
Reviewed by Kyle Hatzinger

Operations Other Than War, OOTW in military lingo, punctuated the decade between America’s involvement in Operation Desert Storm and the Global War on Terror. Walter Kretchik’s *Eyewitness to Chaos: Personal Accounts of the Intervention in Haiti*, brings the 1994 United States and later United Nations mission in Haiti out from the shadows of the 1993 US military involvement in Somalia and the 1998 intervention in Kosovo by giving voice to some of the men and women who planned and participated in this mission. The result is an excellent first step in understanding why the United States became involved in Haiti and how the US Army executed the mission both unilaterally and as part of a United Nations mission. The volume grabs the reader’s attention, and does a great job holding it throughout.

Drawn from over forty oral interviews from key informants conducted within the framework of the Haitian Oral History Project, the book allows the reader to understand the human experience of military service members (and even two missionaries caught in the midst of their own undertaking to Haiti). While very few of the interviewees are lower rank soldiers, the author expertly uses his selection of interviews combined with a myriad of official reports, documents and published works to paint an excellent strategic and operational picture of the Haiti mission.

Kretchik sets out to describe the experiences of not only those who planned and participated in the two Haitian missions, but also those who witnessed its carrying out first-hand (p.xv). Acknowledging the complexity of both the nation of Haiti (once among the richest during the 19th century, now arguably the poorest in the Western Hemisphere) as well as the mission itself, the author wisely devotes his entire first chapter to bringing the reader up to speed on the island nation’s history – from the natives’ first encounters with Europeans to 1991. This historical survey not only provides sufficient background information to dive into the intricate story of the 1994 mission, but helps to understand how the Haitians historically interacted with military power. By the end of the book, the reader better grasps why the events leading up to and during the Haitian intervention unfolded as they did.

While executed in 1994, the Haitian mission’s origins stretched back to the Reagan administration, as a plan for “a forced entry into Haiti” (p.45). Kretchik’s narrative begins in earnest following the September 1991 removal of Jean-Bernard Aristide, Haiti’s first democratically-elected president. Important to his thesis is that while the United States was not immediately pursuing military solutions, the military planning mechanisms were churning in parallel to diplomatic efforts. By January 1993, Haiti officially became a
United Nations mission, and by the fall of 1993 the US military began receiving warning orders for participation there. Immediately complicating planning was the dual military and political disaster in Somalia, which Kretchik highlights to demonstrate how US actions in one area of the globe produced second- and third-order effects: in this case, emboldening members of the Aristide opposition to openly defy the attempted docking of a humanitarian ship at Port-au-Prince.

New challenges arose. Kretchik writes that military planners now had to “adjust to ever-changing circumstances” as they attempted to finalize a military intervention while the United Nations and other organizations attempted to broker a peaceful solution in Haiti (p.43). Eventually, four military plans emerged depending on the environment in Haiti when the order came for the military to deliver. Dusting off the 1988 plan for a Haitian invasion, planners quickly realized that with UN involvement, the likelihood of executing such an operation was minimal. As a result, subsequent plans reflected more of a blend between the potential contributions of the military and government organizations. The book describes the many levels throughout the military that scrambled to piece together plans and contingencies and conduct rehearsals weaving together US military and civilian efforts. Remarkably, the planning of what was then known as OPLAN 2370 was completed by a relatively small number of individuals maintaining a Top Secret security clearance (p.53).

By the summer of 1994, the military’s concept for entry into Haiti had narrowed down to two options. At this point, Kretchik highlights an additional complication: the flood of Haitian and Cuban refugees to the United States during the political upheaval in the country. The issue of refugees, particularly from countries in which the United States is conducting or preparing to conduct military action, is one that is part of the current national conversation at this writing. Eyewitness to Chaos provides a historical example for Americans to examine as the US attempts to grapple with the current questions regarding displaced individuals.

A little less than halfway through the book, he relates how, on 15 September 1994, President Bill Clinton announced the United States’ pending intervention in Haiti to “remove dictators from power and restore Haiti’s legitimate, democratically-elected government” as “Operation Uphold Democracy” (p.72). The author wonderfully captures the tension of military members as the plan that had been molded for almost two years inched toward reality. One senses this not only from the oral history quotes, but also from Kretchik’s description of events. The reader will hang onto his narrative as he tells the story of the junta leader receiving intelligence from the Haitian spies outside Fort Bragg, North Carolina, the entrance of a former United States president, Jimmy Carter, onto a peace delegation that went to Haiti in attempts to broker an eleventh-hour solution, to the climatic statement by a Haitian cultural adviser to the United States Army correctly asserting that the Haitians would cave in the face of military pressure.

From September of 1994 through the end of March of 1995, the US Army’s mission in Haiti proved to be as complex as the two-year planning process for the
intervention. While the above-mentioned cultural adviser may have predicted the junta backing down in the face of American military might, Kretchik points out that for many American soldiers, Haiti was going to be the war they had trained for. This turned out not to be the case, and the soldiers found the situation in Haiti confusing. This was compounded by the various military units trying to interact with one another as well as with other government organizations and the Haitian people. For as good as Kretchik’s chapter on the lead up to the United States’ entry into Haiti is, the fourth chapter, devoted to the initial movements and titled “Conducting a Military Intervention”, proves even more compelling as the military interviewees recount the numerous challenges faced. As one officer summed up the situation upon his arrival, “This place is terrible” (p.84). Much like what the US Army would experience in Iraq during its occupation a decade later, soldiers found themselves not only maintaining a military presence in terms of providing security, but also having to restore basic civil services. By 1995, Haiti appeared to stabilize enough that the American operation gave way to a United Nations mission.

Though the United States was no longer the sole stakeholder in Haiti, forty percent of the United Nations forces were comprised of American soldiers, whom Kretchik uses as a window into how the transition to UN oversight occurred. As the UN prepared to assume mission duties in Haiti in March of 1995, the country was also preparing for elections in June of that year. Almost simultaneously, US Army units were rotating in and out of Haiti. Kretchik’s oral history subjects shine here in their frank discussions of what went well, and what could have been improved in terms of conducting reliefs in place between units and support from higher headquarters in the United States. They provide useful vignettes that would serve any military commander preparing to execute a similar transition somewhere around the globe.

Kretchik offers analysis as to the outcome of both the US and UN missions in Haiti. His scholarly examination of the effects of intervention does not lead him to stray from the strong suit of this book: letting the participants’ words tell the story. Unsurprisingly, the reflections of military members on their time in Haiti and what it will mean in the long term are mixed. Some believe they had helped Haiti and its people to get back on their feet, while others felt they did more harm than good. The author lets the interviewees’ words stand on their own, only aptly contextualized, without attempt to judge.

American military interventions of past twenty five years have taken various forms, producing an array of results. Eyewitness to Chaos provides an excellent example of one of those interventions which Americans know little about, but provides a myriad of interesting lessons for topics the US as a society grapples with today. Thanks to Kretchik’s work, not only is the historiography of this event fuller, but we may begin to understand what led the United States to undertake operations in Haiti, and how the men and women who executed US policy did so in a very challenging and complex environment.

In 1999, Walter Kretchik published the official Army history of the Haitian intervention through the Army Command and Staff College. John Ballard’s Upholding Democracy : The United States Military Campaign in Haiti, 1994-1997, is another
extensive work on the Army’s mission to Haiti. *Eyewitness to Chaos* will complement both of these works well. This book would be a fine reference for undergraduates seeking baseline knowledge of the Haitian intervention, or an example of how oral histories can be incorporated to best effect to make sense of a larger history. Military members and even policy-makers may find this volume useful should the United States prepare to conduct other such interventions in the future.

Kyle Hatzinger
Department of History,
United States Military Academy,
West Point, New York, USA