

## Chapter 10 Additional Material

### U.S. Marines in Haiti, 1915–1934

Of all American interventions in Latin American, Haiti can be considered to be the most difficult because of that nation's political corruption, economic exploitation, guerilla warfare, and religious divisions. Born with great hope when it gained independence in 1804, Haiti's history has included a succession of dictatorships, coups, and rebellions. A racial caste system existed in which about 10 percent of the population oppressed the remaining ninety percent. Haiti's ruling elite minority was composed of mulattos or *mulâtres*, who spoke French, professed Catholicism, lived in the urban areas, and found work in the government, banks, or corporations. The impoverished Haitian peasant majority, known as *noirs*, were of more pure African blood. This mostly illiterate lower racial class spoke Creole, practiced Voodoo, and barely survived as subsistence farmers.

For Marines serving there from 1915 to 1934, Haiti was exotic and beautiful, while also being primitive and dangerous. Voodoo presented one of the most serious challenges to maintaining order. Attempts to stamp out this religion actually made it a stronger source of disruption and rebellion for the Haitians. Conversely, allowing its practice with no restrictions made it a source of corruption and crime just as it had been before the American arrival in Haiti. Most of the Marines never could strike the balance between limiting Voodoo's threat to stability in Haiti and allowing the religion to have a legitimate place in Haitian culture. At least one Marine officer, however, did outline a viable balance in the following letter: "I have made very careful inquiries of all my officers and others and I can find no single case where the alleged voodoo [sic] dances have led to disorderliness etc or directly to other crimes."<sup>1</sup> In seeing the dances as benign, he

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<sup>1</sup> Letter by John R. Henley, 1 October 1927, "Voodoo Cases," Box 20, Record Group 127, Records of the

demonstrated cultural awareness.

The Marines attempted to bring order, stability, democracy, and civilization to Haiti and other Latin American nations in hopes of making the indigenous peoples more like white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestants. These symbols were consistent with the attitudes shared by many Americans. In case after case, however, any positive effects of Marine occupations faded after their departures.

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### **Isolationist Feelings in the United States in the 1930s**

On the heels of the stock market crash in 1929, the Great Depression caused even greater

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*Gendarmerie d'Haiti* , A1, Entry 21, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

military downsizing of the U.S. military than had occurred during the 1920s. The fiscal assault came at the hands of the “isolationists,” who believed that the United States erred by entering in the First World War, and henceforth should remain insulated from military and political entanglements around the globe. Isolationist politicians included Senator Gerald P. Nye, Republican from North Dakota; Senator Henrik Shipstead, Democrat from Minnesota; Representative Hamilton Fish, Republican from New York; and Representative Frank Church, Republican from Illinois. Their message resonated with most Americans, who cared nothing about the rise of Nazi Germany in Europe or Militarist Japan in East Asia in the 1930s, when they had so much trouble feeding, clothing, and housing themselves. Congress responded to isolationism’s political power by slashing appropriations to the U.S. military.

Even in the face of the Great Depression, the military’s fortunes slowly changed when Franklin D. Roosevelt ascended to the presidency after the election of 1932. He looked sympathetically on the plight of the military in part because he served as Assistant Secretary of the Navy in Woodrow Wilson’s administration from 1913 to 1921.

The U.S. Navy and Marine Corps, in particular, gained two additional powerful allies in Congress in 1932. Representative Carl Vinson assumed the chairmanship of the House Naval Affairs Committee. In this capacity over the next four decades, “Uncle Carl” acted as patron saint for both seaborne services. On the other side of the aisle, Representative Melvin J. Maas, a Republican from Minnesota, was instrumental in supporting the seaborne services. As the ranking minority member on the House Naval Affairs Committee in the 1930s, he worked closely with Vinson to sponsor legislation to fortify island bases in the Pacific and to continue reforms in the military’s promotion system. Maas personified civil-military relations as both a congressman and an officer in the Marine Corps Reserve. This second role

gave him a unique understanding of the military. Maas took every opportunity to alert the American people to the growing global dangers and the need for a strong military to protect American interests.

Roosevelt, Vinson, and Maas recognized that the march of events in East Asia and Europe increased the possibility of war. Nevertheless, domestic problems still demanded the lion's share of Americans' attention. Unemployment, for example, remained at 16 percent in 1936. Isolationists galvanized public resistance against increased military expenditures and reactionary foreign policies. The understandable desire to avoid war led to the passage of the Neutrality Acts of 1935, 1936, and 1937. In the event of war, supplying American munitions or floating American loans to belligerent nations would be prohibited, and travel by Americans on belligerent ships would be forbidden. The isolationists also sought to obstruct the efforts of Vinson, Maas, and Roosevelt to increase military preparedness.

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## **The Pre-World War II Career of Lieutenant General Brehon Somervell**

During the Second World War, the magnitude of America's expansion is staggering in terms of manpower. The U.S. Army grew from a peacetime strength 270,000 Soldiers in 1941 to in maximum wartime strength of 8 million in 1945. This growth becomes ever more incredible because most of the Soldiers deployed overseas during at least part for the Second World War. Not only did these men need to be turned from citizens into Soldiers, but they also required sufficient weapons, ammunition, vehicles, equipment, food, water, fuel, medical supplies, clothing, and even cigarettes to be transported across thousands of miles of oceans and hundreds of miles of ground. In all, the United States produced some 260 billion long tons of supplies for the American and Allied militaries.

The officer responsible of the U.S. Army's piece of this effort was Lieutenant General Brehon Somervell. Before the war, he supervised the multi-year construction of what would become La Guardia Airport in New York City. His workforce numbered in the 10,000s each year. Managing a complex project helped Somervell prepare a much greater logistical challenge

of his career as the Army Service Force's Commanding General during World War II. He supervised some 2 million soldiers representing branches in this role.

For further reading, see James Kennedy Ohl, *Supplying the Troops: General Somervell and American Logistics in WWII* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1994).