

February 7, 2010

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Addicted to Haiti

By BEN FOUNTAIN

Dallas

IN 1999 I made a day trip from the Haitian capital, Port-au-Prince, up to the wanly charming town of Kenscoff, a couple of hours drive into the mountains. I'd done this journey before, but not in several years, and as the road wound upward I couldn't help being astonished by the sprawling mansions that had taken over the hillsides.

Where this road had once offered peaceful views of terraced fields, patches of forest, clusters of modest farmhouses, there now hulked villa after mind-boggling villa, as if the McMansions from Dallas's flat-as-a-pancake suburbs had been transplanted to the mountains overlooking Port-au-Prince. Had oil been discovered in Haiti? As every turn revealed new vistas of architectural bombast, my Haitian friend in the passenger seat was shaking his head, muttering the same word over and over:

Drogue. Drugs.

Since Haiti's devastating earthquake, much attention has been focused, rightly so, on the convergence of economic, political and cultural forces that rendered the country so vulnerable to this catastrophe. Many have looked to the past for guidance, and recent weeks have given us earnest and often perceptive analyses of Haitian history, reaching back to its brutal colonial origins, its proud, improbable and staggeringly violent war of independence, and continuing on through the next 200 years of mostly miserable governance, that depressing catalog of revolts, coups, betrayals and interventions — usually aided, if not procured outright, by foreign powers — that drained Haiti of so much of its wealth and promise.

But if Haiti is to be rebuilt, or not merely rebuilt but transformed, then drug trafficking needs to be recognized for what it is, a primary force — arguably, the dominant force — in Haitian political life for the past 25 years.

A 1993 memo, written by John Kerry as the chairman of the Senate Subcommittee on Terrorism, Narcotics and International Operations, asserted that “there is a partnership made in hell, in cocaine, and in dollars between the Colombian cartels and the Haitian military.” At the time, Haiti was well on its way to becoming the Caribbean's leading transshipment point for cocaine entering the United States from South America, and while the individual actors may have changed in the years since then, the partnership has continued to thrive. Today, drug trafficking is a billion-dollar-a-year enterprise in Haiti, generating tremendous profits in a country where most people survive on a few dollars a day.

In any country, this kind of wealth would provide ample incentive and means for acquiring power, but in

Haiti the drug trade exerts an influence out of all proportion to other sectors of society. The narrative of Haitian politics since the fall of the Duvalier regime in 1986 closely tracks the rise of drug trafficking. As Haiti struggled to hold elections in the years immediately after President Jean-Claude Duvalier's ouster, compelling evidence [pointed to the involvement](#) in cocaine trafficking of Col. Jean-Claude Paul and other high-ranking officers, a faction of the Haitian military that was, perhaps not coincidentally, especially pitiless in its suppression of the democratic movement.

The military continued to be closely linked to the drug trade during Jean-Bertrand Aristide's brief first turn as president, cut short by the coup of Sept. 30, 1991, and little changed after his ouster. Indeed, Port-au-Prince's chief of police, Lt. Col. Joseph Michel François, emerged as the next key man in Haitian drug trafficking, presiding over a notorious network of soldiers and paramilitary attachés that, in addition to expanding the country's drug trade, carried out a [ruthless program of political terrorism](#) in which thousands of Haitians were murdered.

Those years of intense repression coincided with Haiti's rise as the region's major transshipment point for cocaine, a distinction it maintained even after civilian rule was restored in 1994. By 2000, an estimated 75 tons, or 15 percent of the cocaine consumed annually in the United States, was being channeled through Haiti. Drug-related corruption and violence became endemic during Mr. Aristide's second term as president, with many in his inner circle — including the National Palace security chief, the director of the Haitian National Police, the head of an investigations unit of the National Police, and the president of the Haitian Senate — eventually serving time in American prisons for violations of American narcotics and money-laundering laws.

At virtually every turn over the past two and a half decades, Haiti's attempts to establish the institutions and standards of civil society have been subverted or crushed, often with the hand of the drug trade clearly evident. President René Prével's administration made greater strides than any previous government toward true reform, yet progress even before Jan. 12 was tenuous. The National Police remained a weak and uncertain force; the judiciary was dysfunctional; government ministries were highly politicized and rife with corruption; concepts of transparency, human rights and the rule of law were fragile at best.

At present, there is no lack of debate on how best to go about remaking Haiti. Plan better. Build better. Push for institutional reform. Pour in many billions of dollars in international aid, with stronger oversight, firmer resolve, greater involvement of the Haitian public and private sectors. An opposing school of thought says that aid should be cut off completely, forcing Haitians to take ownership of their country's fate; only shock therapy can break the enduring cycle of dependence, dysfunction and self-inflicted poverty.

Whichever way you lean, chances are that the power and profits of drug trafficking will doom your prescription to irrelevance. Yes, Americans have shown tremendous generosity toward Haiti since Jan. 12 — more than \$20 million in text donations to the Red Cross, \$57 million and counting raised by the Hope for Haiti Now telethon, the private planes stacked up at airports in southern Florida, waiting for a landing slot in Port-au-Prince. That's the part of the story that makes us feel good.

Then there's the other part. The United States leads the world in cocaine consumption, which means there is a line that goes straight from our stupendous drug habit back to the conditions in Haiti, all those years of toxic governance that set the stage for so much destruction, so much death and injury.

So it's come to this: the richest country in the hemisphere and the poorest, the first republic and the second, trapped together in the New World's most glaring modern failure, the war on drugs. It would be naïve to hope that Americans will quit their cocaine any time soon for Haiti's sake. But it would be equally naïve not to recognize this huge obstacle standing in Haiti's way, and the role we've played in creating it. Our aspirations for Haiti lead straight through our addictions.

Ben Fountain is the author of the short-story collection "Brief Encounters with Che Guevara."

[Copyright 2010 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)