

HAITIAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT FOUNDATION Willingness, Know-How, Resources

Weston, Florida, Port-au-Prince and Aquin, Haiti
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“From the mountains to the sea, from charity to development”



Haiti, a sophism - a diaspora in Haiti

The morning of March 8, 2023, my plane had just left Toussaint Louverture International Airport, in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, bound to Fort Lauderdale, Florida, where I live in nearby Weston. Comfortably seated and reclined, mentally exhausted after ten days in Haiti, I closed my eyes to finally relax from the stress of the trip's daily infernal reality that relentlessly whips the country, to the point where millions of Haitians no longer know to what saints to pray.

Suddenly, my thoughts drifted to Brian Nichols, the U.S. Under Secretary of State for the Western Hemisphere, who was flying in the opposite direction, to Haiti. Our planes may have crossed halfway. Surprisingly, as happened that day, our paths have always crisscrossed at the crossroads of history since our African ancestors suffered slavery in America, his in the United States, mine in Haiti.

I fled Haiti in January 1966, when I was twenty years old, curiously for the same reasons youths flee Haiti today: Fear. The physician/dictator at the time, François Duvalier, and his henchmen, like today's gangs and their bosses, terrorized the population. By the way, that was the year Brian Nichols was born.

Two people exactly of same origin! One is a 77-year-old diaspora with a 36-year commitment to Haiti in a non-governmental organization, the *Haitian Resource Development Foundation* (HRDF), with decades of field experience. Despite this, it is difficult for him to grasp the simplest to the most complex solutions, ideas, and methodologies regarding Haitian realities. The other is a Black American with no Haitian field experience, who arrives in Port-au-Prince, perhaps loaded with hypotheses for a solution to restore security, organize elections by the end of 2023, and solve what seems to be the sempiternal Haitian crisis that began in 1804, 219 years ago when Haiti's independence was declared.

Still flying to Florida while he is headed to Port-au-Prince, I imagine the amazement and the shock that gripped Brian Nichols, on leaving the Toussaint Louverture International Airport in his armored car and accompanied by guards armed to the teeth! He's immediately confronted by the Haitian chaos. A dense and unavoidable sight awaits him, with thousands of people frantically rushing here and there, in dusty streets filled with uncollected garbage, the anarchic traffic, the young beggars, and many other reflections of this chaos.

Passing Charles Sumner Avenue, named after the American Senator and anti-slavery champion during the Civil War era, Nichols will appreciate the expression of gratitude of Haitians. The name of that senator should bring to mind what happened on February 4, 1862, when Mr. Sumner, of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, introduced a bill authorizing the President of the United States to appoint diplomatic representatives to the Republic of Haiti that was already more than half a century old. Despite fierce Southern opposition, Senator Sumner, from Massachusetts, through extremely laborious effort, secured America's long-delayed diplomatic recognition of Haiti.

And as Brian Nichols' armor-plated limousine, heading to the American embassy, cautiously parts the capital's Red Sea of Black pedestrians, I have already landed in Fort Lauderdale, and calmly seated in a taxi that quickly, without any impediment, took me home, via Interstate 695.

During my stay in Haiti, to both those of the elite and underclass friends, I asked the same question regarding the current situation in Haiti. My "elitist" friends, maintaining their privileged attitude towards the "underclass", answered that they were mainly concerned about the continuing insecurity, and hoped for the landing, the soonest possible, of white [foreign] armed forces to free them from the scourge of the gangs. My underprivileged friends, meanwhile, had two additional concerns: To obtain a passport, and find a sponsor to "*file the Biden*," that is the new "Human Parole" program for Haitian migrants announced, January 5, 2023, by US President Joe Biden, to allow them to escape the island, if only for about two years.

For his part, despite his historical knowledge of the contribution of American Jewish lawyers in the 1960s in the voter registration campaigns in Mississippi during the civil rights movement of Black Americans, Brian Nichols, has his narrative all prepared. When meeting with those of the Haitian political class, he will listen attentively and probably reiterate the American administration's will to improve the Haitian people's security through its support of the Haiti National Police (PNH) and then restore the Democratic Order through elections at the end of 2023. Then, he will jet back to Washington and, upon landing, he will calmly call a cab to take him home. Just as I did two days earlier.

Meanwhile, Haiti, nicknamed an "*Ungovernable Chaotic Entity*," since January 2023, is not governed by any elected official. The country has neither a legally functioning executive branch, a legislative branch, nor any judicial authority. Indeed, there's no president, senators, congresspeople, mayors, communal councilors, etc. Nothing! Nada! Zip!

What observation and analysis to make of this situation?

The Haitians have created for themselves an unreal world, a certain sophism in a galactic black hole from which the country cannot extricate itself. But above all, the Haitian myth of its independence, from 1804 to date, has wrecked its relationship with others, by constructing a posture that ignores otherness. In other words, Haitians have closed in on themselves, to the detriment of moving forward with other societies, thereby hampering their development. The Haitians have yet to validate the contemporary reality seen in developing societies because the weight of traditions and rites prevents them from moving toward modernity.

Today, most Haitians live in conditions comparable to those of medieval societies. This recalls my years in the Deep South of the United States in the early 1980s, when I observed that many Black citizens then lived in the same backward conditions. I remember sharing photographs with some friends from Shreveport, Louisiana. Looking at them, they were dismayed by Haiti's miserable and backward conditions. Then, I pointed out that I had taken the photos just a few minutes earlier in Shreveport, across the train tracks.

Brian Nichols must be well acquainted with this irony. One of the American government's significant steps to overcome this situation was to create the network of "*Historically Black Colleges and Universities*" (HBCUs). Most of these schools were established in the southern states, after the Civil War, to increase educational opportunities for Black Americans. The HBCUs still function; the current American Vice President, Kamala Harris, is a graduate and an exemplary product of an HBCU.

Therefore, the questions that arise are: How to create the conditions for modernity in a society where rites and traditions predominate, and religions are one of its fundamental vectors? How to create the conditions for change that will mainly fight corruption and promote social equity?

In 2005, before the Undersecretary came on the scene, answers to these questions had emerged with the recommendations of the *Haiti Advisory Group*, convened by the then-Governor of Florida Jeb Bush. I was a member of the Task Force. Its work-product covering security, economic development, disaster preparedness and response, was endorsed by the U.S. Department of State. Coming before the 2010 earthquake and the upheavals of the past few years, it could be updated and implemented. It should be noted that, of the twenty-

five recommendations, only the one urging a more favorable import policy --the HOPE Act-- has been implemented for job creation and economic development in the manufacturing sector. Coincidentally, earlier this month, on March 8, U.S. Senator Marco Rubio, of Florida, reintroduced the HOPE Act for a 10-year renewal. But all the other recommendations have been lying idle, waiting for a wake-up call. They should be implemented as a coherent package because economic development cannot be realized without security, which constitutes the fundamental framework of societies.

Another complementary way to engage in the process of modernity and be freed from the weight of rites and traditions consists in the establishment of a powerful educational system aimed at developing knowledge, autonomy and making each child a full-fledged responsible member of society, in the image of the "*Black Hussars*" of the Republic, led by the famous Jules Ferry, under the Third French Republic, in the years 1870 – 1880. The nickname "*Black Hussars*" came from the students who wore black uniforms while in training to become teachers. The fundamental idea was to provide and ensure free and secular compulsory education to eliminate "*the last, the most formidable inequality that comes from birth, the inequality of education*", as Jules Ferry declared as early as 1870. Today, in Haiti, eighty percent (80%) of education is not provided by the State, which is one of its fundamental missions.

Needed: A policy of anti-corruption and honest individuals to lead

Of course, a modern education presupposes a functioning and solvent Nation-State, with zero-tolerance for corruption. For this to happen, the citizens must be able to detect and oppose corruption and be safeguarded against the temptation to become corrupt themselves. They should eradicate from their mind the famous slogan of the Father of the Nation, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, who said: "*Plimen poul la, men pa kite l rele*" (*Pluck the hen, but don't let it make noise.*)

Finally, moving toward modernity also means having honest politicians and businesspeople who respect the institutions. In this unprecedented crisis, we can see that Canada has sanctioned several members of the Haitian elite, including former presidents, prime ministers, senators, congressmen, and powerful businessmen, for their direct or indirect illicit financial and operational support to the armed gangs.

To conclude, I would like to invite Brian Nichols to *Aquin*, far from the hustle and bustle of Port-au-Prince, to address all these challenges. He will observe the confrontation between this historical matrix and the conditions of implementation of modernity, by looking in the distance at the small island, aptly named "*La Trompeuse*" (The Deceiver)]. Allegorically, he will embrace this illusion on this island where many dreams and lives have run aground, as it's often the case in Haiti.

According to legend, *La Trompeuse* was named after this Haitian cutie who was exiled there for cheating on her husband, an elegant French officer. However, two other explanations are true. The first was the sale of illusions and *chimeras*, "authentic" dream chalets on stilts on *La Trompeuse*, conceived and designed by two Haitian and French scam architects, who peddled and sold them, sight unseen, to financially unsavvy Haitians in the diaspora. The second truth concerns certain adventurous and reckless swimmers showing off, imagining that after a few vigorous strokes, they'll be able to arrive, just like Olympic champions, on the beautiful beaches of *La Trompeuse*. Unfortunately, they will drown and disappear, carried away by the strong undercurrents. Isn't Haiti, *La Trompeuse*, a metaphorical representation in which the major weight of rites and traditions prevents the waves of modernity from washing up on the shores of Haitian society?

Like Senator Charles Sumner in his fight for American diplomatic recognition of Haiti and the American Jewish lawyers' voter registration campaigns in Mississippi in favor of Black Americans during the civil rights movement, Brian Nichols, today, has the opportunity, in partnership with the HBCUs, to lay the groundwork for the reconstruction of Haiti. Above all, he can update the recommendations issued in 2005 by the *Haiti Advisory Group* of the Florida Governor, so that all actions are undertaken coherently for the benefit of all Haitians to

acquire their equity rights, as well as to help future Haitian generations in making the frog leap toward modernity.

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March 28, 2023