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Effective Government Requires a Functional Landscape

by George M. Woodwell

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News reports from Haiti continue to emphasize political chaos and the failures of Aristide in governing eight million people in an island nation of ten thousand square miles. If only Haiti's leadership were competent!

To be sure, political and social and economic incompetence has led Haiti over two hundred years to this pinnacle of impoverishment among all the nations of the western world.

But a government expected to pull a nation up by its bootstraps is doubly frustrated if there is no bootstrap to be found. Such is the circumstance in Haiti.

Haiti now has a virtually completely dysfunctional landscape, the most thoroughly dysfunctional in the Americas. Its forests are gone. Agriculture has been driven to mountain slopes too steep to stand on. Erosion from destabilized slopes has filled the valleys. Rivers, fed by torrential rains in the mountains, run fitfully, no longer in defined channels but with each storm find new channels through the silt and gravel, often through slums built on one-time agricultural land. Potable water is at a premium and water-borne diseases are endemic and the common lot of the poor. Siltation has contributed to the final destruction of coastal fisheries, and the nation is heavily dependent on food supplied by USAID, while refugees seek every conceivable way at the risk of life itself to find a refuge elsewhere, especially on the shores of the United States.

While it is fine to rail at the conspicuous political failures of Haiti and to place blame on individuals, the fact is that a viable and effective government requires a functional landscape to stand on, a base of environmental resources to build a government and an economy around. In Haiti everything must be done at once in a circumstance where almost nothing seems possible and increasing chaos makes the challenge more difficult daily. Where can a start be made? What comes first? A water supply? A land-use plan providing for re-establishment of agriculture on land now in slums and forests on slopes now supporting a tenuous, temporary agriculture?

Haiti has slipped beyond the point where it can help itself, no matter who is in governmental control. Outside help is needed urgently, but not on the trifling scale offered until now.

If the U.S. were to take its leadership role in the world seriously, it would make an example of Haiti by restoring it, first, as a functional landscape, then as a functional democracy. It would take recognition that the global political hazards of allowing any nation to sink so low include contagious impoverishment—biotic, economic, regional impoverishment. Correcting the trend will require some genuinely imaginative insights in ecology, some bold steps in relocating people into suitable housing and offering them missions and jobs in reconstruction. It is a ten billion dollar challenge, not a hundred billion dollars. The ten billion dollars is a trifle that can quite reasonably be torn from military ventures. Haiti would emerge in return as a model for the world, not only as a political success, but as an example of what the U.S. stands for in enabling a future for a now beleaguered and decaying world.