almost no allies. It will take decades for Haiti to gain the footing that it needs to chart a path toward economic growth and strong political institutions. Today, countries across the Caribbean like Jamaica are asking their colonial powers to repay millions to the descendants of enslaved Africans who toiled for centuries to create the wealth that Britain, France, Spain, the United States, and many others now enjoy. While unlikely, France and the United States should begin to right their historical wrongs by repaying Haiti for the decades of predatory economic practices that were levied on the Haitian people.

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