

International

The New York Times

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Mixed U.S. Signals Helped Tilt Haiti Toward Chaos

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Published: January 29, 2006

PORT-AU-PRINCE, [Haiti](#) — As his plane lifted off the runway here in August 2003, Brian Dean Curran rewound his last, bleak days as the American ambassador in this tormented land.

Haiti, Mr. Curran feared, was headed toward a cataclysm, another violent uncoupling of its once jubilant embrace of democracy more than a decade before. He had come here hoping to help that tenuous democracy grow. Now he was leaving in anger and foreboding.

Seven months later, an accused death squad leader helped armed rebels topple the president, [Jean-Bertrand Aristide](#). Haiti, never a model of stability, soon dissolved into a state so lawless it stunned even those who had pushed for the removal of Mr. Aristide, a former Roman Catholic priest who rose to power as the champion and hero of Haiti's poor.

Today, the capital, Port-au-Prince, is virtually paralyzed by kidnappings, spreading panic among rich and poor alike. Corrupt police officers in uniform have assassinated people on the streets in the light of day. The chaos is so extreme and the interim government so dysfunctional that voting to elect a new one has already been delayed four times. The latest date is Feb. 7.

Yet even as Haiti prepares to pick its first elected president since the rebellion two years ago, questions linger about the circumstances of Mr. Aristide's ouster — and especially why the Bush administration, which has made building democracy a centerpiece of its foreign policy in Iraq and around the world, did not do more to preserve it so close to its shores.

The Bush administration has said that while Mr. Aristide was deeply flawed, its policy was always to work with him as Haiti's democratically elected leader.

But the administration's actions in Haiti did not always match its words. Interviews and a review of government documents show that a democracy-building group close to the White House, and financed by American taxpayers, undercut the official United States policy and the ambassador assigned to carry it out.

As a result, the United States spoke with two sometimes contradictory voices in a country where its words carry enormous weight. That mixed message, the former American ambassador said, made efforts to foster political peace "immeasurably more difficult." Without a political agreement, a weak government was destabilized further, leaving it vulnerable to the rebels.

Mr. Curran accused the democracy-building group, the International Republican Institute, of trying to undermine the reconciliation process after disputed 2000 Senate elections threw Haiti into a violent political crisis. The group's leader in Haiti, Stanley Lucas, an avowed Aristide opponent from the Haitian elite, counseled the opposition to stand firm, and not work with Mr. Aristide, as a way to cripple his government and drive him from power, said Mr. Curran, whose account is supported in crucial parts by other diplomats and opposition figures. Many of these people spoke publicly about the events for the first time.

Mr. Curran, a 30-year Foreign Service veteran and a Clinton appointee retained by President Bush, also accused Mr. Lucas of telling the opposition that he, not the ambassador, represented the Bush administration's true intentions.

Records show that Mr. Curran warned his bosses in Washington that Mr. Lucas's behavior was contrary to American policy and "risked us being accused of attempting to destabilize the government." Yet when he asked for tighter controls over the I.R.I. in the summer of 2002, he hit a roadblock after high officials in the State Department and National Security Council expressed support for the pro-democracy group, an American aid official wrote at the time.

The International Republican Institute is one of several prominent nonprofit groups that receive federal funds to help countries develop the mechanisms of democracy, like campaigning and election monitoring. Of all the groups, though, the I.R.I. is closest to the administration. President Bush picked its president, Lorne W. Craner, to run his administration's democracy-building efforts. The institute, which works in more than 60 countries, has seen its federal financing nearly triple in three years, from \$26 million in 2003 to \$75 million in 2005. Last spring, at an I.R.I. fund-raiser, Mr. Bush called democracy-building "a growth industry."