

The First Lionel Laine Keynote Speech
at the celebration of the 50th Anniversary of the AMHE
by Louis J. Auguste, MD, MPH, FACS, FSSO
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Good evening Dr. Clerisme, Chair of the Board
Mr. President of the Central Executive Committee, Dr Latortue and Mrs. Latortue
Mrs. Fabienne Sajous, Haitian Ambassador to Panama
Mrs. Mercedes Narcisse, Councilwoman Brooklyn, NY
Members of the Central Executive committee and their spouses
Members of the AMHE Foundation
Distinguished Members and Guests:

I felt honored when Dr Latortue assigned me the duty of delivering the Keynote address on the night when we celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the AMHE or Association Medical Haitienne a l'stranger, the legacy of Dr. Lionel Laine, one of the founders of the Association. For those of you who do not know, a few years after founding the Association, he traveled to Haiti, took arms in an attempt to overthrow the Haitian dictator Duvalier and paid the ultimate price. He was a man who backed his words with action and we are proud to honor his memory tonight..

Dr. Latortue left me free reins to develop the topic of my choice. Out of many options, I selected a theme, that you will agree with me, is most challenging and some of you may even deem it hopeless, but I consider it existential for us, indeed a threat to our identity, our culture, our nation. Finally let us face it an existential threat, perhaps the biggest threat to our mental and physical health, as well as that of our compatriots whatever country or continent they may live in.

Generally, the point of reference for most, if not all Haitians is the epic victory of enslaved Africans over Napoleon's army in 1803. This achievement was an inspiration to Simon Bolivar who liberated most of South America from the grips of the Spanish royal crown. It was also an inspiration to the oppressed, enslaved Africans of the United States, a reason for concerns for all the colonial powers of Europe. To this day, it remains a source of pride and an ego booster against all the insults and frustrations faced by our brothers and sisters.

Unfortunately, two hundred years later, we find Haitians being depicted as the most violent gang in Miami, in the "Grand Theft Auto" video game, perhaps a prelude to the emergence 10 years later and the rapid rise of the gang culture in Haiti, as detained Haitian criminals in American jails are regularly deported back to Haiti, even if they left Haiti as babies or toddlers and also as part of a widespread tactic by Haitian politicians to shore up their standings, by securing the backing of more and more violent and blood-thirsty groups of individuals. As predicted by many observers of Haitian politics, it would not be long before these gang leaders decided to appropriate such lucrative operations to themselves, so lucrative that we now have citizens from other countries coming to join this or that other gang. Port-au-Prince is now surrounded by gangs, with daily kidnappings and rapes of younger and younger women, at an accelerated rate, now in broad daylight, in places of worship and even private medical clinics, resulting at times in murder, but certainly in the impoverishment of the middle, the low middle and the lower socio-economic classes, who have to pay these large ransoms to save the lives of their close ones.

Even those who have not been directly impacted are experiencing stress levels, never before known in Haiti, perhaps not even during the Duvalier regime. People stay home, even avoid going to church if they can or just go to work and come back immediately. People are living the stress, the fear that every day they go out, they may not come back home.

Those who are kidnapped and are lucky enough to survive the ordeal, those who are raped or tortured are forever traumatized, live from one panic attack to another or even commit suicide. Some simply send their children to live with relatives abroad, hoping to have them back under better circumstances or hoping that they will never come back. Others choose to expatriate themselves at any cost. They borrow money, sell their cattle, sell their hoes to collect enough money for a plane ticket to Chile, Brazil, Guyana, or enough money to board a rickety, overloaded, barely seaworthy vessel to make the perilous trip to Miami or the Bahamas. Collective Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, for me is a euphemism, that does not even come close to reflect the state of mind of our brothers and sisters in Haiti. It broke my heart recently when one of the surgical residents that we met in Cap-Haitien at the time of our first medical mission, called to inform me that he was on his way to Canada. He was working in Port-au-Prince as a surgeon, but he could not bear the thought that one day, his young daughter or his wife would fall victim of these gangsters. He has no medical license in Canada, but he was ready to do anything to support his young family. In fact, we all have had a chance to see professionals with university degrees in Haiti, school teachers, doctors, lawyers, having to take jobs here in the US as Uber drivers, home makers, baby sitters, nursing assistants, lab technicians, whatever it takes, to provide for their families both here and back home.

If the stress of this voluntary or forced exile, the dislocation of the families, the loss of friends or community support were not enough, these young strong Haitians have to cope with rejection, disdain, discriminations wherever they go. Just like the slave traders kidnapped the youngest and healthiest young Africans to sell them into slavery, Haiti is losing every day her next generation of workers, intellectuals, scientists, leaders. These migrants have to be super strong to make that trek from Brazil or Chile, through dangerous jungles or rivers in 11 different countries to reach what they perceive to be the "Promised land." It is not only a brain drain but also a drain of energy. In apiculture, there is a situation called, COLONY COLLAPSE DISORDER, when the majority of the worker bees in a colony disappear, leaving behind a queen and a few nurse bees to care for the remaining immature bees and the queen. This phenomenon can be responsible for the loss of 30 to 60 % of bee colonies. I will leave it up to you to discern any parallel with what we are witnessing in Haiti.

Now let us turn the spotlight on us, the diaspora. What is the impact of the current situation in Haiti on us? Our Whatsapp accounts are filled daily with gore, blood and death. Young adults, teen agers, children being shot point blank, Bodies being burned and their flesh being eaten by sick, must be mentally deranged criminals, Bodies being carved out with machetes. Even though we may be on safer ground, we also live here with the stress that the few relatives left in Haiti may one of these days face a kidnapping or worse. The specter of the Rwanda massacre seems to have elected permanent residence in the back of our mind. We see parts of our familial inheritance, home, land usurped by squatters and thieves. We find ourselves in the impossibility to even visit our native land, to make that trip that always brings joy to our heart and recharges our batteries after being depleted by the stressful life abroad. The common feeling, shared by all Haitians, is that we are losing our country. Is Haiti still a country?

Most of us here have achieved some professional and financial success. Some had to change their plans and instead of building a retirement home back in Haiti, they opt to retire in Florida or Dominican Republic. Some of our children no longer consider themselves Haitian or claim any part of our Haitian culture. They may think that all is fine, but they cannot escape the implicit biases that they necessarily face when looking for a job or looking for a promotion or a leadership position, the implicit biases that they may face even in their personal relationships with other nationalities, when Haitians are painted with a broad brush at the image of the violent scenes aired on the TV screens, perhaps, the only times when they talk about Haiti.

Many of our brothers and sisters in Haiti do not have the luxury to move away or ignore the situation. I speak daily with my relatives and my friends. They live in fear and hope, fear that one day it may be their turn or their loved ones' turn to face the violence, fear that they may one day see a lifetime of savings evaporate in a day, despite all precautions, armored vehicles, metal gates, dogs, paid security guards or else. Most of them will add that they pray. They pray for Haiti! They have been praying for decades. Mind you I am a practicing catholic, but I dare say that if our ancestors had just prayed, we would probably still be in bondage. Karl Marx tells us that "Religion is the opium of the people." The Bible also says "Aide-toi et le ciel t'aidera – God helps those who help themselves." I am more in support of this second approach.

Others are hoping that the US will take over Haiti, making it the 51st state. To them, I would reply it will be a cold day in hell when the United States agrees to integrate Haiti in its territory. You just have to listen to what the US Senator Benjamin Tillman, in the middle of the Spanish-American War, had to say at the end of the nineteenth century in opposition to the annexation of the Philippines. "That would mean another million and a half of negroes, ten million Malays, Negritos, Japanese and Chinese, to say nothing of the hundreds of thousands of mongrels of Spanish blood" joining the republic. In the case of Haiti, that would mean 10 million more Negroes, lest they could all be eliminated. Thus, very unlikely!

The third solution considered or hoped for in desperation is that the US military would come and get rid of the bandits and the different warring gang factions. To the supporters of this opinion, I would say: Dream On! The US has not stopped intervening in the internal affairs of Haiti since her Independence, always trying to extract, steal, rob everything they could. We do not have time in this presentation to list all the prevarications we have been the victims of, one of the most blatant ones being the heist perpetrated by the US Marines, when in 1914 they simply walked into Haiti Central Bank in downtown Port-au-Prince and just took all the gold they could find in the coffers. It has been and it remains clear that the US and the other "Friends of Haiti" do not want to see Haiti be an inspiration for the other exploited nations of the world. They do not want Haiti to succeed. One can hardly believe what Franklin Delano Roosevelt had to say about us: "If we can keep the Haitian with shoes fighting with the Haitians without shoes, we have nothing to fear from Haiti." Maya Angelou expresses it best: When someone shows you who they are, believe them the first time.' The center of power in the US may shift from Democrats to Republicans and vice versa but the policy toward Haiti does not deviate. A policy of destabilization in order to keep the country in poverty and to continue to shamelessly exploit its people. The wave of kidnapping for ransom has been a boon to American businessmen. Almost every other week, a load of AR-15 or AK-47 with thousands and thousands of rounds of ammunition is intercepted at

one of the Haitian ports. One can assume that for one that is intercepted, there must be at least five to 10 that go through. The country is awash with automatic rifles. Every 14- or 15-year-olds in the slums owns one, while mind you, the Haitian army has been disbanded by Aristide and Clinton and there is still an official embargo on the sale of arms to the Haitian police. Is the picture getting clearer to you now? How much is an AR-15? Between \$500 and \$2000. That is a billion-dollar trade that benefits the US economy, completely unregulated, as recently reported by the New York Times. The blood money from kidnapping and murdering our brothers and sisters is laundered somehow and finds its way into American banks.

We are likely to see some kind of military intervention to boost the power of the local police, while the flow of automatic rifles continues from Miami and New Jersey. We are likely to see a lowering of the temperature in Port-au-Prince, but at what cost?

Hundreds and hundreds of young Haitians will be gunned down, slaughtered, disappeared. Then it will go on, unless... Unless the diaspora raises its voice and demands a stop to this craziness, this crime against humanity, occurring just a few miles south of Florida and barely being exposed to the world opinion.

In 1803, enslaved Africans, freedmen, mulattoes, Polish deserters came together to fight Napoleon's army and create the first black independent republic in the World. L'Union fait la Force – We find strength in Unity! What we thought then to be Independence is no longer! Haiti has been weakened, impoverished first by France, but also through the policies of Democrats and Republicans. Haiti is being governed by a "Core Group," with American, Canadian, French ambassadors deciding who is going the next leader in Haiti. Essentially, they are governing without a mandate, without any legislative body, while they criticized President Moise for not holding elections. Meanwhile, young Haitians are getting slaughtered by gangs and by the police, with guns probably coming from the same manufacturers. Our brothers and sisters in Haiti are exhausted. They have no voice. They can only pray!

We have a voice! We have a platform and we can be heard. In 1990, the CDC had falsely listed being Haitian as an independent risk factor for HIV-AIDS. On April 20, 1990, 155,000 Haitians marched on the Brooklyn Bridge to the Federal Building in Manhattan. Their voices were heard and a month later, the CDC had removed Haiti from the 4-H associated with that disease. Two physicians were among the leaders of the movement, Emile Jean-Baptiste and Jean-Claude Compas, along with the Haitian American Alliance.

One can be intimidated by the fact that these gun dealers probably have the backing of the NRA. One can say that the AMHE cannot get involved in politics. To that, I would reply: It is not a question of politics. It is a question of health, physical health, people dying every day, people being stressed and living with PTSD and all its aftermaths. It is an existential question for all Haitians.

We are not seeking violence. Drs. Jacques Stephen Alexis and Lionel Laine paid dearly with their lives for attempting to overthrow the Duvalier's regime. Violence against ourselves cannot be the solution.

I will paraphrase a sentence of Manuel to Anaise in *Gouverneurs de la Rosee/Masters of the Dew*: See my hand. Open, all the fingers can be bent. Clenched in a fist, they cannot be pulled apart." We have to work with Haitians in Law Enforcement, Elected Haitian American officials, Haitian American Law Association, the Black Caucus in Congress, the Black Life Matter movement, the Black Family Summit, the NAACP, all groups against gun violence, other Caribbean and Central American Nations facing the same issues, etc...

If we can stop the flow of weapons into the country, if we can stop the laundering of ransom money, if we can make the "CORE GROUP" understand that they cannot continue to destabilize Haiti, that will be a start.

It took our ancestors 12 years, from 1791 to 1803 to overthrow the colonial structure. We have yet to start. LET'S GO!

Thank you.