7. The Donkey and the Horse: Haiti and the United States

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On a January night in 2009, Rob Broggi, a hedge fund manager and board member of the ONEXONE Foundation, attended a forum on Haiti at the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston. The agenda featured a panel discussion that included actor and activist Matt Damon, Broggi’s former college roommate. Also on the panel were Paul Farmer and Brian Concannon, whom Broggi had never met.

That night, Concannon delivered a detailed indictment of US policy toward Haiti. “And I didn’t believe a word of it,” Broggi says. “I thought Brian in particular was a sort of left-wing radical, and he was exaggerating a lot of these points, especially relative to the US State Department’s role in a lot of schemes, which clearly in his opinion served the United States’ interests at the great expense of the Haitian people.”

Broggi decided to begin his own research on Haiti’s history and current situation. “The more I learned about it, the more I learned that Brian was exactly right,” he says now. “If anything, he and Paul were being too kind about the significant injustices that have been borne by the Haitian people.” Broggi called Concannon, introduced himself, and soon after joined Farmer on the IJDH board of directors.

In a classroom at Drexel Law School in Philadelphia in the fall of 2011, Brian Concannon describes to the assembled students and faculty the grim situation in Haiti. He talks about the tragic loss of life in the earthquake, the massive destruction of Port-au-Prince, and the post-earthquake homelessness, hunger, and violence against women. He discusses the devastating impact of the cholera epidemic.
Concannon’s dark eyes, set off by his graying, receding hair and a close-cropped beard, signal intensity. He is dressed in a sober charcoal suit. The subject he discusses is a serious one; he treats it as such, and pulls his audience along with him.

Concannon then makes his case that Haiti’s only chance to recover from this desperate state of affairs is by inculcating the rule of law. “The people of Haiti are not poor because they don’t work hard,” he says. “The people of Haiti are poor because they can’t enforce their rights.” He rattles off a list of fundamental rights Americans take for granted: the right to enforce a contract, the right to be treated fairly as a citizen complaining of official misconduct, the right to possess and leverage clear title to property. All are largely absent in Haiti, he says. Concannon tells the group that the enforcement of basic human rights must occur if the Haitian people are to escape an endless cycle of disaster and struggle.

To illustrate this statement, Concannon shows the Drexel audience a PowerPoint slide comparing in stark relief the effects of a 2010 earthquake in Chile with the disaster that had occurred a month earlier in Haiti. Although the Chilean earthquake was 500 times stronger than Haiti’s, Haiti suffered 230 times more mortality.1 Concannon explains how enforced building and zoning codes could have saved tens of thousands of Haitian lives, and how rebuilding and reinvestment in Haiti is blocked by the inability of landowners to prove legal title. He walks through the responses to the crisis by the BAI and IJDH—the lawsuits and demonstrations to stop mass evictions, the groundbreaking cholera claims, and the international advocacy and ground-level push on behalf of women left vulnerable by the weakness of the Haitian state.

Born and raised by Irish American parents in a Boston suburb, Concannon seems an unlikely champion for the people of Haiti. But commitment to serving the poor is a family tradition. Concannon’s late father, Brian Sr., was a personal injury lawyer who enjoyed taking on the cause of the underdog. “Dad was a gregarious guy; he was fairly intellectual, well-read, the kind of person who liked to spout off Greek and Latin. Mom was more intense and focused on social change,” Concannon says.2 RoseAnne Concannon taught high school English before going to law school after her kids were grown; she became a family law attorney representing victims of domestic violence. Concannon is the second of five children, and all the siblings are either social workers or public interest lawyers. The original Concannon law office furniture has been handed down to the IJDH offices in Boston.

After graduating from Georgetown Law Center in 1989, Concannon practiced law for a few years with the Boston firm of Mintz Levin—work he found to be “morally neutral.” Neutrality was not in Concannon’s nature, says his Georgetown classmate Nancy Reimer. “We all went to law school thinking we would save the world somehow,” Reimer says. “But Brian had that idealism and then some. You knew that a corporate law firm was not his long-term future.” Sure enough, Concannon eventually quit the firm. He spent several months considering whether to dedicate himself to environmental advocacy or human rights law, and then began working for
the UN in 1995. Concannon had studied French at Middlebury College, and was intrigued by the idea of working in Francophone Africa. Instead, he was assigned to Haiti as a human rights observer. Immediately, he started reading everything about Haiti that he could get his hands on.

The book that made the most profound impression on Concannon was Paul Farmer’s *The Uses of Haiti*, first published in 1994. In the book, Farmer, an anthropologist as well as a physician, explains the meaning of the title: “Haiti, like other small and dependent nations in the Southern Hemisphere, has long existed to serve the wealthy—if not the wealthy of Haiti, then that of Europe and North America. Haiti exists to provide its clients with tropical produce, raw materials, or cheap labor. Outside of their country, Haitians are useful for cutting cane, cleaning buildings, or driving cabs. Of all the uses of Haiti, these have been the most constant.”

Indeed, exploitation has been the sad and recurring theme of Haitian history since Christopher Columbus arrived in 1492 at the island called *Ayiti*, “land of mountains,” by the Taino natives living there. The Arawak-speaking people on the island Columbus renamed Hispaniola were quickly put to work building Spanish forts and cultivating sugar cane for export. European-imported disease, violence, and hard labor caused the natives to die at such a startling rate that the Taino population dwindled to nearly zero in just a few decades. But the appetites of colonial powers did not diminish accordingly.

By the seventeenth century, the French had colonized the western third of the island of Hispaniola, and called their claimed territory Saint-Domingue. To replace the labor of the now-extinct natives, enslaved Africans were brought to Saint-Domingue in bondage. As many as a million slaves were transported to the island, with brutal working conditions and abuse killing one-third of them in the first few years after their arrival. The toil of these slaves, who made up nine-tenths of the colony’s population, transformed Saint-Domingue into the world’s dominant supplier of sugar and one of the globe’s top exporters of coffee, cotton, and indigo. By the mid-1700s, the colony was producing more wealth than the thirteen North American colonies combined.

Then, in August 1791, Saint-Domingue exploded. Legend has it that the Haitian revolution was launched during a dramatic religious ceremony presided over by a slave named Boukman at Bois Caïman in the northern part of the island. At that ceremony, Boukman is said to have announced, “God who is so good orders us to vengeance / He will direct our hands, give us help / Throw away the image of the God of whites who thirsts for our tears / Listen to the liberty that speaks in all our hearts.” Tens of thousands of slaves began a massive revolt, destroying plantations and killing white masters. The whites retaliated for the attack by killing many Africans for every white killed, a pattern that would continue in the conflicts to come. Boukman was soon captured and beheaded by the French, but the resistance continued. Many of the slaves had been soldiers in Africa before their capture, and
they deftly assembled into small mobile units that launched deadly guerilla attacks against the slaveowners. Former slaves like Toussaint L’Ouverture (who brought his former white masters to safety before joining the rebels) joined the uprising and forged an alliance with the Spanish, who provided weapons in the hopes of gaining control of the French colony themselves. Great Britain was making moves to gain power over Saint-Domingue, too, seeking the allegiance of the plantation owners. Facing the potential loss of its colony to its European rivals and acknowledging the slaves’ dominant numbers, the French made the decision to abolish slavery in order to secure the allegiance of the slave insurgents.6

L’Ouverture, now carrying the title of French general and later governor, took control of the colony. But after Napoleon Bonaparte seized power in France in 1799, he sent a military expedition, led by his brother-in-law Victor Emmanuel Leclerc, to restore direct French rule of Saint-Domingue. Leclerc’s mission, in Napoleon’s words, was to “rid us of the gilded negroes.” L’Ouverture was captured and transported to France. As he boarded the ship, L’Ouverture issued a famous warning to his captors. In his excellent one-volume narrative, Haiti: The Aftershocks of History, Laurent Dubois says the most accurate rendition of L’Ouverture’s declaration is “In overthrowing me you have cut down in Saint Domingue only the trunk of the tree of liberty of the blacks; it will spring up again from the roots, for they are deep and numerous.”7

L’Ouverture died in a French prison. But, as he predicted, the resistance carried on. Initially, many of the leaders of the slave rebellion, including L’Ouverture’s lieutenant, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, agreed to join the French side. However, the defection of their leaders did not cause the former slaves to abandon their struggle, and they instead created small battle groups and headed to the mountains to launch attacks. Eventually, their leaders rejoined them. At a gathering of rebel generals in May 1803, Dessalines symbolically separated the former slaves from France once and for all, tearing the white bar out of the French tricolor flag and stitching together the red and blue to create the flag of a new nation. The French were driven off the island, and on January 1, 1804, the Republic of Haiti became the first—and still the only—nation to be created by a successful slave rebellion. Most versions of the new red-and-blue Haitian flag contained the words Liberté ou la mort—liberty or death. After a bloody thirteen-year struggle for freedom, during which an estimated 150,000 ex-slaves died, there was no doubting the people of Haiti’s commitment to that principle.

But the glorious dream of Saint-Domingue’s former slaves was a nightmare for the world powers that had built their empires and economies on a structure of slavery and colonization. Although Haiti joined the United States of America as the hemisphere’s only other republic, the United States, barely a quarter-century removed from its own successful rebellion, was far from welcoming. The United States had been a dedicated trading partner with the French via Saint-Domingue, and had sent troops and money to defend the colony’s white slaveowners from the
revolt. George Washington had said that it was “lamentable to see such a spirit of revolution among the blacks” of Saint-Domingue. Thomas Jefferson wrote of Haiti’s slave rebellion, “If this combustion can be introduced among us under any veil, we have to fear it.” Beginning with Jefferson’s presidency, the United States refused to recognize Haiti’s independence. Senator Robert Hayne of South Carolina in 1824 explained the stance that was the official US position for the first half-century of Haiti’s existence: “Our policy, with regard to Hayti [sic], is plain: We can never acknowledge her independence.” He considered the topic one of several that “the peace and safety of a large portion of our Union forbids us even to discuss.”

Viewed through the eyes of committed slave-owners and those who relied on an economy built on human bondage, the fear was quite justified. Haiti declared itself a refuge for escaped slaves and proudly served as a model for subsequent campaigns to end slavery and colonialism, including hosting Simón Bolívar and other Latin American revolutionaries as they planned their rebellions. The Haitian legacy of successful guerrilla resistance to slavery also inspired many US slaves and abolitionists, including Gabriel Prosser, who led a slave revolt in Virginia in 1800, and likely Nat Turner, who led his own rebellion in 1831. John Brown was a student of the tactics of the Haitian Revolution, and Brown invoked the memory and strategies of Toussaint L’Ouverture before his raid on Harper’s Ferry. When Brown was hanged, flags in Haiti flew at half-mast. A major thoroughfare in Port-au-Prince is still named John Brown Avenue.

But the tension over slavery, and even an official French and American embargo of Haiti, did not prevent US and European merchants from trading with Haiti in the nineteenth century. The proximity of the United States led to increasing American involvement in the Haitian economy. The balance of trading power between Haiti and the wealthier nations was far from equal, however. France refused to relinquish its colonial claim on Haiti and threatened blockade and war until it successfully extracted from Haitian president Jean-Pierre Boyer in 1825 a promise to pay reparations for the French property seized in the rebellion. The United States, along with Germany, France, and Britain, routinely engaged in “gunboat diplomacy” to collect on debts allegedly owed by Haitians. For example, in December 1914, US marines docked their warship in Port-au-Prince, disembarked, and entered the Banque National d’Haiti, where they took a half-million dollars in gold (worth $11 million today). The marines reboarded their ship and brought the gold to New York.

Even expropriations like these were subtle compared to the US Marine invasion of Haiti in July 1915. In the preceding years, the United States had occupied Cuba and Puerto Rico, sent marines twice to the Dominican Republic, and taken over construction of the Panama Canal. Soon enough, Haiti too was under control of the United States’ heavy hand in the Caribbean. But Haiti was different, according to Woodrow Wilson’s secretary of state, Robert Lansing: “The experience of Liberia
and Haiti shows that the African race are devoid of any capacity for political organization and lack genius for government. Unfortunately there is in them an inherent tendency to revert to savagery and to cast aside the shackles of civilization which are irksome to their physical nature.”16 (An even less nuanced evaluation of Haiti was provided by Lansing’s predecessor as secretary of state, William Jennings Bryan, who was stunned by revelations contained in a briefing on the country about which he knew little. “Think of it,” Bryan said. “Niggers speaking French!”)17 Certainly there was political turmoil in Haiti, none of it helped by foreign powers raiding the country’s coffers. But consider the turmoil in Lansing’s own United States, where three presidents had been assassinated in the preceding half-century, lynchings were commonplace in the South, and preparations were being made for entry into the massive, senseless carnage of the First World War. Yet Lansing’s racist message was largely well received in the US media, where National Geographic applauded the marines for squelching the sovereignty of Haitians, whom the magazine called the “unthinking black animals of the interior.”18

Shortly after the invasion, the US forces declared martial law in Haiti, seized control of the Haitian treasury and customs houses, and arrested the editors of a newspaper critical of the American actions. Another early agenda item for the American occupiers was smoothing the path for US corporations seeking to take advantage of Haiti’s natural resources. Standing in their way was an iconic clause of the Haitian Constitution, dating back to Jean-Jacques Dessalines, that prohibited foreign ownership of property. Both a symbolic and concrete repudiation of the oppressive days of French ownership of Haitian plantations—and people—the ban carried such importance to the Haitian citizenry that it had been referred to as the “Holy Grail” of the country’s independence.19 Predictably, Haiti’s elected senators and deputies refused to go along with US wishes to strike down the ban. So the Americans simply dissolved the Haitian Parliament—at gunpoint. (Smedley Darlington Butler, the marine officer who led the armed contingent ordering the Haitian legislators to disperse, referred to Haitian leaders as “shaved apes . . . just plain low nigger.”20) However, Butler also later expressed some misgivings about his role, saying that he had been “a gangster for capitalism” in making “Haiti and Cuba a decent place for the National City Bank boys to collect revenue in.”21) The Haitian Parliament would remain silenced for the next dozen years.

In its place, the marines and the US-created Haitian army oversaw a referendum on the new constitution that the parliament had refused to ratify. Opponents of the new constitution were arrested before the election, and, under the watchful eyes of the marines and Haitian army soldiers, Haitians coming to the polling places were offered only a white ballot marked “Oui.” Few dared to make a special request for a pink ballot marked “Non.” The measure passed, 98,294 to 769.22 Quickly, North American firms snatched up a quarter-million acres of prime Haitian real estate for plantations of sugar, bananas, and rubber. Peasants were driven from their homes and often compelled to reenact Haiti’s despised past by working for foreign
occupiers, sometimes as forced labor and always for very limited compensation. This was a tragic turn for Haitians, but it was a gold rush for foreign investors, as the New York daily *Financial America* said in November 1926: “The run-of-the-mill Haitian is handy, easily directed, and gives back a hard day’s labor for 20 cents, while in Panama the same day’s work cost $3.”

The de jure seizure of the Haitian economy by the United States was readily accomplished, but maintaining de facto control of the country would prove to be a bloodier task. Marines responded to resistance by rural Haitian militias known as Cacos by burning entire villages considered friendly to the rebels. Marines also turned to the new but decidedly imprecise tactic of aerial bombing, and summarily executed captives suspected of being involved in the resistance. In 1919, a marine general prepared a confidential report on the Haiti mission, admitting that “practically indiscriminate killing of the natives has been going on for some time.” When the Caco leader Charlemagne Péralté, formerly a Haitian army commander, was assassinated by a marine, Péralté’s body was brought by train to the town of Le Cap. There, the corpse was stripped bare and tied to a door of the local police station, where photographs were taken and residents were brought to view the body. US airplanes then dropped photos of Péralté’s body in rural areas of Haiti considered to be supportive of the Cacos movement. (When Jean-Claude Duvalier was forced out of the country in 1986, a crowd of Haitians tore down a statue of Christopher Columbus from its base in Port-au-Prince, threw it into the sea, and renamed the area where the statue had stood after Charlemagne Péralté.)

The rural resistance was followed by student strikes and popular demonstrations against the occupation. As the occupation continued, the Haitians forged alliances with international organizations, including the NAACP, which condemned the US role in Haiti. It took nearly two decades, but eventually the Haitian opposition to the US occupation grew too large to control. The marines’ departure in 1934 was hailed as Haiti’s “second independence.” But the scars of the era lingered, as did US influence in Haiti.

Much as Adolph Hitler manipulated German resentment after the national humiliation of World War I, the physician-turned-politician François “Papa Doc” Duvalier skillfully exploited simmering Haitian bitterness over US domination. Duvalier was among many Haitians who noted the Americans’ reliable practice of elevating light-skinned Haitians to positions of prominence, including all four presidents installed by the United States. The self-described noiriste Duvalier pledged his support to the blacker masses of Haiti. But the tactically nimble Duvalier also adopted an anti-communist stance that earned him the endorsement of the US embassy in his first presidential election, in 1956. Thus began a three-decade, two-generation reign of Duvalier terror over Haiti, bolstered by American guns and money.

Within two years of that election, the US Marines returned to Haiti, this time to assist the Haitian army in pushing back a rebel challenge to Duvalier’s increasingly
repressive rule. According to Colonel Robert Debs Heinl Jr., who commanded
the mission, a Marine contingent sent to Haiti in 1959 was told by the State
Department that “the most important way you can support our objectives in Haiti is
to help keep Duvalier in power.” 28 In ensuing years, the United States provided
millions of dollars in financial support to Duvalier, with the $13.5 million delivered by
the United States in 1961 (the equivalent of $104 million in 2013 dollars) account-
ing for more than 50 percent of the government of Haiti’s budget. The United States
provided machine guns and rifles to both the Haitian military and the terrorizing
tontons makouts, at least until Duvalier’s blatant election fraud and political violence
annoyed the Kennedy administration enough to inspire a cutoff in military aid in
1961. But, just a year later, Cold War realpolitik won out over human rights con-
cerns, and the US-to-Haiti money flow was regenerated in return for Duvalier cast-
ing the deciding vote to expel Cuba from the OAS. Later, Richard Nixon sent New
York governor Nelson Rockefeller to Port-au-Prince for a high-profile meeting with
Duvalier, giving the dictator international credibility, after which the United States
sent another $1 million in arms to Haiti, in 1971. 29

When François Duvalier died that same year, the United States sent warships
to block any potential invasion of Haiti by exiles who could have interfered with
nineteen-year-old Jean-Claude Duvalier’s ascension to power. The younger Duvalier
immediately made a public pledge to be a bulwark against Communism, and Haiti
continued to receive hundreds of millions of dollars in US aid—an estimated $467
million from 1972 to 1981 alone. 30 Jean-Claude Duvalier was never considered to
possess the Machiavellian political mind his father had, but he proved nimble enough
to adjust to his American patrons’ changing perspectives on the relative importance
of human rights in Haiti. During the Jimmy Carter administration, Duvalier briefly
allowed opposition parties to form and an independent media to exist, only to bru-
tally shut them down when Ronald Reagan was elected. The importance of the US
role in propping up the Duvaliers was underscored when some of that support was
finally pulled away. Unnerved by growing protests, strikes, and deadly reprisals by
Duvalier’s makouts on demonstrators, the United States announced on January 31,
1986, that it would be reducing its $56 million aid package to Haiti. A week later,
Duvalier and his family fled Haiti—on a US cargo plane. 31

Yet the end of the Duvalier era did not signal the end of US involvement in
Haiti any more than the end of the Marine occupation had. The military junta
that quickly replaced Duvalier used US-donated antiriot equipment and training
to violently resist popular demonstrations for democracy. The United States, wield-
ing the power of that aid and the invoice for a substantial debt racked up by the
Duvaliers, was able to convince the military government to capitulate in one area
where even the Duvaliers had refused to budge. General Henri Namphy cut Haiti’s
import tariffs and reduced government support to local farmers, thus opening the
Haitian market for imports of government-subsidized food from the United States.
The post-Duvalier military government killed thousands of Haitians in a vicious
backlash against calls for democratic elections, but Namphy’s decision on economic policy may have been an even more deadly blow inflicted on the Haitian people.\textsuperscript{32}

The tariff and budget decisions by Haiti’s post-Duvalier government reminded Haitians of a lesson they had learned well in the previous century: the eviction of an oppressive power from their shores does not mean that the economic price for the repression leaves with it. When France in 1825 was able to force Haiti to agree to compensate the French for property lost in the revolution to the sum of 150 million francs (by comparison, the Louisiana Purchase price was 80 million francs), the debt crippled the Haitian economy. As Mark Danner wrote in a \textit{New York Times} essay days after the January 2010 earthquake, “The new nation, its fields burned, its plantation manors pillaged, its towns devastated by apocalyptic war, was crushed by the burden of these astronomical reparations, payments that, in one form or another, strangled its economy for more than a century.”\textsuperscript{33} Indeed, just two decades after the country’s independence, a vicious cycle was set in motion, and Haiti assumed the status of a perpetual debtor nation. Money that should have gone to building much-needed roads and schools and sewage systems in Haiti was instead sent off to France. In 2003, the government of Haiti calculated that the debt, with its original price being about $3 billion in modern currency, had ultimately cost the country $21 billion.\textsuperscript{34} These reparations to France, and subsequent loans taken out to pay for them, snowballed until Haiti was in a state of financial disarray that has haunted the country from the early nineteenth century to today. The year before the United States’ 1915 invasion, Haiti’s government was spending 80 percent of its revenue on debt service.\textsuperscript{35} And, as recently as 2006, Haiti was spending twice as much on debt repayment—much of it racked up by the thieving Duvaliers—as it was on desperately needed health services.\textsuperscript{36}

When Haiti needed aid to meet the subsistence needs of its people, it was presented by its creditors with a series of disadvantageous offers that the country’s leaders were in no position to refuse. For example, under Jean-Claude Duvalier, USAID launched a campaign to transform Haiti into the “Taiwan of the Caribbean”—that is, the supplier of the cheapest export-assembly labor in the Western Hemisphere.\textsuperscript{37} As a 2003 report by the American Center for International Labor Solidarity put it, “Under this model, workers are seen as primarily a production cost.”\textsuperscript{38} And that cost was remarkably low. Wages were held down by enormous unemployment, the absence of unions, and little prospect of worker activism under a repressive regime. Duvalier was sufficiently politically and financially indebted to the United States to agree to a neoliberal economic program eliminating nearly every obstacle to free trade and providing tax exemptions for profits and tariff exemptions for the import of raw materials and machinery.

By 1984, Haiti was the ninth-largest supplier of goods to the United States, mostly of assembled products like baseballs, clothing, and toys.\textsuperscript{39} One of the businesses to take advantage of the setting was Hemo-Caribbean and Company, which
purchased plasma from impoverished Haitians to be frozen and shipped to US laboratories. At the height of its operation, the scheme sent five tons of plasma out of Haiti each month. When the arrangement received some criticism in the international media as a ghoulish enterprise, the biochemist in charge of the operation responded, “If the Haitians don’t sell their blood, what do you want them to do with it?”

The neoliberal process of keeping wages and social supports minimal and tariffs and taxes almost nonexistent was part of a process called “structural adjustment” that was dictated by Haiti’s international creditors like the International Monetary Fund (IMF). By the time Duvalier was forced out in 1986, there were three hundred US corporations working in Haiti. Those companies, and their consumers, may have benefited from the arrangement, but the people of Haiti saw little positive impact. As Haiti-born Wesleyan University professor Alex Dupuy has written, a host country does not benefit from an industry where raw materials are imported in and the assembled products are shipped out. The coveted “multiplier effect,” generated when goods are both produced and purchased locally, is absent from this export-only model. Combined with poverty wages that provided little purchasing power to workers struggling to make ends meet, this meant that all of the bustling export-assembly activity did not move the economic needle. Even the World Bank, a champion of the strategy to build Haiti as an export-assembly hub, admitted in 1978 that the sector had provided little positive effect on the country’s economy. Duvalier conceded the same point three years later.

Unfortunately, this sad episode of Haiti’s economic history appears poised to repeat itself. In 2009, Paul Collier, an Oxford professor of economics and a former director of the World Bank’s Development Research Group, prepared a report on Haiti at the request of UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon. The key to Haiti’s economic recovery, Collier concluded, would be the revival of the Haitian garment industry and its potential to create hundreds of thousands of Haitian jobs. Remarkably, Collier seemed unconcerned that those jobs were destined to pay sub-poverty wages. In fact, it was the existence of rock-bottom wages and desperate Haitians willing to work for them that Collier saw as providing the key to Haiti’s future. “Due to its poverty and relatively unregulated labour market, Haiti has labour costs that are fully competitive with China, which is the global benchmark,” he wrote.

The US Congressional Research Service echoed that analysis in a 2010 report, which warned that a recent increase in the Haitian minimum wage could reduce that competitiveness. The increase the CRS report characterized as “large” raised the Haitian minimum wage for textile workers to about $3 per day. A 2011 survey of twenty-seven Haitian garment factories showed that a majority of them paid workers even less than the law required.

Yet the US State Department, the IDB, and the Martelly government continue to see bright prospects for Haiti in this low-wage blueprint. To supplement the many
trade incentives and duty exemptions included in the Hemispheric Opportunity through Partnership Encouragement Act of 2008 (HOPE II) and the Haiti Economic Lift Program (HELP) Act of 2010, they pulled together over $200 million in post-earthquake subsidies to create an industrial park in northeast Haiti. The site chosen for Caracol Industrial Park seems less than ideal, since it is located in Haiti’s first-ever marine protected area and hundreds of farmers had to be evicted to make room for the construction. Questions were also raised about the likely economic benefit of the project. The park’s anchor tenant, Sae-A Trading, a South Korean clothing manufacturer and supplier to American retailers like Walmart and Gap Inc., has a troubled labor history in Central America. Predictably, the company’s promised jobs in Haiti are set to provide extremely low pay, with March 2013 reports that Haitians working at the park were taking home only US$1.36 per day after paying for their transportation and food. Even José Agustín Aguerre, the IDB’s Haiti department manager, gave the idea a less-than-ringing endorsement, telling the New York Times as the park opened, “Yes, it’s low-paying, yes, it’s unstable, yes, maybe tomorrow there will a better opportunity for firms elsewhere and they will just leave. But everyone thought this was a risk worth taking.”

David is not so sure. (His name has been changed to protect him from possible retaliation.) I spoke to him one late afternoon in front of an arched entrance labeled “Parc Industriale Metropolitain.” Behind us, thousands of Haitians streamed toward the traffic-choked streets of Port-au-Prince. The industrial park houses a huge expanse of garment assembly plants near the airport, and it was time for a shift change. David, a thin thirty-two-year-old man wearing a short-sleeve dress shirt and dark slacks, works here at a company called Interamerican Woven. At his factory, David is part of a team of several thousand that puts together pants for export to the United States.

While a lot of high-powered people think David’s job represents the answer to Haiti’s many problems, it certainly has not raised him out of poverty. David’s wages do not reflect that Interamerican Woven, like the other companies in this complex, benefits from very favorable trade agreements and other subsidies to buttress the Haitian garment assembly industry. Gesturing in the direction of the workers leaving the industrial park, David says that most of them earn about two hundred Haitian gourdes per day and work nine-hour days six days each week. David earns 250 gourdes per day. The typical exchange rate is forty Haitian gourdes for one US dollar, so these workers take home about $5 or $6 each day.

The initial daily expense for the Haitian garment worker is transportation, David explains. He lives relatively close to the industrial park, and considers himself fortunate to pay only forty gourdes per day for his ride to work in a tap-tap—one of the colorful, overcrowded vans and covered pickups that serve as the chief mode of transportation in Port-au-Prince. But some of David’s colleagues live further away, with many paying sixty gourdes each day just to get to and from work.
Buying a simple breakfast of plain spaghetti and juice, plus rice and beans for lunch, costs another hundred gourdes or so. That means these workers head home after clearing only forty gourdes for each day’s work—about one US dollar—and they have not yet paid for dinner or housing. David’s real-time cost-of-living analysis is backed up by others I talked to in Haiti. In 2011, the AFL-CIO–supported Solidarity Center conducted a study estimating the living wage for apparel workers in Port-au-Prince. Factoring in the costs of necessities like food, housing, cooking fuel, and child care, the Solidarity Center estimated a living wage for an adult with two dependents to be 1,152 gourdes—about $29—per day.52

The conditions at the garment assembly factories are rough. David says his workplace at Interamerican Woven is brutally hot—a literal sweatshop—with little ventilation and limited potable water. An October 2012 report, produced by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and International Finance Corporation as part of the Hope II legislation, confirms this. The report says the company and several other garment assembly companies were regularly out of compliance with minimum wage, overtime, and social insurance requirements, as well as failing to meet baseline requirements for workplace conditions like acceptable temperatures and clean drinking water.53 A subsequent study by the Workers’ Rights Consortium, published in October 2013, found that Haitian workers at these factories, who make clothes for sale by North American name brands like Gap, Gildan, Kohl’s, Levi’s, Russell, Target, VF, and Walmart, were being deprived of nearly a third of the wages they are legally due. Some of those factories named as sites of this wage theft include those at the generously subsidized Caracol Industrial Park.54

Jackson (also not his real name) works for one of the companies, Global Manufacturers and Contractors (GMC), which was identified in these reports. He is among two-thousand-plus workers assembling the T-shirts of name brands like Hanes and Champion. Jackson and his wife have two young children. To make ends meet, both parents work six days per week, with Jackson’s wife skipping church on Sundays to take on an extra part-time job. Even with that extra income and some scholarship support for their children’s schooling, the family runs out of money before each paycheck. In order to pay rent and keep food on the table, they engage in a regular practice of borrowing from family and friends.

Jackson is not accepting the situation passively. He is an active member and the general secretary of SYNOTHAG, a syndicat of workers advocating for better wages and conditions. Company management pushes against the union, he says, harassing its members whenever possible. Investigations by the ILO have confirmed widespread violations of union rights in the Haitian apparel industry.55 “The people fired for being part of the union make a list this long,” Jackson says, holding his hands two feet apart. “They find a different reason to let them go, but they are tagged because they are part of the syndicat.”

Jackson is undeterred. The salaries are unfair, and the companies could easily pay them better, he says. If that means a little less profit for the owners, that is a
reasonable cost for justice. His position is backed up by economic analysis by the World Bank’s International Finance Corporation, which analyzed the competitiveness of the Haitian garment assembly industry in 2011. The report concluded that the preferential market access to the United States provided by HOPE II and HELP, and comparatively low sea freight costs, provide a distinct market advantage to these companies.56 “The argument that factories in Haiti can’t raise wages is bogus, as they have some of the most competitive costs in the world already,” says Jake Johnston, a research associate for the Center on Economic and Policy Research. “A slight raise in wages won’t kill the industry.”

The T-shirts Jackson makes for GMC are shipped to Etazini—the United States—so I ask him if he has any message for Americans. He thinks for a moment, then replies: “Wi. I appeal to their conscience, and hope they ask questions about what they are buying. We make T-shirts for cents, they buy them for dollars,” he says. “That is the reason we come together to support each other; to fight for fairness.”57

The migration of Haitian people from the countryside to compete for low-wage jobs in Port-au-Prince is a phenomenon created by the late twentieth-century structural adjustment mandates on Haiti, especially the disastrous agricultural policies dictated by the United States and other international creditors.58 Although trade imbalance has been a staple of the Haitian economy for centuries, the Haitian people had nurtured a successful agricultural sector dating back to the revolution. Separate from the often-dysfunctional government, rural Haitians adhered to the lakou system of property management, which successfully divided former plantations into small plots, respected a process of joint decision-making, and yielded crops that supported the extended families living there. Following what Haitian sociologist Jean Casmir calls a “counter-plantation” system, Haiti had for generations met its own food needs and exported to other countries.59

Then, beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, the IMF, with the United States as its largest shareholder and dominant voice, forced Haiti to dramatically reduce tariffs on imported staples. The Haitian tariff on rice, for example, was dropped from 50 percent to the current rate of 3 percent, far below the regional average of 20 percent.60 The result is that Haitian farmers can no longer compete with food imports from the United States or other countries where food crops are highly subsidized by their governments. As Haitian women’s rights activist Yolette Etienne says, “You who used to grow your own plantains, who didn’t need to buy plantains, are told, ’You don’t have to grow plantains because we make enough for you to buy them from us when you need them.’ But where do you get the money to buy these plantains from overseas?”61

Today, Haiti imports more than half its food. Eighty percent of rice consumed in Haiti is imported, and the one-time sugar capital of the world actually imports sugar as well. Haitian farmers who can’t sell their crops stop growing them, which means that there is no local alternative when international prices spike or economic fortunes...
drop. In April 2008, the price of rice doubled, sending thousands of Haitians into the street for the so-called Clorox food riots, the name inspired by hunger so painful it felt as if bleach were eating away at one’s stomach. Those Haitian hunger pains can be traced directly back to US and global trade policies.62 “If governments that preached trade liberalization in Geneva would practice it—and that includes reducing domestic support measures that affect trade—if everything was on a level playing field, that would be very helpful to Haiti,” Marc Cohen, a senior researcher on humanitarian policy and climate change at Oxfam America, told Foreign Policy magazine in 2013.63 Little wonder the IMF rice tariff edict is referred to in Haiti as the plan lanmo—Creole for “death plan.”64

The collapse of the Haitian agricultural system has had predictably grim ripple effects. Wood and charcoal are the chief fuel sources in Haiti, and thus survive as two of the few remaining cash crops, leading to dramatic deforestation. In 1923, in the middle of the US occupation, 60 percent of Haiti was covered by forest; in 2006, the number was less than 2 percent.65 The deforestation in turn leaves Haiti vulnerable to flooding and landslides in the wake of heavy storms. In 2004, for example, Tropical Storm Jeanne caused major flooding in Haiti and three thousand people were killed. By comparison, Jeanne was a full hurricane when it hit Puerto Rico, Barbados, the Dominican Republic, and the United States, but only thirty-four people were killed in all those countries combined.66 Concannon describes the effect and its economic origins this way:

[People point to] the mountain farmers who cut down the trees that in other countries slow the rain down. But the farmers would not cut the trees if they had a choice—they know better than the experts what happens when rain hits a deforested slope, because it rushes away with the topsoil that is needed for next year’s crop and is many farmers’ only legacy for their children. But legacies and next year’s crop mean nothing when the children are dying now, so the farmer cuts and sells the tree to buy today’s medicine and food.67

Hundreds of thousands of Haitians have migrated away from this denuded countryside where they can no longer earn a living. Some head overseas (19 percent of Haiti’s GDP is made up of remittances from emigrants living abroad), but most go to Port-au-Prince. The city that had 150,000 residents in 1950 now has three million people living in it, crammed into poorly constructed and poorly planned hillside structures, many of which collapsed in the earthquake.68

Haiti is a country where the international community is used to having its way. The billions of dollars Haiti owed to international creditors gave those creditors the leverage to dictate many internal policies. The international community has assumed duties like peacekeeping that would traditionally be performed by the state, and thousands of foreign-funded entities in the “Republic of NGOs” influence policy and command
resources. As a result, the Haitian government rarely has been in a position to argue with outsiders’ views of what is best for Haiti, whether it be paying reparations to France, submitting to US occupation, or adopting neoliberal economic policies. The Haitian proverb *Sak vide pa kanpe*—an empty sack cannot stand up—has often been applied to describe Haiti’s government. Haiti’s first democratically elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, tried to assert a different vision for Haiti’s economy. But the United States and the international community pushed back—hard.

Aristide was elected in November 1990 by a landslide total of over 67 percent of the vote, easily defeating neoliberal economist and former World Bank official Marc Bazin. The victory was the crowning triumph of the Haitian pro-democracy struggle that had ousted Jean-Claude Duvalier in 1986. The movement grew out of small community organizations (*organisations populaires*) and church groups (*télégliz*). These groups were inspired in part by the passionate sermons and radio addresses of Catholic priests, especially Aristide, who were proponents of liberation theology and its preferential option for the poor. The *makouts* and the succession of military rulers who replaced the Duvaliers responded to the pro-democracy movement violently, but their brutality only seemed to build the momentum for change. The crackdown raised the profile of reformers like Aristide, who somehow survived four assassination attempts. The 1990 election victory by the Aristide-led Fanmi Lavalas party (the name refers to the many drops of water that together make a mighty flood) was an historic victory for the majority poor of Haiti who sought to move, in Aristide’s words, “from misery to poverty with dignity.” Pursuing that agenda, the newly elected Aristide tried to reverse neoliberal policies. He raised the minimum wages of workers in the assembly industries, increased tax collections from the wealthy, and adopted policies to protect Haitian farmers from the effects of subsidized food imports.

Aristide was met by fierce resistance from the United States, which helped fund an organized political opposition through USAID dollars. Among its targets was the minimum wage increase, which a USAID-funded study said “would reduce the overall competitiveness of Haiti.” As one US official told the *Boston Globe* later, “Aristide—slum priest, grassroots activist, exponent of liberation theology—represents everything the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency], DOD [Department of Defense], and FBI think they have been trying to protect this country from for 50 years.” Less than a year after his election, Aristide was overthrown by Haitian army officers, many of whom had been trained at the Georgia-based US Department of Defense School of the Americas (since renamed the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation) and/or were on the payroll of the CIA. The CIA’s chief Latin American analyst testified to Congress that the coup general Raul Cédras was part of “the most promising group of Haitian leaders to emerge since the Duvalier dictatorship was overthrown.”

Despite this reassurance, the coup government proved to be brutal even by Haiti’s standards, killing thousands—including the Raboteau massacre victims—and causing mass migration. Within six months of the coup, the US Coast Guard
had intercepted more than thirty-eight thousand Haitians fleeing the country.\textsuperscript{73} The growing refugee crisis in the United States was accompanied by a movement in support of the Haitian democracy that was informed and inspired by Haitian activists smuggling themselves and information out of their besieged country. Highlights of the movement included a street-clogging demonstration of more than sixty thousand protesters in New York City in October 1991 and a high-profile hunger strike by the activist Randall Robinson.\textsuperscript{74} In response, the Clinton administration helped Aristide return to Haiti in 1994, but only after first extracting promises to cut government programs for the poor and to lower food tariffs.\textsuperscript{75} In 2010, President Clinton, currently the UN special envoy to Haiti, expressed regret for that mandate: “It may have been good for some of my farmers in Arkansas, but it has not worked. It was a mistake. . . . I did that. I have to live every day with the consequences of the lost capacity to produce a rice crop in Haiti to feed those people, because of what I did.”\textsuperscript{76}

Even with the concessions that enabled his return, Aristide continued to pursue policies, including a minimum wage increase, that the US government felt were interfering with its economic priorities. Aristide “wasn’t going to be beholden to the United States, and so he was going to be in trouble,” US senator Christopher Dodd would say later. “We had interests and ties with some of the very strong financial interests in the country, and Aristide was threatening them.”\textsuperscript{77}

In 1996, Congress passed the Dole Amendment, banning USAID from giving funds to the Haitian government, with some humanitarian and electoral exceptions. Then, in 2000, the United States broadened its efforts, using its influence to impose a total international aid embargo on the Haitian government.\textsuperscript{78} The justification provided for the embargo, which cut the Aristide government’s already-limited spending power in half, was to force a change in disputed 2000 legislative elections. The dispute was a relatively minor one: an accepted Haitian vote calculation system was deemed incorrect by the OAS, which also characterized the elections as “a great success for the Haitian population” and conceded that the majority of the election outcomes would not change under a different calculation.\textsuperscript{79} But the United States, which had bankrolled and armed the Duvaliers, now rose up in righteous anger at alleged injustice in a left-leaning Haitian government. The irony was not lost on Amy Wilentz, author of \textit{The Rainy Season}: “During the four regimes that preceded Aristide, international human rights advocates and democratic observers had begged the State Department to consider helping the democratic opposition in Haiti. But no steps were taken by the United States to strengthen anything but the executive and the military until Aristide won the presidency. Then, all of a sudden, the United States began to think about how it could help those Haitians eager to limit the power of the executive.”\textsuperscript{80}

Perhaps the most damaging anti-Aristide action was the US decision to block an earmarked $146 million loan to Haiti from the IDB. The money was set to be used for programs that included improvements to the water infrastructure system, whose
deficiencies proved so deadly in the 2010 cholera outbreak. As Dr. Evan Lyon of 
Haiti-based Partners in Health said, “[It is] reasonable to draw a straight line from 
these loans being slowed down and cut off to the epidemic that emerged.” By early 
2004, Haiti was in crisis. The embargo and the loan blockade had tightened a noose 
around the Haitian economy, and USAID-supported politicians and radio stations 
were increasing their criticism of Aristide.

Former Haitian military officers, trained in the Dominican Republic and bear-
ing new US automatic rifles and grenade launchers, began marching through rural 
Haiti, destroying police stations and a power plant. (The rebel leader, Guy Philippe, 
would later claim he was in daily contact not just with the US-backed opponents 
of Aristide but with US officials directly.) In February 2004, just a few weeks after 
Haiti celebrated the bicentennial of its independence, Aristide left the country, 
escorted by US Army Special Forces. The Bush administration said that the US mili-
tary was helping the president flee to safety. Aristide and other witnesses say that it 
was a kidnapping.

The day Aristide left Haiti, US president George W. Bush told reporters, “It’s 
the beginning of a new chapter in the country’s history,” and sent marines back 
to Haiti to help quell the reaction to Aristide’s departure. US State Department 
spokesperson Richard Boucher said, “We call on all Haitians to respect this peaceful 
and constitutional succession.” The new government wasted no time in reversing 
the Aristide pro-poor economic policies that had frustrated the Bush administration: 
the new prime minister, Gérard Latortue, quickly ordered a three-year tax exemption 
for Haiti’s largest industries and merchants. Then, during the two years following 
the 2004 coup, three thousand Haitians were killed (including Jimmy Charles) and 
thousands more Aristide supporters jailed (including Father Gérard Jean-Juste).

When he initially found it impossible to believe any version of Haiti’s history where 
the United States has so reliably played the role of the villain, Rob Broggi recognized 
he was not alone: “I think the typical American reaction is this: Why would the 
United States, after giving Haiti all this money over all these years, care about a little 
country with eight million people and why would they care to exploit that? There’s 
nothing there to exploit. You know, the US gives them money, we help them, and 
they just can’t get their own act together.”

As Paul Farmer wrote in his 2011 book, Haiti after the Earthquake, “Haiti has a 
terrible reputation internationally for dozens of reasons, most of them wrong.” But 
some of the perception that Haiti is sabotaging itself is accurate. The United States 
has indeed provided many aid dollars to Haiti, and Haitian leaders bear their own 
share of responsibility for the country’s dismal condition. Not coincidentally, almost 
all those leaders come from the country’s tiny but very rich elite, where 1 percent 
of the population owns 50 percent of Haiti’s wealth. The plantation system is gone, 
but it has been replaced with an economy with similar characteristics: subsistence 
farmers are marginalized and export benefits accrue almost solely to the wealthy.
Remarkably, Haiti leads the Americas in the number of millionaires per capita while at the same time housing the poorest people in the region. As British philosopher Peter Hallward put it in his 2007 book, *Damming the Flood: Haiti and the Politics of Containment*, “This then is the first basic fact of Haitian political life. The country is dominated by a small and well-integrated group of privileged families, surrounded by millions of impoverished people. . . . The elite owes its privileges to exploitation and violence—the violence of radical inequality and destitution, backed up when necessary by the violence of an army or the equivalent of an army—that allows it to retain them.”

The pattern of internal political violence in Haiti is startling, beginning in 1806 with the assassination of Jean-Jacques Dessalines, who had crowned himself emperor of Haiti after independence. The country has now endured a full thirty-two coups d’état and a near-constant state of military dominance over civilians. The government of Haiti made disastrous choices in loans and alliances, and has never been able to develop an economy that is independent of foreign powers, particularly the United States.

Yet Haiti’s own missteps do not change the fact that the United States has had an enduring and often malevolent effect on the lives of the Haitian people. Part of the answer to Broggi’s hypothetical questioning of why the United States should bother with Haiti is that Haiti provided a Caribbean bulwark during the Cold War. A desire to offset the influence of Fidel Castro’s Cuba and prevent a Communist stronghold from emerging so close to US shores certainly helped spur American support for the reliably anticommunist Duvaliers. Arguably, this support was granted not in spite of the Duvaliers’ murderous repression, but because of it: the two Docs’ iron fists of political violence created the economic and governmental stability the United States craved from its neighbors.

But US involvement in Haiti both preceded and survived the Cold War, with a common theme that is less about national security than about exploiting Haiti’s once-abundant natural resources and still-abundant supply of cheap labor. Some of that phenomenon is attributable to the effects of free-market capitalism stripped bare to a core that consists of the relentless search for low-cost labor. But much of the exploitation of Haiti has been enabled by a form of socialism for the wealthy, as the United States uses a combination of government subsidies and loan-shark pressure to rig competition in favor of US agribusiness over Haitian farmers. Policies that make rural life in Haiti unsustainable have the added benefit of pushing Haitians off the land to compete—alongside David and Jackson—for export-oriented jobs that pay miniscule wages. In 2005, a CIBC World Markets analyst noted approvingly that clothing manufacturer Gildan’s labor costs in Haiti were actually lower than labor costs in China. When Haitians leave the countryside to compete for low-wage jobs assembling goods for corporations who are exempted from paying taxes on that labor, the corporations then sell the products at cheap prices in the United States.
American consumers and shareholders win, and Haitians lose. As the Creole proverb says, *Bourik travay pou chwal galonnen*—the donkey works so that the horse can run free.

In *The Uses of Haiti*, Farmer writes that the United States has a “chronic allergy” to Haitian democracy, because a democratically elected Haitian government inevitably will push back against this unequal donkey/horse relationship. Brian Concannon agrees, but he sees a broader historical pattern that suggests a fear by the US government that Haitian attitudes are potentially contagious across borders:

My conclusion is that Haiti has always been punished by the US because it is a bad example of something. And usually Haiti is a bad example of the gap between what we practice and what we preach. In 1804, the problem was that Haiti was really free—was implementing the ideals we set out in the Declaration of Independence. We weren’t, so we could not accept a country that was actually carrying out those ideals. I think the problem now is that Haitians insist on having a popular democracy and a government that carries out policies the people want. It is a poor country and people want progressive redistributive policies that develop the state’s role, support agriculture, build schools, and develop the public health system. We certainly have more things like that than Haiti does, but the trend in our country is to cut back those things. So we don’t have a strong tolerance for Haitians insisting they go in a different direction.

Concannon’s view was more hopeful when he arrived in Haiti in 1995. “My first impression of Haiti was to be struck by the poverty and material deprivation, of course, but I arrived shortly after the restoration of Haiti’s first democratically elected government, and there was an exciting sense of hope and determination among the Haitian people.” Now that they were no longer being tormented by the military government that had ousted Aristide, the Haitian people told Concannon, what they really needed was action to prosecute past human rights abusers and efforts to secure their social and economic rights. “Nothing against the UN, but these tasks of democratic transition were not in the UN’s portfolio,” Concannon says. He continues:

The mission I joined was originally deployed during the coup, and was supposed to observe and report, and did some important reporting. But when democracy was restored, the mission did not do a democratic transition. I think that was partly because of the inertia of a big organization, and partly because the US did not want to do what was necessary. For example, we had our territory and we would drive around the territory, visit a couple of towns every day and talk to judges and prosecutors and civic leaders, priests, everybody, and try to get an idea of what was going on.
We would ask, “Are you getting attacked by the military?,” and they would say no. The military has been abolished. Is the paramilitary getting you? No. They would all say, we need economic and social rights. We would say that is not our mission, our mission is civil and political rights. They would say OK, you can help with civil and political rights by prosecuting the people [in the coup government] who were killing us last year. And we would say we don’t do that because the UN does not get involved. So basically they give you this, “What good are you?” And we’d say, “Oh, we’ll file a report.”

At that time, filing a report was not making any concrete improvements in the lives of Haitians. So, after a while it became clear the mission wasn’t going to switch fast enough to be relevant. And it just got harder and harder to take people’s time, get all their information, and tell them I wasn’t going to do anything concrete to act on that information.

So Concannon switched roles to join the fledgling BAI, created to push the investigation and prosecution of human rights abuses. After teaming with Mario Joseph to win the Raboteau verdict, the lesson Concannon took away from that success was that BAI could indeed get justice for its Haitian clients, but only if it added to its lawyers’ toolbox of briefs and motions the implements of community organizing and international-level advocacy. “Human rights progress does not come from litigation alone,” Concannon says. This is true not just in struggling nations like Haiti, Concannon says, pointing to the historic sea change in US Supreme Court rulings. In less than sixty years, the court moved from the infamous 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson decision upholding the racial segregation doctrine of “separate but equal” to the doctrine’s unanimous 1954 repudiation in the landmark case Brown v. Board of Education. “The difference between the two decisions is not that the Fourteenth Amendment changed or the justices of the Supreme Court got so much smarter in those six decades,” Concannon says. “The difference is that years of determined activism had changed the country for the better.”

Concannon, who is fluent in Creole, spent nine years in Haiti working for BAI. Phil Huffman, Concannon’s friend and rugby teammate during their years at Middlebury College, visited him there several times. “I was struck by Brian’s deep connections to the Haitian people and his close and trusting relationships with his Haitian colleagues,” says Huffman, who is the director of conservation programs for the Vermont chapter of the Nature Conservancy. “I learned that this is really the essence of Brian’s work—to honor the Haitian people’s dignity and to immerse himself in the cause of trying to improve their circumstances and combat some of the injustices they have faced for so long.”

Concannon’s and BAI’s experience changed dramatically after the 2004 coup d’état. After the coup, the generals convicted in the Raboteau massacre were released from prison, and the judge in the case was attacked by unknown assailants. One of BAI’s clients was killed, and others had their homes burned down. Concannon and others
involved in the BAI efforts were devastated. “Ten years of many people’s very hard work building democracy in a country that had never known it, ten years of building schools and training lawyers and building a public health system—all of that went down the drain,” Concannon says, frustration still evident in his voice nearly a decade later.

Like many others, Concannon places much of the blame for the coup on the US government. “That showed me my place to best help the people of Haiti was not in Port-au-Prince but back here in the States, making the US safe for democracy in Haiti,” he says. “We at IJDH are certainly not anti-American. We are only asking the US to stand up and support for Haitians the same ideals of democracy and human rights that are the founding principles of our country. A lot of bad things happen throughout the world in our name—things that Americans, if they really knew, would not accept. And I think that there have been more unjust US policies imposed on Haiti than on any other country.”

When asked now if he could choose to do his work today in Haiti or the United States, Concannon does not hesitate:

No question, the US. I liked living in Haiti. But in 2004, when the coup happened and ten years of very hard work building democracy was flushed down the drain at the whim of our president, it was very clear to me that my place wasn’t in Haiti. Because I could spend the rest of my life working to build things in Haiti only to see the US knock it down. So my place is in the US, using the lessons and the information and the relationships I obtained in Haiti.

Concannon also acknowledges that fundraising to support BAI’s operations is easier to do in the wealthier United States. So is the task of networking with other human rights advocates. “Part of making the United States safe for democracy in Haiti is policy-making, but it is also networking with NGOs, legal groups, and others that can support Haiti,” he says. He adds:

Around 2000, when I was still in Haiti, I started going to human rights conferences. When I said I was working in Haiti, they would look at me like I was from a country that had disappeared. A half-dozen years before, everyone knew about Haiti and most folks working on human rights were involved in Haiti efforts because there was a dictatorship then. But then Haiti kind of fell off the map for them. When the coup happened in 2004, it was obviously extremely important that the human rights community get engaged to try to stop it. But they weren’t connected to Haiti, and they largely did not respond.95

That is not going to happen again on my watch. There are now law school clinics, human rights groups, solidarity groups, and a great network of organizations working on Haiti that understand the need to influence what is going on inside Haiti and in the international community’s engagement with Haiti.
Although Concannon has gathered numerous volunteers and a somewhat lesser number of paid staff around him at IJDH, most observers point to him as the indispensable component of the US-based advocacy. Ira Kurzban says Concannon's organizational and analytical skills are the foundation of the effort. “Brian is not just great at gathering skilled and dedicated people around the cause and motivating them to do good work, he is really at the core a brilliant strategist and an outstanding lawyer. Clearly, he could be working in a large law firm making a lot of money, or holding a high-level job in a presidential administration. We are lucky, and the people of Haiti are lucky, that he has instead committed his life to human rights work in the poorest country in the hemisphere.” Congresswoman Maxine Waters, former Congressional Black Caucus chair and one of Haiti’s leading advocates in US politics, has said often that Concannon and IJDH are the best sources for information on Haiti.\footnote{96}

He has not lived full time in Haiti since 2004, but Concannon still has his fans there, as his IJDH colleague Nicole Phillips discovered. During one of her extended stays in Port-au-Prince in 2010, she shared with some of the activists with the Haitian women’s rights group FAVILEK the news that Concannon was going to be visiting soon. His second child was born less than two weeks after the earthquake, so he had not traveled to Haiti in several months. Phillips realized the women of FAVILEK knew Concannon from his years living in Haiti, but she was not prepared for the reaction to the news of his upcoming visit. “They all swooned, like he was a movie star or something,” she recalls. One of the women put both hands on her chest and said, “Oh Brian, he is my heart!” Haitians see well-meaning blan (foreigners) come and go, Phillips explains, and she has never seen a non-Haitian embraced in the way Concannon is. “Brian has committed to them so completely, in learning the language, in living there for so many years, and in staying with the cause long-term, and it has earned him this amazing amount of affection and loyalty,” Phillips says.

Concannon is uncomfortable with the personal praise, but he acknowledges that his credibility on Haiti human rights issues derives in significant part from his experience in Haiti and his enduring relationships there. “Maybe someone who was a quicker study than me wouldn’t have needed nine years in Haiti to learn what I did. But it certainly would have been impossible for me to do my job effectively without having spent substantial time there and having established a strong relationship with Mario. We built that relationship by working through a lot of crises over the course of the years.”

\footnote{Even after the 2004 coup d’État, some of those Haitian crises continued to be spurred by US actions. Diplomatic cables obtained by the group WikiLeaks and published by \textit{Haïti Liberté} and the \textit{Nation} show that US officials worked hard after the coup to keep the democratically elected Aristide from returning to Haiti, even while the military officials who ousted him were taking bloody vengeance on his}
supporters. The cables revealed that when Dominican Republic president Leonel Fernández called for Aristide’s return in late 2004, he was sharply admonished by the US ambassador to the Dominican Republic. The US ambassador alleged that Aristide was involved in drug trafficking—an allegation never brought to any court and fiercely denied by Aristide’s supporters. As recently as 2011, President Obama urged South African president Jacob Zuma and UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon to block Aristide’s return to Haiti from exile in South Africa. Aristide finally returned to Haiti in March 2011.

These same diplomatic cables also showed how the United States actively opposed Haitian leaders’ efforts to improve the economic situation in their country anytime the proposals conflicted with US government or business interests. In 2006, Haitian president René Préval signed a deal to join Venezuela’s PetroCaribe alliance, in which Haiti would pay only 60 percent of the cost of purchased oil to Venezuela up front, with the remainder payable over twenty-five years at 1 percent interest. It was an undeniably favorable deal for cash-strapped Haiti. But the plan angered the United States, which was at odds with Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez. Predictably, rival oil producers like ExxonMobil and Chevron were also opposed to Haiti’s deal with PetroCaribe. The cables obtained by WikiLeaks showed that the oil companies’ representatives and then-US ambassador to Haiti Jane Sanderson met behind closed doors and coordinated resistance to the deal.

The cables contained significant correspondence showing the US State Department also assisted contractors for Fruit of the Loom, Hanes, and Levi’s in their campaign to resist a unanimous Haitian Parliament decision in June 2009 to raise the minimum wage. The increase, approved by legislators after a series of worker strikes and demonstrations, would have compelled the contractors to pay 62 cents per hour, or about $5 per day, to Haitians sewing clothing for sale overseas. (Recall that a living wage for a worker living in Port-au-Prince has been estimated to be $29/day.) But the cables show US deputy chief of mission David E. Lindwall saying that even the $5/day wage “did not take economic reality into account.” In the end, a unanimous Haitian Parliament decision backed by overwhelming public support was no match for the opposition by the contractors and the US government. President Préval and the legislators dropped the textile industry minimum wage to about $3/day. Haitian workers continue to be the lowest paid in the hemisphere.

The US response to the January 2010 Haitian earthquake was in many respects generous and lifesaving. But, as is more fully discussed in Chapter 5 of this book, some of the US actions served as abse sou klou—making a bad situation worse, or literally “an abscess on an open wound.” Perhaps no US effort post-earthquake was more damaging than its role in the Haitian presidential and legislative elections of November 2010. Haiti’s Provisional Electoral Council (CEP), controlled by outgoing president Préval, decided to exclude more than a dozen political parties from the election, including the most popular party, Fanmi Lavalas. It was a decision tantamount to the Republican Party in the United States conveniently excluding the
Democratic Party from elections, and US officials knew it. Republican US senator Richard Lugar and the Democrat-dominated Congressional Black Caucus publicly questioned the chances for a fair election under these terms. Behind-the-scenes communication also showed that US officials were well aware of the blatant unfairness of the election plans. The CEP decision had “emasculated the opposition,” said the European Union and Canadian ambassadors, as reported in one of the US diplomatic cables obtained by WikiLeaks. US ambassador to Haiti Kenneth Merten explicitly states in one of the cables that he was aware that President Préval was manipulating the elections. But Ambassador Merten also reports the consensus from a meeting with fellow ambassadors to Haiti from Brazil, Canada, and Spain, which was that “the international community has too much invested in Haiti’s democracy to walk away from the upcoming elections, despite its [sic] imperfections.”

Of course, protecting an investment in “democracy” by holding unfair elections is an oxymoron, as was amply demonstrated on Haiti’s election day. Under the watch of UN peacekeepers, an astonishing level of fraud and exclusion occurred. Thousands of citizens were prevented from voting because they had lost their identification cards and/or were left homeless by the earthquake. Voter intimidation and ballot box stuffing were reported, and nearly one in four votes cast was disqualified or never received by the already-tarnished CEP. The uncounted ballots and the low turnout meant that fewer than one in five registered Haitians voters had his or her votes counted in the election, according to post-election analysis by the Washington-based Center for Economic and Policy Research. The problems were so manifest that twelve presidential candidates led their supporters to the streets to protest the elections. Then two of the candidates—Mirlande Manigat and Michel Martelly—dropped their protests after being informed that a US-pushed reconsideration put them in a second-round runoff, which Martelly won. Participation in the first election was the lowest for any election in the Western Hemisphere in over sixty years. Participation in the second round was even lower.

The United States had de facto control over the fiasco, and could have put a halt to it, Concannon insists. “In the WikiLeaks documents, they [US officials] said, ‘Yes, President Préval is manipulating the elections,’ and they conceded all the problems in the elections we at IJDH were screaming about and they were publicly denying at the time,” Concannon says. “But they conclude we have to go with this election because Préval is our guy. So it is more important to them that the government running Haiti takes orders from the US than that they actually represent the Haitian people.”

Coupled with the United States’ complicit silence in the Martelly administration’s failure to prosecute Jean-Claude Duvalier, the bogus 2010 and 2011 elections provided a post-earthquake American stamp of approval for the perpetuation of the Haitian legacy of corruption at the highest levels of government. (Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index ranked Haiti 165th out of 174 countries in 2012.) Even though Duvalier remains free, there have been published
reports that Aristide may be indicted by the United States on unspecified corruption charges. If the indictment occurs, Aristide supporters like Ira Kurzban say that it would be just the latest installment of an effort to keep Haiti’s most progressive—and arguably most popular—leader out of the political picture.

Kurzban has been by Aristide’s side throughout Aristide’s up-and-down political career, including escorting Aristide into exile, first to the Central African Republic and then to South Africa. It is a roller-coaster ride that Kurzban insists is being conducted largely by US officials. “Remember that Aristide is the one who approved me setting up BAI in the first place, because he understands the importance of the rule of law. That is the irony of all this, and why the US government dislikes him is still a mystery to me. As I always say, he is no Fidel!” To Kurzban, the Martelly administration—with the cooperation of US intelligence services, if not the US State Department—is headed toward a Duvalierist state of affairs, complete with a Haitian army responding to the orders of a Haitian president and the country’s donors. “As some people say, Haiti is returning to 1934, when the United States left Haiti but left behind a US-created Haitian army.”

Yet popular US discourse usually attributes Haiti’s troubles to its culture, or to some character flaw lying within the people who have suffered so much. After the earthquake, US television reporters spent more time speculating about imminent waves of looting—which never occurred—than on the remarkable solidarity of Haitians and the organized aid they pulled together before the international community ever arrived on the scene. One CNN reporter questioned whether the devastation even bothered the Haitian children she saw after the quake. Another CNN reporter asked a woman, “Why don’t you Haitians cry?” New York Times columnist David Brooks wrote a post-earthquake column entitled “The Underlying Tragedy” that blamed Haiti for having “progress-resistant cultural influences” like poor child-rearing and Vodou. The day after the earthquake, televangelist Pat Robertson attributed the disaster to what he referred to as Haiti’s “pact to the devil.” The Billy and Franklin Graham NGO Samaritan’s Purse, the recipient of USAID funds for its work in Haiti, has trumpeted its work promoting Christianity and combating Vodou in Haiti, describing the Haitians’ need to “take back their country from voodoo, despair, and sin.”

This was not a new perspective from powerful Americans. US marine brigadier general Ivan W. Miller said during the early twentieth-century occupation by the United States that the Haitians “had no conception of kindness or helping people.” John Russell, the high commissioner of that occupation, wrote, “The Haitian mentality only recognizes force, and appeal to reason and logic is unthinkable.” Writing in the Atlantic Monthly in 1993, USAID official Lawrence Harrison (whom the Times’ Brooks cited in his 2010 column) said, “I believe that culture is the only possible explanation for Haiti’s unending tragedy.”

The notion that Haitians have themselves to blame for their misery is more subtly, but perhaps just as damningly, suggested in the work of the respected author The Donkey and the Horse.
and geographer Jared Diamond. In his 2005 book, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail*, Diamond put forward the argument that culture (Diamond uses the terms “attitudes” and “self-defined identity”) is in part to blame for Haiti’s struggles compared to its Hispaniola neighbor the Dominican Republic. In an August 2012 column in the *New York Times*, Diamond made the comparison again: “Just as a happy marriage depends on many different factors, so do national wealth and power. That is not to deny culture’s significance. Some countries have political institutions and cultural practices—honest government, rule of law, opportunities to accumulate money—that reward hard work. Others don’t. Familiar examples are the contrasts between neighboring countries sharing similar environments but with very different institutions. (Think of South Korea versus North Korea, or Haiti versus the Dominican Republic.)”

Diamond’s attribution of Haiti’s struggles in part to government transparency and the missing rule of law is on the mark, as was his discussion in *Collapse* of the effects of the outside powers’ fear of Haiti as “a Creole-speaking African society.” But Diamond’s reference to Haitian’s allegedly unproductive attitudes and his facile reference to “culture’s significance” feeds into a blame-the-victim conclusion. Like Diamond’s more lengthy analysis in *Collapse*, his column’s suggestion that the Dominican Republic and Haiti were and are on even playing fields ignores critical historical facts. *Collapse* never mentions the uniquely harmful effects on Haiti of France’s reparations collections, the US and international support of the Duvaliers and then the rebels who twice overthrew Aristide, and the international neoliberal and protectionist policies that continue to handcuff the Haitian people.

Haitian American anthropologist Gina Athena Ulysse calls the practice of blaming the Haitian culture for the country’s struggles the “sub-humanity” perspective: if we do not see Haitians as fully human, it is easier for Americans and the international community to accept Haitians’ suffering and to approve of heavy-handed breaches of the country’s sovereignty. “It stems from the dominant idea in popular imagination that Haitians are irrational, devil-worshipping, progress-resistant, uneducated, accursed black natives overpopulating their God-forsaken island,” Ulysse writes.

Little wonder that Paul Farmer says in *Uses of Haiti*, “From the point of view of the Haitian poor, the US foreign policy towards Haiti has never been well-intentioned.” Or, as the Haitian proverb says, “Those who give the blows forget, those who bear the scars remember.” Randall Robinson—human rights activist, founder of the African American organization TransAfrica, and author of *An Unbroken Agony: Haiti, from the Revolution to the Kidnapping of a President*—is less subtle: “Shadowed by a long past of cruel experiences, contemporary Haitians have ample reason to believe that where the world’s white nations are concerned, notions of democracy and other abstract decencies weigh little against the ageless and seductive traditions of color, prejudice, and greed. The leaders of the white world simply do not accord to constitutions and laws of black countries the near-sanctity they accord to their own.”
After his talk at Drexel Law, Concannon rushes a few miles across town to a conference of US human rights lawyers. In a meeting where Concannon is one of only two lawyers wearing a suit and tie, he intently listens to various comments, taking notes on a legal pad. It is a friendly crowd for IJDH, and Concannon pulls no punches when he is asked to summarize recent events in Haiti advocacy. As to the 2010 and 2011 elections, “The good news is that we were all over the local and international media, so much so that our opponents thought we had somehow rigged the internet because Google searches kept turning up our reports.” Everyone laughs and claps. “The bad news is that Haiti now has a new president [Martelly] elected by only 18 percent of the Haitian people, but with 100% of Secretary Clinton’s support. The US selected a president for Haiti who has long-standing ties to right-wing death squads.”

Concannon also tells the group that Mario Joseph and other BAI and IJDH lawyers were making a presentation to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva that very day, as part of the Universal Periodic Review of Haiti. Concannon says that the material provided to the council by the collaboration of thirty-seven organizations that BAI and IJDH had brought together “dwarfed” in quality and quantity all else presented, and that a link to a shorter summary of IJDH’s report had been retweeted by writers for the Economist and the Miami Herald.

Later in the conference, Concannon joins a more formal panel presentation. There, he chooses to stress that, despite the bleak present, there is hope for Haiti’s future. “There really is a fairly simple solution, and I saw it with my own eyes: democracy works in Haiti. The international community and the US just need to allow it to happen,” Concannon says. There are plenty of reasons for Americans to want Haiti to succeed, he insists. He points to how the United States has spent billions of dollars in aid to Haiti—money that can halt the perpetual cycle of disaster and rebuild only if the Haitian people are empowered. “And there is always the core concept of Christianity which is shared by other faiths and beliefs—that we have a duty to care for the least of our brothers and sisters.”

Since he moved back to the United States from Haiti in 2004, Concannon has persuaded many Americans to agree. The Drexel law students and faculty he addressed will be spending their spring break in Haiti on a fact-finding mission. They are some of the hundreds of US lawyers and law students who have had direct impact in Haiti as part of what one international lawyer calls a Concannon-created volunteer “pipeline” between Haiti and the US legal community. After the earthquake, IJDH enlisted lawyers and law students to help file the complaints with the IACHR challenging camp evictions and exposing the dangerous conditions that led to the rapes of women in the camps. Reports prepared by US volunteers have been submitted to the UN and distributed widely, often forcing the international community and Haitian government to extend additional support to those left homeless and vulnerable.
Ted Oswald has worked on these reports, spent time in Haiti, and helped start Drexel’s program while a law student, all with Concannon’s encouragement. Oswald says Concannon provides a model of US-Haitian partnership. “There’s a humility there with Brian that’s really admirable. And I’ve seen other attorneys who are interested in helping Haiti where that characteristic is lacking—there is often the sense of the American attorney being a savior,” Oswald says. “But with Brian, I think he’s seasoned enough and humble enough to know that if things are going to change, it’s going to have to be in the hands of the Haitians.”

Even other Americans with significant experience in Haiti marvel at Concannon’s commitment. Dr. Evan Lyon worked in Haiti as a teacher before joining Partners in Health, which has thousands of staff members in the country. As part of PIH, Lyon says, “I was always able to have this fairly quick connection to colleagues and getting things done.” He continues:

I was a cog in a very big machine. Brian has never had that. As I became a doctor, I had a very clear path for how I can work: I connect one-on-one with patients, in a collegial way with doctors and nurses, in a training way with residents and students. Brian has never had that. Not only is he not a Haitian, but the cultural and licensing issues means he is really not able to practice his profession there the way a foreign doctor or nurse can.

So what is most impressive about Brian is his patience and persistence and willingness to accept delayed gratification—or, more accurately, no promise of gratification at all—while pursuing a novel and uncertain path toward reforming a legal system that has never worked for the poor and powerless. And to do so for year after year. I don’t think I could do that. I don’t think I am made of that. I work hard, and I do plenty, but it takes a unique person to take on the challenge Brian accepts.

As a not-for-profit organization, IJDH is dependent on donations. One of its financial supporters is Karen Ansara of the Ansara Family Fund. Ansara has devoted much of her time to encouraging US groups to support international efforts, and is the founder of a philanthropy consortium called New England International Donors. “IJDH and BAI speak with integrity and authority about the situation in Haiti because they are on the ground in the tent camps and the slums and doing community organizing, yet at the same time advocating at an international level,” Ansara says. “The combination is just unbelievably effective. When we visited the BAI offices in Port-au-Prince and heard from one of the women who work with rape survivors—oh my God. It was incredible to hear the stories and know what she sees every day. What can be more convincing than hearing from someone who is living it?”

In an interview, Ansara heaps compliments on everything from IJDH’s website to its volunteers to its ability to squeeze every dime out of a shoestring budget. But she
saves special praise for the balanced partnership between the Haiti-led and US-led wings of the effort. Before cutting any checks, Ansara studied up on IJDH, and was surprised to learn that Concannon had been a lawyer and working in Haiti at BAI before Joseph joined the effort. Since Concannon seems to be perpetually pushing Joseph into the spotlight, Ansara had just assumed Concannon was the junior partner of the two. Concannon constantly nominates Joseph for human rights awards and recognitions, and steers media inquiries toward Joseph when the language barrier allows. A human rights lawyer tells of calling to invite Concannon to an expenses-paid trip to Paris to address a rights group, and Concannon insisting that Joseph go in his stead. “Who has their ego enough in control to do that?” Ansara asks. She continues:

But I think Brian can do that because he sees the cause as more important than himself, and he has such respect for Mario—their partnership is really a beautiful thing.

And that in turn gives me such respect for Brian. Despite everything he has seen and lived and committed his life to, he never comes across as self-righteous or shrill. Somehow he maintains a sense of humor and perspective, which of course helps attract people like us to stand with him and Mario in this cause.

In his calls to action for human rights in Haiti, Concannon regularly cites a well-known Haitian proverb: *Men anpil, chay pa lou*—many hands make the load light. Returning to the United States from Haiti recently, I saw some of the hands Concannon would like to enlist in the cause. A large crowd, with a dozen Americans for every Haitian, waited at Toussaint L’Ouverture Airport to board a flight to Miami. Most of the Americans wore cargo pants and baseball caps, along with colorful T-shirts bearing slogans like “Healing Haiti: Northwest Christian Mission” and “Don’t Forget Haiti” in English and Creole. An American woman in her thirties speaks to a companion in the security line: “Usually in March, I go on a nice yoga retreat. But this year, I had a calling to make a difference.” She is not the only one hearing the call. The Parish Twinning Program of the Americas reports over 340 partnerships between US and Canadian Roman Catholic parishes and “twin” parishes, mostly in Haiti. As in the case of hundreds of other Christian mission programs, the groups provide short-term medical care or assist with safe water, housing, or educational projects in Haiti. The Parish Twinning Program reports that its parishes have sent over $22 million worth of aid to Haiti.123

The people of Haiti certainly need this support. Many of these mission efforts focus on remote rural areas where health care and other services are particularly scarce. And the compassion and generosity that animate these efforts is undeniable. Yet it is equally undeniable that Haiti needs a functioning government more than it does a plethora of cabined-off efforts that resemble those already being pursued by thousands of unconnected NGOs on the ground. Concannon went to the Parish
Twinning Program annual conference one year, and was struck by a map of Haiti that included dots representing different projects by the twinning program members. “It was exciting to see how big the program was,” Concannon says. “It was also deeply comforting to know that in all the space covered by those dots people were getting some combination of healthcare, education, food, religious education, clean water, etc. But of course, there was lots of space that isn’t covered with a dot, where people don’t have access to those things. A systemic approach can be seen as filling in the space between the dots, to make sure that everyone’s human rights are respected.” To a casual observer of Haiti, it seems obvious that no Christian youth group is going to build a countrywide sewage treatment facility. Clearly, no team of doctors and nurses from Nebraska will create a functioning national health-care system.

But Concannon disagrees. He sees the weekly surge of concerned Americans heading to Haiti as an untapped resource for activism to address Haiti’s big-picture issues. Concannon is sometimes asked to speak to groups that have sponsored mission trips, and he takes the opportunity to both thank them for their service and urge them to think more broadly:

These are people who are following what Jesus said: “Whatsoever you do for the least of my brothers . . .” Which is wonderful. But a lot of religious groups kind of take the position of “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s,” and they will just do their little part. But a more expansive reading of what Jesus said is that you have to address the underlying social conditions. So my challenge to them is to expand the focus from building schools and hospitals and churches. That is all good, but they are drops in the bucket. These people can use their experiences in Haiti to work on broad systemic changes, too.

Concannon says he has twice seen the evidence of the possibilities inherent in mission-oriented Americans stepping into the advocacy arena. “During the 2004 coup d’état, I was really surprised and disappointed that the media, human rights groups, and development groups failed to step up for the people of Haiti. But two sectors did respond with a real commitment: the National Lawyers Guild [a human rights lawyers group Concannon is active in] and a lot of US Catholic groups who had ‘twinning’ relationships with Haitian Catholic parishes. These American Catholics were talking to people on the ground and knew what Haitians were saying and feeling.”

One of those Catholic groups was the Indiana contingent who successfully lob-bied Senator Richard Lugar to press the coup government to release Father Gérard Jean-Juste. The leader of the Indiana coalition was Joe Zelenka. Zelenka began travelling to Haiti in 1990 and founded a twinning relationship between his Indianapolis parish of St. Thomas Aquinas and a small Catholic community in Belle-Rivière, an isolated mountain village in southwest Haiti. The Indiana parish has dug wells in
Belle-Rivièreme, built a K-12 school where it pays the teacher’s salaries and provides school lunches. It has created clean water programs and sent more than a dozen medical missions to the community. Zelenka has served as president of the Parish Twinning Program board and helped raise funds to build Visitation Hospital in Petite-Rivièrè-de-Nippes.

But Zelenka agrees with Concannon’s argument that the relationships between US and Haitian faith communities present an opportunity, and an obligation, to do more:

Obviously, I think that what the Parish Twinning Program and Visitation Hospital are doing is incredibly important. But will it bring the kind of justice Haiti needs? No. It’s just a start. We can send our own money and we can send supplies to our friends in Haiti, but there are still so many people who are homeless or hungry due to underlying issues.

We need to educate ourselves about how the well-being of Haitians continues to be threatened by the US and the rest of the international community, and we need to raise our voices more and more to bring to Haiti the kind of justice they pray for. When folks did just that on behalf of Gerry Jean-Juste, we learned that elected officials like Senator Lugar will listen to us, because we do know a lot about Haiti and the problems there. Americans who go to Haiti care passionately about the people there, and we could have a real impact by bringing the voice of the Haitian people to decision-makers here in the US.

Concannon admits to occasional frustration that even his colleagues in the legal profession often do not envision how they can be a part of the solution in Haiti. Shortly after the earthquake, a group from a Washington, DC-area law school raised an impressive sum of $30,000 to assist Haiti. They decided to give the money to the Red Cross instead of directing it to human rights advocacy. “That would have paid for two years of a Haitian lawyer’s salary,” Concannon says ruefully. But many other US lawyers and law students have been generous with both time and treasure, and a few have thrown themselves full time into the cause.

One of those lawyers is Meena Jagannath. Jagannath was born in New York City and raised in New Jersey as the younger child of parents who had emigrated from India. Her parents and relatives spoke the southern Indian language of Telugu in the family home, and it became the second of seven languages Jagannath would learn over the years. During one college summer break, Jagannath returned to her parents’ home state of Andhra Pradesh to work at a rural development organization, teaching English and researching women’s microcredit groups. There, she developed her budding passion for human rights advocacy, nurtured by her parents’ examples of how lives can change when poor people are empowered.

“I knew that growing up in the US, I was very distant from the actual reality of life in underdeveloped countries, but until I spent that summer in India, I did
not fully appreciate how much of an accomplishment it was for my parents, and my mother in particular, to come from a highly rural, kind of parochial setting to achieve all their success in the US,” she says. Jagannath’s father is a retired professional mechanical engineer and her mother worked on Wall Street for many years. “They were of rather modest means growing up, and it was amazing that they were able to get their educations and come to the US—especially my mother, who was one of the first women in her village to go to college.”

Inspired by her parents’ examples, Jagannath volunteered for a variety of international human rights projects while earning her undergraduate degree at Tufts and her master’s at Columbia. One of those experiences was in Guatemala, working with Mayan community members who were testifying as witnesses in a genocide trial after their communities were targeted by the country’s dictators in the 1980s during the Guatemalan civil war. “The Mayans still don’t have much of a voice in Guatemala’s politics, but this experience taught me how the law could be used to create a platform for greater political participation for this very marginalized population,” Jagannath says. “At the same time, I was excited to discover that I could have a role in the process by being in solidarity with poor persons asserting their rights.”

Like many advocates, Jagannath stresses the value of human rights campaigns and litigation building off the platform of constitutions, treaties, and statutes. Such campaigns allow long-oppressed people to demand their rights, as opposed to requesting charity or mercy. “Ideally, the law can arm these people with the language they need to assert their own place in the political dialogue and argue for real social change,” she says.

Jagannath had just graduated from the University of Washington law school when she heard a presentation by US lawyers who had returned from a fact-finding mission in Haiti. The lawyers described the campaign to stop the epidemic of sexual violence committed against Haitian women in the post-earthquake IDP camps. As it happens, Jagannath had recently picked up a copy of Mountains beyond Mountains, and was in the middle of reading Pulitzer Prize–winning author Tracy Kidder’s 2003 profile of Paul Farmer’s work in Haiti. “It was like an ‘Aha’ moment, where it became clear to me that Haiti was where I should be,” she says now. Jagannath contacted Brian Concannon to volunteer her services to BAI. Soon, she was raising money from family and friends to finance her stay in Haiti, studying to make Haitian Creole her seventh language, and heading to the BAI offices in Port-au-Prince.

There, Jagannath found clear limits on what a young American lawyer can accomplish in a country that is not her own. “I am very aware of the fact that I will not live the consequences of my work, and that it’s the Haitian people who will,” she says. “So I need to be careful about what my presence is doing in their country. One of the attractive things about BAI is that this is a place where “helping” does not mean you substitute your judgment or your opinions for Haitians.’ Instead, you reinforce local capacity and leave it to the folks here in Haiti to do the important work.” That philosophy is sometimes easier said than followed, Jagannath learned.
As part of the BAI women’s rights advocacy team, Jagannath worked with a Haitian colleague to develop a network of women’s grassroots groups advocating for better police and prosecution responses to rape. Eventually, Jagannath realized that both her colleague and some network members were beginning to defer to Jagannath as the leader of the group. “So I decided to take a significant step back and now I am trying to play more of a consultative role,” she says. “[My Haitian colleague] is established as the leader now, and that is working much better for everyone.”

But Jagannath has also found that US partners on the ground in Haiti can be extremely valuable in providing local advocates and their communities with access to international legal forums and media. From her eyewitness vantage point in Port-au-Prince, Jagannath has drafted reports and contributed to international legal petitions, published several articles in US law journals outlining the human rights challenges in Haiti, and delivered presentations—both live and by Skype from BAI’s offices—to audiences in the United States. She says she is privileged to witness the progress in police and court responses to rape victims and her Haitian women colleagues’ growing confidence in their ability to make changes in their communities.

Like most BAI and IJDH attorneys who are not from Haiti, Jagannath will return to the United States after a year or two in Port-au-Prince, deliberately leaving the long-term ground-level leadership to Haitians. She says she will continue her human rights career in the US, and take with her the insights gained from working in solidarity with Haitians in their home community. Just as importantly, she will leave with many of her Haitian colleagues and clients a different vision of how Americans can be involved in Haiti. Jagannath would almost certainly reject the term “ambassador,” but she and other American lawyers filling similar roles with BAI and IJDH represent the United States in a way that carries significant promise for Haiti-US relations. She says:

People in Haiti do ask, “How is it that you come from a country that has dominated our political situation, and yet you don’t have the same view?”

I think that part of our presence here is about letting the people of Haiti know that there are folks in the US who are in solidarity with their struggle, and that we want to help give voice to those who are working to make changes here. There is a lot of criticism to be made about the way the US engages in Haiti, but there are also Americans who are allies with the folks struggling here.

When I compare the experiences that I’ve had in India and Guatemala and Haiti and all of these places, what strikes me the most is that, empirically, the effects of poverty are similar in all of these settings. The food or the clothes or the language might be different, but people relate to each other in much the same way. I think the struggles of the poor are universal. So it seems to me that it’s important to remember that, before we are Americans or Haitians or Indians or whatever we are, we are humans.