

# The 1915 U.S. Invasion of Haiti: Examining a Treaty of Occupation

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One hundred years ago this past summer, President Woodrow Wilson ordered U.S. Marines to invade Haiti. The ensuing occupation lasted 19 years.

The United States had had a rocky relationship with Haiti ever since the former slave colony revolted against France and won independence in 1804, the only nation founded by a slave rebellion. Initially, the United States refused to recognize the new nation, and Southern slaveholders, fearing a similar rebellion, pushed for a trade embargo. However, by the turn of the twentieth century, America had replaced France as Haiti's chief trading partner, and American interests, specifically in agriculture and infrastructure, increased significantly. These powerful business interests drove U.S. policy and ultimately forced the invasion.

A struggling economic situation and political uprisings, sometimes fueled by foreign governments (British, German, or French), had created continuous instability in Haiti. Additionally, Haiti had taken out costly loans from many countries, which sent the country spiraling further into debt. Two especially significant loans were from French banks—one to pay back an indemnity France had demanded for loss of land and slaves after the colony broke free, and a second loan to pay back the excessive commissions of the first.<sup>1</sup> In 1914–15, 80 percent of Haiti's government revenue was spent on debt service.<sup>2</sup> Although Haiti continued to pay its debts, U.S. bankers used

the fear of debt default to take control of the National Bank of Haiti, which served as the treasury and held the government's funds.

Six months before the invasion, Marines had disembarked in Haiti and removed the equivalent in today's terms of \$11 million in gold from the National Bank of Haiti and transferred it to the National City Bank of New York, on the grounds that the funds might be needed to pay back U.S. bankers.<sup>3</sup>

The move gave the United States considerable control over the Haitian government. Business leaders pressured President Wilson to get control of Haiti's customs houses, the main source of Haiti's revenue. Wall Street mogul Roger L. Farnham, at the same time vice president of the National City Bank of New York, vice president of the National Bank of Haiti, and president of Haiti's railway system, played a prominent role in pushing for the invasion. With so much financial interest and experience in the country, Farnham had become a key Wilson administration advisor on Haiti.<sup>4</sup>

During the same period, World War I was raging in Europe, and German influence in Haiti had been making Wilson uneasy. German merchants had integrated into Haitian society more than their American counterparts, often marrying into Haitian families and therefore circumventing a law that forbade foreign ownership of land.<sup>5</sup> Wilson feared that Germany might try to establish a military base near the Panama Canal, which the

U.S. had taken over and completed in 1914. In fact, the United States had an ongoing interest in establishing its own naval base in Haiti's northern port of Môle Saint-Nicholas (right across from Cuba's Guantanamo Bay).

Backed by the Monroe Doctrine (established by President James Monroe in 1823)—that the United States would not tolerate Europe's interference in the Western Hemisphere<sup>6</sup>—and a Jim Crow perception that freed blacks could not govern themselves, the United States landed in Haiti on July 28, 1915, following the killing of the president, and had imposed an election within weeks.<sup>7</sup> By September, the United States presented Haiti with a treaty—the Treaty Between the United States and Haiti (Articles I–XIII of which are featured on pp.246–247)—which concluded the active invasion and launched a two-decade occupation.<sup>8</sup> The treaty gave the United States total power over Haiti's financial system through the customs houses and the state treasury, authorized the U.S. to create a new Haitian military, and prohibited Haiti from selling or renting territory to another foreign power.

The State Department's Office of the Historian offers a candid account of the 1915–1934 occupation and describes the U.S.–Haiti treaty as follows:

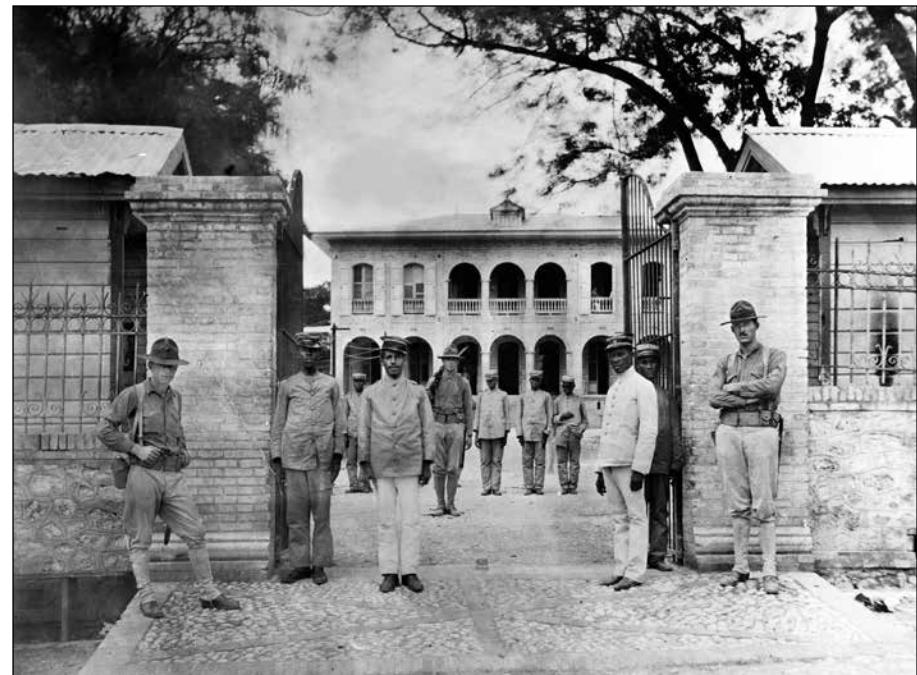
The articles of this agreement created the Haitian Gendarmerie, essentially a military force made up of U.S. citizens and Haitians and controlled by the

U.S. Marines. The United States gained complete control over Haitian finances, and the right to intervene in Haiti whenever the U.S. government deemed necessary. The U.S. government also forced the election of a new pro-American president, Philippe Sudré Dartiguenave, by the Haitian legislature in August 1915. The selection of a president that did not represent the choice of the Haitian populace increased unrest in Haiti.<sup>9</sup>

Pockets of resistance to the U.S. occupation sprang up throughout the country, and thousands of Haitians lost their lives fighting against the Marines. Charlemagne Péralte, who had been a Haitian army commander, led the Cacos anti-occupation forces and became the most famous and admired leader. His forces posed a considerable threat to the U.S. Marines, who planned and carried out his assassination in 1919. The Marines carried Péralte's dead body through town and later tied his body to a door, stripped bare except for a loincloth, and placed it on display at a police station. His body was photographed by a Marine photographer and hundreds of copies of the picture were dropped from a plane above areas considered supportive of Cacos.<sup>10</sup> The Marines unwittingly provided Haiti with an iconic photograph that served to cement Charlemagne Péralte's position as a great martyr in Haitian history.

The invasion of Haiti was one of a series of U.S. interventions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that were spurred by American business interests, specifically of the United Fruit Company, which had heavy investments in the production of bananas, tobacco, and sugar. The United States seized Cuba and Puerto Rico from Spain in 1898, and in the next decades intervened in Panama, Honduras, Nicaragua, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic.

The Monroe Doctrine, which had



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U.S. Marines and Haitian soldiers are posted outside the gates of the presidential palace in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, October 7, 1915, two months into a 19-year U.S. occupation.



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A U.S. Marine poses surrounded by casualties of a battle with Haitian resistance fighters, October 11, 1915.

established for the United States the Western Hemisphere as its domain, had been further strengthened in 1904 by President Theodore Roosevelt's "Big Stick" policy.

By the mid-1800s, Monroe's declaration, combined with ideas of Manifest Destiny, provided precedent and support for U.S. expansion on the American continent.... The doctrine's greatest

extension came with Theodore Roosevelt's Corollary, which inverted the original meaning of the doctrine and came to justify unilateral U.S. intervention in Latin America.<sup>11</sup>

In 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt tried to bring an end to this period of American militarism with his Good Neighbor

*continued on page 248*

<p>By the President of the United States of America.</p> <p>A. PROCLAMATION.</p> <p>Whereas a Treaty between the United States of America and the Republic of Haiti having for its objects the strengthening of the amity existing between the two countries, the remedying of the present condition of the revenues and finances of Haiti, the maintenance of the tranquillity of that Republic, and the carrying out of plans for its economic development and prosperity, was concluded and signed by their respective Plenipotentiaries at Port-au-Prince, on the sixteenth day of September, one thousand nine hundred and fifteen, the original of which Treaty, being in the English and French languages, is word for word as follows:</p>	<p>4 TREATY WITH HAITI.</p> <p>4. Chargé d'Affaires of the Jr., Chargé d'Affaires des États-Unis; Et le Président de la République d'Haiti, Monsieur Louis-Philippe d'Haiti, Monsieur Louis Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and Public Instruction, who, having exhibited to each other their respective powers, which are seen to be full in good and true form, have agreed as follows:</p> <p>All of these people have agreed (see verb at end).</p> <p>Article I</p> <p>The Government of the United States will, by its good offices, aid the Haitian Government in the proper and efficient development of its <b>agricultural, mineral</b> and <b>commercial resources</b>, and in the establishment of the finances of Haiti on a firm and solid basis.</p> <p>Article II</p> <p>The President of Haiti shall appoint, upon nomination by the President of the United States, a General Receiver and such aids and employees as may be necessary, who shall collect, receive and apply all customs duties on imports and exports accruing at the several custom houses and ports of entry of the Republic of Haiti. The President of Haiti shall appoint, upon nomination by the President of the United States, a <b>Financial Advisor</b>, who shall be an officer attached to the Ministry of Finance, to give effect to whose proposals and labors the Minister will lend efficient aid. The Financial Advisor shall devise an adequate system of public accounting, and in increasing the revenues and adjusting them to the expenses, inquire into the validity of the debts of the Republic, enlighten both Governments with reference to all eventual debts, recommend improved methods of collecting and applying the revenues, and make such other recommendations to the Minister of Finance as may be deemed necessary for the welfare and prosperity of Haiti.</p>	<p>5 TREATY WITH HAITI.</p> <p>5. Chargé d'Affaires of the Jr., Chargé d'Affaires des États-Unis; Et le Président de la République d'Haiti, Monsieur Louis-Philippe d'Haiti, Monsieur Louis Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and Public Instruction, who, having exhibited to each other their respective powers, which are seen to be full in good and true form, have agreed as follows:</p> <p>All of these people have agreed (see verb at end).</p> <p>Article III</p> <p>The Government of the Republic of Haiti will provide by law or appropriate decrees for the payment of all customs duties to the General Receiver, and will extend to the Receivership, and to the Financial Advisor, all needful aid and full protection in the execution of the powers conferred and duties imposed herein; and the United States on its part will extend like aid and protection.</p> <p>Article IV</p> <p>The U.S. president (not the Haitian president) names the General Receiver ... who "receives" the money generated by exports and imports.</p> <p>Article V</p> <p>The U.S. president names the Financial Advisor ... who will manage Haiti's economy and by extension relations with other governments.</p> <p>Article VI</p> <p>The U.S. president names the Financial Advisor, who shall be an officer attached to the Ministry of Finance, to give effect to whose proposals and labors the Minister will lend efficient aid. The Financial Advisor shall devise an adequate system of public accounting, and in increasing the revenues and adjusting them to the expenses, inquire into the validity of the debts of the Republic, enlighten both Governments with reference to all eventual debts, recommend improved methods of collecting and applying the revenues, and make such other recommendations to the Minister of Finance as may be deemed necessary for the welfare and prosperity of Haiti.</p>
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The highlights in the left column and the annotations in the right column of each page of the document have been added to enhance class discussion. The complete document, Treaty Between the United States and Haiti: Finances, Economic Development and Tranquillity of Haiti, which is in English and French, can be accessed at <https://archive.org/details/treatywithhaiti00pome00> or search "Treaty with Haiti" at <https://archive.org/>. (Pages 1-2 of this 1915 treaty, not featured here, include a title page and a page stamped with the date of printing by the Washington Government Printing Office.)

## TREATY WITH HAITI.

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**6** **the interest and sinking fund of the public debt of the Republic of Haiti; and, third, to the maintenance of the constabulary referred to in Article X, and then the remainder to the Haitian Government for purposes of current expenses.**

In making these applications the General Receiver will proceed to pay salaries and allowances monthly and expenses as they arise and on the first of each calendar month, will set aside in a separate fund the quantum of the collections and receipts of the previous month.

#### ARTICLE VI

**The expenses of the Receivership, including salaries and allowances of the General Receiver, and his assistants and employees, and the salary and expenses of the Financial Adviser, shall not exceed five per centum of the collections and receipts from the customs duties, unless by agreement by the two Governments.**

#### ARTICLE VII

**The General Receiver shall make monthly reports of all collections, receipts, and disbursements to the appropriate officer of the Republic of Haiti and to the Department of State of the United States, which reports shall be open to inspection and verification at all times by the appropriate authorities of each of the said Governments.**

#### ARTICLE VIII

**The Republic of Haiti shall not increase its public debt except by previous agreement with the President of the United States, and shall not contract any debt, or assume any financial obligation unless the ordinary revenues of the Republic available for that**

accord, [probable: 2<sup>e</sup> à l'intérieur de la partie] de la partie investissement de la dette.

**The "constabulary" is an army of Haitians who are trained, armed, and commanded by the U.S.**

**Five percent may not sound like a lot, but it represents a huge tax on Haiti by a foreign power (the U.S.).**

Maintaining the constabulary will also cost Haitians, above and beyond the five percent.

**Haiti will not control its own finances or foreign relations on financial matters.**

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**purpose, after defraying the expenses of the Government, shall be adequate to pay the interest and provide a sinking fund for the final discharge of such debt.**

#### ARTICLE IX

**The Republic of Haiti will not without a previous agreement with the President of the United States, modify the customs duties in a manner to reduce the revenues therefrom, and in order that the revenues of the Republic may be adequate to meet the public debt and the expenses of the Government, to preserve tranquility and to promote material prosperity, the Republic of Haiti will cooperate with the Financial Adviser in his recommendations for improvement in the methods of collecting and disbursing the revenues and for new sources of needed income.**

#### ARTICLE X

**The Haitian Government obligates itself, for the preservation of domestic peace, the security of individual rights and full observance of the provisions of this treaty, to create without delay an efficient, constabulary, urban and rural, composed of native Haitians. This constabulary shall be organized, and officered by Americans, appointed by the President of Haiti, upon nomination by the President of the United States. The Haitian Government shall elect these officers with the proper and necessary authority and uphold them in the performance of their functions. These officers will be replaced by Haitians as they, by examination, conducted under direction of a board to be selected by the senior American officer of this constabulary and in the presence of a representative of the**

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**public, disponibles à cette fin, suffisants pour payer les intérêts et pourvus à un autreissement pour l'extinction complète d'une telle dette.**

#### ARTICLE IX

**La République d'Haïti, à moins d'une entente préalable avec le Président des États-Unis, ne modifiera pas les droits de douane d'une façon qui en réduirait les revenus; et afin que les revenus de la République**

**In this case, "revenues" means "taxes." How are the citizens of Haiti represented in this process? What power do they have?**

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### TREATY WITH HAITI.

**8** **Haitian Government, are found to be qualified to assume such duties. The constabulary herein provided for, shall, under the direction of the Haitian Government, have supervision and control of arms and ammunition, military supplies, and traffic therein throughout the country. The high contracting parties agree that the stipulations in this Article are necessary to prevent factional strife and disturbances.**

#### ARTICLE XI

**Here, the United States concerned about another country buying or renting territory in Haiti?**

#### ARTICLE XI

**Is this treaty helping to establish democracy in Haiti?**

#### ARTICLE XII

**Is this treaty helping to establish democracy in Haiti?**

#### ARTICLE XIII

**Is this treaty helping to establish democracy in Haiti?**

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**functions. La gestionmarie ici prévue aura sous la direction du Gouvernement Haïtien, la surveillance et le contrôle des armes et munitions, de la constabulaire, soit**

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Policy, stating, “The definite policy of the United States from now on is one opposed to armed intervention.”<sup>12</sup> Uprisings and strikes in Haiti, combined with the proclaimed new ideology to respect the rights of others, precipitated the end of the U.S. occupation in 1934. But as historian Alex Dupuy points out, there was no longer a threat of European

dominance over Haiti’s economy, and structures had been well established to guarantee U.S. hegemony in Haiti for the foreseeable future.<sup>13</sup> 

#### Notes

1. Laurent Dubois, *Haiti: The Aftershocks of History* (New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt and Co., 2012), 175.
2. Hans Schmidt, *The United States Occupation of Haiti, 1915–1934* (Rutgers University Press; Reprint

edition, 1995), 43.

3. Dubois, 204; Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State, “U.S. Invasion and Occupation of Haiti, 1915–1934” (<https://history.state.gov/milestones/1914-1920/haiti>).
4. Hans Schmidt, *Maverick Marine, General Smedley D. Butler and the Contradictions of American Military History* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1987), 82. See also James Weldon Johnson, “Self-Determining Haiti,” *The Nation* (August 28, 1920): 25, [www.thenation.com/article/self-determining-haiti/](http://www.thenation.com/article/self-determining-haiti/).

## In the Classroom: Analyzing the U.S.-Haiti Treaty of 1915

Briefly review and establish the context with the class of the Monroe Doctrine and (Theodore) Roosevelt’s Corollary, which validated U.S. intervention in Latin America in the early twentieth century. Discuss the unfolding circumstances of the U.S. invasion of Haiti 100 years ago, possibly projecting the timeline on a white board. Once the historical context and circumstances have been established, distribute copies of the Treaty Between the United States and Haiti of 1915 (Handout) to launch classroom discussion.

#### *Synopsis of the Treaty*

- Articles I-IX give the United States complete control of Haiti’s finances through the customs houses and the state treasury.
- Article X authorizes the United States to create a new military (constabulary) to replace Haiti’s existing army.
- Article XI prohibits Haiti from selling or renting territory to another foreign power or entering into any contract with any foreign power that might “impair” the independence of Haiti.
- Article XIV (not featured in the Handout) states “...the United States will lend an efficient aid for the preservation of Haitian Independence and the maintenance of a government adequate for the protection of life, property and individual liberty.”

The complete treaty can be accessed at <https://archive.org/details/treatywithhaiti00pomegoog>.

### From Independence to Occupation

- 1804—Haiti wins independence from France after a revolt that began in 1791. President Thomas Jefferson refuses to recognize Haiti.
- 1806—The United States places a trade embargo against Haiti.
- 1862—During the U.S. Civil War, the United States grants Haiti recognition.
- December 1914—U.S. Marines land in Haiti, remove the equivalent of \$11 million of Haitian government funds from Banque Nationale d’Haiti, and transfer it to National City Bank of New York, on the grounds that it might be needed to pay debts to U.S. bankers.

### The U.S. Occupation at a Glance

- July 27, 1915—Haitian President Vilbrun Guillaume Sam is killed by an angry crowd after he ordered the execution of 167 political prisoners.
- July 28, 1915—U.S. President Woodrow Wilson orders Marines to invade Haiti.
- August 1915—The United States imposes the election of Philippe Sudré Dartiguenave as president.
- September 3, 1915—U.S. Admiral William Caperton declares martial law in Haiti, which remains in effect until 1929.
- September 16, 1915—Haiti signs a treaty presented by the United States.

Two government ministers resign in protest.

- May 3, 1916—The treaty is formally ratified in Washington.
- 1917—The Wilson administration pushes for a new Haitian constitution that allows foreigners to buy land (outlawed since independence from France). The Haitian legislature rejects the new constitution. The United States forces Haiti’s president to dissolve the legislature.
- 1917—Haiti’s new military, led by U.S. Marines, uses forced labor (corvée) to build roads, fueling anti-occupation resistance.
- 1918—The new Haitian constitution is approved.

- October 1919—U.S. Marines William Button and Herman Hanneken assassinate resistance leader Charlemagne Peralte.
- 1929—Strikes and protests against U.S. occupation increase in Haiti.
- December 1929—Marines fire on a crowd of 1,500 demonstrating in the town of Les Cayes, killing 12 and wounding 23.
- March 4, 1933—In his inaugural address, President Franklin D. Roosevelt declares his Good Neighbor Policy.
- August 15, 1934—American troops withdraw, leaving the Haitian Armed Forces, created and trained by U.S. Marines, in charge of Haiti.

5. Dubois, 207.
6. Message of President James Monroe at the Commencement of the First Session of the 18th Congress (The Monroe Doctrine), 12/01/1823; Presidential Messages of the 18th Congress, ca. 12/02/1823-ca. 03/03/1825; Record Group 46; Records of the United States Senate, 1789-1990; National Archives, [www.ourdocuments.gov](http://www.ourdocuments.gov).
7. Office of the Historian, "U.S. Invasion and Occupation of Haiti, 1915-34" (<https://history.state.gov/milestones/1914-1920/haiti>).
8. The full text of the Treaty between the United States and Haiti, signed at Port-au-Prince, September 16, 1915, can be accessed at <https://archive.org/details/treatywithhaiti00pomegog>.
9. Office of the Historian, "U.S. Invasion and Occupation of Haiti, 1915-34" (<https://history.state.gov/milestones/1914-1920/haiti>)
10. Dubois, 261.
11. Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State, "Monroe Doctrine, 1823" (<https://history.state.gov/milestones/1801-1829/monroe>).
12. Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State, "Good Neighbor Policy, 1933" (<https://history.state.gov/milestones/1921-1936/good-neighbor>).
13. Alex Dupuy, *Haiti in the World Economy: Class, Race, and Underdevelopment Since 1700* (Boulder, Co.: Westview Press, 1989), 140-141

## Other Primary Sources

James Weldon Johnson, "The Truth about Haiti. An NAACP Investigation," *Crisis* 5 (September 1920): 217-224. History Matters, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5018/>.

History Matters, "The People Were Very Peaceable": The U.S. Senate Investigates the Haitian Occupation, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/4945/>. *Inquiry into Occupation and Administration of Haiti and Santo Domingo by the United States Senate Select Committee on Haiti and Santo Domingo* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1922).

United States Department of State / *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States with the Address of the President to Congress, December 8, 1914*. Haiti, pp. 334-386, <http://images.library.wisc.edu/FRUS/EFacs/1914/reference/frus.frus1914.i0024.pdf>

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