



People walk among the rubble of Port-au-Prince 31 January 2010 where over 97,000 buildings were destroyed and 188,000 were damaged when a 7.0 magnitude earthquake rattled Haiti on 12 January 2010. (Photo by author)

# The Pitfalls of Well-Meaning Compassion

## Joint Task Force-Haiti's Infowar of 2010

Col. John "Jay" Boyd, PhD, U.S. Army Reserve, Retired

**U**.S. Air Force Col. Buck Elton was proud of his team. Landing at Port-au-Prince, Haiti, at close to 7 p.m. on 13 January 2010, his 1st

Special Operations Wing had reopened the city's earthquake-damaged airport to humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HA/DR) flights in a record twenty-eight

minutes. Upon arrival, Elton's airmen immediately set up a reception center for incoming urban search-and-rescue teams and initiated a landing-slot system for hundreds of humanitarian flights coming into Haiti. "Most of us operated nonstop without sleep for the first 40 hours," Elton admitted. "Mosquitoes are everywhere, and [it is] absolute carnage outside the wire."<sup>1</sup>

Elton's team made tough decisions. His airmen ran the airport for days, initially diverting many aircraft wanting to land due to overcrowding. "We were landing over 250 aircraft per day without phones, computers, or electricity, and people were complaining about the logjam at the airport," he recalled.<sup>2</sup> Elton did not realize the complaining had just started. His team had done exceptional work, but "no good deed goes unpunished."<sup>3</sup>

U.S. Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) and Joint Task Force-Haiti (JTF-H) engaged in a prickly information war with U.S. allies, international detractors, U.S. political pundits, and factions of the American public. Ten years later, in 2020, this experience provides constructive lessons for future American HA/DR operations.

An American success story, Operation Unified Response (OUR)—its soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, coastguardsmen, and others—stayed on task and accomplished its mission. JTF-H minimized human suffering, delivered essential medical care, and offered security support to United Nations (UN) forces and the government of Haiti (GOH). It provided the UN, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and the GOH the capacity to function in the long term, achieving its end-state goals.<sup>4</sup>

## The Quake

At 4:53 p.m. on 12 January 2010, the island nation of Haiti, the poorest nation in the Americas, experienced a 7.0 magnitude earthquake. In an event lasting less than thirty seconds, an estimated 230,000 people died.<sup>5</sup> The quake's epicenter—ten miles southwest of Haiti's largest city, Port-au-Prince (PaP), experienced another thirteen aftershocks in the next seven hours and a total of thirty aftershocks during the first twenty-four hours. Within a forty-one-mile radius, an estimated 3.9 million people had been affected. Over 97,000 buildings were destroyed and 188,000 were damaged. Eight hospitals were knocked out, and fourteen of sixteen GOH public buildings were rendered useless.<sup>6</sup> The harbor of

PaP was assessed as unusable due to pier damage. The only major facility capable of receiving humanitarian aid and personnel was the nation's airport, which remained functional although the airport terminal and tower had collapsed and were thus unavailable.

U.S. Embassy-Haiti pushed out an emergency request for aid at 4:11 a.m. on 13 January, part of which stated, "Providing such assistance is in the interest of the U.S. Government because of humanitarian concerns and the importance of demonstrating that Haiti's closest friends stand ready to help."<sup>7</sup>

## Joint Task Force-Haiti: The Initial Response

Lt. Gen. P. K. "Ken" Keen, the USSOUTHCOM deputy commander, was in Haiti visiting the U.S. ambassador to Haiti, Kenneth Merton, at Merton's home on the day of the earthquake; both survived unscathed.<sup>8</sup> The USSOUTHCOM commander, U.S. Air Force Gen. Douglas Fraser, quickly opted to build JTF-H with Keen in command.

The concept for OUR was textbook, utilizing doctrine contained in the then new Joint Publication (JP) 3-29, *Foreign Humanitarian Assistance*.<sup>9</sup> In addition, JTF-H was directed to conduct phase I (emergency response); move to phase II (relief operations); and begin to transition (redeploy) during phase III (restoration); as the GOH, UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH), nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and UN agencies assumed responsibility for phase IV (stabilization) and phase V (recovery).<sup>10</sup>

Per JP 3-29, Keen requested a joint public affairs support element, Secretary of Defense Public Affairs

**Col. John "Jay" Boyd, U.S. Army Reserve, retired**, holds a BA from Vanderbilt University, an MA and an MEd from the University of Cincinnati, and a PhD from the University of Kentucky. During his career, he served with the 4th Battalion, 54th Infantry Regiment, 194th Armored Brigade; the 100th Division; the 15th Psychological Operations Battalion; and the 45th and 20th Military History Detachments. He worked as a Department of Defense command historian for the 81st Readiness Division, U.S. Office of Army Reserve History, and the U.S. Army Chaplain Center and School. His military deployments include Bosnia, Iraq, and Haiti, where he served as the Joint Task Force-Haiti command historian.





(Figure by Army University Press)

## Joint Task Force- Haiti's Phased Response

Office (PAO) support, and a combat camera team.<sup>11</sup> Starting with two public affairs officers on 13 January, over one hundred public affairs and information operations personnel were busily at work in Haiti ten days later.<sup>12</sup>

USSOUTHCOM's Office of Strategic Communications (StratComm) issued its guidance for Haiti at 8:16 a.m. on 14 January, and not a moment too soon. "Press is everywhere, so hard to avoid. We said the obvious," Keen had emailed the day before.<sup>13</sup> In StratComm's list of possible "tripwires and constraints" was the need to (1) manage expectations—explaining that the United States could not fix everything it assessed as damaged; (2) deflect any stories that the relief mission was focused only on U.S. citizens and personnel; and (3) disavow assertions that "an a/c carrier, amphib ships, Marines, 82nd AB" was "an invasion of Haiti."<sup>14</sup>

Previous USSOUTHCOM HA/DR efforts usually resulted in criticism of relief efforts for either being too slow or not robust enough. Anticipating this, Joseph "Pepper" Bryars from the USSOUTHCOM Office of Strategic Communications offered up some veteran advice. "While we're working the assessment to provide the most needed and effective HA for Haiti, I recommend that we also focus on immediately generating the vital optic of the U.S. military delivering 'something.' If that optic isn't seen soon, then it will harm our credibility in the future."<sup>15</sup>

Unfortunately, criticisms of U.S. efforts were already in play; the *Christian Science Monitor* struck early, asking, "Why is it taking so long for Pentagon aid to reach Haiti?" and Reuters asked, "Who's Running Haiti?" before proceeding to describe a state of anarchy in which the GOH had ceased to exist and the UN peacekeeping force MINUSTAH had been rendered impotent by the earthquake.<sup>16</sup> Latin America expert Dan Erikson of the Washington-based Inter-American Dialogue think tank commented: "The sad truth is that no one is in charge of Haiti today. This vacuum, coupled with the robust response from the Obama administration, has inevitably created a situation where the U.S. will be the de facto decision-maker in Haiti."<sup>17</sup>

Initially, JTF-H sorely lacked the situational awareness for making any decisions; U.S. assessment teams were still en route to PaP. During the first days, civilian news media in Haiti outnumbered the U.S. military, becoming the dominant source of information. Having few options, USSOUTHCOM made decisions based on anecdotal media reports, which often triggered what staff members called the "10,000 mile screwdriver."<sup>18</sup>

One such "screwdriver" was retired Lt. Gen. Russell Honore, of Hurricane Katrina fame. "The next morning after the earthquake, as a military man of thirty-seven years' service, I assumed ... there would be airplanes delivering aid, not troops, but aid," the general ranted to *USA Today*. "What we saw instead was discussion about, 'Well we've got to send an assessment team in to see what the needs are.' And anytime I hear that, my head turns red."<sup>19</sup>

All major news services sent doctor-reporters into PaP, among them Dr. Sanjay Gupta of CNN.<sup>20</sup> Reaching the city's General Hospital ahead of U.S. forces, Gupta broadcast an urgent request for security and emergency medical help. He even contacted Honore, who called USSOUTHCOM, which informed JTF-H of the situation. Doctor-reporters on the scene often amplified the sense of urgency, triggering hasty responses from JTF-H. In one instance, on 19 January, approximately sixty U.S. troops on helicopters used the lawn of Haiti's presidential palace as a landing

zone and marched to the General Hospital to provide security. For some Haitians, it looked like an invasion.<sup>21</sup>

## Trouble at the Airport

The congested situation at Port-au-Prince's Toussaint Louverture International Airport added to international criticism. Elton admitted,

We took some heat at the airfield early on for the large number of diverts international flights were executing ... We had 40–50 diverts a day for the first few days because there were no flow control measures to meter the number of aircraft that wanted to land here.<sup>22</sup>

Doctors Without Borders was unhappy, claiming three to five of its aircraft carrying medical supplies had been diverted. Commercial planes were often rerouted because they took longer to unload than military aircraft.<sup>23</sup> Flights that failed to coordinate with USSOUTHCOM for landing slots at PaP were also turned back.<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, this triggered accusations that the United States was monopolizing the airport to evacuate only its own citizens. When U.S. air controllers diverted a French relief flight and U.S. ground troops

delayed the evacuation of sixty-three French citizens, tempers flared. French Cooperation Minister Alain Joyandet protested, saying, “This is about helping Haiti, not about occupying Haiti.”<sup>25</sup>

Later, Guido Bertolaso, the head of Italy's Civil Protection Agency, who had managed a 2009 earthquake in Italy, denounced the U.S.-led effort as “pathetic,” declaring, “It's a truly powerful show of force, but it's completely out of touch with reality. They don't have close rapport with the territory, and they certainly don't have a rapport with international organizations and aid groups. ... [W]hen confronted by a situation of chaos.” Bertolaso told Italy's RAI television, the United States tends “to confuse military intervention with what should be an emergency operation, which cannot be

Aviation experts from various U.S. agencies work under austere conditions 12 January 2010 to ensure ramp operations and slot times are processed for inbound and outbound air traffic into Haiti's Toussaint Louverture International Airport. Port-au-Prince's main seaport was destroyed and most roads were impassible, leaving the airport as the only lifeline for relief to the Haitian people. (Photo by Kenneth Langert, Federal Aviation Administration)







entrusted to the armed forces. We are missing a leader, a co-ordination capacity that goes beyond military discipline.”<sup>26</sup> This criticism came from U.S. allies.

Inserted into this mix, Col. Billy Buckner, 18th Airborne Corps, was selected to head the JTF-H StratComm office. Keen also secured the services of The Rendon Group (TRG). Founded by John Rendon in 1982, TRG would provide JTF-H with “public affairs recommendations, media monitoring and analysis (depending on functional level of Haitian media), and quantitative and qualitative data collection for the Strategic Assessment.”<sup>27</sup>

Back at USSOUTHCOM, Bryars continued to work on strategic communications. He suggested intelligence sharing, rules of engagement, hand-cranked radios, and a “unified face.” “Perhaps we should consider a daily process of posting appropriate intelligence products on the nonclassified portal for use by NGOs, coordinated through Partnering,” he recommended. “I’m sure there are potential risks associated with this, but sharing images of open roads, concentrations of people, open hospitals, etc., would help build the desired narrative of a ‘Unified Response.’” As to the U.S. military role in security, it was

Soldiers assist Haitian citizens 2 February 2010 by carrying bags of food from the World Food Program distribution point. U.S. soldiers were instrumental in initially opening nine distribution points around Haiti. (Photo by author)

subject to “audience interpretation,” which would raise a wide range of “law-and-order” questions. These would need to be managed. Bryars recommended a unified face, where JTF-H personnel were always seen as subordinate or working with U.S. government civilians.<sup>28</sup>

## Open Season on JTF-H: The Radical Fringe Attacks

Four days into OUR, a cacophony of criticism descended on the newborn JTF-H. “Bolivia’s socialist President Evo Morales called the U.S. relief effort ‘unjust, inhuman and opportunistic’ and called for United Nations action to counter purported Yankee imperialism.”<sup>29</sup> Never one to disappoint, Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez accused the United States of using Haiti’s earthquake to occupy the country. “Why send three thousand armed soldiers unless it is for war?” he fumed,

"It appears they are militarily occupying Haiti, taking advantage of the tragedy."<sup>30</sup> His comments were echoed by other anti-American leaders such as Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega. "What is happening in Haiti seriously concerns me," Ortega chimed in, "It seems that the bases [in Latin America] are not sufficient ... Haiti seeks humanitarian aid, not troops."<sup>31</sup> He blamed American militarism and President Barack Obama, demanding the immediate withdrawal of the U.S. military.<sup>32</sup>

None of this was particularly surprising. What was surprising was the number of mainstream media outlets—foreign and domestic—that were pushing out negative critiques of the U.S. relief effort. According to Army South's Regional Media Analysis, *Recent Trends in Media Coverage*, on 18 January, negative media stories outpaced positive stories throughout Latin America by almost two to one.<sup>33</sup>

Responding to negative attacks, Lt. Gen. Keen aimed to get JTF-H on message. He sought advice from TRG's John Rendon in an email, saying, "I know we are getting our teeth kicked in but that is understandable quite frankly (I guess) :(" <sup>34</sup>

"The stories are not negative. The issue is negative," Rendon answered. "The first story box is about the magnitude of the tragedy; the next one will be about First Responders." He believed JTF-H was on message, that Keen needed to "press forward" with more social messaging. He also urged JTF-H to thank other countries, individually and collectively. Even countries who were helping symbolically, "the ones we perhaps don't like." Rendon went on, saying,

Military relief is too slow; Military is not handling logistics problems once there (airport is disorganized, planes aren't allowed to land; supplies aren't getting to people). These criticisms are almost inevitable given the scope of the problem and the 24/7 nature of the media. The responses we've seen so far are appropriate. Providing daily updates on progress will assist. It might even make sense to provide a micro briefing on each plane that is landing (and those that are holding and why), what it contains and where the relief supplies will go and when, use podcasts as well. Showing the capabilities of the U.S. military, not just telling the media what those capabilities are, will also begin to change the tone.

There need to be more quotes in the coming days from non-USMIL people addressing the positive work being done (NGO's, partner nations and Haitian citizens thanking the U.S. military for their help) ... When we thank them, they are likely to thank us, and those quotes of them thanking us will result in positive and credible press coverage.<sup>35</sup>

The "ideological fringes" accusing the United States of invasion or being used as a "meal on wheels" were not mainstream. "I would usually say don't get distracted," Rendon counseled, "but I'm certain questions about these fringe criticisms will be asked on the Sunday morning shows because they [the media] like that political game, use the time honored techniques of Answer, Transfer, Message."<sup>36</sup>

No matter the messaging, JTF-H was not immune from self-inflicted wounds. As previously mentioned, on 19 January, soldiers of the 82nd Airborne used the lawn around the collapsed Haitian presidential palace as a landing zone, inserting several platoons intended for security at the General Hospital. However, the optics were aggravating. For those critical of the U.S. Army, the photos looked like an American invasion; for others, it looked like a rescue mission. "We are happy that they are coming, because we have so many problems," said Fede Felissaint, a hairdresser who watched the landings. He had no problems with U.S. troops at the palace. "If they want they can stay longer than in 1915," he said, recalling that U.S. Marines had occupied his country for nineteen years (1915–1933).<sup>37</sup>

Other Haitians were not so forgiving. The military arrival at the palace was not welcomed by several refugees camping nearby. "It's an occupation. The palace is our power, our face, our pride," asserted Feodor Desanges.<sup>38</sup> Critics accused U.S. troops of landing with "shoot to kill orders."<sup>39</sup> Canadian conspiracy theorist Michel Chossudovsky interpreted the landing as part of a larger American scheme:

The unspoken mission of U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) with headquarters in Miami and U.S. military installations throughout Latin America is to ensure the maintenance of subservient national regimes, namely U.S. proxy governments, committed to the Washington Consensus and the neo-liberal policy agenda. While U.S. military

personnel will at the outset be actively involved in emergency and disaster relief, this renewed U.S. military presence in Haiti will be used to establish a foothold in the country as well [as] pursue America's strategic and geopolitical objectives in the Caribbean basin, which are largely directed against Cuba and Venezuela.<sup>40</sup>

## Getting the Narrative Right

Landing at the PaP airport on 16 January, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, along with the new head of USAID, Dr. Rajiv Shah, made a four-hour visit to show U.S. support and confer with Haitian President René Préval.

On 20 January, Clinton reacted to OUR criticism. "I am deeply concerned by instances of inaccurate and unfavorable international media coverage of America's role and intentions in Haiti," she wrote Department of State personnel. "This MISINFORMATION THREATens [sic] to undermine the international partnership needed to help the people of Haiti, and to damage our international engagement across the range of issues. It is imperative to get the narrative right over the long term." Chiefs of mission were instructed to track down and correct "ill-informed or distorted stories" and get them corrected. "I also ask you to report back to me through your Assistant Secretary," she directed, "This is a personal priority for me, and I will be looking for your reports."<sup>41</sup>

Did Clinton know what was coming? On 20–21 January, Hugo Chávez and his "Chavistas" accused the United States of attacking Haiti with a secret tectonic earthquake-making weapon. Accusing the United States of employing an "earthquake weapon," which could cause "weather anomalies ... floods, droughts and hurricanes," the erratic strongman insisted the "attack" on Haiti was a U.S. military test in preparation for an earthquake attack on Iran. Citing "an alleged report from Russia's Northern Fleet," Chávez accused the U.S. government's unclassified High Frequency Active Auroral Research Program (HAARP), located in Alaska, of the attack.<sup>42</sup>

Chávez's accusation combined two conspiracy theories. The first originated in a 14 January report by conspiracy theorist Sorchá Faal titled "US Quake Test Goes 'Horribly Wrong,' Leaves 500,000 Dead In Haiti." The second story blamed the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan, China, on HAARP. The Russian Northern Fleet report

proved to be a Faal invention. Chávez's comments were reported as news by Al Manar in Lebanon and by other media in Iran, Russia, and Pakistan.<sup>43</sup>

Journalist Sharon Weinberger characterized HAARP as "the Moby Dick of conspiracy theories."<sup>44</sup> HAARP's actual purpose was to examine "the interactions of radio waves in the ionosphere and the subsequent effects on communications, radar, and navigation systems."<sup>45</sup> Whatever it was, the potshots taken at JTF-H by Chávez and his cohorts were upending U.S. foreign policy throughout South America.

## A Maturing JTF-H Responds

Buckner (StratComm) got the "narrative right." The winning strategy was theme/message consistency designed for the long haul. As U.S. troop numbers from Fort Bragg, North Carolina, surged 18–22 January, so did task force capabilities. A joint interagency information cell (JIIC) was established. This amalgamation of U.S. government agencies developed common themes, messages, and talking points. It provided the unity of effort (messages) for all U.S. agencies working in Haiti.<sup>46</sup>

Buckner's office got busy escorting and embedding reporters, setting up interviews, and pushing a variety of stories and analysis through assorted media. One of the newest media sources, Twitter, came into its own during OUR when Haiti's communications went down. Author Tim Leberecht believed Twitter "grew up" as a result of the quake. "Sysomos, an analytics firm in Toronto, estimated that nearly 150,000 posts containing both 'Haiti' and 'Red Cross' were sent through Twitter since the quake," he reported. The Red Cross posted a tweet that they claimed help to raise \$8 million.<sup>47</sup>

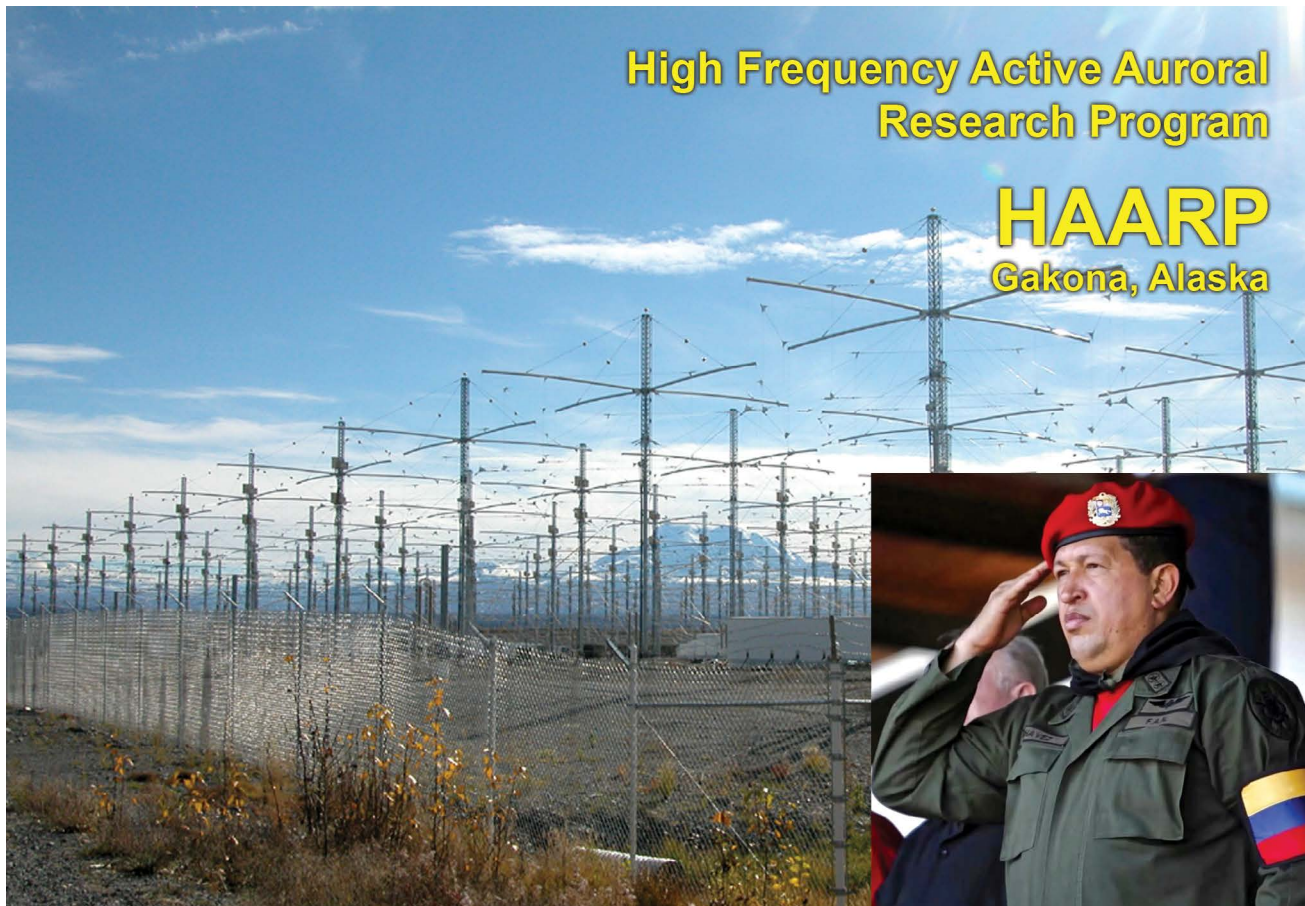
Buckner managed a fully functional joint information center (JIC) at the U.S. embassy and a forward element at the airport. Other elements were located with the 2nd Brigade, 82 Airborne; the hospital ship USNS *Comfort*; the USS *Carl Vinson*; and the amphibious relief mission.

Guided by the JIIC, JTF-H stayed on message. The intended audiences were the Haitian people, the Haitian leadership, the American people, and the international community. The core themes included (1) a global response intended to save lives and ease suffering, (2) Haitians helping Haitians, and (3) the United States "will stand with Haiti for the long term." There were also "undesired" themes requiring rebuttal: (1) U.S. efforts too slow/not enough/



## High Frequency Active Auroral Research Program

**HAARP**  
Gakona, Alaska



## !! US CAUSED THE EARTHQUAKE !!

disorganized, (2) “U.S. Keeping Inept Haitian Government Afloat,” (3) U.S. military as an occupying force, and (4) the U.S. will rebuild Haiti.<sup>48</sup>

There was good news; although Americans were evenly divided over the Obama administration’s policy and legislative initiatives, 74 percent of Americans polled believed the United States was “doing enough” for Haiti and rated the U.S. military effort as “very good” or “excellent.” A private Gallup poll discovered “little differentiation” when evaluating the performance of the different service branches; all were seen as “doing an excellent or very good job.” Television, internet news sites, and radio remained primary news sources, while younger Americans (one in five) used social networking sites.<sup>49</sup>

However, there was also bad news; JTF-H was losing the infowar in parts of Latin America, USSOUTHCOM’s area of responsibility. For analysis and operational purposes, USSOUTHCOM geographically divided Latin America into four geographic areas: the Caribbean, Central America, the Andean Ridge,

The compilation photo is from a class presentation slide showing how Hugo Chávez blamed the 2010 Haiti earthquake on the U.S. government’s unclassified High Frequency Active Auroral Research Program (HAARP). (Composition photo is modified slightly due to copyright restrictions. HAARP photo by Michael Kleiman, U.S. Air Force Public Affairs. Chávez photo courtesy of the Embassy of Venezuela, Minsk)

and the Southern Cone. By the fourth week of OUR, 57 percent of stories discussing U.S. military efforts were negative compared to 43 percent neutral/positive combined. The Andean Ridge (Venezuela, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru) led the way. Chávez’s Venezuela waged an anti-American campaign with sporadic support from Bolivia and Ecuador. No other Latin American nation pushed out more stories than Venezuela. The runner up, Ortega of Nicaragua, accounted for one-third of the stories emanating from Central America.<sup>50</sup>

If there was a saving grace, over time, media reports were declining and shifting away from the U.S. military.



A noticeable drop began around 18 January. The volume of new media items “decreased significantly while the focus of most of the items had shifted from the Military Component of HA/DR to larger geo-political issues.”<sup>51</sup>

## Transitioning from Haiti: Messaging Shifts

At the start of OUR, JTF-H’s ability to tell its story was fragmented. Phase I (emergency response) was by its very nature often reactionary; media events were random, chaotic, and often outpaced the JTF’s capabilities. However, as JTF-H moved to phase II (relief) operations, StratComm became more proactive.<sup>52</sup>

This started with the arrival of the hospital ship USNS *Comfort* on 20 January, “a promise of hope anchored a mile out in the bay.” A visible symbol of U.S. commitment to Haiti, it became a focal point for reporters who pestered the JIC and Joint Visitors Bureau to go aboard.<sup>53</sup>

The stabilizing work of JTF-H engineers stands out. The discovery that hundreds of Haitians were afraid of sleeping in their homes—whether those buildings were structurally sound or not—demanded action. What would assure people it was safe? U.S. engineers created an assessment inspection system to evaluate the soundness of buildings, which encouraged Haitians to go back home. To help them in their work, engineers stood up an assessment training program for Haitian nationals. As their transition (redeployment) came near, JTF-H engineers focused on removing rubble and restoring the Turgeau neighborhood. One officer dubbed it “a quick win.”<sup>54</sup>

The positive optics of the Turgeau project demonstrated the good will and hard work of JTF-H. Such media opportunities were possible in phase II:

Friday, Haitian media and AP [Associated Press] observed engineering assessment training in Turgeau. The event was a huge success. More than 50 journalists were in attendance/from CNN, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, NPR, Voice of America, and many Haitian media.<sup>55</sup>

While the “ideological fringe” demanded an immediate U.S. withdrawal, many NGOs, as well as

elements of the U.S. and Haitian publics, insisted that the United States not leave too soon. Half a dozen U.S. officials believed leaving Haiti before the security situation was reestablished would backfire. “The risk is ... that they will leave too quickly, and we will have chaos,” said Andrew Natsios, USAID administrator from 2001 to 2005. “They’ve got their hands full in Iraq, Afghanistan-Pakistan. The U.S. military does not want to do this, in terms of anything beyond the humanitarian response.”<sup>56</sup>

After years of combat operations, U.S. military forces found themselves in an awkward position—they were loved! Many Haitians preferred them over the GOH and wanted them to stay. For Haitians, the GOH appeared inept, uncaring, and corrupt.<sup>57</sup> Despite repeated StratComm attempts to convince them otherwise, people were not buying it. Imagine U.S. surprise—and embarrassment—when pro-U.S. demonstrations popped up around PaP. One rally took place 2 February along Delmas Street, where government offices, NGO headquarters, and diplomatic facilities were located. Demonstrators carrying American flags tore down Haitian flags as they marched.<sup>58</sup>

Elizabeth Ferris of Washington’s Brookings Institution pondered such moments. “The U.S. military’s role is still not clear to me,” she mused. “Are there plans for it to exit in a reasonable period of time?” Her conclusion, “There’s a lot of pitfalls to all this well-meaning compassion.”<sup>59</sup>

The first significant departure of American ground forces occurred on 24 February when the 1st Squadron, 73rd Cavalry Regiment, returned to Fort Bragg. It was followed by the 1st Battalion, 325th Parachute Infantry Regiment, on 5 March. The media noticed. “US troops withdrawing en masse from Haiti,” one Associated Press story warned, declaring “U.S. troops are withdrawing from this capital leaving residents fearing that their departure is a sign of dwindling international interest in the plight of the Haitian people.”<sup>60</sup> This storyline is what JTF-H wished to avoid.

The most visible symbol of American commitment in Haiti, the USNS *Comfort*, now came into

**Next page top:** A young female patient receives treatment 10 February 2010 aboard the USNS *Comfort* in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. (Photo by author)  
**Bottom:** The Military Sealift Command hospital ship USNS *Comfort* (T-AH 20) maneuvers off the coast of Haiti 20 January 2010 to conduct humanitarian and disaster relief operations as part of Operation Unified Response. (Photo by Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Erin Olberholtzen, U.S. Navy)







play. As of 27 February, the *Comfort* had worked itself out of a job. All patients had been discharged, and the ship sat empty. The medical capacity of the UN, NGOs, GOH, USAID, and other entities had improved to the point where seven hundred beds were available onshore.<sup>61</sup> However, releasing the USNS *Comfort* was tricky; the ship could not just steam away without its departure being well socialized, lest panic and feelings of abandonment ensue.

JTF-H considered three courses of action (COA) for releasing the USNS *Comfort*: COA 1—leave immediately (recommended); COA 2—leave in ten days and reduce some medical staff; and COA 3—leave in ten days and reduce medical staff and crew to peacetime cruising.

JTF-H leaders chose a hybrid COA 3: leave in ten days with a reduced medical staff at a cost of around \$200,000 a day. The departure date was set for 10 March. This was deemed the reassuring and compassionate choice.<sup>62</sup>

The sailing of USNS *Comfort* was well publicized through press releases and local Haitian media. Ten days prior to sailing, the EC-130J “Commando Solo” aircraft, a flying radio station, broadcast the departure date mixed with public service announcements, always assuring Haitians the United States was with them for the long term.<sup>63</sup> To cushion the blow and test potential adverse reactions, a one-day refueling mission outside PaP was publicized. This “dress rehearsal” on 5 March worked well; PaP remained calm. Five days later, in the early morning hours of 10 March, the USNS *Comfort* departed PaP without incident for Baltimore, its home port.

Like it or not, when the USNS *Comfort* sailed, it sent a clear message of impending U.S. withdrawal. Throughout March and April, JTF-H continued to transition (redeploy), leaving trace elements and bringing in new but smaller units from U.S. Army South and the 377th Theater Sustainment Command (U.S. Army Reserve) to continue limited support. By late May, JTF-H consisted of two military police companies, the 5330th Combat Sustainment Support Battalion, and small engineer and medical detachments. On 28 May, JTF-H deactivated, handing its mission over to New Horizons, USSOUTHCOM’s annual joint and combined humanitarian assistance program.<sup>64</sup> Operation Unified Response was at an end.

## HA/DR Infowar Lessons for a Joint Task Force

There are operational lessons from Joint Task Force-Haiti and Operation Unified Response that can be applied to an HA/DR joint task force.

**Phase I.** HA/DR missions are most vulnerable during phase I (emergency response). At the beginning of an HA/DR operation, JTF messaging is more reactive than proactive due to time constraints and the chaotic nature of the crisis. Without assessment teams, HA/DR decision-making remains random and uncertain; emergencies require situational awareness. The uncertain situation on the ground can open up any JTF to accusations of incompetence and disorganization.

The sudden introduction of large numbers of uniformed military personnel offers opportunities for anyone to interpret their purpose. The possibility of self-inflicted wounds based on media interpretation or inappropriate troop behavior should be anticipated.

Message consistency is a prerequisite; expect criticism from friends and allies, as well as the international fringe. Criticism may include conspiracy theories, misinformation, and outright lies, all of which should be contested. In some cases, such as the criticism received from the Andean Ridge countries, time and short attention span might be the only remedy. As Leo Tolstoy said, “The two most powerful warriors are patience and time.”<sup>65</sup>

In a phase I environment, StratComm must look for lifesaving good news story opportunities. To shape discussions, an HA/DR messaging template is necessary from the start.

Once activated, ensure the JTF-StratComm team receives clear commander’s intent and priorities, a mission statement, and an end state, knowing the end state may change over time.

The majority, if not all HA/DR JTFs, will work under the lead of UN, USAID, and host-nation governments. These organizations or governments may be inadequately staffed and lack the capabilities of the JTF, and JTFs must be prepared to assist them with StratComm planning and resources. It helps to develop “lead from behind” messaging while building relationships with other HA/DR forces on the ground—even urban search-and-rescue teams.

It is important for JTF leadership to know their environment, who the key partners are, and what is

known about the culture in which the HA/DR operation is implemented.

Knowledge of U.S. historical interactions with host nations is a must. For example, a contentious history of U.S. intervention and occupation of Haiti preceded JTF-H's formation. Understand U.S. history and how U.S. messaging will influence your audiences (international, host nation, U.S. public, and government officials).

**Phase II.** Within phase II (relief operations), a proactive communication strategy becomes possible. A fully manned joint public affairs support element and PAO presence in-country (JIIC, JIC, Joint Visitors Bureau) will result in effective planning and analysis. Planned relief activities will provide StratComm with positive media opportunities as the JTF conducts its work of delivering aid, providing medical help, improving sanitation, building shelters, and more. From phase

II to phase III, military transition and redeployment will change messaging. When redeploying, identify symbols of humanitarian commitment such as hospital ships, hospitals, reconstruction activities, or departing support units. This may require detailed media planning and socialization before departure.

Diverse interest groups such as the UN, NGOs, foreign nations, the U.S. public, host-nation citizens, and even the host-nation government may attempt to delay or stop the redeployment of U.S. forces.

Throughout all phases of an HA/DR, never forget the "vital optic." Photos/footage of U.S. military personnel engaged in helping victims capture the true essence of lifesaving American humanitarian operations.

Finally, in the words of Lt. Gen. Keen, "Always be ready ... we had zero warning ... had to deploy from a dead start."<sup>66</sup> ■

## Notes

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3. "The Upside of Yankee Imperialism in Haiti," *Washington Times* (website), 25 January 2010, accessed 4 September 2020, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2010/jan/25/the-upside-of-yankee-imperialism-in-haiti/>.

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13. Lt. Gen. Keen, email message to Col. Jim Marshall (Director, Public Affairs), "RE: POTUS Press Synch," 13 January 2010, SCHC.

14. "Haiti HA/DR StratComm Guidance (as of 13 Jan 2010)," Haiti HA/DR Mission Update Brief, 14 January 2010, SCHC.

15. Joseph Bryars, email message to Gen. Doug Fraser, "Vital Optics," 14 January 2010, SCHC.

16. Gordon Lubold, "Why Is It Taking So Long for Pentagon Aid To Reach Haiti?," *Christian Science Monitor* (website), 14 January 2010, accessed 8 September 2020, <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Military/2010/0114/Why-is-it-taking-so-long-for-Pentagon-aid-to-reach-Haiti>; Andrew Cawthorne and Tom Brown, "Who's Running Haiti? No One, Say the People," Reuters, 14 January 2010, accessed 8 September 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-haiti-earthquake-vacuum/whos-running-haiti-no-one-say-the-people-idUSTRE60D5VB20100114>.

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