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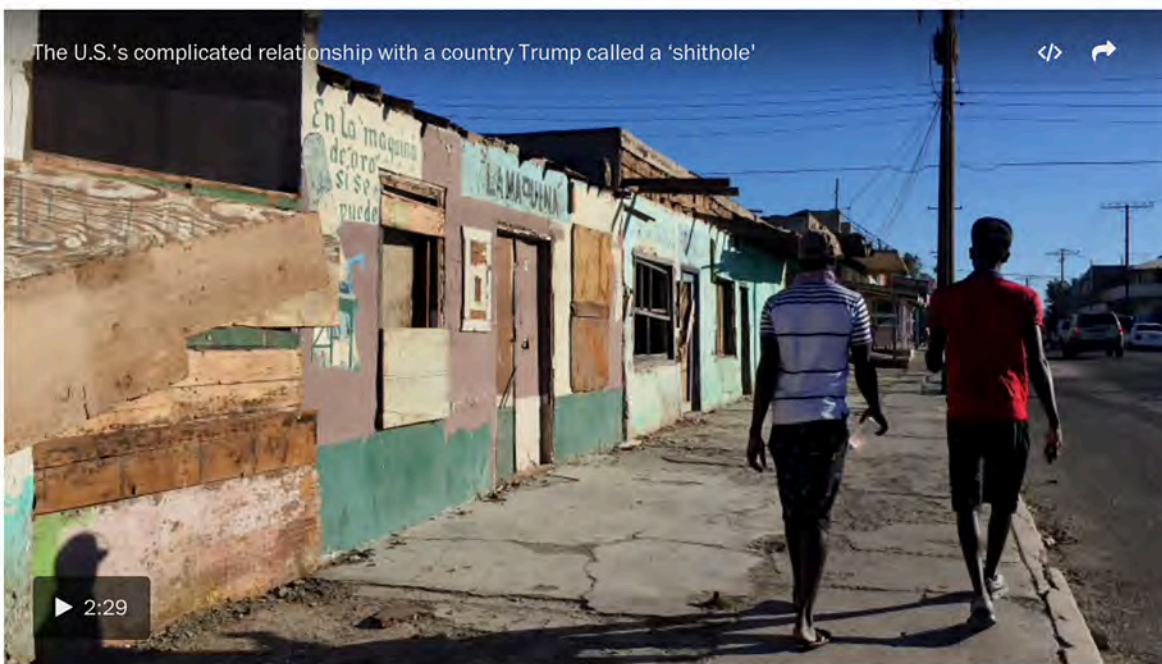
# This is how ignorant you have to be to call Haiti a 'shithole'

President Trump's defenders don't know anything about Haiti's history — or the United States's.



By Jonathan M. Katz January 12 at 5:36 PM [Follow @KatzOnEarth](#)

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The U.S.'s complicated relationship with a country Trump called a 'shithole'

President Trump is under fire for referring to Haiti, El Salvador, and African countries as "shithole countries."  
(Victoria Walker/The Washington Post)

The president had no respect for Haiti. He could see as well as anyone following the news that the country was a basket case — racked by political unrest, filthy, incapable of handling its own affairs. There was no doubt his opinion of the black republic was informed by his blatant racism, which included praising members of the Ku Klux Klan. He had criticized his predecessors' foreign wars while running for office. But in the White House, he realized he was willing to flex the country's muscles abroad, as long as the mission fit his motto: "America first."

Taking Haiti was a U.S. priority, he decided. The United States would invade.

That president was Woodrow Wilson. The year was 1915. And if that was the beginning of a story you've never heard before, you aren't alone.

Since news broke that Wilson's unwitting heir, President Trump, called Haiti — along with El Salvador and seemingly all 54 nations in Africa — “shithole countries,” the president's defenders made it clear not only that they do not know Haiti's history but also that they're unaware of their own. As soon as they heard his comments, Trump's partisans went defensive, claiming that while Trump might have been rude, he was right.

Fox News regular Tomi Lahren tweeted: “If they aren't shithole countries, why don't their citizens stay there?”

“Trump should ‘vehemently condemn’ the Haitian government for running a shithole country,” wrote Will Chamberlain, one of the organizers of last year's inaugural “DeploraBall.”

Some on the right particularly applauded a segment on CNN in which *National Review* editor Rich Lowry asked political commentator Joan Walsh whether she would “rather live in Norway or Haiti.” It was a reference to Trump's reported wish that the United States ring in more Nordic immigrants instead of those from Latin America or Africa. Walsh refused to answer, noting she'd never visited either country. Tucker Carlson accused her of dishonesty. “Those places are dangerous, they're dirty, they're corrupt and they're poor,” the Fox News host said, with an indignation Wilson would have admired. “Why can't you say that?”

Trump's supporters on cable news appear to believe that they, and he, are brave tellers of unvarnished truths others are too timid or politically correct to say out loud. (Never mind that Trump is a notorious, if not pathological, liar — or that, hours later, he tried weakly to walk back the “shithole” remark after his favorite TV show told him to.)

But in reality, they don't know many truths at all. To rail against poverty in countries such as Haiti and argue that it's some naturally occurring, objective reality ignores why that poverty exists and what the United States's role has been in creating it. And ignoring that means not only making bad and hateful decisions today but risks repeating the errors of the past.

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Haiti was founded Jan. 1, 1804, by people of African descent who were tired of being slaves. They fought and won a revolution against France, ultimately defeating an expeditionary force of Napoleon Bonaparte's army, then the most powerful in the world.

France fought so hard to keep the colony because it was basically the Saudi Arabia of coffee and sugar at the time, providing the majority of both commodities consumed in Europe. The money it generated fueled the entire French empire. But it was made with blood. The slave regime necessary to produce those crops was so deadly that 1 in 10 enslaved Africans kidnapped and brought to the island died each year. As historian Laurent Dubois has noted, the French decided that it was cheaper to bring in new slaves than to keep the ones they had alive.

As soon as Haiti was free, the world's most powerful empires did everything they could to undermine it. France refused to acknowledge the new nation existed. In the United States — then the only other independent country in the Americas — President Thomas Jefferson, a slaveholder, was uninterested in seeing a free black nation succeed nearby. The slaveholding powers refused to set up official trade with Haiti, forcing the country into predatory relationships. Haiti's independence remained a cautionary tale U.S. slavers used to counter abolitionists until the Civil War.

France finally offered much-needed diplomatic recognition in 1825, at gunpoint. King Charles X demanded the Haitian government pay restitution of 150 million gold francs — billions of dollars in today's

money — to French landowners still angry about the loss of their land and the Haitians' own bodies in the war. If they didn't pay, he would invade.

Haiti's leaders agreed. They spent the next decades raiding their own coffers and redirecting customs revenue to paying France for the independence they had already won, ravaging the economy. By the 1880s, Haiti had paid what France had wanted. But now it owed huge sums to foreign banks, from which it had borrowed heavily to make ends meet. In the early 20th century, much of that debt belonged to banks in the United States. Americans had also established extensive business interests in Haiti, exporting sugar and other commodities.

The United States, meanwhile, was looking to expand. Starting in 1898, we began using our military to secure new territory and markets overseas. By 1914, we had annexed the Philippines, Hawaii, Guam and other islands in the Pacific. In the Caribbean, we had Puerto Rico and a permanent base in Cuba at Guantanamo Bay. The Marine Corps had also helped carve out a new Central American country, Panama, in exchange for rights to dig a canal providing a trade route to Asia — and the United States invaded Nicaragua, Honduras, Mexico and elsewhere.

Haiti was next. Haiti's politics, roiled by the economic turmoil caused by the debt, were in a tailspin. Presidents were repeatedly assassinated and governments overthrown. The banks demanded payment; U.S. businessmen wanted more security and control. Newspapers had been paving the way for U.S. public opinion — a *New York Times* dispatch in 1912 declared, "Haitians acknowledge the failure of a 'Black Republic' and look forward to coming into the Union."

In late 1914, U.S. Marines came ashore in Port-au-Prince, marched into the national reserve and carried out all the gold. It was hauled back to the National City Bank in New York — known as Citibank today. Months later, declaring his concern that European powers, especially Germany, might gain a foothold in the Caribbean (even though they were all busy with World War I), Wilson ordered an invasion, then a full occupation.

The U.S. flag was run up Haiti's government buildings. The Haitian government and armed forces were dissolved. For the next 19 years, the United States ruled Haiti. U.S. Marines fought a bloody counterinsurgency campaign to stamp out resistance. The Haitian government, constitution and army were disbanded and replaced with new U.S.-friendly ones. Intending to embark on a major public works program, the Marines instituted a system, drawn from Haitian law, called the *corvée*, in which peasants were essentially re-enslaved. Many of the occupation's leaders were explicit white supremacists who used lessons they had learned instituting Jim Crow at home to create new, American forms of discrimination in Haiti. One major organizer was Col. Littleton W.T. Waller, a child of antebellum Virginia who assured his friend Col. John A. Lejeune — the future commandant of the Marine Corps: "I know the n— and how to handle him."

Not all Americans were fans of the colonial regime in Haiti. Anti-imperialist lawmakers, journalists and organizations including the NAACP protested, held hearings and wrote screeds against the occupation. But most Americans, then as now, were essentially unaware. As reports of massacres and other abuses mounted, though, embarrassment grew. Franklin D. Roosevelt, who had served in the occupation of Haiti as assistant secretary of the Navy, came to office promising to end U.S. imperial policies in this hemisphere. The occupation ended in 1934. Haiti had some new roads and buildings, a legacy of scars and abuse and a new U.S.-made economic and political system that would keep wreaking havoc over the decades to follow.

In 1957, a U.S.-trained physician, François Duvalier, came to power. Known as Papa Doc, he was a black nationalist who positioned himself in part as an heir to the Haitian Revolution and an opponent of U.S. imperialism, but he also knew how to manage a nearby superpower. U.S. presidents gave him, and his son who succeeded him, support at key moments (when they weren't trying to sponsor coups against him), until the dictatorship ended in 1986.

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So in light of all that history, to be convinced that Haiti just happens to be a failed “shithole” where no one would want to live, you’d have to know nothing about how Haitians view their country and themselves. You’d have to know nothing about the destructive U.S. trade policies that continued past the end of the dictatorship, destroying trade protections and, with them, local industries and agriculture. You’d have to not know about the CIA’s role in the 1991 coup that overthrew President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, or the U.S. invasions in 1994 and 2004. You’d have to know nothing about why the United States sponsored and took the leading role in paying for a U.N. “stabilization mission” that did little but keep a few, often unpopular, presidents in power and kill at least 10,000 people by introducing cholera to Haiti for the first time. And you’d have to not understand the U.S. role in the shambolic response to the Jan. 12, 2010, earthquake — which was a mess, but possibly not in the way that you think.

Haiti is indeed a difficult place to live for many of the people who live there. Poverty is rampant. There is no good sanitation system, in part because the same international system that introduced cholera in 2010 steadfastly refuses to meet its promises to pay to clean it up. (Before the outbreak, the United States withheld funds to pay for water and sanitation infrastructure for more than 10 years for purely political reasons.) After centuries of exploitation and abuse, the best hope for many Haitians is to move away — and suddenly encountering infrastructure and opportunities, they thrive. For many migrants, the ultimate goal is to earn enough money to retire, build a home in Haiti and go back.

In trying to walk back his slur Friday, Trump insisted that he “has a wonderful relationship with Haitians.” There is no evidence of that. As he decided to move forward with forcing the deportation of tens of thousands of Haitians allowed to take refuge after the 2010 earthquake, Haiti’s leading newspaper pronounced him the country’s “worst nightmare.” Last summer, he reportedly said all Haitians have AIDS — a slur that cuts deep in the Haitian American psyche. And now this.

I lived in Haiti for 3½ years, by choice. I saw many people struggling, many beautiful and terrible sights, and lived through some of the hardest days of my life. I learned a lot about the complicated relationship between that country and ours — the ways in which our power can be used for good, and to do incredible harm. Many people pointed out this week that Haitians have been through far worse than a racist president calling their country a “shithole.” The question is whether, knowing the truth, we all want to go through it again.