



**STUDENTS
FOR HAITI**

HAITI HISTORY

Revolution and freedom (1791-1804)

Haiti was once known as the “Pearl of the Antilles” as it was one of France’s wealthiest colonies. The French enslaved the Haitian people which led to a massive revolt in 1791. With Toussaint L’Ouverture as their leader, Haitians united for freedom. Napoleon Bonaparte, with his cruel war tactics, sent massive armies to Haiti to control the situation. They committed brutalities beyond belief, killing innocent women and children, burning people alive, and even sending Haitians to early forms of gas chambers. Toussaint L’Ouverture was deceived by the French army, seized, and exiled to France, where he eventually died in prison.

News of L’Ouverture’s death united the Haitian people in revolution and fueled their willpower to win the war. The betrayal of Toussaint led to the collaboration of leaders such as Dessalines, Christophe, and Pétion. Battles later, on January 1, 1804, Dessalines declared Haitian independence from the French, reclaiming the indigenous Taíno name of Haiti (“Land of Mountains”) for the new nation.

Political corruption and debt (1804-1915)

A cycle of political corruption, unrest, and national debt began following the Haitian victory that continues today. In 1825, with its warships ready, France demanded that Haiti pay 150 million francs in war reparations (the equivalent of 21 billion dollars today), for loss of their former colony. This debt was later reduced, but payment was still required in order for Haiti to gain international recognition. Repayment of debts continued and locked Haiti into its current role as a debtor nation. The U.S, France, Britain, and Germany continued to have influence in the country and exercised a disproportionate amount of economic power, which caused a great deal of racial tension. From 1911 to 1915, there were six different Haitian presidents, each of whom was killed or forced into exile. The Liberal and National political parties forming in Haiti were highly polarized and constantly at violent odds.

U.S occupation of Haiti (1915-1934)

The actions and eventual assassination of Haitian president, General Vilbrun Guillaume Sam, in 1915 served as a pretext for U.S occupation of Haiti. Following his inauguration, Guillaume Sam faced a great deal of political opposition, and this may have influenced his decision to execute 167 political prisoners in July 1915. Following their execution, an enraged mob attacked Guillaume Sam inside the French embassy and quite literally tore him to pieces. Members of the mob paraded through the streets of Port Au Prince with parts of his dismembered body, which shocked U.S politicians and spurred them to customs houses and administrative institutions.



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action. Within six weeks, representatives from the United States controlled Haitian There were pros and cons to the 20-year U.S occupation of Haiti. Haitian infrastructure was greatly improved: roads and bridges were built, a telephone system began to function, and several towns gained access to clean water. Many schools and hospitals were restored, which improved education and healthcare. However, Haitians were often treated as second-class citizens, by white foreigners that held many racial prejudices and did not believe that Haitians had the right to self-determination. President Herbert Hoover became concerned about American's presence in Haiti after economic protests and violence erupted, especially after marines killed at least ten Haitian peasants in Les Cayes during a local protest in December of 1929.

Hoover appointed two commissions to investigate the situation in Haiti. The Forbes Commission praised the infrastructural improvements that the U.S administration had made in Haiti, but it criticized the deliberate exclusion of Haitians from positions of real authority in the government. The commission also asserted that "the social forces that created [instability] still remain--poverty, ignorance, and the lack of a tradition or desire for orderly free government." In response to these and other such criticisms the U.S withdrawal from Haiti was well underway by the time Roosevelt became president in 1932.

The Duvalier dictatorships (1957-1986)

In 1957, Francois Duvalier, or "Papa Doc," emerged as Head of State in Haiti and quickly gained nearly absolute power. He rewrote the National Constitution in 1961 and became the first "President for Eternity of Haiti" shortly thereafter. His dictatorship subjected the press to heavy censorship and committed grave human rights abuses yet managed to extract millions of dollars from Washington by playing the race card and acting as an ally against communism, particularly during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Meanwhile, Papa Doc committed violence against political opponents and exploited Voodoo practices to instill fear into the majority of the Haitian population. Papa Doc's regime is regarded as one of the most repressive and corrupt of modern times and resulted in the deaths of over 30,000 Haitians.

Upon Duvalier's death in April 1971, power passed to his 19-year-old son Jean-Claude Duvalier or "Baby Doc." Under Baby Doc, Haiti's economic and political conditions continued to decline. He maintained a reign of terror over Haiti's working class through the *Tontons Macoutes*, infamous, armed thugs that had previously committed atrocities in the name of his father. Baby Doc also made decisions that crippled the Haitian



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peasantry as a result of international pressures. The ASF (African Swine Fever) Eradication Project that he agreed to was particularly devastating for Haitian peasants. After an outbreak of ASF in the Dominican Republic in 1978, the Mexican, Canadian, and U.S. governments wanted work to be done to ensure that this disease did not spread to North American pig populations. After deliberation, the U.S was allowed to spend \$15 million and 13 months killing every pig in Haiti. Peasants were not adequately compensated for their loss of livestock which increased poverty and Haitian dependency on the United States as the U.S attempted to replace some 400,000 slaughtered pigs with North American breeds, with limited success.

Baby Doc had destroyed the peasants' economy, and as such, the events that would culminate his overthrow in 1986 were soon in-place. Widespread discontent in Haiti began in 1983, when Pope John Paul II condemned the Baby Doc regime during a visit, provoking a rebellion. In February 1986, after months of disorder, the army forced Duvalier to resign and go into exile.

Democracy in Haiti (1990—present)

In 1990, Haiti held a national democratic election, and Priest Jean-Bertrand Aristide won the presidency with 70 percent of the votes. Aristide created literacy programs and began to make democratic reforms. However, a military coup stormed Aristide's residence in 1991 to counter these reforms, and Aristide was forced into exile. The de-facto military government that had taken over then set up death squads that murdered over 1,500 people, and thousands of Haitian refugees began to flee the island.

In 1994, President Bill Clinton ordered American forces to intervene to "protect American interests and stop the brutal atrocities that threaten[ed] tens of thousands of Haitians." The Clinton Administration drew up a plan to create a new Haitian police force and restore Aristide to power. A negotiating team led by former President Jimmy Carter travelled to Haiti to persuade the de-facto authorities to reinstate constitutional rule. One month later, after a military force of 21,000 landed in Haiti to end the military regime, the three de-facto leaders--Cedras, Biamby, and Francois—departed Haiti. President Aristide returned to power in October of 1994, and his term lasted until December of 1995, when René Préval, his hand-picked successor, was elected.

Préval was the first Haitian president to serve for an entire, uninterrupted term, from February of 1996 until early 2001. Aristide was elected once again following Préval's term, but the election was believed to be fraudulent. Senate and parliament



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elections that took place were also believed to be fraudulent. Despite these suspicions, Aristide was inaugurated as President once again and served until February of 2004, after signing a resignation contract “to avoid bloodshed” and boarding a plane to the Central African Republic. Before his departure, gang violence and many protests against Aristide had ensued, which in the eyes of many foreign powers, had been enough to merit his oust from power.

A transitional government was then put in place, with Chief Justice Boniface Alexandre and Gerard Latortue as its president and prime minister, respectively. The interim government managed to arrange 3 rounds of successful elections. A peaceful presidential election took place in February of 2006 in which 60 percent of voters participated and Préval was elected President. Haitian singing sensation, Michel Martelly, was elected president in the spring of 2011 and is the president of Haiti today.

Return of former Haitian dictators

In January of 2011, Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier returned to Haiti from France, to the outrage of many Haitian people and government officials. Although Baby Doc claimed that he had come to help his country, many suspected that he had come to disrupt the Haitian elections that were scheduled to take place in March. To exacerbate this problem, Aristide also returned to Haiti from exile in the Central African Republic just days before the presidential election. Those overseeing the elections worried that the commotion stirred by his former opponents and supporters would prevent many Haitians from voting. Haiti has a long history of political instability as a result of riots, protests, and gang violence precipitated by polarized government officials. Whether or not former leaders like Baby Doc and Aristide had the right to return to Haiti remains controversial.

The Martelly Presidency

Despite concerns, a successful election took place in early April of 2011 and Michel Martelly was elected as Haiti’s rightful president. Although foreign leaders and political commentators have since expressed concerns about the leadership of this ‘singer-turned-president,’ the majority of the Haitian poor are in favor of his continued presidency.



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According to Georges Pierre, a Haitian father whose children do not attend school and who lives without electricity, running water, or plumbing, *“This is the first time we have a government that cares about the people... Martelly is moving with the people, helping them find housing. A lot of children who were not in school are there today because of the free education. I would be happy if he were re-elected for another five years and then he can become president for life.”*

It has been speculated that Martelly’s charisma, singing talent and use of radio, visual, and social media have made Haitian citizens feel more connected to him and hopeful about the future. Martelly has also used government money to provide many Haitian children with free education. However critics note that the living conditions of many Haitians have not dramatically improved since Martelly became president. Many also criticize his revival of the Haitian army since leaders in the past have used military power to exert their force over political opponents and strike fear into the population. However, Martelly argues that creating a militia provides jobs for Haitians, and that a cohesive police force is necessary to ensure national security.

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