

The More Things Change...

Patterns of Power in Haiti

Cycles of political violence and instability stretch back to Haiti's independence in 1804. As deposed President Aristide and his successor, General Cedras, confront each other in the latest act on this stage, both the Haitian population and the rest of the world have been left wondering what they can do to end the bloodshed.

by Brian Coutain

Eighteen hundred and four was a glorious year in Caribbean history. For the first time in the history of the world, a successful slave rebellion had taken place. That rebellion—a revolution contemporaneous with the American and the French—was in Haiti.

Up to the revolution, Haiti had been one of the world's richest colonies, and by far the most prosperous French colony. The future looked promising for the new nation after its independence, and many hoped that Haiti would become an affluent black democracy in the New World. So how did a country with such encouraging beginnings become the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere? What went wrong along the way?

The answer, paradoxically, lies in the success of the Haitian revolution itself. Haitians did not secure independence through diplomatic negotiations with the French, but rather through armed resistance. The revolutionaries set aside little time for constitutional engineering or the codification of democratic principles in a formal constitution. Consequently, political intrigue, violence and power struggles soon became hallmarks of the Haitian political structure.

One leader of the revolution—Jean Jacques Dessalines—proclaimed himself emperor in 1804 and was assassinated within two years, beginning a long line of presidential power struggles. Added to the nation's woes was the increasing role played by outsiders. Abraham Lincoln's recognition of Haiti's independence in 1862 was a source of pride for Haitians, but the increasing commercial and political interference in its affairs by the United States, Spain, England, and France were less welcome advances.

Over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries both of these chronic problems—the constant threat of foreign intervention and the country's weak internal political structure—strengthened and enlarged the Haitian military. Power struggles within Haiti involved the military both as an instrument of political terror and as a source of political power itself. The military was essentially the power broker and “kingmaker” in Haitian affairs. Furthermore, the threat of external involvement ensured a privileged place for the military as a bulwark against the prospect of recolonization. However, much like the political system itself, Haiti's military was rife with internal feuds and divisions—factionalism which further fuelled the country's political instability.

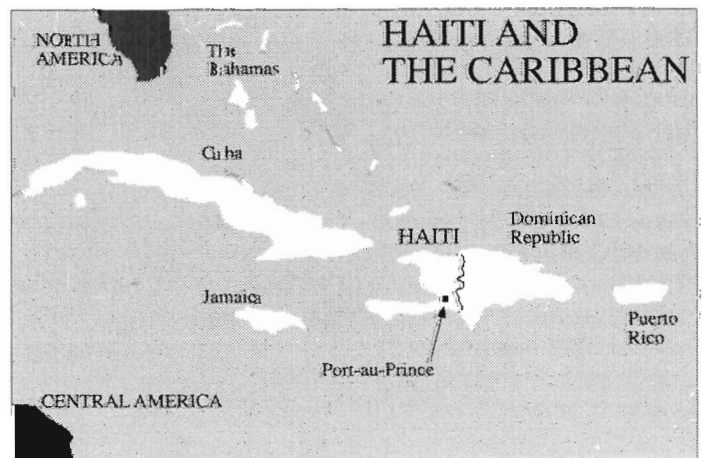
At the same time, the Haitian state, its resources, and its

economy were often mercilessly exploited. In 1925, some 120 years after independence, Haiti won official French recognition by promising a large indemnity to former French planters. The required money was borrowed of necessity from France, but at usurious rates. The “double indemnity” further weakened the economy, already under severe strains due to the maintenance of large armies. Moreover, several Haitian presidents were all too willing to embrace foreign economic agendas if these consolidated their own power within the country.

American Intervention

After more than a century of precarious independence, Haiti abruptly lost its freedom when U.S. Marines seized the capital, Port-au-Prince, on July 28, 1914, occupying the country until 1934. The assassination of President Jean V.G. Sam—the sixth Haitian president since 1911 to meet violent death at the hands of local opposition—and the massacre of political prisoners in the Presidential Palace, combined to provide President Woodrow Wilson with a humanitarian justification for intervention. However, Wilson also had a strong stake in protecting American investments in Haiti, as well as in safeguarding the geopolitical value of a friendly government in the Caribbean.

During the years following occupation, movements towards Haitian insurrection grew in size and intensity, but were crushed by U.S. armed forces in the early 1920s. Thereafter, the United States sponsored a series of puppet presidencies, ruled the nation through a military high commissioner,



[Electromap, Inc.]

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and left Haitians minimal voice in their government.

In 1922, a large U.S. bank loan to Haiti was arranged, providing for generous interest payments to foreign bond holders (mostly Americans). However, little of the principal was invested in public works projects or productive enterprises to enhance Haiti's infrastructure. The cost of redeeming the balance of the loan drained the Haitian economy for a quarter of a century.

However, American policy in Haiti changed in 1930. The legislature elected Stenio Vincent, one of the most ardent opponents of American occupation, to the presidency. Though the U.S. refused to abandon its sway over Haiti's economy until 1947, it did promise to end the armed occupation of the republic, and the last American Marines were withdrawn in August of 1934.

By June 1935, President Vincent, considering himself "indispensable," had the constitution amended to extend his term in office for five years, and refused to step down after his term expired. In the face of these actions, a triumvirate of military leaders forcibly announced his resignation. It is worth noting that only two presidents in Haiti's history have ever relinquished power voluntarily. The second did so in 1879, and by that time Haiti had sustained 69 "revolutions."

This pattern of succession through violence, assassinations, and coups became the institutionalized means of political change in Haitian politics, and exemplifies the structural problems that Haiti continues to face. The military, with its monopoly on violence, increasingly became Haiti's only source of power and legitimacy, a development that has had profound consequences.

The Duvalier Era

In 1957, Dr. François "Papa Doc" Duvalier, a medical doctor trained in Haiti who had studied public health at the University of Michigan, was elected president of Haiti. Like so many before him, he too refused to leave office when the time came, declaring himself "President for life" in the new constitution of 1964. Though he was more successful than his predecessors in maintaining power, his success came at a high price for the Haitian people.

Duvalier's first hurdle was to come to terms with the pivotal role of the military. By organizing loyalists into a paramilitary guard known as the "Tontons Macoute", bolstering the secret police, and later establishing the Leopards, a U.S.-trained counterinsurgency force, Duvalier was able to counterbalance traditional military strength. In the process, however, he further complicated the power structure by playing the military and the Tontons Macoute against one another while keeping both under his control. At the same time, he gained the military's direct support through a combination of carrot and stick. He controlled the appointment of high military officials, granted privileges to army supporters, condoned the military's long-standing control of political terror, and dealt



François "Papa Doc" Duvalier, self-declared President For Life.
[Columbus Memorial Library, O.A.S.]

severely with potential oppositionists.

Duvalier also maintained control through institutionalized nation-wide intimidation, widespread espionage, strict censorship, allegations of internal communist plots and invasion, murders, torture, imprisonment without trial, and enforced exile of potential presidential rivals. To balance the army's power, Duvalier assigned a share of the task of terrorizing the population between the three existing branches of military force. Complicating the picture were the constant public reminders of the mystical powers that Duvalier took on as the high priest of Haiti's Voodoo religion.

No tyrant can live forever, and in 1971 Duvalier died, but perpetuated his authoritarian regime by bequeathing the state to his son. Only 19 at the time, Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier survived for 15 years, but not without the help of a powerful internal security apparatus behind him. Jean-Claude was not the shrewd and calculating manipulator that his father was and, in the end, could not survive a popular uprising in 1986. With Jean-Claude Duvalier deposed and in exile, the predictable cycle of coups and counter-coups returned. A succession of six military-backed regimes governed the country in the four year period leading up to the election of Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 1990.

The Aristide Years

Father Aristide, born in 1954, was the son of an educated and devoutly Roman Catholic Haitian family. He joined the Salesian teaching order and pursued advanced studies in the Dominican Republic, Israel, and Canada. More influenced by radical Liberation Theology than by traditional Catholicism, Aristide was known for citing the Gospel of St. Luke, where Christ is quoted as saying: "And he that has no sword, let him sell his gar-



Business as usual: downtown Port-au-Prince during the Duvalier era. [Columbus Memorial Library, O.A.S.]

ment and buy one."

This encouragement of rebellion through biblical passages antagonized the established church hierarchy, who eventually expelled Aristide from the Salesian order for inciting violence and class struggle. But Aristide continued preaching in the slums of Haiti, becoming increasingly popular among the nation's poor. Even so, he surprised everyone when he declared his candidacy for the presidency. On December 16, 1990, in the first free election in the nation's history, he was chosen President of Haiti, garnering almost 70 percent of the popular vote. Yet, even before his inauguration, he survived three assassination attempts and an attempted coup.

While in power, Aristide dismissed a number of the senior army officers in the hopes of reducing the military's influence, and appointed Brigadier General Raoul Cedras as Commander-in-Chief of the army. He began to work on the legacy left to him by 29 years of Duvalier tyranny, which included (and includes) high unemployment, an average yearly wage of about US\$350, a 70 percent illiteracy rate, and an infant mortality rate that runs well over 100 per 1,000 births—double that of the neighboring Dominican Republic. Under Aristide, the economy improved and human rights abuses declined. His social reform programs—in particular minimum wage laws and higher taxes on the rich—earned him the enmity of Haiti's elite.

In September, 1991, after eight months in power, the Aristide government was overthrown by General Cedras. Though the coup is largely explained by the power aspirations of the military, and Cedras in particular, support for Aristide was particularly weak among the business community, whose political interests have historically allied them with the military.

Ultimately, the rebels decided to let Aristide live in order to avoid unwelcome international attention. According to an independent radio station, 250 people died during the coup when soldiers fired into crowds of Aristide supporters. The international reaction was swift and unanimous: the coup was condemned in every capital. The United States, Canada, France, and other countries immediately suspended economic aid to Haiti, and many other leaders, including Venezuela's President Perez, declared their willingness to take part in "the severest action" to reestablish democracy in Haiti.

The U.S. Reaction

The overthrow of Aristide confronted America's Bush administration with a foreign policy dilemma: where did Haiti fit into the "New World Order?" The initial response was moderate—primarily, critics argue, because Haiti did not have the strategic importance of Kuwait. The administration ruled out military intervention almost immediately, opting instead for the trade sanctions proposed by the Organization of American States (OAS). America's tepid response only emboldened Haiti's new military leaders.

Back in the United States, Haiti quickly became an issue in the 1992 presidential campaign, and Bill Clinton promised that if elected he would end the Bush policy of returning fleeing refugees to Haiti. But the potential for a massive wave of

illiterate immigrants, many of whom might die before they even reached American shores—coupled with the stereotypes of Haitians as AIDS carriers—proved more than the Clinton administration could shoulder. After the election, President Clinton announced that he would continue the Bush policy of economic sanctions.

In June 1993, the Clinton Administration pushed for United Nations (UN) sponsored oil embargoes to complement the sanctions already in place—a move that some argue was designed to placate the Congressional Black Caucus after his reversal on the refugee issue. The sanctions and oil embargo had devastating effects on Haiti's already fragile economy. Though they failed to stop the flow of goods through Haiti's porous border with the Dominican Republic, they did succeed in doubling prices, which mostly hurt the nation's poor. But as unemployment neared 50 percent, the business community began to feel the pinch and pressured the military to negotiate.

The military capitulated and took part in a series of meetings with representatives of Aristide's government on Governors Island in New York. The meetings culminated in the Governors Island Accords, which called for a four-month transition period, beginning no later than October 30, 1993, during which Aristide would return to power to serve out his term. In return for lifting the embargo and an amnesty clause, the military high command agreed to resign. Aristide was forced to sign the accord by U.S. and UN mediators, despite what he considered to be its flawed nature. The Haitian military was confident that the U.S. would not intervene with force, and left the meeting feeling that they maintained the upper hand. Aristide was left with few options.

Analysts have been quick to uncover the flaws in the Governors Island Accords and point to five problem spots. First, the accords lifted the UN/OAS embargo and resumed economic aid *before* Aristide returned to Haiti. Second, they left General Cedras in charge of the military during the transition period. Third, they left

ambiguous the future role of the Chief of Port-au-Prince Police, Michel François, one of the most brutal supporters of the coup. Fourth, they gave far reaching amnesty for the military and its supporters for the crimes committed during Aristide's exile. Finally, the accords simply required the retirement (with pension) of Cedras, although according to Haitian and international human rights groups, more than 3,000 people died during his reign of terror.

Despite the exceedingly generous nature of the Governors Island Agreement, the military leaders refused to honor the accord and reneged on each promise. Instead, they unleashed the Zinglando—a paramilitary force of armed supporters controlled by Police Chief François. The Zinglando terrorized the population into submission, and also succeeded in shutting out UN and OAS human rights observers by murdering the Minister of Justice as well as one of Aristide's major financial supporters.

When the Zinglando began broadcasting strongly anti-American rhetoric and challenging American motives, the U.S. became increasingly wary of direct involvement. For example, the navy vessel Holland County turned back on its assignment to help professionalize the Haitian military. Recently, Secretary



Jean-Bertrand Aristide: democratically elected then overthrown. [Embassy of Haiti]



*A family home, typical of life in rural Haiti (1970).
[Columbus Memorial Library, O.A.S.]*

of State Warren Christopher has acknowledged that American policy in Haiti has failed, and many are skeptical not only of the Haitian military, but of Aristide's chances for success as well.

Reports coming out of Haiti suggest that the military is consolidating its power by systematically murdering Aristide supporters. With no on-site observers to count the bodies, no one knows for sure how many people are being killed. What is certain is that General Cedras and his 7,000 man army have defied the world and emerged victorious, just as the Haitian military has done for years.

Options for the International Community

Debate rages over the appropriate response to the crisis in Haiti—and especially over the issue of foreign intervention. Arguments against outside interference come from both Haitians and Americans, and are all premised on concepts of national sovereignty. Some opponents point to the bitter legacy of U.S. involvement in Haiti and the region. They argue that the end of the Cold War should signal a time to end America's direct presence in the Caribbean. These opponents claim that neither Haitians nor the people of the Caribbean are political children incapable of resolving their internal affairs. They point out that the U.S. itself has historically had periods of tremendous instability, such as the Civil War, Shay's Rebellion, and innumerable moments of internal conflict. Even Great Britain, some argue, had a military dictatorship during her transition to parliamentary democracy.

Foes of direct involvement also point to hopes for a Haitian future that is more distinctly their own. They claim that the time is ripe for Haiti to recreate the polity according to *Haitian* national interests. Allowing the United States to intervene once again would only result in a modern precedent and further inhibit the ability of Haitians to solve their own disputes. Americans have their own reasons for opposition. Many are gun-shy from recent mishaps in Somalia and Bosnia. Others, such as Senator Jesse Helms, are wary of Aristide's anti-American rhetoric, his tacit approval of violence against political opponents, and warnings about his anti-democratic tendencies.

Those who support intervention in Haiti, by the U.S. or other nations, generally invoke Haiti's long and troubled democratization movement. The military, they argue, has been

used by a tiny elite to veto the will of the people. Given the internal political dynamics, the distribution of power, and the political culture of fear and mutual distrust, no group will give up power since its very survival is at stake. Military dominance and quicksand-like politics, they argue, have an inertia that internal forces will not be able to dislodge. Any agreement involving the military will inevitably leave them with substantial power. It would then be only a matter of time before the abuse of power and privilege would return.

Also, an agreement with the military would essentially condone their actions in the brutal coup by failing to punish those involved. This would set a damaging precedent, not only excusing the individual military leaders responsible for killing thousands of Haitians, but also ensuring their early retirement and pension. Other proponents of foreign intervention point to the end of the Cold War. The removal of the geopolitical stakes from the region has freed the only remaining superpower, the United States, to intervene constructively and multilaterally with the United Nations.

Many in the Caribbean, however, remain cautious about unilateral American intervention. Grenadian Ambassador to the UN, Eugene M. Pursoo, is a good example of this wariness. When asked what the Caribbean leadership was doing about the Haitian crisis, he replied: "The Caribbean leaders have clearly expressed their abhorrence at the behavior of the Haitian military and their determination to see the duly elected Government of Father Aristide restored. The question is whether they have the military might to effectuate such desires." When asked, given the lack of military capability in the Caribbean, whether there would be support for a US invasion of Haiti, he added: "A UN or OAS military force with contributions from the Caribbean and US would be the ideal situation."

Some of those favoring intervention stand firmly unconcerned about the nationality of any possible military force. One Haitian student summed up this sentiment when he stated that "I don't care if the devil himself goes in and takes care of the army. I'll support him." Comments like this suggest that the only way to break the cycle of violence in Haiti will be if the military is dealt with severely and seriously.

Critics fear that any pact involving the military would leave Aristide greatly constrained, allowing them simply to wait out his term, get rid of him, and return to military rule. They point out that it has happened before and it could happen again. Of course, there is equal precedent that Aristide, should he return, may be reluctant to relinquish power. His past acceptance of violence as a viable political option reflects his deep roots in Haiti's turbulent past. ●

Suggestions for Further Reading

- Jean-Bertrand Aristide, with Christophe Wargny, *Aristide: an autobiography*. (Maryknoll, 1993).
- Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, *Haiti: the Breached Citadel*. (Westview Press, 1990).
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- Robert Debs Heinl, *Written in Blood: the Story of the Haitian People, 1492-1971*. (Houghton Mifflin, 1978).
- David Nicholls, *Haiti in the Caribbean Context*. (St. Martin's Press, 1985).
- Amy Wilentz, *The Rainy Season: Haiti since Duvalier*. (Simon and Schuster, 1989).