

The Haitian Revolution: past, present, and personal

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Unless one has developed a specific interest in Haiti, for one reason or another, it is likely that the Haitian Revolution of 1791-1803 will not come to mind on the first day of the New Year. Haiti has, for all intents and purposes, become irrelevant in most people's perceptions of World History, but nothing could be further from the truth. The Haitian Revolution did in fact shake to the core many of the dearly held assumptions of the 18th century in regard to the universal Applicability of the ideals of freedom, equality, and aspirations of all men, notwithstanding their racial differences. The French and American revolutions, and even the Church (just as it accommodated itself later to worldwide anti-semitism, segregation of blacks in the U.S. and apartheid policies in Rhodesia and South Africa) never dedicated themselves to the goals of eradicating slavery and promoting a universal set of human rights, with the necessary emphasis on the word "universal". The Haitian Revolution was the first movement of its kind to boldly challenge all assumptions of racial inferiority and buttress this challenge with sweeping military victories over the armies of the most powerful European nations of that time.

This created a tremendous amount of fear in the U.S. and other parts of the world that Haiti's example would replicate and bring a swift end to their highly profitable plantation systems. From that fear grew the need to suppress Haiti from the news and from gatherings of the civilized world. Powerful economic interests, in concert with the prevailing racial ideology, dictated at that time that the independence of Haiti should not be recognized.

Today, we recognize not that Haitians have been able to live independently for 200 years, as they have not, but that 200 years ago, our forefathers firmly established the ideals under which we should live and eventually die for. Today, Haitians are still engaged in the fight to make those dreams come true, not just for a small subset of privileged individuals, but for all Haitians -- and by extension, all people in the world who are still denied their basic human rights. Should we not mark this date and celebrate those ideals, we would simply deny ourselves one of the exceptional opportunities that our concept of time provides to regroup and gather our strengths to continue the struggle on many fronts. For the Haitian peasant family which is still illiterate, malnourished and often in danger of starvation and untreated life-threatening illnesses, for the Haitian laborer working without adequate identity, citizenship, rights, and legal protection, we must celebrate the ideals of the Haitian evolution and be mindful of the fact that 1804 has yet to concretize to their yes in any meaningful way. Hence, 2004 is not an end in itself... it's only a renewal.

From a personal perspective, I am mindful that I owe the rights and personal freedom that I exercise today to the struggles of those who preceded me, and in a large part to the heroes of the Haitian Revolution. That those rights and personal freedom also come with the

moral obligation to do anything in my power to advance the stage for those who will follow, thereby establishing myself as a firm link in an unbreakable chain of links to the full concretization of our collective freedom. Five years ago, I decided to dedicate a website to that goal. Today, I can look at "Windows on Haiti" as the result of my dedication and input to the struggle. On purely objective terms, the website is a very small step in terms of protecting the gift of Haiti that was bequeathed to me, but on a personal basis I feel satisfied that on the bicentennial anniversary of Haiti's independence, I have dedicated my energies for five years to letting the world know that to a great many people, Haiti and its Revolution still matter.

Countless freedom fighters and nationalist leaders have acknowledged that they were inspired by the Haitian Revolution, from the liberation wars of Latin America, to civil rights advocacy in the United States, and the anti-colonialist and anti-apartheid struggles on the African continent. So in many lands, the Haitian Revolution became synonymous with freedom of the oppressed. Indeed many of those struggles were successful in their execution, as many new nations emerged, following the examples of Haiti and one should add, the United States. That the United States was a white nation that prospered and that Haiti was a black nation on the road to total impoverishment is also a fact that has not been lost on the world. The aftermath of the Revolution can be murky to the indiscriminating eye. What's the big deal, might one say. Hence the struggle continues to have the Haitian Revolution come true for every single Haitian. It is associated today to the struggle for economic rights and political freedom, literacy and health, education and democracy. Any ordinary citizen or government leader, who would exalt the virtues of the Haitian Revolution and not dedicate himself or herself to the concretization of its revolutionary ideals in today's Haiti and for the Haitian poor, is simply mouthing words without a good appreciation of their meaning. For the Haitian Revolution to be completely successful, it has to live in every Haitian heart. It has to guide all Haitians in positive actions for a better future.

I think that there are greater forces aligned today against the political freedom and economic rights of the Haitian people than there were even at the time of Toussaint Louverture and Dessalines. Those forces yesterday were naked in their exercise of strength and oppressive ideology. True, at that time, they were also married to a program of Christianization of slaves imported from Africa. But, all in all, it was easy for a slave to tell his friends from his enemies. Today, all internal and external enemies of the Haitian people like to present themselves as its great friends. They act in the name of Haitians, but not for their benefit. They create economic initiatives to rob the people further of their last possessions, while pontificating about the fiscal benefits of one set of economic policies as opposed to another. They sow discord and hate to keep the people divided. They promise everything to those who do not have, while in practice they only deliver more to those who have already. They champion democracy in words, while they marginalize the masses and deprive them of their right to vote and participate in decisions that will greatly affect their future. I see greater social upheaval happening in the near future, though I do not possess a crystal ball to see how it will all play out and to be able to tell to those who would listen "I knew exactly how it was all going to end." In fact, I do not see an end to anything. I see only the continuation of the struggle.

Today's political leaders should simply read their history and understand that their time is necessarily limited. Limited in securing material benefits for themselves or limited in extending the gains of Haiti's revolution to the disenfranchised masses. No one is immortal. However, their name and reputation will outlive them and they will be judged by their survivors and by the people for whom they have chosen to serve or not to serve. Far from the passions of the moment, History will record their deeds and judge them quite apart from empty speeches and promises.

Long live the Haitian Revolution. The people of Haiti have just begun to fight for their place in the sun.

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