Jeb Sprague


A September 16, 2013 AP article, “Haiti A Step Closer to Having Army Again,” quietly reported on a ceremony that took place in the Haitian countryside at which the first forty-one recruits of a reconstituted Haitian military were welcomed to their new posts. As Jeb Sprague shows in the impeccably researched Paramilitarism and the Assault on Democracy in Haiti, this is an unfolding story to which we should pay close attention. Jean-Bertrand Aristide finally disbanded the Forces armées d’Haïti (or FAd’H) in 1995 after their decade-long effort to violently turn the clock back to the era of the Duvalier dictatorship, which they succeeded in doing in a 1995 coup d’état that lasted three years. More recently, neo-Duvalierist President Michel Martelly has promised to revitalize this same military, whose members have been active in various paramilitary groups since the army’s formal dissolution. Sprague’s demonstrated expertise on the history of Haitian paramilitaries leaves little doubt that we are witnessing another attempt to turn back the clock by re-legitimating a military force whose wars have always been waged against Haiti’s majority poorest populations.

With exhaustive detail and depth Sprague traces how former FAd’H leaders joined up with rogue police chiefs as early as 1999, the eve of Aristide’s second presidency, to form a paramilitary group called the Revolutionary Front for the Liberation of Haiti (the FRN) whose sole aim was to bring down Aristide’s government a second time, which they succeeded in doing in February of 2004. Along with former FAd’H members, such as Guy Philippe, who had been integrated into the new post-1995 civilian police force that was trained under the auspices of the U.S. and Canadian governments, FRN members were recruited from an unsavory crew of ex-military (often wanted criminals) living in exile in the Dominican Republic—for example, Remissaint the Ravix, a former sergeant in the Haitian military, death squad leader in the town of St. Marc, and alleged narco-trafficker, and Louis-Jodel Chamblain, former tonton-macoute and a founding member of the death squad FAP, which was estimated to have killed thousands of Aristide supporters during the 1991–94 coup period.

Sprague begins his book with a hair-raising story of his August 2007 meeting with Chamblain in an upscale Pétionville hotel. Following the tense interview, Chamblain demands to know for whom he was working and where he was staying, and Sprague and his companion flee from Chamblain’s car, legitimately fearing for their safety. This introductory anecdote presents Sprague as a fearless investigator, heroically plunging into the heart of the story by
interviewing the likes of Chamblain (and also Guy Philippe). But the only such anecdote in the book, it gives something of a false clue to what will follow. The true heroism of the project is much less spectacular and of course ultimately more significant for our understanding of the power of paramilitaries to change the course of democracy in Haiti; Sprague waited six years to gain access to 11,000 U.S. embassy and State Department documents through the Freedom of Information Act, and he tirelessly catalogs and contextualizes the most salient information that could be gleaned from these documents. In addition to the embassy cables and interviews with key members of the paramilitary groups, he interviewed several members of Aristide’s government, Lavalas party members, and leaders of the political opposition, and researched the Wikileaks U.S. State Department cables for the period 2004–10. He also cites Haitian, Dominican, and U.S. journalistic sources—both mainstream and progressive—as he pieces together a complex puzzle that reveals how the rogue government and police personnel, Dominican presidential and state department officials, and the U.S.-backed and supported Haitian political opposition groups, the Convergence démocratique (the CD), and the Group of 184, sometimes joining forces, sometimes fighting among themselves, were all nonetheless collaborating and machinating, united by the same goal of taking down Aristide.

One of the book’s most important contributions is in showing for the first time that members of the CD and the Group of 184 were the principal financial backers of the FLRN. While these individuals always refused to admit their connection to the paramilitaries (and have more recently admitted to some collaboration), Sprague shows that the collaboration ran deep indeed. As for the United States, he admits to having discovered no hard evidence that the U.S. embassy in Haiti knew that the opposition with whom it was close was funding a military assault on the legitimate government. Yet his account leaves little doubt that the United States knew about it and supported it ideologically, and through indirect means, materially. The U.S. government’s funneling of millions of dollars to the political opposition while withholding promised aid money to the Haitian government has long been understood as a means by which it waged a “war of attrition” against Aristide. Now we have yet further evidence that “democracy promotion” in Haiti between 2000 and 2004, the campaign to expand the opposition beyond a few business elites, was closely intertwined with the paramilitary campaign to topple Aristide’s government. The connection deepens the claim, made by Peter Hallward, that U.S. involvement in the coup of 2004 represented one of the most successful experiments in “neo-imperial sabotage” of the last several decades, an effort waged through so many dispersed intermediaries and in the mainstream media (unduly influ-
enced by State Department press communiqués) as much as on the ground, that it “wasn't widely criticized or even recognized as a coup at all” (2007: xxv).

While *Paramilitarism and the Assault on Democracy in Haiti* can occasionally be tedious reading—sometimes summary rather than cataloguing of the facts might have sufficed—Sprague has made the right choice as a scholar and activist. He knows that there are many who will resist his claims, and that the exhaustive work of documentation, contextualization, and the organization of events into a clear time line is crucial for his book to be heeded by skeptics. My only other criticism is that his left-wing rhetoric is occasionally extreme; while my own sympathies are with him, his language could give those who most need to read this book an excuse to turn away. Sprague could have afforded a more sober voice as his years-long research and careful documentation of this mass of startling evidence speaks for itself. Indeed, any scholar, activist, or journalist writing on Aristide and the democratic movement in Haiti from here on will have to contend with his work, and he has set the bar high for those who might seek to counter his claims. Focusing on a period in Haiti (2000–04) that coincides with the dawn of a post-9/11 era in which truth has become a troublingly flexible concept, his book restores faith in the power of evidence and tireless research to prove what really happened.

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