

# So Far, Compassion For Haiti Has Its Limits

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Everyone agrees that the Haiti earthquake is a serious situation. Serious enough for the U.S. to send thousands of Marines, to take over the airport, to suspend Haiti's sovereignty and take over the operation. Serious enough to unify the bitter partisan divide and put George W. Bush, Clinton, and Obama together to raise funds. Serious enough for benefit concerts and the invention of new forms of philanthropy, where people can donate through their cell phones. But the Haiti earthquake is apparently not all that serious:

1. It's not serious enough to give undocumented Haitians a full amnesty. Yes, it was serious enough to give them Temporary Protected Status (TPS), which they'd been asking for for years, so that they can send back money legally and so they're not in danger of being deported back to their re-devastated country. But they still have to pay \$470 for registering (every dollar of which could have gone to Haiti &ndash; which adds up to millions of dollars if more than a few thousand register and pay the fee), and after their 18-month grace period ends they will be in the system and easier to deport than they were before registering.

2. It's not serious enough for public money. 200,000 people dead and millions homeless is a tragedy, but one approximately 30,000 times less serious than the Iraq war (\$100 million for earthquake relief, \$3 trillion for the Iraq war) and 40,000 less serious than the \$4 trillion bank bailout. For those crises, the treasury magically opens, the money magically appears in the accounts, the public debt grows, and the taxpayers can pay later. For an earthquake or a tsunami, we rely on people's generosity, and put together star teams to beg for money on behalf of the victims.

3. It's not serious enough to let Jean-Bertrand Aristide, Haiti's former president, return. In times like these, playing politics is frowned upon, right? But playing politics to prevent a popular leader from returning to his own country after being forced into exile isn't. Aristide's kidnapping and the 2004 coup was a special humiliation inflicted on Haiti, his continuing exile a continued insult. This earthquake is not serious enough to stop that insult.

4. It's not serious enough to pay Haiti back the \$22 billion it's been owed by France since the money was extorted by a blockade. The story is old and much repeated but deserves to be repeated again. When Haiti became independent in 1804 through a revolt of the slaves, France used a naval blockade to force the new country to pay its colonial master compensation for the property the Haitians &ldquo;stole&rdquo; - the property being the value of the slaves themselves. The indemnity, 150 million francs at the time, stopped the country from being able to rebuild after the devastation of the war of independence. When the international community was starving Haiti to death from 2001-2003, Aristide began a campaign to say &ndash; okay, if aid is blocked and loans are blocked, forget those, just give us our money back. 150 million francs in 1804 makes about \$22 billion today. At that point, the machinations to overthrow Aristide began in earnest.

Before too long, as the security and looting stories rise in prominence, opinion pieces will appear about the ingratitude of Haitians. As donations level off, analyses will discuss compassion fatigue. These would be better informed by being a little less oblivious to the limits of governmental compassion for Haiti.

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