

**A VISIT TO PORT-AU-PRINCE, HAITI
DECEMBER 6-13, 2003**

Dick Bernard

CONGRATULATIONS

to the people of Haiti on 200 years of independence: 1804-2004.

CONGRATULATIONS

to Lavalas and the government of Jean-Bertrand Aristide
for heroic efforts since 1986 to bring Democracy and Freedom
and economic and social Justice to the poor people of Haiti against incredible odds.

*“Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.¹
Blessed are the meek: for they shall possess the land.
Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.
Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after justice: for they shall have their fill.
Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.
Blessed are the clean of heart: for they shall see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.
Blessed are they that suffer persecution for justice’ sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are ye when they shall revile you, and persecute you, and speak all that is evil against
you, untruly, for my sake.”*

Matthew 5:3-11²

¹ *The poor in spirit.* That is, the humble; and they whose spirit is not set upon riches.

² From my Grandmother Bernard’s 1906 edition of the Catholic Bible (Douay-Reims, including the footnote)

A Personal View of the Reality of Haiti, its People, and its Political and Geo-Political Situation

The following pages are my story about Haiti as seen at the end of 2003. This story is based on readings, observations, conversations and impressions, some recent, some over a long period of time; all intended as a beginning and not an end.

I did not plan the itinerary of this visit, nor did I participate because of the itinerary for a powerful seven days study tour in Haiti, December 6-13, 2003. I was very happy the itinerary turned out to be what it was: an often intense learning opportunity. Until the journey I was like most Americans: dependent for my very limited knowledge of present day Haiti on whatever came from/through the mainstream media, which was almost nothing. It was to my advantage to visit Haiti without political “baggage” or history about the country, I feel. It was a better opportunity to soak up impressions.



The itinerary from which this report flows begins following my impressions of Haiti.

If this paper is your first contact with Haiti, I'd urge it not be the last: Haiti's is an important story to be better understood, and this, its bicentennial year, is the perfect time to seek greater understanding of our near-island neighbor, less than two airplane hours east of Miami.

I would have a single recommendation for all readers: take my account for what it is, a personal account. And determine to learn much more about Haiti and its relationships with others, especially the United States, in 2004.

My summary thoughts:

The democratically elected government of Haiti (Aristide/Lavalas) deserves encouragement and support of the U.S. Government.

The U.S. government appears to be actively supporting efforts to destabilize and remove the democratically elected government of Haiti.

I come from a generation that generally believed and trusted the official words of politicians and the media. We may have been naïve then; it is even more certain now that acceptance at face value of official words and pronouncements is risky, at minimum. Skepticism and questioning is essential to find the truth, or some semblance of the truth.

Stories and their Roles in our Lives

Haiti is a complex story. We all live in our stories – we cannot escape that reality. We pick selected facts from an infinitely large collection of facts, and then interpret them in our own uniquely biased way. Sometimes we do not even wish to be bothered with facts, and make up an alternate reality that fits our view, believing and spreading rumors or gossip. I am no different than you in this regard. We are human.

Countries, too, live their stories. My country, the United States, lives in its stories of grandeur, of freedom, of democracy, of idealism. Our country has its own abundant mythology about itself.

Political history is almost always written from the point of view of the elite, and especially from the point of view of the winner. The poor are too often the pawn – regardless of who “wins” the political struggle. Haiti presents an anachronism: it is the poor who, in 1986, finally threw out a vicious dictator, and in 1990 elected a government whose orientation was to the poor, and which later eliminated its military. It has elected its leaders ever since. This has created political problems: elites do not like to relinquish control; nor do military commanders.

Regarding Haiti, I write from a distinct personal bias for the poor and disenfranchised victims: they are who I came to learn about and from. They are the people who seem essentially irrelevant to power people, except as parts of the collective wealth-generating machine of the most powerful tiny minority who are accustomed to exercising the power and control. (In Haiti, these upper-class rich are a very tiny minority and seem most commonly referred to as mulattoes, or the Bourgeoisie.³) Among them is immense wealth, particularly compared to the paysans – the peasants. A separate group, the nouveau riche, have more recently gained wealth through legitimate and not so legitimate means – as drug trafficking. As in all societies, many people in Haiti occupy various economic and social niches, between the rich and the poor. By whatever measure, however, Haitians are, on average, very poor.

There is an immense Haitian diaspora, often referred to as “the tenth department”⁴ primarily in big east coast U.S. cities like Boston, New York and Miami, which contributes in many ways to the economy, and which is part of the political battlefield for the future control of Haiti.

³ As in most communities and countries, there are a few – often five or so - family units which exert a disproportionately large control over the affairs and wealth of the country or the community. With relatively little thought, we can probably identify the dominant names in our own communities. Of course, these small groups of elite interact with each other, and expand through marriage and other means. As described in the Haiti Files (1994) edited by James Ridgeway, here are Haiti’s five dominant families, and the source of their wealth (p. 36): **Brandt’s** – edible oil, poultry, banking, agricultural plantations, and, allegedly, connection with drug traffickers; **Mevs** – sugar production, manufacture of shoes, plastics, import of sugar giving it almost total control over the sugar industry of Haiti; **Accra** – monopoly on the production of internally sold textile products for the 500,000 plus uniforms for school children, large contracts for the supply of uniforms and food for the army and various agribusiness activities; **Bigios** – monopoly on steel and construction materials, a share in the edible oil market and jewelry; **Behrmann** – with concessions to import automobiles and trucks.

⁴ The word “department” in Haiti, is similar to the word “county” or “state” in the United States – a separate and distinct part of the country.

It is important to note that not all poor are “good”; nor are all rich “bad. Some true heroes for the poor in Haiti were very well off; some brutal agents for Duvalier likely came from the ranks of the poor.

My trip to Haiti was to observe, and what I set out to observe with the greatest interest was those in the bottom 99% of the population of this poverty stricken country – one of the poorest in the world - who have the least to gain, and the most to lose, from political maneuvering by internal and external elites, including our own United States of America. I cannot even begin to describe everything I have learned: this will be simply a thumbnail sketch. I left Haiti with the conviction that this near neighbor of ours deserves much more attention than it gets from the American people. We have much to learn about ourselves, from learning of Haiti’s unfortunate history, its present day reality, and its 200 year relationship with the U.S.

Impressions of Haitians

Those pictured below are poor children, receiving an opportunity for an education. As I look at this and other pictures, and remember, I wonder about the future fate of these children born into poverty in a poor island nation. What lies ahead for them? Indeed certain elements would consider the people who bring these children education as enemies (see next paragraphs). Look carefully at these photos and see Haiti at the end of 2003, and see Haiti’s future.

The final two days of our visit to Port-au-Prince were marked by political violence: anti-government demonstrations, ultimately resulting, we were told, in several deaths. One of the deaths was a man we had met only two days earlier at a school which he had co-founded for 350



Children at SOPUDEP School

children in poverty (some of the students shown in the aforementioned website pictures). He was a local literacy official. His death was not a random act of violence; he had been assassinated near the Presidential Palace. His likely crime: “Viv Aristide” - being a strong supporter of the administration of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, now effectively under political ‘siege’ by enemies determined to destroy it.

During these two days of violence, and indeed all week, I observed life as it played out among the poor in the neighborhood in which we were staying, a geographic section more or less demarked by its relationship to one of the main roads in Port-au-Prince. Our neighborhood was not the poorest of the poor – that is reserved for the infamous Port-au-Prince slum, Cite Soleil, and for the rural precincts – but it was poor nonetheless. And

when you're poor in Haiti, poor is "poh", really, really poor, as a friend from another Caribbean island once described Haitian poverty in relation to the people of her own poor Caribbean island. We made only one short trip into the Haitian countryside. At our residence, a woman, just returning from ten days somewhere out there, allowed to me that "returning to Port-au-Prince is like returning to paradise."

Our last evening, late at night, I heard a half-dozen gunshots, not far away...but otherwise life went on. (I find it almost amusing, as I write in late December 2003, that we in the United States are now on Orange (high) Alert: it is the deliberate marketing of Fear to breed Dependence on the Government Authorities.)

If one ventured out on the Port-au-Prince streets, as we did all week, including the unsettled days Thursday and Friday, the bustle of traffic was constant – there were many cars, trucks, tap-taps (taxis, mostly pickups and trucks carrying passengers), though the traffic decreased markedly on Friday. On Friday, it was the rare business that we found to be open; occasionally our route had to change because burning tires were a signal that a street was blocked.



But, curiously, this white faced English-speaker in a sea of dark faces speaking Creole never once felt unsafe in the neighborhood or enroute to or from any place we were visiting. We took no unnecessary chances, but the dominant impression was that we were among a gentle people: one needed to seek trouble to find it.

Evidence of American Christmas existed in Haiti, at least in external ways: several times, usually on businesses, I saw outside decorations mindful of Christmas as home. At the same time, it was impossible to imagine an American kind of Christmas excess in many Haitian homes.

We went for a long walk in the neighborhood on Friday – the planned excursion to the south coast city of Jacmel scrubbed due to the violence and uncertain safety. Except for one guy who met our group, and loudly exclaimed "Aba Aristide", (down with Aristide), there was no readily apparent sense that anyone much cared what was happening not far away. Doubtless, however, people were clustered around radios, keeping in touch with the troubles outside, and we weren't included in their conversations. Indeed, someone we met at the Oloffson Hotel the previous night said that it was when things were eerily quiet that she worried.

A couple of nimble members of our group engaged some kids and young adults in some street soccer, kicking around a non-descript ball, and all had a great time; a bunch of idle men who were passing the time gambling invited us to join the game, which we declined; the youngest member of our group, a recent high school graduate, was like the “pied piper of Hamelin” with a bunch of street kids near a church under construction.



The street vendors - almost all women – had their spots staked out on the side of the street: someone’s specialty mangoes; someone else’s true “free range” fried chicken. In a doorway, a woman was cooking some gruel over charcoal. Women are the backbone of the current Haitian economy, we were told by Anne Hastings of the unique Fonkoze bank (www.fonkoze.org). Fonkoze, the brainchild of a Haitian Priest, makes loans averaging \$110 to groups of poor people with entrepreneurial ideas; the repayment rate is 99.5%. People negotiating loans had to be literate by the time of the third loan. Fonkoze is a venture of considerable interest to me.

Still, one got the sense that most folks were simply living lives of quiet desperation – the struggle was to survive today, not to get a new Lexus. At the same time, “survival” was not necessarily grim – one could feel a sense of community on the street that we have largely lost here in the United States. Isolation from one’s neighbors is not an easy option in Haiti.

While “regime change” was being played with at “higher” levels – and the U.S. is without doubt an active player in this dark drama to force President Aristide to resign – the people in the ‘hood were making do, as they always have. Several times I heard, and even more often noticed, the truth of, the axiom: “every Haitian is an entrepreneur.” When the unemployment rate exceeds 70%, as Haiti’s does, it is rather pointless to direct a person to “get off your rear and go out and get a job” – there is no job to get, nor is there unemployment insurance.⁵ Unemployment should

⁵ I cannot get out of my mind a certain category of Haitian unemployed. From 1959-86, the Duvalier’s ruled ruthlessly through their enforcers in the police, Ton Ton Macoute, and the Army. Papa Doc Duvalier is said to have been a student of Hitler’s methods of keeping control over the people. Only a few years after Baby Doc Duvalier was forced into exile, and only seven months after Aristide became president of Haiti, an Army coup sent Aristide into exile for three years. When Aristide returned, the Army was disbanded, and no longer officially exists. The former officers – some went into exile – and the personnel, some with diabolical “skills”, are among the unemployed, and are potentially useful to anyone fomenting regime change against the currently standing government. Most of these people have melted back into the population. Certain among them enjoy support among people or groups or even countries with money. It is not difficult to see similarities between Haiti, and the U.S.

represent a major quandary to Capitalists: people who cannot make money cannot spend it: \$1 spent in America turns over several times; presumably the same multiplier effect would work with the Haitian Gourde, which is currently worth 2 _ American cents.

In a real sense those street vendors, and the ever present beggars, and even those guys gambling around the hulk of a cannibalized car were all, in a sense, entrepreneurs without much opportunity to realize a dream, even a modest one. The business of the day was simply to survive: no Starbucks in these neighborhoods. Someone said that Haitians are criticized for lack of long term vision: there seems just cause for such lack of looking ahead, at least long term – for the poor, tomorrow is the critical day, not five years down the road. The poor don't have the option of having dreams.



Countryside near Port-au-Prince

Up in the hills, perhaps 10 difficult miles from downtown Port au Prince, on a back country path, we came across a solitary old woman who was sitting by the path, selling a type of fried food (that looked like goldfish crackers and tasted a lot like overdone American Indian frybread) to whoever might pass by. I call her “old”, but the nature of the consequences of poverty is that she was

probably younger than I. I didn't buy anything from her. I regret that, now.

“Poverty” got perhaps its first definition for me at collection time in St. Clare's Catholic Church, the Sunday following our arrival. The church was full, and the collection was taken from people coming forward and dropping their contribution in baskets held at the Communion rail. We were perhaps half way back, and I was surprised at the small amounts in the basket when we dropped in our dollars, though many had come forward. It was truly a collection of the biblical “widow's mites” – people gave from the little that they possessed. Our group's later contribution to St. Clare's probably far exceeded the donation of the many parishioners at all the Masses that Sunday...but in relative terms, it was proportionally much less than they had given that day.

Education is still an elusive dream for many in Haiti. The gentleman we met who two days later was killed had co-founded a pre-school through high school specifically for 350 poor children who otherwise could not afford to attend school. Our 27-year old driver and interpreter, if born in the U.S. of A. would likely have been a PhD by now: he is fluent in four languages, personality plus, is ambitious and very gifted. By day, he took us here and there, expertly; by night he was a student, studying to take the SAT, and a hoped for break to go to college in the

sponsored regime change in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Simply disbanding the police and military and other enforcers does not assure an easy end to the problem.

U.S. He was also a husband and father and very religious: what went unspoken was what would happen if he earned admission to a U.S. University. Would his wife and two-year old be able to go along? The most likely answer, “no”: more Haitians are not wanted as permanent residents of the United States.

At the Church I looked for and found almost no paper – no church bulletins, fliers, etc. The choir had music; the Priest and lectors had a lectionary, but for those in the pews it seemed mostly verbal communication.

Our driver and I were visiting one evening right after he had delivered us to the Hotel Oloffson. I asked him about politics in Haiti. He demurred: “You have to be flexible”, he said, speaking of himself. It was impossible to read if he was pro- or anti-Aristide, or even if he had strong political leanings. In his survival mode, his worst nightmare was that he would be on the outside looking in if the political winds shifted, and it was not an idle concern. To get ahead, he reasoned, you had to get along. And to get along, you didn’t take sides when it came to politics: you stayed “flexible”. In a sense, this makes the job of the proponents of regime change simpler: make it impossible for the current regime to do what it can for the poor, blame the governing party, called Lavalas (the flood), and its leader, Aristide, for the lack of success, and thus encourage a vote against the incumbents – very much the “American way”.

As the week went on, I began to quietly notice, and listen for, evidences of personal communications in Haiti.

Unlike our typical Midwestern U.S. lives of isolation – including driving from place to place in a car, usually by ourselves with windows up – privacy is not much of an option in Haiti.

The street vendors – the department stores of Haiti – clogged every sidewalk; what space was left was clogged by pedestrians, all who seemed to have some specific destination. There seemed little laughter or idle banter. Life was serious business.

A surprising number of people had cell phones, though they weren’t ubiquitous as they are in the more developed world.

I can recall only a single working traffic light on the many streets that we traveled, and there were lots of vehicles, almost all diesel and very smelly. Coming into a busy intersection was a most fascinating non-verbal dance. With a single rather chaotic and nerve-wracking exception, cars merged surprisingly easily at even the busiest intersections – the guy you cut off didn’t “give you the finger” or curse or shoot you a la American road rage; likely he had cut someone else off a block back: the “style” was much more laid back. In a sense, I felt traffic moved better than many rush hour melees I’ve seen in Minnesota. It was a “dance” practiced every day by Haiti’s drivers.

I don’t recall seeing a single bicycle or motor scooter or train.

I had been to another third world country a few years ago, and my dominant memory of the streets there was incessant honking of horns. In Port-au-Prince I rarely heard a horn. It seemed more a “dance” than a “fight” to get from one place to another.

Uniformed police, highway patrol, directors of traffic were rarely seen, at least in the many routes we took.

Haiti is hot all year, and electricity even in Port-au-Prince is sporadic and uncertain, so except for the very wealthiest (and there is very extravagant wealth – Haiti’s 1% matches our own richest 1%), dwellings, including our own, had no glass windows and only, if you were lucky, screens. Doubtless air conditioning exists, but it is doubtless not common, outside the most wealthy.

A consequence of open dwellings is that you can hear most everything. What became interesting to me as the week went on is that I didn’t hear music (though I experienced wonderful Haitian music, including from the poor), or blaring radios (the main and very common form of media – indeed radio was Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide’s unexpected doorway to the Presidency of Haiti in 1990.) We were told that about 30% of Haitian households have television. Newspapers seems to have limited circulation, but do exist. Interpersonally, I didn’t hear



people hollering and screaming at each other, though I’m sure personal relationships are not idyllic in Haiti – they are humans, after all. At least twice, I heard the staccato of gunfire late at night – but it had the ring of some gangland rubout somewhere in the vicinity, more than a domestic dispute gone terribly awry.

I looked for evidence of America: such was not hard to find. Products, of course, like Coca Cola (canned in USA), cars and gasoline stations. Driving down a street one of us noticed an Edina (MN) athletic shirt on a kid. But not all signs were positive. A couple of little kids practiced their “f—k you”; gangsta rap with its profanity and reference to shotguns dominated a pleasant park on a Sunday afternoon in Petion-ville. We don’t export only goodness to the surrounding world.

Friday night, as we visited in the enfolding darkness, I mentioned that I did not recall actually seeing or hearing a bird all week (except for some seagulls near the waterfront). We talked about that for awhile. About that time, a big bird flew quietly by. But I continue to have the impression that birds of any sort were not much in evidence and this in a place where the daytime temperatures are always near 90, and at night in the 60s.



While there may not have been many songbirds, there was an all-night neighborhood symphony of barking dogs and roosters. I was expecting the roosters to be an irritant; the dogs were something else, and much, much more irritating and unpredictable. When we saw them in the day, they were almost all brown, and skinny, and they were everywhere. No leash laws in Port-au-Prince; probably no Puppy Chow either – these were survivors. In

the day, not much barking, and certainly no threatening behavior to strangers. But not a night went by that we didn't hear an eruption of dogs barking: sometimes, it seemed dog fights and dog "conversations" dominated the very late evening hours.

Chickens were common in the neighborhood; occasionally we would see goats and pigs rummaging in garbage. In this regard, the scene might have been similar to our own towns 100 years ago. I recall seeing no cats, but there are lots of Haitian proverbs involving cats, and cats are nocturnal, and don't bark! So they were very likely there, sleeping, when we were out and about.

I came away with an overall impression in the neighborhoods that the main issue was personal survival; and the people were generally not at all visibly hostile to we rich white folk in their midst.

My memory of the poor people of Haiti is very positive, though tinged with sadness. Theirs is a very rough row to hoe.

A Not-Always-Holy and Sometimes Combustible Crucible: State, Church and Other Non-Government Organizations (NGO's)

In my country, the United States, there has been a constitutional separation of church and State since the beginning. Still, even in the U.S., where the division between church and state seems so clear, there is constant tension over the proper boundary between church and state, and

without church operated charities as hospitals and orphanages, burdens on the state would increase dramatically.

Add to this the visible and invisible tensions between churches over beliefs; and historical or current suspicions and hostilities between even “Christian” denominations, most especially their leaders at all levels, and the current campaign by the Bush administration to give organized religion even more entrée into, and influence over, areas previously prohibited, and an ever more contradictory picture emerges.

One can imagine the spoken (and mostly publicly unspoken) tensions in a place like Haiti which has been used and misused by outsiders since it first harbored the Spanish (“God, Gold and Glory”) of Christopher Columbus in 1492, and later the French settlement and slave trade (from whom most Haitians descend), and you have a combustible mix. Add further, the resulting dependence of Haiti on outside economic assistance and charity, with the inevitable (often implied) strings attached, and even more fuel is added.

Perhaps this is why a then-Catholic Priest, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, was overwhelmingly elected in a democratic election by poor people in Haiti in 1990. Perhaps that is also why his administration has excited such loathing from the power brokers that make up the Haitian elite, both native born or foreign, who seem so desperate to get rid of he and his political party. (See “Regime Change” below)

Following are my own brief impressions of some of the power players in Haiti as the Haitian bicentennial year begins.

The role of “Legliz” (Creole, variation of the French, l’Eglise: “the Church”)

In Haiti, “the Church” is more than simply the Catholic Church, though Catholicism has, since Columbus in 1492, always played a dominant role among religions in Haiti, and is said to be the religion of 80% of the Haitian population.

Sunday afternoon, a day after arrival in Port-au-Prince, we were taken on a tour of some of the sights of the city. One of the drive-bys was of the very large and magnificent Cathedral of the Catholic diocese of Port-au-Prince, one of ten Catholic dioceses of the country. A fence surrounded the Cathedral, and was locked, and as everywhere else, there were street market people, and poor people begging there. The structure was completely dissonant with the flock it represents, who are mostly poor.

Beggars also met us at Sacre Coeur (Sacred Heart), a church where one of the leaders of the movement that brought Aristide to power, Antwan Izmary, was assassinated in 1993 – dragged from Mass to the square in front of the church, and shot. (Antwan’s brother was also assassinated, prior to his brother, apparently as a political message to Antwan to “back off”, which Antwan declined to do. Both killings were during the Army coup years 1991-94.)

“The Church” is a complicated entity in the affairs of Haiti; indeed, it is complicated everywhere. It is not just the Catholic Church. As of May 3, 2003, Vodou (Voodoo) is now also

an officially accepted religion in Haiti. Assorted Protestant denominations are a strong and growing presence as well. Many U.S. religious denominations have active links to Haiti for various objectives.

The **Catholic Church**, the Church of my birth and active membership all my life, is a somewhat schizophrenic entity everywhere, no less in Haiti.

The Catholic Church that I know is essentially two churches: the hierarchical (official) church; and the local church faith communities, “the people”. The work – and messages, and even goals – of these entities are not necessarily always congruent.

One of the most positive things I learned about in my visit is a program of American Catholic Churches, and even some dioceses, to “Twin” with Haitian parishes.

As I understand the Gospels, Jesus’ teachings in the Christian scriptures are essentially Liberation Theology – a “preferable option for the poor” (Matthew 5 the cornerstone). Still, for almost its entire history, the hierarchical church has seemed most comfortable in its alliance with power, money and secular interests. **Those in secular and temporal power often give little more than lip service to the poor, and the Church has traditionally been very nervous if the idea of “preferable option for the poor” is advanced too far.** The Vatican seems to have had a rather strained relationship, but later concordat with the ruthless presidents for life of Haiti, Papa Doc Duvalier, and later his son, Baby Doc, where ultimately the Bishops of Haiti were effectively approved by Duvalier, thus virtually assuring a puppet church for the Haitian dictators.

When Aristide, then a Catholic Priest, was democratically elected President of Haiti in 1990, the Vatican alone among the world’s then-232 nations initially refused to recognize his government – ostensibly because they didn’t want a Priest to be President of the country – it upset the hierarchical notion which still rules the Church. (Aristide’s rise to prominence came in a rather paradoxical way: his fiery and charismatic sermons were broadcast throughout Haiti by Catholic Radio Soleil, and made him a household word in even the most remote villages. The Belgian Priest who put his sermons “on the air” back in the 1980s, died shortly after our return from the island.)

Probably the most tragic “picture” of unholy alliances I’ve read is of Mother Teresa complimenting the Duvaliers when she opened a Sisters of Charity hospital in Port-au-Prince in 1983. This was a hospital we visited, filled with tiny waifs suffering from diseases like AIDS and tuberculosis. About the same time as Mother Teresa’s visit, the Pope visited Haiti, and to his credit publicly criticized the regime in power for its misuse of power. In a real sense, the regimes of the Duvalier’s bred the abysmal conditions that created a need for Mother Teresa’s charity hospital.

Most recently, and more positively, in the current and ongoing major political crisis of Haiti, the Catholic Bishops seem to be attempting with unknown success to mediate between the Aristide Government and the groups attempting to overthrow it. At least, it can be said, the Church is

trying to do something which is apparently constructive. At last report, the Aristide government was willing to talk; the opposition wasn't.

The **Protestant** wing of Haitian Christianity, made up of diverse groups, gives the impression of being more inclined to want to get rid of the Aristide government. There is long-term tension between Protestants and the Catholic Church, which, as far back as 1840, did all it could to not allow other religious denominations into Haiti.

There is a tiny **Orthodox** presence in Haiti, and **Jewish**, but compared with the others, their numbers are insignificant.

Vodou, which is now recognized as a legitimate religion in Haiti, is a possible political force as well.

Whatever the case, organized religion, in the context of Haiti, seems in much more than just the business of saving souls; and has a long history of comfortable alliance with the oligarchy, the power structure. It is also something of a "bridge" between the U.S. and Haiti, and thus susceptible to political mischief.

There is one other religious item of particular and longtime personal concern to me: that is the Catholic Church position against any family planning other than through abstinence. For example: in Haiti, beset by a major population growth problem and desperate poverty, apparently the hierarchy no longer objects to condoms, as long as the official policy remains to encourage abstinence. But, in my opinion, the official church policy is not very responsible, and sometimes tragic. What about the situation, reported to us by women who were subjected to rape and torture during the military coup years, where a son was forced under threat of death to have sex with his own mother, and she became pregnant by him? Obviously abstinence or even condoms would not be part of this violence. But the Vatican officially persists in its view that sex is an optional and controllable trait of humanity, and that even prospective "life" is to be protected in every instance, without exception. My bias: the institution of my Catholic Church has made an immensely complicated human issue into a simplistic and intractable moral absolute, thus making an undesirable situation infinitely worse.

"Regime Change": A major "benefit" of the Bush administration adventures in Afghanistan and Iraq from 2001 on is that, finally, the U.S. tendency to meddle in other country's affairs, including fomenting regime changes favoring the privileged classes, is now transparent and out in the open to anyone willing to notice.

The U.S. has been intimately and seldom positively involved (if one considers the interests of the poor) in the affairs of Haiti since Haiti gained its independence from France 200 years ago. Initially, the dilemma was essentially that the U.S. was a nation of slave owners, while Haiti was a nation resulting from a slave revolt, and thus run by former slaves. The two oldest independent countries in the western hemisphere thus had no community of interest. But this tension has continued to exist ever since, with less than positive results for the Haitian people.

(One of our hosts recalled waiting for a conversation with a white foreigner who moved into an official capacity after the Army coup had been thwarted by international forces in 1994. At the time recalled, the official was simultaneously on the phone with then-U.S. Senators Jesse Helms and Strom Thurmond.)

As 2003 ends, Haiti is a cesspool of political foment, and it takes little imagination to see how the U.S. might, most paradoxically, be stirring the pot to encourage the overthrow of a democratically elected Haitian government.

In a real sense, Haiti seems to be a political anachronism when viewed by the traditional power elite in any country. The poor are just not supposed to govern their destiny. But in Haiti, since 1990, that is what has happened: the poor have, several times, selected their representatives in free elections, and it presents a quandary to foment regime change when a democratic electoral process is already in place and basically functional – except that the “wrong” people are being elected.



Presidential Palace

The present Haitian government view is laid out in a 2003 booklet well worth the \$1.50 it costs: “...*Since the election of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 2000, the United States has moved to sabotage Haiti’s fledgling democracy through an economic aid embargo, massive funding of elite opposition groups, support for paramilitary coup attempts, and a propaganda offensive against the Aristide government. While the Bush Administration imposes its rule over Iraq, attempts to topple the elected government of Venezuela, ignites yet another anti-Castro campaign against Cuba, and undermines civil liberties here at home, the U.S.-led assault on Haiti has gone largely unnoticed. Hidden from the headlines for years, this campaign has now become an open effort to destroy a progressive popularly elected government....*” (From Hidden from the Headlines: the U.S. War against Haiti, available for \$1.50 from Haiti Action Committee, PO Box 2218, Berkeley CA 94702.)

As January, 2004, begins, President Aristide will have two years of his term remaining, but because rules for new elections have not been agreed to, only 9 of 27 Senators will remain in office, and none of 80 representatives. The usual intrigue of dirty politics, American style, is rife in Haiti: rumors and character assassination, and the like. Thrown in as an addition is a carryover from the brutal Duvalier days, and days of the Army coup: political assassinations of opposition leaders. A coalition of opposition seeking to unseat Aristide’s Lavalas is going to try to establish a parallel un-elected government for the probable reason of creating confusion in the minds of voters. It will be interesting to see, if this gambit succeeds, how the U.S. will officially position itself.

We spent one night at the famed Oloffson Hotel in Port au Prince, an old hotel somewhat “down at the heels” with a richly deserved reputation for attracting characters involved in local political intrigue. (The Oloffson is richly described as the Hotel Trianon in Graham Greene’s classic novel, The Comedians. The description still fits.) We happened to be at the Hotel the night of the anti-government riots, and while we didn’t hear or see anything dramatic in or among the assembled crowd, it was easy to imagine people paying very close attention to who was there, including ourselves, and what they were doing. In a sense, it’s reputation – and the reality we observed – reminded me a bit of the Cantina scene in the original Star Wars, up to and including a superb “vodou rock” group – RAM – which plays there every Thursday night.

The Oloffson seems central in the political dance that is Haiti. This quote from the back of a RAM CD describes it as well as anything: *“We began recording Puritan Vodou in April ’94. Port-au-Prince was in the middle of an embargo. The Haitian military was occupying the country, people were being killed in their homes at night, and gas was being sold in plastic milk containers by the side of the street... As a band, we would try to finish our rehearsals before dark so the band members could cross an open park area called “The Frontier” without risking too much danger. As the sun would start to set people would fidget and look at their watches...*

“Thursday nights at the Oloffson Hotel were our steady gigs...The audience was full of Haitian and foreign military, beautiful Creole Haitian women, spies, CIA agents, foreign press, photographers, people from the left, the right, writers, musicians, film-makers...everyone mingling, dancing, drinking...It was like the DMZ (De-Militarized Zone)...One night a week the fighting stopped only to be resumed on Friday...Eventually, 20,000 international troops landed on Haitian soil and the fighting stopped for more than just one night....”

While it would be difficult for someone to truly connect the dots, it seems almost a certainty that the United States government is actively, if indirectly, trying to get rid of the Aristide government, and replace it with one that would be more capitalist oriented (i.e. Bourgeoisie controlled). This has been a common modus operandi of the U.S. in other places for many years, and it would be a safe bet that it continues here in Haiti. Aristide seems to raise the fear of the dreaded “C” word – Communism, as in Cuba – but try as I might, I couldn’t find any evidence to support any such intention. Aristide was elected with a commitment to try to better the lot of the poor – at the very least, soften the poverty with dignity, including such things as better education and health care opportunities, land ownership and clean water: hardly reactionary programs. And all based on Liberation Theology preached from the pulpit, hardly “godless”. But empowering the poor is a threat to many, and not only in Haiti.

What creates the major dilemma for the U.S. and that the bourgeoisie and their allies is that the poor in Haiti have now had “a taste of salt” - several opportunities to exercise democracy through voting, and once given the taste, it is harder to deny, even to a people whose main interest is day to day survival. So, what seems to be happening are two strategies: one to destroy the government through rumors and scare tactics (an occasional assassination of a leader helps to tone down opposition leaders – fear is a de-motivator); and, as bad, an attempt to starve the existing government of needed development funds, so that it finds it impossible to improve the lot of the poor, thus leading more easily to charges that it has failed in its commitment to them. The latter is happening through what appears to be a bogus hold-up of a needed loan of about

\$500 million dollars, on which Haiti is paying interest, but hasn't seen the majority of the principal. Behind the hold-up is the United States government.

As previously noted, on January 1, 2004, the beginning of Haiti's bicentennial, the state of the government will be almost unfathomable to us: Aristide remains president (though the opposition is trying to force him to resign); only 9 of 27 Senators, and none of 80 Representatives will remain in office, and no agreement has been reached on how to elect their successors. It creates a critical dilemma. The Catholic hierarchy has proposed a middle ground solution, which Aristide is willing to accept, but the opposition has rejected, so the future is unclear. Haiti in the news should be, and may become, more compelling in the coming weeks and months.

NGO's (Non-Government Organizations) and Their Role in the War for Haiti

When I first announced to friends and family that I planned a trip to Haiti, I was surprised to learn how many people I knew had actually been there for one reason or another, as far back as the early 1950s. As the trip proceeded, I became aware of the octopus like tentacles of all manner of NGO's, including Church affiliated, that have some branch over Haitian soil, from Twinned Parishes, to building churches, to providing shoes, to...you name it. Every group has altruistic motivation – some charity, some justice.

I make no pretense about knowing all there is to know about the NGO's and their involvement in Haiti and its politics, but I do have some observations.

On Tuesday, December 9, we visited a school for 350 impoverished youngsters, which meets in a former home of a murderous thug from the Duvalier years. It was an official of this school who, two days later, was assassinated. One of the persons who showed us around the school pointed out, with some irritation, the Haiti headquarters of a worldwide organization which was literally next door, and which occupied very fancy grounds. He said that he did not know of a single time that people from their next door neighbor had so much as visited the school, which is part of the government's literacy program. It was as if, he suggested, that they were in a different world.

I don't know what the organizations response would be to my contact's assertion, nor do I know anything about its role in Haiti politics.

I do know that the neighbor's grounds appeared almost palatial behind the gates which, like for most similar facilities, kept the community out. (The school we visited was also gated).

Thinking organizationally – my work role for an entire career – I thought of what I might do, if I was anti-government, and wished to co-opt the NGO's, and make them into allies. It really would be quite simple, I think. I would first assess who the leader of the NGO was, and his/her needs (including ego). I would then nurture a relationship with the most influential person I could within the NGO, offering (and delivering) on needed "goodies", be they access to supplemental aid money, participation in policy making groups, expense paid trips to conferences, and on and on and on. If you have resources, the possibilities would be endless. In

short, I would co-opt the idealism with the reality of leaders with egos...and every leader has an ego and most can be “bought”, for the right price, the right kind of “currency”. When the struggle is between temporal and spiritual power, temporal has a long head start.

Charity versus Justice

There are many books devoted to the issue of Charity vs. Justice, and it is not my intention to plow new ground on the issue. But Haiti is a strong “learning lab” about the problems inherent in Charity, and the possibilities inherent in Justice.

There are obviously endless opportunities/examples of Charity as it might apply to Haiti, from giving money to beggars; to sending work teams to help construct churches; to providing school supplies, clothing, etc., “to the poor”. But Charity is something that can be and is both granted and denied; it can be started, and stopped, at whim. Charity facilitates dependence, not independence. Charity often has strings attached, such as agreeing to be “saved” (as in “saving souls”). Charity can translate to Justice, but the key is its conditional nature: it can be a golden handcuff for its recipient.

What seems more desirable is money and other resources provided as startup funds to help the people help themselves, through public education, infrastructure (roads, clean water, etc), health care, and the resulting jobs for local people. This is Justice, as I would define it. Fonkoze, the people’s bank previously described, seems an ideal example of working for Justice. But it is in the justice area that destructive external games seem in play to make the government fail. A loan granted but not fulfilled makes impossible infrastructure improvements (all of which cost money, and require labor, and which help alleviate the overwhelming unemployment). Justice fairly applied leads to independence, not dependence.

A Concluding Note

I went to Haiti with little understanding about this country, even though, thanks to our group leader, we did background readings and had many conversations for several months prior to the trip. I returned with much more understanding than most Americans ever achieve, largely because I’d actually been to the country, and had an extraordinary set of contacts, again thanks to our group leader, that most “civilians” never have access to.

There is a War going on in Haiti, rendered almost invisible by American adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the emphasis on fear in America: the “War on Terror”. This war is between the rich and powerful and the poor. The U.S. is intimately involved in this War, and on the side of rich, and has always been so involved.

The Poor far outnumber the Rich, and thus in theory have much more power. The Rich have the Money, and more means to Manipulate opinions.

The issue that I see in Haiti, as its bicentennial year begins, is not imperfections in the Aristide government. I would not believe anyone who tried to convey that this government has not made mistakes...especially since it is still a new practice in democracy, in a country unaccustomed to

democracy. Trying to administer what is essentially an experiment in democracy in a country twice as populous as my own state is fraught with the potential for failures and even abuses by some in the bureaucracy.

What I see as scandalous are overt efforts, covertly supported, to bring down a legitimately elected government. This is particularly scandalous if, as believed, the American government is in any way behind the conspiracy of “regime change” in Haiti, particularly through efforts to withhold loans already approved to help implement basic programs for the good of Haitians. The amount of money embargoed, apparently a loan of about \$500 million, is tiny in American terms, huge in Haitian. (\$290 million would translate into \$1 per American citizen.)

I would only add my voice to the overwhelming majority of Haitians who simply desire to be “free to be” productive, constructive and free citizens.

Itinerary – page 19

Other reading and web sources – page 21

OUR ITINERARY:

Pre-December 6: Several months of reading and weekly study/discussion groups about first, Liberation Theology, and then, Haiti.

Saturday, December 6:

- Arrive Port-au-Prince in light rain, consequence of Tropical Storm Odette. (Rain ended overnight; rest of visit was typical Haitian weather.)
- We stayed at Visitation House, a very welcoming guest house in the Delmas 33 area of Port-au-Prince – room and two meals a day. Highly recommended.
- **Sunday, December 7:**
- Sunday Mass at St. Clare's Catholic Church, a church in a modestly poor neighborhood (by Haitian standards). The Mass we attended, nearly two hours, is re-broadcast one week later at 4-6 a.m. and 10-12 noon the following Saturday at www.radyoginen.com or www.rgdh.net.
- Seminar on the History of Haiti, especially post-Duvalier history, by a person who's lived in Haiti over 20 years and is highly knowledgeable about the situations.
- Tour of sights in downtown area of Port-au-Prince, especially government and historically significant areas.
- Dinner at the two room cement block home of our driver/interpreter, spouse, son and extended family in Mont Calvaire.

Monday, December 8:

- Private Meeting/discussion with Haitian Catholic Priest.
- Several hours listening to the wrenching stories of two dozen victims, mostly poor Haitian women, of sexual assault, torture and other atrocities, during the period of the Army coup in the early 1990s.
- Long private meeting with Director (President) of Fonkoze Bank, a bank dedicated to making small loans to groups of persons, mostly poor women, who wish to do entrepreneurial activities. Average loan is \$110; repayment rate is 99.5%. www.fonkoze.org It costs \$25,000 to set up a new branch of this nationwide bank, and I returned committed to this project. Stay tuned for details in the months that follow. I would invite your participation in this venture in Justice.

Tuesday, December 9

- Morning at School which serves 350 poor Haitian children, including through high school – students for whom school is otherwise not accessible. One of the founders of this school, who we met, was assassinated two days later.
- Lunch at luxury hotel, El Rancho, which is a favorite of rich people.
- Afternoon with Haiti advocate and documentary film maker; interview with director of Television Nationale d'Haiti, and tour of the national television studio complex.

Wednesday, December 10

- International Human Rights Day
- Visit under construction Methodist church being built by American volunteers.
- Visit vendors outside a church guest house in Haiti, and catch up with home at cyber café (featuring an armed guard at the door.)
- Visit Caribbean market, a grocery store remarkably similar to an American store, including the products on the shelves (a store probably not economically accessible to most Haitians).
- Visit with Caribbean patriarch of the Orthodox Church, at his home/church in Mont Calvaire (directly above his place is the home of the purportedly richest Haitian businessman – truly a mansion overlooking the Port au Prince area.)
- Two hours feeding and visiting with small children at the Sisters of Charity/Mother Teresa Hospital – mostly slum kids desperately ill with diseases like AIDS and Tuberculosis. Impossible to tell their ages, they are so small and fragile.
- Walking tour of the guest house neighborhood and facilities and services to the local neighborhood – including food, water, clinic, literacy and building trades training program...

Thursday, December 11

- Long, private meeting with President Aristide's foreign press liaison.
- Drive to, and visit with, folks at the House of Blessings Orphanage perhaps 15 miles inland from Port-au-Prince. Opportunity to experience the dismal roads and beautiful, but very poor, environment of rural Haiti. Lunch at Baptist complex of the Turnbull's, which reminded us a lot of home and which is sprawling – a little empire of its own.
- Overnight at 108 year old Oloffson Hotel in Port-au-Prince, including the Thursday night concert of the resident and popular and high-energy Vodou-Rock band, RAM. The band has been part of the Olaffson scene since 1990.
- Enroute to the Oloffson, unplanned and completely unintended drive by of the anti- and pro-government demonstrations near the Presidential Palace which turned violent and ultimately resulted in several deaths on Thursday and Friday, including the apparently deliberate assassination of Andre Jan-Marie, a local literacy official, we had met at the school on Tuesday.

Friday, December 12

- Awoke to billowing smoke and chanting at distant manifestations (demonstrations).
- Planned excursion to the southern coast city of Jacmel was cancelled due to blocked roads, continuing political violence and potential risks emanating from that.
- Walking tour of the general neighborhood of our guest house – perhaps covered a mile or more each way during the morning. We visited a second time the under construction Methodist Church, as well as a lady and her family who are active in that church.
- Left by car to have lunch, but restaurants, gas stations and most other businesses were closed due to the continuing demonstrations; some streets blocked by burning tires or other barricades. No incidents of any kind with people, including when we were stalled on a city street with a flat tire. I never felt fear at any time.

Saturday, December 13

- Depart Port au Prince. Ride to airport, and time at airport, was uneventful.

Some Basic Information (facts as interpreted by...):

- Our group: www.stjoan.com – go to Help icon and search for Haiti (includes all group reports from Haiti, most recent first.)
- The government of Haiti website: www.haiti.org
- Pro-Aristide Government group: www.haitiaction.net (includes our second group report accompanying the story of the death of Andre Jan-Marie)
- Example of an anti-Aristide government individual or group website (not sure of origin, somewhat bizarre content): www.wehaitians.com
- The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency fact book about Haiti:
<http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ha.html>

Recommended Reading:

- Unexpected News: Reading the Bible with Third World Eyes by Robert McAfee Brown (1984)
- Introducing Liberation Theology by Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff (1987)
- Mountains Beyond Mountains by Tracy Kidder (2003) the biography of Dr. Paul Farmer.
- Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights and the New War on the Poor (2003) by Dr. Paul Farmer. Also, Farmer's book, The Uses of Haiti.
- Rainy Season by Amy Wilentz
- Mine of Stones by Madison Smartt Bell, Harpers Magazine, January 2004 (Bell is also the author of several historical novels about Haiti).
- The U.S. War Against Haiti – Hidden from the Headlines, published 2003, available for \$1.50 a copy from Haiti Action Committee – PO Box 2218, Berkeley CA 94702.
- Chemen Kwa Pep Ayisyen: People of Haiti Stations of the Cross: A pilgrimage honoring some of the champions of Haiti's struggle for democracy.
- Immaculate Invasion by Bob Shacochis
- Hideous Dreams by Stan Goff
- The Haiti Files: Decoding the Crisis edited by James Ridgeway
- The Comedians by Graham Greene