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“What interests me is the future of Haiti, it is the future of Haitians, it is the progress of democracy, and the progress of the rule of law.”

— Foreign Affairs Minister Pierre Pettigrew, June 17, 2005

“From the outset I clearly signaled my intention to have Canada take a leadership role in providing the international support needed to produce a blueprint for Haitian society. ... Democracy is the right of every Haitian citizen. It is a condition absolutely essential to improving the economic and social welfare of each citizen.”

— Prime Minister Paul Martin, December 11, 2004

WHILE THE DISPARITY BETWEEN the hemisphere’s wealthiest and poorest countries is massive, the gap in the story told by politicians and the North American media about Haiti and what ordinary people in that country believe, is similarly wide. Our introduction to this gap was Jeremy, fun, full of youthful enthusiasm, creativity and passion. He was a 19-year-old photographer from the Delmas neighborhood of Port-au-Prince when Haiti celebrated its 200th birthday on January 1, 2004.

“It should have been a time to celebrate our history,” Jeremy said. But rather than enjoy a festive occasion and a nationwide celebration, the Caribbean state of eight million was in turmoil. A destabilization campaign was waged by foreign powers upset by a government that strove to put the needs of poor Haitians before the interests of foreign corporations, the International Monetary Fund and a wealthy elite.

According to Jeremy’s version of events, U.S. and Canadian soldiers ousted the democratically elected Haitian government of Jean-Bertrand Aristide on February 29, 2004. A few weeks later, a “council of wise people” picked by the U.S., appointed an interim “illegal” government headed by Gérard Latortue, a man from Florida who had not lived in Haiti for 15 years.

“Haiti was the first nation of free people in the Americas,” said Jeremy. The only successful slave rebellion in human history established a state 60 years before the USA’s emancipation proclamation. (It wasn’t until after this proclamation ending slavery that the U.S. managed to recognize Haiti’s independence.) He spoke of how, in August 1791, slaves rose up in the north of France’s wealthiest colony (for the slave owners, not the slaves) and their rebellion quickly spread. Soon the brilliant Toussaint L’Ouverture took the lead. “Brothers and friends, I am Toussaint L’Ouverture, my name is

perhaps known to you. I have undertaken vengeance. I want liberty and equality to reign in San Domingo [Haiti and Dominican Republic],” said the slave who would be free. These words, said Jeremy, should be as well known as the American Declaration of Independence or the Declaration of the Rights of Man from the French Revolution of 1789. For reasons of race and empire, they remain obscure to this day.

In 1796, the British Empire sent one of its largest-ever expeditionary forces to crush the rebellion and reinstitute slavery because of worries that the “bad example” might spread throughout its colonies in the Caribbean. Instead, L’Ouverture’s military victories turned the island into “the burial ground of Great Britain.” Soon after, Napoleon Bonaparte sent 35,000 troops to re-conquer France’s former colony and restore slavery. (Washington gave \$400,000 — a vast sum at the time — to the French effort.) Despite a campaign of terror waged against the Haitian people, Napoleon too was defeated. Spain made similar attempts, sending thousands of troops between 1791 and 1804. Victorious over the military forces of three empires, the freed slaves of Haiti declared independence in 1804. But Toussaint L’Ouverture did not live to see the new country. In a prelude to the centuries of lies and duplicity to come, he was lured to “peace negotiations” but was instead transported across the Atlantic where he died in captivity. Three

years after independence the country's first leader, Jean Jacques Dessalines, was murdered by the "lighter skinned" Creole elite in the first of more than 30 coups. As they say in Haiti, "A constitution is paper, the bayonet is steel."

In 1804, as in 2004, Haiti was, to the colonial powers, a "threat of a good example," a poor country that broke from the path of exploitation and chose to chart its own course.

"THE COUP D'ÉTAT OF 1991 showed how terribly afraid the one percent is of the mobilization of the poor. They are afraid of those under the table — afraid they will see what is on the table. Afraid of those in Cité Soleil, that they will become impatient with their own misery. Afraid of the peasants, that they will not be 'moun andeyo' [outsiders] anymore. They are afraid that those who cannot read will learn how to read. They are afraid that those who speak Creole will learn French, and no longer feel inferior. They are afraid of the poor entering the palace, of the street children swimming in the pool. They are not afraid of me. They are afraid that what I say may help the poor to see."

— Jean-Bertrand Aristide *Eyes of the Heart*, 2000

THE GOVERNMENT OF PRESIDENT Jean-Bertrand Aristide was not perfect, said Jeremy, but it offered hope to the millions of desperately poor Haitians who had seldom experienced anything close to democracy. Aristide,

a former priest, helped build a movement of ordinary people to challenge the power of the foreign-dominated elite, which reached appalling levels of brutality and exploitation during the 30-year reign of "Papa Doc" and "Baby Doc" Duvalier. Baby Doc was exiled in 1986 by popular unrest. In 1990, Aristide, with 67 percent of the vote, defeated the U.S.-backed candidate, former World Bank official Marc Bazin.

But Aristide's first government lasted only seven months until it was overthrown in September 1991 by a CIA-backed military coup. A worldwide outcry and a wave of "boat people" fleeing Haiti, together with the brutality and drug dealing of the illegal government, compelled the Clinton administration to send 20,000 troops to the island in 1994, returning Aristide to the presidency. He governed until 1996, when Haiti saw its first democratic transfer of power after René Préval, an associate of Aristide, won handily in the 1995 elections.

In May 2000, Aristide's Fanmi Lavalas party won an overwhelming victory in elections for about 7,500 local and nation-wide positions. A report of the Organization of American States described the elections this way: "The day was a great success for the Haitian population which turned out in large and orderly numbers to choose both their local and national governments and for the Haitian National Police." The report noted some

irregularities in the tallying of votes and the failure to count others, but concluded that “since one political party [Fanmi Lavalas] won most of the elections by a substantial margin, it is unlikely that the majority of the final outcomes in local elections have been affected.”

In the face of this overwhelming victory and a certain win for Aristide in the November 2000 presidential elections, the response of the Haitian elite and their foreign backers was to declare the elections tainted. They said eight of 27 Senate seats should have gone to runoff elections. But, even without the disputed senators Fanmi Lavalas still had a majority in the senate. Instead of working inside the democratic system to improve the lives of ordinary Haitians, the elite plotted the overthrow of a government it did not control. And for this, they received significant aid from foreign governments. Pressured by the new George W. Bush administration, which seemed to view Aristide and a democratic Haiti with particular contempt, most western governments suspended aid. Instead, money was channeled into “democracy enhancing” groups that worked to undermine the government.

“We are poor and need help,” said Jeremy. “But instead wealthy countries spend their money on making life worse for us. Why do they hate us?”

This question hangs over recent events in Haiti like an unspoken family secret.

WITHIN FIVE WEEKS OF HAITI'S 200-year anniversary celebrations, the country was in the grips of an armed insurrection. On February 5, 2004, in Gonaïves, insurgents killed police and took control of the country's fourth largest city. Initially Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Bill Graham denounced the rebellion, saying that Canada supported Aristide's elected government. On February 12, U.S. Secretary of State, Colin Powell told the Senate foreign relations committee: "The policy of the [Bush] administration is not regime change. President Aristide is the elected president of Haiti." And he reaffirmed that five days later. "We cannot buy into a proposition that says the elected president must be forced out of office by thugs and those who do not respect law and are bringing terrible violence to the Haitian people."

The force of former Haitian soldiers (from an army disbanded by Aristide) swept through the country, beginning with St. Marc, an important port city. Then on February 22, Cap Haïtien, the country's second largest city, fell to the insurgents. Scores of police officers were killed and many more simply abandoned their posts to the better-armed rebels. As the insurgents made their way to Port-au-Prince, the international community, (including Paul Martin's Liberal government) ignored the elected government's requests for "a few dozen" peacekeepers to restore order in a country without an army.

On February 26, three days before Aristide's removal, the OAS permanent council called on the UN Security Council to, "take all the necessary and appropriate urgent measures to address the deteriorating situation in Haiti." The Caribbean Community (CARICOM) called upon the UN Security Council to deploy an emergency military task force to assist Aristide's government. This appeal for assistance was flatly rejected by the world's most powerful nations, exposing their pro-coup position.

By the end of the month, gunmen had overrun all major cities except for Port-au-Prince and rebels set up on the outskirts. Supporters of the elected president built barricades across the capital. They blocked the main arteries of the city of two million and prepared to fight. Even with most of the country in rebel hands, the government's prospects began to improve as pro-government police recaptured several cities. A shipment of guns, bulletproof vests and ammunition was in Kingston, Jamaica, en route from South Africa at the request of CARICOM. Rumors were swirling that Venezuela had agreed to send soldiers to protect the constitutional government. Most important, Port-au-Prince's size makes it difficult for a few hundred men to capture; rebels were likely not capable of seizing the capital while holding on to the cities they had already overrun.

But the battle for Port-au-Prince never took place. In

the early hours of February 29, 2004, U.S. soldiers, with Canadian forces “securing” the airport, escorted Haiti’s elected president and his security staff onto a jet and out of the country. A new UN force quickly took charge of the country, along with an interim government appointed by a council of “wise people” put together by France, Canada and the USA. Canadian and U.S. officials insisted the president had resigned to avoid a bloodbath, a version of events accepted by most of the world’s media despite Aristide’s contradictory account. He claimed to have been forced from office by U.S. troops. One of Aristide’s U.S.-based security guards confirmed the president was kidnapped. Referring to the U.S. version of events he said, “That was just bogus. It’s a story they fabricated.”

Who is more believable? Why would Aristide lie? Only a few days before supposedly “voluntarily” resigning Aristide said he was prepared to die fighting the rebellion. Why did the U.S. take Aristide to the Central African Republic (without telling him or his wife where they were going) when Miami is only an hour away by air from Port-au-Prince? Why did the U.S., France and Canada send troops to Haiti on or before February 28, but not earlier when the elected government asked for them? Why did U.S. Coast Guard vessels get an emergency call to patrol Haiti’s waters two weeks before Aristide’s ouster? Why was the UN able to pass a motion calling for intervention to stabilize Haiti on

March 1, but not on February 26? Why has UN Secretary General Kofi Annan ignored the demands of CARICOM and the African Union for an investigation into Aristide's removal? Why, since the intervention by Canadian, U.S. and UN-led troops, has the economic, social and human rights situation deteriorated significantly?

“WHAT WE NEED is to move from elections to elections, not coup d'état to coup d'état. ... But there is clearly a small minority in Haiti with their allies in foreign countries. Together, they said no to elections, because they knew once they respect the will of the people in a democratic way through free, fair democratic elections, then they will not be able to continue to live in a country where they don't pay tax, where they still have the wall of apartheid, where they continue to consider the coup as if there were not human beings, and so and so. ... The United States, France, Canada and so many others should do something to repair, if they can, what they did. Because what they did is a crime. The same way slavery is a crime against humanity, the same way what they're doing against the Haitian people, it's also a crime. And all of that we can put it in this process of maintaining a black holocaust in Haiti.”

Aristide, interviewed by Amy Goodman from exile in
South Africa, May 2005

A FEW MONTHS AFTER Aristide was ousted, Jeremy was in exile and his aunt was dead — killed by armed thugs who were searching for him. An aspiring young journalist with the state television network, Jeremy was one of thousands of Haitians hunted down for their affiliation with the elected government. “In your country, is it a crime to want a better life?” he asked. He returned to Port-au-Prince in December 2004. “Here, the rich and powerful seem to want democracy made illegal.”