Book Review: Eduardo Aldunate, Backpacks Full of Hope: The UN Mission in Haiti

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Review of “Backpacks Full of Hope”


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The Haitian Revolution in 1789 set Haiti on a collision course with contemporary world leaders. The events of 1789 have remained relevant throughout history, and to the present-day. No other revolution has left people so desolate for over two centuries. Haiti is still reeling from the repercussions that were meted out to it by Europe, specifically, France, and the United States after Haitians fought for, and won, their independence from French slave masters in 1789. Since then, Haiti has gained reputation as the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere.[1] As a result of the slave revolt in 1789, France and the United States imposed an economic embargo on Haiti. Moreover, as punishment for the revolt’s success, the French imposed fines on Haiti to pay financial reparations for loss of property.[2] Payment of this debt to France was completed in 2004, 215 years after the Haitian Revolution.

In light of this complex backdrop, a book about present-day Haiti must necessarily engage with its social and political history. To remove this historical context would cause the text to lose its legitimacy. In his book, *Backpacks Full of Hope: The UN Mission in Haiti*, Eduardo Aldunate’s account of modern-day Haiti ignores this history, which is a major shortcoming throughout the text. Although Major General Aldunate strives to humanize the UN mission in Haiti in the aftermath of the 2004 military coup, his account, perhaps unintentionally, is fueled by the rhetoric of “otherness.” As is common in global media, stories about Haiti are centered on the “coup and earthquake syndrome,” which has the tendency to marginalize the multitude of social and political issues that continue to plague the people of this country.

Given the tendency of the media and other commentators on Haiti to overlook these issues, I looked forward to reading this book and was drawn to the work because of its title: *Backpacks Full of Hope*. I was optimistic that the book would unearth some form of prescription to heal Haiti’s anemic economy, and to restore hope to its people. Instead, the text reads like the journal entries of a soldier who seeks to vindicate and extricate himself from negative media stories that occurred during the time he was the UN Chief in the Haitian Mission (2005-2006).
The foreword sets the stage for the many gaps and conclusory statements that pervade the autobiographical writing style. The foreword situates Haiti’s history as the land of Dessalines and Duvalier as a country that has known only strife and conflict (p ix). This indictment of Haiti is short-sighted and rife with historical error. Notably, Jorge Heine, the author of the foreword, has totally obliterated any memory of the achievements of Toussaint L’Ouverture in the late-eighteenth-century – an omission that some historians, and Haitians, may find unforgivable.

Although the author acknowledges some of these historical facts, his failure to adequately address the issues within the historical space lessens the impact of the text, as historical context is required in a publication of this nature. If the book is touted as an academic text, then one expects a certain degree of citation of scholarly authorities. The major flaw of Backpacks Full of Hope is the lack of scholarly citations, which are necessary to bolster most of the author’s assertions and conclusions about the country. In this vein, the text is not suitable for academics, but does provide a quick survey of the turbulent period in Haiti during the early years of the twenty-first century, which can be useful for those unfamiliar with the prominent issues at that time. The book may also be useful to military personnel or young adults who are contemplating military service in that part of the world. Major General Aldunate provides a good description of life in the trenches of modern-day crisis. He also outlines a sufficient range of pitfalls and precautions that may be instructive to a young and inexperienced member of the military if they were to serve in as complex a society as Haiti. The recent lawsuit filed against the U.N. on behalf of victims of a cholera outbreak testifies to the mistrust between the Haitian people and the U.N. This relationship of mistrust is not unique to Haiti. The issues articulated in this book contains a series of lessons in intercultural communications and understanding that can be applied to the U.N. and its peace-keeping missions around the world.

Although the Backpacks Full of Hope works as a narrative given its first-person raconteur, the author’s decision to present the work as a documentary of the UN mission in Haiti does not hold true to the book’s theme. Instead the book reads as Major General Aldunate’s own attempt at self-vindication for certain allegations that were made against him in the international press. In the book, General Aldunate refers to allegations in the international press by a fellow countryman who accused him of participating in certain human rights violations for the Chilean military government.[3] The title in particular is quite misleading as it claims to be an account of the UN mission in Haiti. A potential reader could make the rational inference that the book would explain the context of the UN mission in Haiti, provide some historical guidance, while also providing a descriptive account of information and daily operations of the mission. Instead, it is overwhelmingly a personal account that hints at allegations of impropriety that the author had been accused in his home country of Chile.

Aldunate’s introspective approach would be more appropriate if Backpacks Full of Hope was written in the context of diary entries with dates included in the entry. This format would be a more effective style for the
book and it could then be used as an aide in an educational context that one could refer to corroborate the history of the United Nations mission in Haiti.


[3] See Back Packs Full of Hope at pp. 3-4. See also, General Eduardo Aldunate: Chile?s Problematic Gift to Haiti who could turn out to be President-elect Bachelet?s First Foreign Policy Challenge at http://www.soaw.org/about-the-soawhinsec/13-soawhinsec-graduates/1252 (stating that “explosive charges have been made against Aldunate over his role in the high profile murder of a former Spanish diplomat, as alleged by the victim?s daughter. As a result, outgoing President Lagos may soon have less reason to crow about his administration?s putative accomplishments, with the Aldunate affair possibly being the first foreign policy crisis that incoming president Michelle Bachelet will have to face.”)