

The Central Nervous System of Haiti's Reign of Terror – COHA



March 11, 2010

HaitiPress Releases



COHA

A Malediction on Haitian Society

Few countries in the hemisphere have suffered through such an extensive run of unqualified repressive regimes and military dictatorships as Haiti. The nearly thirty years of harsh rule under François “Papa Doc” Duvalier, and his son, Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier that ended in 1986, are likely the most infamous epoch in the painful history of this small French-Creole nation that occupies the western third of the Caribbean island of La Hispaniola. Certainly, the main tool for the maintenance of the regime’s grasp on the population through much of this period was the “Tonton Macoutes,” renamed in 1971 as the Milice de Volontaires de la Sécurité Nationale —MVSN (Volunteers for National Security). Although this organization no longer formally exists, its legacy of paramilitary violence and sheer brutality still contorts Haitian modern political and economic cultures.

The Birth of Terror

In 1959, only two years after becoming president, “Papa Doc” created a paramilitary force that would report only to him and would be fully empowered to use unremitting violence to maintain the new administration’s authority to summarily dispose of its enemies. This marked the birth of one of the most brutal paramilitary organizations in the hemisphere and was justified by the leader’s profound paranoia towards the threat posed by the regular armed forces. Haiti’s military began to steadily lose a great deal of authority with the consolidation of the François Duvalier regime, which it would not recover until 1986, when the pressure coming from senior military officers played a major role in the fall of Jean-Claude. A spate of coups followed, with military figures occupying the vacancy left by “Baby Doc.”

The Haitians nicknamed this warlord-led goon squad the “Tonton Macoutes,” after the Creole translation of a common myth, about an “uncle” (Tonton) who kidnaps and punishes obstreperous kids by snaring them in a gunnysack (Macoute) and carrying them off to be consumed at breakfast. Consequently, these torturers, kidnapers and extortionists were feared not only by children, but also by the country’s general population, as well as by opposition members and business men not willing to make enforced pay-offs to the

authorities. The militia consisted mostly of illiterate fanatics that were converted into ruthless zombie-like gunmen. Their straw hats, blue denim shirts, dark glasses and machetes remain indelibly etched in the minds of millions of Haitians.

Ever since its establishment, this brutal organization had free rein to act unreservedly, disregarding any ethical or civil rights of the citizenry that might interfere with its indiscriminate violence. They were not accountable to any state branch, court or elected body, but rather only to their leader, "Papa Doc."

The Second Most Feared Man in Haiti

The dictator's hold on power was guaranteed by the secret police's terror campaign, and usually, the head of the "Macoutes," was considered to be extremely close to the dictator. This was especially true under President François Duvalier. Luckner Cambonne was a particularly fierce head of the "Tonton Macoutes" throughout the 1960's and the beginning of the 1970's, for two reasons: first, because he was considered perhaps the most powerful and influential man in Haiti during the transition from "Papa" to "Baby Doc," and second, because of his unique brand of cruelty that enabled him to become very rich and earned him the nickname "Vampire of the Caribbean."

As a result of his close relationship with "Papa Doc," Luckner climbed rapidly up Haiti's power structure and he became the chief plotter of the extortions carried out by his henchmen. Later, he profited by supplying corpses and blood to universities and hospitals in the United States. His brutality was manifest whenever there was a shortage of what he considered raw material (corpses). In that case, he did not hesitate to kill innocent people to facilitate the growth of his "industry."

In 1971, following an altercation with the Duvalier family regarding his role in post-"Papa Doc" Haiti, Luckner fled to Miami. Nevertheless, he remained an ardent supporter of the Haitian regime until his death in October of 2006. He stated once in the British newspaper *The Independent* that a "good Duvalierist is prepared to kill his children (for Duvalier) and expects his children to kill their parents for him." This sentiment displays the rationale of the "Tonton Macoutes," a goon squad, which was fiercely loyal to but one family and not in any way in the service of the nation or its people. Even though there are some MSVN leaders that were never formally identified in the recent history of Haiti, such as Roger Lafontant, they all are clear examples of the power that the organization and its leaders had and continue to possess to one degree or another, in contemporary Haiti.

Mysticism and Reality

A key characteristic of the structure of the MSVN was that some of the most important members of the "Tonton Macoutes" were vodou leaders, with this belief system currently practiced by roughly half of the country's population. This religious affiliation gave the

"Macoutes" a sense of unearthly authority in the eyes of the public, which allowed them to perform horrific acts without any form of retribution from the Haitian population at large. What this means is that "the 'Tontons Macoutes' were part of a conscious strategy to identify spiritual forces and nationalism with loyalty to Duvalier, and to instill fear in [his] opponents." From their methods to their choice of clothes, vodou always played an important role in their actions.

However, despite the religious nature of vodou, the facts as well as the numbers speak for themselves. These merciless killers murdered over 60,000 Haitians and many more were forced to flee their homes. Consequently, Haiti suffered an unparalleled and crippling brain drain that robbed the small country of many of its most educated citizens.

The militia created a sense of fear through continuous threats against the public as well as frequent random executions. The "Tonton Macoutes" often stoned and burned people alive, regularly following such rites by hanging bodies of their victims in the street as a warning to the population at large. The diversity of the victims was also a measure of the "Macoutes" cruelty. They could range from a woman in the poorest of neighborhoods who had the temerity to support an opposing politician, all the way to an accommodating foreign diplomat or even a business man who refused to "donate" money for public works (the public works being the pockets of corrupt officials and even the dictator himself).

The Role of the U.S.

For decades, the situation in Haiti kept deteriorating without any calls for international intervention. Although the United States was a preeminently active and interested participant in the development of Haiti's political culture, it failed to speak out against such atrocities—not even during human rights-focused administrations such as Jimmy Carter's—as a result of Cold War logic. Washington was certainly far more interested in supporting a pro-American tyrant whose purported task was to stop the spread of communism in the region, rather than protecting the Haitian people by supporting a healthy democracy and a responsible authority in Port-au-Prince. Butch Ashton, a business man who made his fortune during the Duvalier dictatorship by establishing corporations such as Citrus (a fruit exporter) and the Toyota dealership in the country's capital, vehemently claims that the Tonton Macoute militia was trained by the U.S. Marine Corps and that the highest levels of the American government were complicit in this arrangement.

The U.S. has been an active supporter, albeit from the shadows, even years after the "Tonton Macoute" reign of violence officially was over. The Human Rights Watch reported on Haiti in 2004 and stated, "The United States, notably, showed little enthusiasm for the prosecution of past abuses. Indeed, it even impeded accountability by removing to the U.S. thousands of documents from military and paramilitary headquarters, allowing notorious

abusers to flee Haiti, and repeatedly giving safe haven to paramilitary leaders.”

The “Tonton Macoutes”: Legacy and Transformation

The darkness of the “Tonton Macoutes” era may have seemed to subside upon the official dismemberment of the organization, which occurred after “Baby Doc” fled Haiti for France in 1986. However, massacres led by paramilitary groups spawned by the Macoutes continued during the following decade. After 1991, when Aristide was illegally forced to leave the presidency, the vestiges of the MVSN became known as “attachés,” or savage groups of vigilantes attached to government security forces, or crooked political organizations which had the ability to use force against its foes. Consequently, a number of small paramilitary bodies were organized to work with these mafias as “stability” keepers. A good number of these new bodies were being formed by former “Macoutes.” Many of these militias remained nostalgic for the good old days of Duvalierism, with some even attempting to ignite their own reign of terror.

The most feared paramilitary group during the 1990’s emerged as a political presence just as sadistic as the MVSN: the “Revolutionary Front for the Advancement and Progress of Haiti—FRAPH,” which Toronto Star’s crack journalist Linda Diebel described as modern-Macoutes and not as the political party they claimed to be. The reporter declared that the FRAPH, under goon figure Emmanuel Constant, was even worse than the Duvalierist militia because it was no longer subordinate to one absolute authority. The FRAPH also cooperated with the regular army to persecute Aristide’s followers; this made them even more dangerous than the “Tonton Macoutes”, because in the old days the militia and the legal armed forces were more rivals than allies. This paramilitary group also extended its influence far outside La Hispaniola to diasporas throughout the world, “Fraph also had a presence abroad, with offices in New York, Miami, Montreal and other cities with large Haitian exile communities.”

These ghosts from the past still torment Haitian and U.S. policy: last year a group of civic activists accused the Obama administration of turning a blind-eye to the criminal activity being practiced against Aristide backers and supporters of his Fanmi Lavalas party. The group that was trying to prevent the participation of Haiti’s most popular party in the 2010 elections through the use of indiscriminate violence and political pressure was led by a former paramilitary leader convicted in the U.S. for drug trafficking and money laundering, Guy Philippe.

There a long history of paramilitary violence in Haiti that seems all but unstoppable, regardless of whatever government may be in charge. As Professor Robert Maguire observed in 2002, “the unabated power struggle among the country’s politicians has been joined by a renewal of the kind of paramilitary violence that the vast majority of Haitians hoped had ended with the disbandment of the Haitian Armed Forces in 1995.” But there are some other issues that feed the existence of the paramilitary phenomenon: these factors

include drug trafficking, rampant poverty, demoralized police forces, and the primacy of the interests of the elite. All of these factors explain why the remnants of the "Tonton Macoutes" are still a very important part of Haiti's political and social heritage, even as they and their descendents continue to fragment into small groups with different interests, maintaining their penchant for violence and chaos.

Dick Bernard
6905 Romeo Road
Woodbury MN 55125-2421
651-334-5744
dick.bernarddt1878@icloud.com
<https://thoughtstowardsabetterworld.org>
<https://outsidethewalls.org>
<https://chez-nous.net>
<https://amllllloncopies.info>

January 22, 2026

Woodbury Mayor and Council
C: City Manager, Jason Posel, Shelly Schafer

We intended to attend the Council meeting a week ago Wednesday, but the environs appeared to be so crowded when we arrived that we came home and watched the proceedings on-line the next day. My personal feelings are in this blog: <https://thoughtstowardsabetterworld.org/confronting/> (Jan. 16 about mid-page, para beginning "Wednesday....").

I did not have anything to say Wednesday. I had taken my position with you back in July (copy enclosed). The overall current situation here in our state and now in our community is extremely concerning, as you know.

In July I mentioned the similarity with ICE I saw with the Tonton Macoutes in Duvalier's Haiti. I never personally experienced the Macoutes but their tactics live on in our own metropolitan area, and others. Here is a specific internet reference about said Tonton Macoutes: <https://coha.org/tonton-macoutes/>.

There must be a better way than having anonymous ruffians - ICE - invading my city and state. Intimidation does not work long term. ICE does not seem to be held accountable by the Federal Government which put them on the job in the first place.

*

On a separate but important note: unanticipated in the six months after July 24 I have the following comments about our city.

Following my July 24 letter Jason Posel reached out to me, and we had a positive informal in person meeting, I think on August 8. It was just 'a cup of coffee' kind of deal, unexpected but very much appreciated by me. It was the first of several recent positive interactions with Woodbury law enforcement.

I am a frequent participant in a "coffee conversation" group, and at two recent meetings, the city was represented. One was with Mayor Burt about affordable housing; the second with two Woodbury police officers reporting on the policing history with the new bus line. Both were very informative meetings I was glad I could attend.

Then came the last two weeks, and two personal encounters with Woodbury Police.

The first was at Lunds-Byerly's and apparently my car was subject to a complaint called in to the department. I was stranded in the lot with a dead battery, and a jump start from another citizen didn't work. I had gone in the store to tell them my car would have to be there overnight. The responding officer was very polite. It was a stressful time for me – AAA came out the next morning. A kind citizen and a relative helped me move the car into an overnight parking space. When community support was needed, I had it, and your policeman was an important part of it.

Then came Wednesday night and the Council meeting.

I previously noted we came and went home because it didn't seem likely we'd even get in the building. There was lots of foot traffic, people apparently parking across Valley Creek and walking to city hall.

I made a U-turn, legal I think, but it was dark, and I misjudged and heard a loud crunch on the driver's side. Turned out I had gone onto the median and collided with the signpost there. There was nothing I could do. We drove home. I got out of the car – the door wouldn't open so I had to do some acrobatics to get out on the passenger side, not easy at 85. I called in an incident report, and a short time later the on-duty officer called, apparently from his squad, and I filed my report with him. As with the previous encounter at the grocery store, the behavior of this officer was first rate (I didn't get either of their names but I'm sure they're easily accessed.)

*

I wish our community and our state and country well. We are at a very problematic time.

Thank you for reading. I will be making this available to others, including out lawmakers.

Dick Seward

Dick Bernard
6905 Romeo Road
Woodbury MN 55125-2421
651-334-5744
dick.bernarddt1878@icloud.com
<https://thoughtstowardsabetterworld.org>
<https://outsidethewalls.org>
<https://chez-nous.net>
<https://amillioncoples.info>

July 30, 2025

Mayor, Council, Jason Posel and City Manager, City of Woodbury
C: Shelly Schafer

RE: HERO Training Center and ICE

A friend wrote me about Monday's Woodbury Police Multicultural Advisory Committee meeting recounting the discussion about ICE and the HERO center, etc. This letter is my opinion about a current issue. (Jason comes across very positively).

I am extremely concerned about the entire issue surrounding migrants regardless of status in the U.S. and the attending issue of an insistence on anonymity for ICE agents (the masked characters) and general treatment of suspects.

Yesterday morning, I took the two selfies which are enclosed. They are both of me in our garage. It took a minute or so in all. They were easy to stage. The "props" are always in my car – I have a sensitivity to sun and the hat is essential if I'm walking outside. The mask is Covid-19 era.

My wearing sunglasses, mask and hat, I would not be welcome in a local bank, and I would probably get un-favorable looks at church, in the grocery store or at my coffee shop, Caribou, across the street from city hall.

If there is a United States of America 50 years from now, an objective history of this time in our history will not be flattering. "What were we thinking?". ICE reminds me of what I know about the Tonton Macoutes in Haiti in the era of the Duvaliers. I wrote about this. in my blog for July 12 <https://thoughtstowardsabetterworld.org/tonton-macoutes/>.

You have a lot of say in what proceeds from this point on. I'll be watching. I have lived here for 25 years, and I have always been pleased and proud of my city. I hope this continues.

