

Michael Deibert, *Notes from the Last Testament: The Struggle for Haiti*
 Seven Stories Press: New York 2005, \$22.95, paperback
 454 pp, 1 58322 697 4

JUSTIN PODUR

KOFI ANNAN'S HAITI

In the vast corrugated-iron shanty town of Cité Soleil, home to quarter of a million people, all the schools are shut down and the one hospital closed. White armoured UN personnel carriers patrol the perimeter, half a dozen blue-helmeted heads poking out of the turret, automatic weapons trained on the streets. It is the masked units of the Police Nationale d'Haïti, bolstered by heavily armed irregulars from the officially disbanded Haitian army, who take the lead in the brutal raids into working-class neighbourhoods, but the Mission des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation en Haïti—MINUSTAH—who back them up, blocking off exits as the PNH spread out through the area and the gunfire begins. In the poor districts of Port-au-Prince—La Saline, Bel Air—a 2004 human-rights investigation reported, such raids leave 'dead bodies in the streets almost daily, including innocent bystanders, women and children, with the UN forces visibly acting as support for, rather than a check on, the official violence'. One Québécois police officer attached to the UN force complained that all he had done since getting to the island was 'engage in daily guerrilla warfare'.

Welcome to Kofi Annan's Haiti. It is two years since the UN-backed Multinational Interim Force headed by the US, France and Canada toppled the constitutionally elected Lavalas government of Jean-Bertrand Aristide. The case for military intervention was based on claims of a possible 'humanitarian catastrophe' in the making, and the mandate hurriedly bestowed by the UN, as Marines and Légionnaires clomped into the National Palace, was to 'promote the protection of human rights'. France, Haiti's former colonial master, had been the moving force behind the invasion. The Bush Administration, bogged down in Iraq, burnt by the failed coup

against Chávez in 2002, and counting down to the 2004 election, was chary of another military engagement. Chirac and Villepin, keen to ingratiate themselves after the contretemps over Operation Iraqi Freedom, offered a bespoke package: UNSC backing for a multilateral invasion force with guaranteed withdrawal in three months, to be replaced by a broader UN mission. Chirac's advisers, searching for a formula with which to discount Aristide's claim that Paris should repay the millions it had once extorted from Haiti, had suggested that the bicentenary of the demi-island's 1804 independence offered France the opportunity to 'shed the weight which servitude imposes on the master'. It was a burden eagerly shouldered by Lula's Brazil, Lagos's Chile, Kirchner's Argentina and others as, from June 2004, they replaced the initial France-US-Canada force in order to assist the 'peaceful and constitutional political process'.

In fact, as Peter Hallward argued in NLR 27, what had been unfolding in Haiti in the run-up to the invasion was 'less a "crisis of human rights" than a low-level war between elements of the former armed forces and the elected government that had disbanded them'. In effect, the 'international community' has sided with the ex-junta and their elite backers in that war, and is prosecuting it against an astonishingly resilient mass of Lavalas loyalists. MINUSTAH forces have made no effort to disarm the ex-combatants of the FADH—Forces Armées d'Haïti—the soldiery that terrorized the island under the military dictatorships of the 1980s and early 90s, and waged a Contra-style insurgency against the Aristide government from the neighbouring Dominican Republic after 2001.

On the contrary: FADH elements have been recruited into the PNH, after minimal 'screening', and notorious death-squad leaders rehabilitated to spearhead attacks on Lavalas supporters with the apparent collusion of the UN. MINUSTAH troops were present when the PNH opened fire on unarmed Lavalas demonstrators outside the UN headquarters in Bel Air in April 2005, killing five protesters on the spot and leaving four more mortally wounded. MINUSTAH forces and the PNH killed some 25 people in Bel Air in early June 2005. The following month they launched a joint raid on Cité Soleil which, according to a Reuters TV crew, left another eight dead.

The interim government of Gérard Latortue, installed by the invasion force with a primary mandate of organizing elections, is still in office, unelected, two years later. In January 2006 elections were postponed for the fourth time, on the grounds that voter registration cards and polling stations were not 'ready'; this despite the fact that legislative and presidential elections had taken place on a regular basis for ten years prior to the UN occupation, and Aristide had boasted of his loyal upholding of the constitution. Leading Lavalas politicians—including the former prime minister, Yvon Neptune—have been held for months on end without charge; there have been hundreds

of illegal, warrantless arrests. The Lavalas priest Gérard Jean-Juste, a strong contender as presidential candidate, has been imprisoned without charge since the summer of 2005. Although there has been a write-in campaign to get him on any forthcoming ballot paper, his candidacy has been officially disqualified since he is unable to present himself in person. Amnesty International has recently declared him a prisoner of conscience.

The situation has led to increasing tensions within MINUSTAH itself. In the summer of 2005 the Mission's military commander, Brazilian General Augusto Heleno Ribeiro Pereira, asked to be relieved of his post at the end of his tour of duty, intimating that he was worried about the killing of civilians that had been taking place and did not wish to be held responsible for 'war crimes'. Brazilian troops were reported to be unhappy at going into neighbourhoods not so dissimilar to those where their own families lived, and seeing unarmed women and children die. Under his replacement, General Urano Teixeira da Matta Bacellar, Brazilian soldiers tried to adopt a more conciliatory role, including opening a health clinic in the shanty town. But MINUSTAH's civilian head of mission, former Chilean foreign minister Juan Gabriel Valdés, has come under increasing pressure from Haitian business elites to resume the offensive. 'We are waiting for [Valdés] to give clear instructions to the troops under his command to cleanse Cité Soleil of the criminals, like they did in Bel Air', Reginald Boulos told Radio Métropole listeners on 5 January 2006:

You cannot make an omelette without breaking eggs. We think that MINUSTAH's generals need to make plans to limit collateral damage. But we in the private sector are ready to create a social assistance fund to help all those who would be innocent victims of a necessary and courageous action that should be carried out in Cité Soleil.

On 6 January, the UN Security Council met to discuss the situation in Haiti. The following day, General Teixeira da Matta was found dead in his hotel room; the post-mortem established that it was suicide. According to press reports, this followed a heated debate with Valdés the night before.

After two years, the blatant deterioration of the human-rights and security situation on the UN watch is clearly in need of some explanation. What MINUSTAH's backers require is an account that will, firstly, make Aristide's regime out to be so inhumanly terrible that any alternative would be justified; and secondly, to argue that Aristide himself is still to blame for everything that is wrong in Haiti, even though exiled in faraway South Africa.

Right on cue Michael Deibert, who covered the destabilization of the Aristide government between 2001 and 2003 for Reuters and the *Miami Herald*, has produced *Notes from the Last Testament*. This sprawling account of the Aristide years, poorly annotated (fifty-five footnotes, for a book of 454

pages) and apparently unedited (typos and repetitions abound), is of note primarily as a substantive attempt to provide such ideological cover. Deibert has no doubts as to the justice of the invasion:

In all of its essentials—the killing of civilians, restriction of personal and professional liberty, the subjugation of all state institutions to the whim of the executive branch that disregarded even the most cursory adherence to such fundamental principals [sic] as human rights and due process—the Aristide government deserved to be overthrown as much as any in Haitian history.

Although he tries to tiptoe round the record of Latortue and his foreign backers, Deibert sets clear pointers as to the major culprit. ‘Aristide had not run out of cards to play’ he writes of a clash on 7 March 2004, a week after the invasion, when the ousted president was being shuttled, a virtual hostage, between African airports. A joint PNH–MINUSTAH assault on a Lavalas demonstration in September 2004 is described as ‘an explosion of violence by Aristide partisans’; Deibert uncritically reproduces the Latortue government’s unsubstantiated—and scarcely credible—assertion that ‘Aristide’s financial and moral support of the rebellion from South Africa’ was to blame for the deaths that ensued.

Notes from the Last Testament deploys the standard literary techniques of the middlebrow foreign correspondent. The narrative is essentially experiential: our man in Port-au-Prince leaves his flat, attends a demonstration, breathes the air, encounters various characters who mutter ominous words about Aristide or sigh about what’s happening to the country. An aerosol of local colour—blue skies, crowded lanes, pungent smells, snatches of *kreyol*, barefoot kids, throbbing music—is spray-painted over a framework supported at all key points by international officialdom. Time and again, the clinching argument of a passage will be made by ‘a member of the OAS team’, ‘a veteran of international observer missions’, or a seemingly ubiquitous ‘us official’. Further claims are attributed to still more anonymous sources: ‘many said’, ‘most said’, ‘critics wondered’, ‘it appeared’; or simply to ‘rumours’, some of which were ‘unusually detailed rumours’. Half a dozen interviews with prominent Haitian opponents of the Lavalas government—Andy Apaid, Evans Paul, Chavannes Jean-Baptiste, Hans Tippenhauer, Micha Gaillard, Pierre Esperance of the National Coalition on Human Rights and (in Manhattan) Michele Montas, widow of Jean Dominique, the radical radio journalist profiled in Jonathan Demme’s *The Agronomist*—fill in the gaps.

Experiential narrative has the advantage of avoiding any necessity to evaluate evidence, weigh contrasting claims or reckon with data (Chomsky, a particular bogey for Deibert, is haughtily dismissed for his ‘flurry of numbers’). Instead, it’s on to the next bar, the next faceless OAS source. Deibert hurries over the social and economic history of Haiti: the two hundred years

from Toussaint to the Duvaliers are dealt with in gobblet form, scattered as flashbacks throughout the opening chapters. As a result, the reader may find it hard to distinguish evasion from honest error, as when Deibert describes the indemnity of 150 million francs demanded by France in 1825 as a basis for the restoration of trade relations as ‘the sum Haiti was forced to pay the French government for recognition of its independence’. The demand was, in fact, for cash compensation for the loss of the former French slaves who, with the Declaration of 1804, had proclaimed themselves free. To fulfil the 1825 agreement, and the crippling trade terms which accompanied it, the Haitian government was forced to borrow an initial 24 million francs at extortionate interest rates from French banks, inaugurating a history of structural indebtedness that has been used as a justification for foreign interventions ever since.

Among the most damaging of these was the 19-year US military occupation initiated by Woodrow Wilson in 1915. The Americans re-engineered Haitian property relations to permit foreign ownership, expropriated land for their own plantations and created a brutal local military to do their bidding. The latter continued in power after the US troops left in 1934, their terror balanced, after 1957, by the Tontons Macoute, the private army created by François ‘Doc’ Duvalier to shore up his own dictatorship against any competition from the generals. Gangs flourished amid the festering poverty overseen from the presidential mansion by Papa Doc and, after his death in 1971, his son Baby Doc, both firm friends of the US. Murderous military juntas continued the repression after Baby Doc was chased from power in 1986 by the ‘flood’—the *kreyol* word is *lavalas*—of popular insurgency. Killings, with mutilated corpses dumped as warnings in streets and alleyways, and the torching of homes and packed churches, were everyday tools of terror for the military elite. Poverty and brutality, reinforced by French and American overlords, had scarred the half-island for generations before Aristide’s first tremulous seven-month presidency in 1991.

Any objective assessment of Aristide’s role must start not from the wild exaggerations of his power offered by Deibert and the current ‘interim’ Haitian government—or, for that matter, by his most fervent supporters—but from a recognition of his weakness. One of many Catholic priests preaching the Lavalas brand of liberation theology in the Haitian slums, Aristide proved a highly popular choice as presidential candidate for the democratic opposition in Haiti’s first free elections after the overthrow of the military dictatorship in 1990, winning a surprising first-round victory over ex-World Banker Marc Bazin. But he had little idea of what to do in office and neither military nor economic elites were prepared to tolerate the upstart for long. General Cédras, seizing power in September 1991, unleashed a new wave of terror against Lavalas supporters in the slums. Death squads led by Louis

Jodel Chamblain, Jean Tatoune and others slaughtered hundreds of oppositionists. Aristide escaped to Washington. The Clinton Administration's conditions for supporting his return to office bound him hand and foot: a savage Structural Adjustment Programme; a cabinet selected by Washington; full amnesty for the junta; and his presidential term to end in 1995, as though he had served the whole of it. Reinstalled by the us Marines, Aristide arrived home in triumph, but a virtual prisoner.

The privatizations and, especially, the agricultural tariff cuts of the SAP, unwillingly implemented, devastated the Haitian economy and alienated key sectors of Lavalas support. As agreed, Aristide stepped down in 1995. His successor as Lavalas presidential candidate, René Préal, won an easy victory in the 1995 election. But political tensions grew as living conditions worsened. In 1994 Aristide had disbanded but, disastrously, not disarmed the brutal FADH, who immediately began to regroup against him, provoking a counter-militarization by some of Aristide's supporters. Disputes over the economic programme split the Lavalas coalition, with Préal's prime minister Rosny Smarth, a strong proponent of the SAP, and others forming the Organisation du Peuple en Lutte, and Aristide setting up Fanmi Lavalas, a personalized grouping with a strong pro-poor rhetoric. The Assembly was deadlocked. The OPL disputed FL's gains in the 1997 legislative elections; in the slums, the rivalries were played out at gang level. Punishment killings continued, though at a far lower level than during the dictatorship years. Among the senseless victims was Jean Dominique, seemingly killed for his sympathies with peasants protesting Lavalas policies, whose leaders had linked up with the OPL.

Officially, the turning-point for the campaign against Aristide was supposed to come with the May 2000 legislative elections: minor irregularities were alleged in the tallying of votes for the lower-order parties, which might have averted some second-round run-offs, though these would have had scant impact on the overall outcome. But Deibert's narrative, broadly chronological from 2000 on, inadvertently lets a cat out of the bag: Convergence Démocratique, the alliance of rich businessmen, Duvalierists, OPL and ex-Lavalas supporters that would henceforth coordinate the campaign for us intervention against Aristide, had denounced the election results even before the count began. It was not vote-tallying anomalies, but the clear prospect that Aristide and his supporters would legitimately sweep both the legislative and the presidential elections that year, and thus be in a position to implement even the minute redistribution of wealth implied in Aristide's meek promise to 'lift people out of absolute misery into poverty with dignity', that was the motivating factor.

Despite what appears to be, on the evidence of his own account, an easy familiarity with us officials working in the Caribbean, Deibert tells us

remarkably little about their actual interventions; a scant half-paragraph addresses National Endowment for Democracy and USAID funding in the most general terms. Haitian officials of the USAID-funded International Foundation for Electoral Systems provided far more information to the human-rights investigators in the 2004 report referred to above (compiled by Thomas Griffin for the University of Miami School of Law). The officials explained that the IFES ran a far-reaching ‘sensitization’ programme in support of the anti-government campaign in Haiti, which included helping to set up and fund student groups, in particular the *Fédération des Etudiants Universitaires d’Haïti* at Port-au-Prince University; business and private sector associations, such as the Group of 184; media and journalist groups, to help ‘sensitize’ radio broadcasters in particular to the anti-government message; and lawyers’ associations, to ‘sensitize’ the judiciary. According to its own officials, the IFES not only rented meeting halls and sound systems for the events of those groups it was supporting, but provided catered meals, accommodation, entertainment and per diem cash payments for those attending. Meanwhile the Clinton Administration cut off Haiti’s aid lifeline within weeks of the Convergence’s first press conference in May 2000; a few months later the Inter-American Development Bank followed suit, cancelling previously agreed loans and plunging the impoverished state into economic crisis.

Still more lethally, paramilitary groups under the command of Guy Philippe, Chamblain and other dictatorship-era commanders began launching operations across the Dominican Republic border. Deibert dismisses the idea that the us provided any support for the anti-Aristide insurgents as ‘swirling conspiracy theories’, refuted by the unnamed ‘American officials on the ground’. Elsewhere, however, he describes how ‘us embassy officials . . . contacted Guy Philippe on the latter’s cell phone . . . and successfully argued for him to delay his planned assault on the Haitian capital for forty-eight hours.’ In a further unwitting revelation of circumstantial evidence of American involvement, Deibert mentions a November 2002 Dominican newspaper report of the us ‘donating twenty thousand M16 assault rifles to the Dominican army in an effort to help the country reinforce its border with Haiti’. Later, he has the paramilitaries arrive in Gonaïves and elsewhere from the Dominican Republic flourishing ‘brand new M16 assault rifles’. These, he quickly adds, were ‘looted from the Gonaïves police station’, though he does not solve the mystery of how the Gonaïves police came to be so well armed.

Was there a ‘human-rights catastrophe’ under Aristide’s government? This was the argument used by the Western media to justify the UN-backed coup against him, and Deibert’s ever-darkening mood music certainly strives to make the case. News of killings—or ‘rumours’ of them—is constantly

being purveyed to him by one source or another as he circumambulates Port-au-Prince. Yet tallying up the actual number of deaths he reports between 2001 and 2004—each in itself a tragic and brutalizing event—we reach a grand total of 212. Amnesty International reports suggest a similar figure. These may, of course, be gross underestimates. But a comparison with Uribe's Colombia is instructive. Here, Amnesty reports around 3,000 politically motivated killings and 600 disappearances for 2003 alone, albeit in a population six times as large: 42 million, compared to Haiti's 8 million.

Deibert must thus rely heavily on insinuation to make his case. Predictably, Aristide is likened to the Duvaliers (ten times) and Pol Pot, and a pro-government newspaper to Streicher's *Der Stürmer*. Pro-Lavalas youth, and the opposition to the Convergence Démocratique and the paramilitaries, are almost universally referred to as *chimeres* in these pages—though Deibert never tells us how he distinguishes a *chimere* from any other teenage boy—and linked whenever possible to a suggestion of nameless *vodou* horrors. Killings receive radically different treatment depending on the political affiliation of the victim. Thus the murder of opposition journalist Brignol Lindor by members of the pro-Lavalas Domi Nan Bwa is described in detail in the prologue and repeated in chapter seven: 'they spared him no mercy, and after stabbing, hacking and lynching him, all that was left was for Lindor's family to come and pick up his mauled corpse.' By contrast, the murder of the Lavalassian Justice of the Peace Christophe Lozama is described in the passive voice, as though the result of natural forces—'Lozama . . . was killed when a *mêlée* erupted between Lavalas and Convergence protesters'—and further downgraded by the disparaging remark that: 'In the coming days, the government and its foreign supporters would turn Lozama's killing into a cause du jour as they attempted to deflect attention from government-sponsored attacks on demonstrators and the press'.

Protest demonstrations, too, get partisan treatment. Deibert is particularly tender about the student supporters of Convergence Démocratique, though he omits any discussion of IFES funding for the Port-au-Prince FEUH. A student rally in November 2002—clearly something of a rampage, with young men in stars-and-stripes bandannas trashing the rector's house and then climbing the gates of the National Palace to yell, 'Aristide, murderer!'—is measured in 'thousands' and described in misty terms: 'It was a small step perhaps, but after a summer of being victimized, it was a victory, and that was all the students needed to keep on going'. In contrast, Deibert provides no estimate of the size of the crowd at a Lavalas rally a few weeks later, stating only that 'several hundreds' joined 'a far larger group', where 'speaker after speaker addressed the crowd with . . . anti-foreign rhetoric'. In sum: 'Rather stage-managed . . . I thought'.

Lavalas activist and musician Annette Auguste, known as *So* [sister] Anne, is singled out for special treatment. Auguste first appears as a ‘some-time folk-singer who . . . had ingratiated herself’ with Aristide; and then, a hundred pages later, as a ‘some-time folk-singer who . . . had immersed herself in the most rancid criminal-political underbelly of Aristide’s entourage’. Describing a clash between a few hundred Convergence Démocratique supporters and a counter-demonstration of ‘thousands of *chimere*’ outside the us Embassy, in December 2002, Deibert tells us ominously that: ‘Among the mob that day was Annette “*So Anne*” Auguste’. Some of the Lavalas demonstrators were carrying small cowhide switches, and some unnamed ‘*chimere*’ later inform Deibert that *So Anne* had “blessed” some of the whips in a *vodou* ritual before the demonstration’. During another clash between students and Lavalas supporters a year later Auguste, according to Deibert, ‘was seen travelling through the area in a car’. The charges culminate with Deibert’s uncritical reiteration of a gang leader’s claim, from his Florida exile, that a baby missing from a Port-au-Prince hospital had been kidnapped by *So Anne* and murdered in a *vodou* ritual to strengthen Aristide. Given the extent of her supernatural powers, it must be a relief to Deibert that the elderly Auguste has been held in prison without charge since May 2004.

Though his final chapter touches on events up to the early summer of 2005, Deibert attempts to skirt issues such as the crushing of democracy and the deterioration of social conditions under Latortue’s ‘interim’ government. The perpetual postponement of elections is, in fact, the perfect solution to the main political problem he identifies: the need to ‘shift the balance of power away from Port-au-Prince, teeming as it is with would-be politicians and armies of desperately poor young men’. The problem of over-politicization, particularly among poor young men, had already been descried from New York. Kofi Annan’s April 2004 report had warned that (regardless of what the Haitian Constitution had to say on the matter), ‘the international community [was] of the view that more time was needed’ before general elections could be held: ‘Haiti’s political life has too often been dominated by highly personalized presidential elections’. Spreading democracy is a delicate matter; it may take years, decades, even, in Haiti’s case, centuries, before a people is sufficiently depoliticized to be ready for it.