The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

MICHAEL NORTON (The Associated Press, British Broadcasting Corporation)

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Q: We are in Caguas, Puerto Rico with Mike Norton. It's the 6th of September 2007. And we're going to talk about Mike Norton from zero until the present time. Mike, tell me first of all in one paragraph just the broad outlines of where you were, what you did, and we'll go into the details later. You were born where? You went where to school? Let's get it in a tiny capsule and then we'll go back and cover it.

NORTON: OK, my biosynopsis. I was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota in May 1942. I suppose it was a lovely spring because in those days before climate change had become an issue springs were lovely in Minnesota. I was born into a working class, Jewish family. I went to school. When I wasn't in their school, I was learning Hebrew at Hebrew School. I went on to college. I began work, actually, at 13 sweeping the floor of a cleaner's and unloading trucks for a number of years and went on to college.

I went to a small college in St. Paul, one of the Twin Cities, called Hamline University. And then I went on for a brief period to post-graduate study at University of Chicago. I didn't last there very long. I found it horribly snobbish. Maybe it was the ghost of its benefactor and the Gothic atmosphere; it also may have been because I felt that it was more important to follow a woman than to pursue my studies. I then went to the University of Minnesota for an MA in Philosophy and English and American Literature. And concluded my studies, that is to say my evasion of the draft, in 1969 at the University of Wisconsin. I had a candidacy for the doctorate in American Literature. I then left for the great beyond.

I spent some time in Ireland. Then I went on to Paris, France, and other adventures followed. I met a wonderful woman who was one of Haiti's most glorious artists. And, in her attempt to get back to her native land, we left Paris in 1979 and went first to Martinique - spent four or five years there - then went to live in the Dominican Republic. And then when Duvalier fell, Jean-Claude Duvalier fell, in 1986, we crossed the border. Actually, we were flown in a private plane. The pilot was the same pilot who was with Aristide when Aristide was ousted.

And then I went to work in Haiti. I scrounged a while looking for a job - very, very difficult to find a job. And then I got into, I did some teaching. I had taught English as a foreign language for a number of years and then I went into radio and I became a journalist. I had my own program - first at night, a program of commentary. I commented on the events - the extraordinary political revolution in Haiti. And then I began a Sunday night interview program with the luminaries of Haiti - artists, politicians, intellectuals - in French and Creole.

I did that until the state of siege in 1988 of General Prosper Avril. And, since my good friend, Antoine Izmery was banished-he was later killed during Aristide's exile by military thugs-since he was my sponsor, I stopped. I stopped regretfully since radio was my true love. And then I dedicated myself entirely to reporting for The Associated Press from 1988 until 2004. And simultaneously I was a sort of pundit/performer for the BBC on the subject of Haiti. I had a lovely experience with the BBC. I was free to give my opinions and arguments. I also, during the coup d'ï¿½tat, did free commentaries and analysis in Creole for a community radio in Montreal for the Haitian community... Things like that: believing at all times that if people could get to know the truth, right action would follow.

Q: A unique trajectory. Thank you for the thumbnail. Every bit of it must be expanded greatly. Let's go in order. Let's go back to the beginning in Minneapolis. What was Minneapolis to you, and how did you see it in your development as part of the larger world?

NORTON: I was a young Jewish boy in Minnesota. You have to understand what Minnesota was to me. Again, it's my Minnesota. What did it mean to be in Minnesota? What was Minnesota? Within a radius of ten blocks, three separate English accents could be heard. The accents of the African Americans whose fathers and mothers had probably migrated from the south after the Second World War. We're now talking about the 1940's as I was born in 1942. The accent of the sons of native-born Minnesotans, and then the accents of the sons and daughters of immigrants like myself. My accent, although you can probably hear something of Minnesota in it, was largely shaped by national broadcast news - Edward R. Murrow and all those other people that my father listened assiduously to. So three different accents.

It was, now looking back on it, rather curious. At the time it seemed natural. But you integrate the unnatural and it functions naturally in your system whether you're conscious of it or not. Minnesota, to me, was the backyard of the house I was born in. It was the elm tree. It was the fresh-smelling grass. It was the bleeding hearts my father planted in the garden. I was in wonder that the ground could put forth such things. It was the aerial I strung from my bedroom to the garage. That was stolen by a neighborhood kid. Hostility: theme of my first youth. That led from the garage to my hiding under my sheets listening to the Voice of America and Willis Conover. And, above my head, the walls plastered with the faces of the great jazz musicians I adored: Satchmo, of course, and Johnny Hodges, Art Tatum, Dizzie Gillespie, Charlie Parker... Charlie Parker died in 1955. I never really got to see him in any of the concerts I tried to attend.My parents were not racist but they were somewhat taken aback by all of those black faces looking at them from my bedroom wall. I was attached to that back yard, to that elm tree, to the beasties I found there and to the smell of the earth in spring. And then when we moved, that became detachment.

I really didn't know where I was. There was a Jewish tradition which, as we will discuss, was extremely important to us. We were orthodox Jews because we were poor. As my parents went up the social ladder - my father was an office worker, he became an office worker with a slightly larger salary - they became conservative. They never got wealthy enough to become Reform Jews, but it was completely class-oriented and turned me off. I didn't understand then two things: what the American way of life was that I was taught again and again at school, and what the Jewish tradition was. For me, American Judaism was Unitarianism with dreidels. I didn't want to play and I didn't understand anything about the anti-Semitism. I mentioned hostility was rife in the neighborhood. Looking back on it, thinking of the son of an Italian immigrant, the son of German Minnesotan stock, "dirty Jew, dirty Jew," every day. That still rings in my ears.

That was Minnesota for me. The nature was splendid. I loved it, I loved it. At that time there were no suburbs. There was a city and there was the country, so my older brother and I went fishing. And we caught snakes and we caught frogs. And we let them go in our neighbor's yard to frighten the not-very-friendly Jewish neighbor. So that was Minnesota to me. No man's land. When we left, I was about thirteen, to move a couple blocks away which was into another world, and it just lost its hold on me. The American way of life I just didn't understand, yet they kept on harping on it. Don't forget this is the '50's; this is Minnesota - more liberal than many parts of the United States - but this is McCarthyism. The relation that my family from Europe had with the left in Europe - one uncle of mine was a member of the Bundt - was completely, completely covered. I had no clue that I was working class. My two grandfathers were both factory workers. My father was a simple office worker. Some things were unexpressed and I had no idea that they were unexpressed. I was sold what I always felt to be a bill of goods.

The American way of life was what? The hotdogs I couldn't eat because they weren't kosher? The awful - at that time television wasn't so bad but I was a child with a radio, I loved the radio - the awful television programs, the commercials...it was just beginning something that has now been developed into America as Disneyland. It wasn't quite that at that time, but I didn't like it. It turned me off. I knew there was something else there. I didn't understand that it was, for example, the Jewish tradition. I don't mean the religious tradition; I mean the cultural tradition. I mean the wealth and wisdom of the Talmud, the extraordinary mythical power of the Tanach. I didn't know anything about that. I felt it. I knew it was there. It had been transmitted to me, and I knew that somehow four thousand years of Jewish tradition weighed a little more heavily than Dick Clark. I liked jazz, so I didn't like rock and roll. I liked the other that I was and didn't know I was.

Q: You say you were the son of immigrants. Is it your parents who immigrated or your grandparents?

NORTON: My parents immigrated. My mother was six; my father was nine. Both of my grandfathers left Poland - one from Lithuania, one from Galicia - to the United States in probably 1914. And along came the war. They had planned, of course, to bring the family over. But along came the war and they were without news from their families from 1915 to 1918. They completely lost contact with their families. And so it was a great reunion in the 1920's when they reunited. And I think that they were friends, so they both reunited in Minneapolis. Jews went to New York, they went to Cleveland, they went to Chicago...and then, like the Mafia, sometimes they went to Minneapolis when things got hot farther east. And that's where I grew up, in Minneapolis.

I must say that if my family history had been different I would never have left Minneapolis. I think I would have traveled, but I would have come back because no place in the world is as beautiful as Minneapolis. The lakes, the people...friendly kinds of people I like, the cultural environment, the weather...the cold in the winter, the heat in the summer, Loring Park... I used to go down to Loring Park and look at the muskrats. They're fascinating.

Q: Before we leave the topic, your parents came as small children. Tell me a little something about your grandparents.

NORTON: My paternal grandfather, I never knew. I saw one picture of him; he was white-haired. He was fifty-two. He worked himself to a heart attack, obviously. People worked their asses off at that time. They worked. They really worked. I don't know if it was a work ethic. I think it may have been to the crack of the whip that they worked. And he worked himself dead. I never knew him. As a matter of fact, my father, who was quite intelligent - came to the United States at nine and graduated high school at sixteen, so he mastered the language in that short period of time and the subjects at sixteen and he graduated at sixteen and had to go to work to support his family - that's why he didn't become middle middle class. He was lower middle class, as we say. I lived in a lower middle class neighborhood. That's hopeful, as in that you're not working class. You're in the lower middle class. It's just a question of time before you rise on the ladder, so he went to work and he took care of his family.

My maternal grandfather was a factory worker, as was my paternal grandfather. He spoke no English really. My paternal grandmother had been a waitress in a Warsaw restaurant. My maternal grandmother never spoke a word of English so far as I know, and I think was traumatized because she never went out. Her daughters did shopping for her. I only saw her outside of the house on the High Holy Days. I don't know how she was transported from home. Did she walk? Was she teleported? Anyway, I think she was terrified of America. She stayed home and cooked and, when I came over, she smiled and rumpled my hair and gave me some gelt and no other contact. They were the old country. They were strange transplanted flowers. And yet, I must say, although there was no commonplace communication between us, there was something more real about them than my teachers or even my schoolmates.

Q: A couple of things: So your father was a father at the age of sixteen?

NORTON: No, no. My father had to become the breadwinner for the family at sixteen.

Q: Ah, the extended family...

NORTON: Yah, and then I don't know when he married. Maybe ten years later.

Q: So your grandmother spoke only...was it Yiddish?

NORTON: Yah.

Q: You did understand Yiddish. You spoke it.

NORTON: Well, it happened to many people. The Jewish community, unlike I think other immigrant communities, didn't want to have anything to do with the old country. Many of them, of course, turned toward Palestine. My father did, too. My father was a Zionist, but a left-wing Zionist. But they didn't want to remember. They were bad memories - bad memories that became atrocious memories when the Shoah occurred. I remember survivors of the Shoah turning up in our community. A friend of my mother's, I remember this woman. This nervous woman with very thin hair who had saved her husband from death in Auschwitz. I remember the look on their faces. I remember a little boy. I remember some of them trickled into our community. The question was...

Q: The use of Yiddish...your grandmother...

NORTON: Yah and so my parents, although they didn't want us to speak it and they didn't want us to learn it. We were American Jews, although I later said I was not a Jew of American origin, I was an American of Jewish origin. They spoke Yiddish when they didn't want us to understand, and, of course, they so often didn't want us to understand that finally we understood. I had two brothers. I understood, I think, more than my brothers because I was the middle child and I had a special relationship, I believe, with my mother. And I was always kind of vigilant. One never knew when the storm would break. So I was always listening. I couldn't speak it but I understood it. And then I was learning Hebrew. And then I learned German. And then all of that. Those three languages I've lost, I've forgotten, by the way.

Q: In your first ten years, was it mostly English?

NORTON: It was English. It was exclusively English but, again, it was in a Jewish home that, gradually (as my father made a little more money, still in the lower middle class but I think he attained the middle middle class), became more and more Jewish style rather than Jewish. My mother kept kosher at home, but we didn't keep kosher outside. It was all very confusing. I didn't understand how you could divide up supposedly divine commandments between inside and outside. I didn't like that sort of stuff. I didn't, I think, ever really believe in the divineness of the commandments, but I did believe in coherency and consistency. And I didn't find that in my family or in the surrounding environment. I only gradually understood the American way of life. Again, after my fashion. It wasn't what I was given at school. It wasn't everybody obligated to go to pep hour. Everybody would "Rah, rah, rah!" the high school football team and all that. It was awful.

Q: Pep hour it was called?

NORTON: Something like that. It was an hour. Two of my friends and I finally said no, and we didn't go. They allowed us to be different-that was a deep lesson in the American way of life. The three of us had study hall. We were all alone, and the rest of the school was shouting, you know, "Rah, rah, rah!" for North High, and I didn't understand that. I didn't like the competitiveness. I didn't like the violence. Look at a football game, it's even worse. Holy Moses, how can they attack that football player for violence. With the dog fighting, Mike Vie, is that his name?

Q: Vick.

NORTON: Mike Vick. I mean, hey man, sure it's illegal, but why isn't football illegal? Why isn't boxing illegal? Why is violence legal in some cases and not in others? Because of what community you belong to? Cock fighting where I am right now is legal. Why is it legal? Why is bull fighting legal? Why don't people get up in arms about bull fighting? Holy Cow, as Phil Rizzuto would say.

Q: So many things to go into. You mentioned the hostility that you felt as a child and later you mentioned the friendliness.

NORTON: Well, the truth of a society is in its children. The prejudices of the parents are expressed by the children. I was a child. I got it double-barreled like all the other Jewish kids, I suppose. At least in my neighborhood, anti-Semitism was rife. Jesus was on the Cross. Who was Jesus? A boxer who lost a championship match. He was all hung up on the ropes. The Catholics learned how to box, and they boxed us. The neighborhood kids threw rocks at us. Why? I don't know. Because we're dirty Jews. We're just dirty Jews. That expressed itself whenever people knew I was a Jew. I was a child. Later on, either because times had changed or because adults hold their tongues, the friendliness - the hospitality of these people - was more apparent. At that time, we never locked our doors.

Q: When you say later, later as you matured...

NORTON: Yah.

Q: Did you think the local culture changed in some way or was it your age difference?

NORTON: It might be, but also there was a race problem. Mine was minor. The race problem was basically between the whites and the blacks. It was a small black community, but ultimately, the black community was so desperate - it must have been in the '60's, I was no longer there - that they burned down the nearby main street of my neighborhood. They were poor. They were really poor. And they spoke different and they acted different. But they gave birth to jazz. Lester Young and his family lived in Minneapolis when he was a teenager. It was a small and, at times, explosive black community.

Q: Well, let's get a painful thing on the record. The hostility: do you think it was general? You mentioned Catholics becoming fighters. Was it everybody else or were there certain ethnic groups?

NORTON: No, well the Catholics didn't like us. I mean they had skills we didn't have. They knew how to box. The blacks at the end of junior high basically the blacks would pick on us. There was an article that Norman Podhoretz, of infamous memory, wrote way back when when I was actually a subscriber to Commentary - early '60's - something about "My black problem." And the situation's pretty well described. Again, it's a child's view of the world. You later learn why, you understand why, but basically I was a member of the oppressed in junior high and the blacks were a member of the oppressive class. They were tough. They were bitter. They were brutal. And they were lost. I had a glimmer of that.

Q: Wouldn't it be logical for two oppressed groups to combine forces against the oppressors?

NORTON: Well, didn't it happen when there was the Civil Rights movement? We were kids, and there was no consciousness. Coming out of McCarthyism, I tell you, there was no consciousness of anything. I didn't know I was working class. I didn't know really the history of the Jews, the immigration. I didn't know the history of the United States. I didn't know what made America that unusual, not completely unique, thing we call a democratic empire, an imperial democracy. I didn't understand manifest destiny. I lived it because I dreamed of hitting the road. Most of my friends went either east - the more intellectual ones - or west - the more surf-oriented, culturally marginal ones - went west. I went across the ocean. It wasn't far enough for me across the ocean. If I could have gone to the moon I would have gone to the moon. Not to get away only from the bad memory of the draft and the ill-digested knowledge I did acquire finally about America's role in the world, but also and especially my family. It was a very turbulent family, a maelstrom, and there was no way out of it. I measured my strength and I found myself wanting. And I thought that the better part of valor would be to flee and I did. I understood it in my own way, of course. The most important sentence in my life was the first sentence I learned in Hebrew School. We didn't begin with B'reishit, with creation; we began with God speaking to Abraham. Lech l'cha, go. Go. And that resonated in my mind as the possibility for me of something glorious. Strange, isn't it?

It means, "go," in Hebrew. Lech l'cha. I remember those words. I remember the version of the Tanach that we were reading from. I must have been eight. Was I eight? Maybe even younger. Lech l'cha. And I went. And I went.

Q: Sorry, the Tanach is what? Is it the Pentateuch?

NORTON: It's that and everything else. It's the Jewish Bible.

Q: I'm going to ask you in a moment about your concept of the American way of life that you mentioned - the concept of the democratic empire. This is part of your intellectual development. Before we get there, let's get as much as we can from your origins. The men in your family worked very hard, you said. By coercion more than by inspiration, I think you were meaning to say.

NORTON: I think my grandparents. My father, no. My father was a true believer, and, of course, he was paid as all true believers are paid, by being shafted.

Q: True believer in what?

NORTON: Work. And doing a good job. And making the boss happy.

Q: He was a manual laborer...

NORTON: No, no, no. He was a bookkeeper, an office worker.

Q: I thought that was his later situation.

NORTON: No, no. He was always a bookkeeper.

Q: OK. Why was he shafted? Just by having the ceiling...?

NORTON: I think that there was a ceiling on his pay. I noticed, I don't know the details, a certain bitterness. He came to realize he was not appreciated, he was expendable. He would take work home on Saturdays. He worked, he worked, he worked. He was always busy puttering in the yard or puttering in the basement. He finally got into the stock market. He kind of became one of these people's investors. It disappointed me, of coursIt may have been at the same time that he committed the unpardonable sin and he shifted from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party. I don't know, was it when McGovern ran, at one moment he voted Republican. That's another subject and worthy of analysis. Why this...he prided himself on being the Average Joe. His name was Joe, by the way. He prided himself on being the Average Joe. I don't know why the Average Joes vote against their interests, but my Average Joe father was not ambitious. He was honest. I admired him for that.

Q: Why did it disappoint you that he went toward the stock market?

NORTON: Because it meant greater integration. He liked the game of it. He didn't invest very much money. By that time already I was anti-capitalist in my outlook. There's nothing that attaches us more to a system than the pleasure we derive from it. And he was obviously deriving pleasure from it. That he didn't connect it with the bitterness of his work experience where the nitty-gritty was, after all, exploitation, that was his affair. Again, I assume he didn't. I don't know. My father did not talk. I can tell you, do you want me to tell you, the one conversation I had with my father?

Q: Of course.

NORTON: I'm getting into the '20's now, my brother got married. He wasn't happily married and my parents, being skinflints, never supported this talented young man. He was so talented. I learned so much from him. I learned more from him than from anybody. I worshipped him.

Q: His name?

NORTON: Leslie. He would take me on hikes and he would force me to collect stones and rocks. We'd hunt snakes. I didn't want to and he forced me to, and I learned. He had the sharpest eyes. He'd look up into the tree and see a cecropia moth. He could...he was wonderful and he kept animals and he...was wonderful. And he had a collection of trilobites. And he wanted to learn taxidermy. He would have been a marvelous biology teacher, but my parents wouldn't help him. He had to work. He had greater problems with my parents than I did. That is why he never moved away. I had lesser problems than he, and so I was able to escape their enchantment. And so my brother was sick. He went to the hospital. Why was my brother sick? He wasn't sick. He was pooped. What did we say at that time? We didn't say depression or anything like that. That came later. I don't know. Not nervous breakdown. That was too...I don't know. Whatever it was at the time, he had it. He couldn't take it anymore. I talked to my father and I said, "Hey, Dad. Surely in life there is more than a house, a collection of opera records, a job, and a kid. Surely." And my father said, "What?" And shame of shames, I couldn't answer him.

Q: Do you think you could answer him now?

NORTON: Oh, of course I could. Look at my life. Dan, I hope you have a good life, but now, at the end of mine, I can say I knew glory face to face. And, of the many women I have known, I have known the most wonderful. And I have spilled my guts on the planet.

My father was repressed. My father didn't sneeze. My father held his sneezes in. My mother was quite the opposite. She held nothing in. But since the only thing that came out was her misery, poor thing, I think she was traumatized by the war - the First World War. By lack of affection. She just didn't have what it took to be happy. And so, between the two of them, Sylla and Charybdis, I decided the best part was to wend my way. Odysseus, by the way, since I'm talking about Sylla and Charybdis, The Odyssey is my favorite book. The Odyssey is not particularly Jewish in spirit, is it? But Odysseus is the most Jewish of the Greeks. I love Odysseus. I love Ulysses.

Q: So did Odysseus take the next step home to heart?

NORTON: Ah, of course.

Q: What else about Odysseus appeals to you?

NORTON: The capacity to extricate himself from predicaments. The wisdom. The courage. The valor. And the intelligence. Great values: intelligence and courage. Persistence. Never ever forget. Never ever give up. Twist and turn if you have to, but never lose sight of the goal. The goal is not straight ahead but it's there. And it's internally straight ahead, not externally. Ulysses was not compassionate. But he was able to live a double life and Lord knows I have lived one - many double lives. Many double lives, I've lived.

What is my name? Michael Norton is the name that this interview will go under because I was a reporter for eighteen years and I wrote under the name Michael Norton. I gave interviews under that name. But my name is really Michael Norton Blustein. And Blustein comes from where? Eighteenth century. The Austrian empire forced us Jews in Galicia to take a family name. That's why we have Blustein, Goodman, Goldman - all of these treacly romantic, sentimental names-Rosenblum. I mean, I understood Malcolm X. I understood Malcolm X. I hated my family name. My real, if I may say, my real name is Nissan Maher ben Joseph. That's my name. That's the name I would have had if the Austrian empire hadn't emasculated so many of us Jews. "Michael Norton" comes from the habit of the Jews to name their children after dead ancestors, and to use the initials to find an American equivalent. I became Michael Norton without the "Blustein" when I was in Haiti, and thereafter whenever I wrote anything journalistic. So I've had a number of lives. Who am I really? I don't know. I guess I'm Michael Norton Blustein after all.

Q: Again, before proceeding...we've talked about the men in your family. The two grandfathers, the father. The mother was a bit bewildered by her situation. Anything else to say about the women whom you knew as family members?

NORTON: My mother was very disappointed that I was not a girl. She had three sons. I was the second. She gave up, I think, and accepted her terrible destiny. Thank God she never had a daughter. And so it was, I later learned by chance, that my aunt, my favorite aunt, in fact took me home with her. And I stayed with her for the first weeks - Julia, a wonderful woman. The most intelligent of these peasant women. My father who was a factory work, paternal grandfather, left the children in the countryside, and they were basically peasants. They had a relative who had some kind of cornmill or sawmill or something like that, and Julia lived in Milwaukee, so we didn't see much of her. So whenever she kissed me, she left a big red mark on my cheek. But I loved her because she was so smart, and she was the only one that took an interest in our family tree. Roots, you know. Through her, I learned that we had one survivor from our family from the Shoah - a maternal great aunt in Bielorusi is what we called it. What's it called now?

Q: Belarus.

NORTON: Belarus. And also the story of the destruction of my mother's native town in the First World War. It was no man's land between the Russians and the Germans and they strung up the inhabitants of this town upside down and they burned them alive and then they burned the town down. I never could get the name of my mother's hometown straight.It was a small village, and they razed it. The Germans did. But it could have been the Russians after all. Mirror image, right?

Q: Sylla and Charybdis.

NORTON: Again, Sylla and Charybdis. She was a light, a very faint light, because kids miss so much. At least I missed so much as a child. I was dreaming. I had to get out. And having to get out, I missed so much. I missed so much of interest in Minneapolis. Of things that were going on. Of the people. I was more interested in looking up and away than looking around attentively. I learned that later. What could I have done? I was extremely, extremely unhappy there, and only gradually, when the distance and the years enabled me to, did I start looking around and at and much less away and up. The discovery of history helped me.

Q: As we go forward chronologically, let's get out of chronology just for a moment. Once you left, we're going to take you to Ireland and France and University of Wisconsin or Minnesota. How did you remain in touch with your family, if you did?

NORTON: I didn't.

Q: You didn't.

NORTON: I didn't. Occasionally I sent a note to my mother saying, "My mother, you know it's not that I disown you. You can't disown your mother." The reason why I finally...that was the last straw in our relationship. It's complicated. My mom's behavior toward my first wife was so intolerable, so crazy. She was so lunatic that I just said hell, I can't do this anymore.

Q: So your mother, your father, your brothers... Your father lived until what year?

NORTON: I don't know.

Q: Yeah, OK. You had two brothers...

NORTON: ...My father died in 1982.

Q: Eighty-two...OK. Any contact...

NORTON: No. For me, it was a snake pit. Again, I measured my force against it. And I found myself wanting. I missed out, probably, on a relationship with my elder brother. My elder brother who was a mechanical draftsman, a worker, and my younger brother who I think became a professor - rather distinguished professor of philosophy, bioethics, that sort of thing. But I didn't. It destroyed my capacity to be a member of the family. Too bad. I don't consider myself a model in any way. It's not a model behavior, but that's the way it panned out for me and, hey, if you've got a broken leg, you limp. I limped. I mean, it was better than not having a leg at all. I limped. It was all right. I'm not a long-distance runner.

Q: You left for where first? And when you left that first time, is that when relations were cut off before?

NORTON: They were cut before. I left in 1969. I reached the magic age. Don't forget, this is Vietnam - Vietnam that awoke us. The Civil Rights movement awoke us. It was a period of extraordinary ferment and wasn't a happy period for families. Many families broke up. I wasn't the only one. A lot of families broke up on those reefs. I understood labor, of course. My family had worked so hard. They had suffered through the Depression and finally they had a little breathing space. Hard to breathe breathing space. Maybe we'll talk about American insecurity, but we had a house. We had some security. And they give birth to children who, at that time, grew up in the time of full employment. That's the Golden Age. We're talking about three thousand years ago.

That was in the '60's, full employment. Wanted adventure! Wanted to discover. People of all sorts, not just in their particular ethnic community, who wanted to have sexual relations outside of the institutional sanction, who wanted to travel, who wanted to fuck up. To a certain extent, I think yes, a certain number of the newer generation wanted to fuck up. They called it, "Have fun." That was the drug generation. That, of course, never tempted me. Never tempted me. I'll tell you why. Because I was very young. I was thirteen, fourteen. I don't know how we did it, but we had a little combo - a couple of friends of mine - drums and piano and clarinet - and we used to hang around the bars. I don't know how they let us in the taverns; they were strip joints on the bowery. And we'd listen to the musicians because the musicians were really quite good jazz musicians but they were on cough syrup for want of anything better. And then other things. And I met jazz musicians who were so brilliant, so wonderful, and so destroyed by heroin. It was heroin. It was smack. Don't forget, this is before drugs came to suburbia. Marijuana, man, you got caught with a roach, you got sent to Stillwater for six years. Marijuana was in the black community; heroin was in the black community.

So when the 60's came and there was a war and the Civil Rights movement and all of that, the generation that came out of these hard-working parents - gone through World War II, also - they wanted something quite different from their parents. Some of them took the road of drugs - the drug generation, the flower generation. Some of them "the hippie don't do anything" generation, you know, and have fun. Peace and love. New age, before the term was coined. And others turned toward political activism. And that was what I was in, sort of, because by then I had already discovered philosophy. I had already discovered poetry. And those are the secret springs of my life.

So my political activism was an ethical stand and went very well with the idea of lech l'cha - go, go, go for it. I think I was quite insightful. In 1969, when I decided to leave the United States... When I did leave the United States: I had decided to leave the United States when I was born... That was the last year, I believe, that PhD's could get a job. In 1970, PhD's had a great deal of difficulty. There were no more slots for them. It may even be the case that full employment died its unnatural death at the end of the 1960's. I felt that. I didn't like school. I wanted an adventure. I wanted my life to be an adventure. I wanted to be a hero. Not in other people's eyes. Not even in mine. Under the eye of eternity, I wanted to go. I heard that in my ears: "Go. See what happens. And do what you must." So, off I went.

Q: You went where first?

NORTON: To Ireland.

Q: Graduate school or...college was where, when?

NORTON: I left the University of Wisconsin in 1969 and went to Ireland. Couldn't find a job. My then wife, we had some of her money, and we spent it in Dalkey which was where the martello tower of Stephen Daedalus is. So I mean, "stately plump Buck Mulligan" went down the tower steps almost within view of the house I had on the rocky hillside. It's where Stephen Daedalus taught Algebra, by the way, for those who know Ulysses. So that was very exciting. I couldn't find a job, but I was looking when the troubles in Northern Ireland broke out. And there was a lot of political agitation, political discussion. I discovered the Maoists. I had a memorable meeting in Trinity College when the Maoists attacked James Joyce for not being in Dublin on Easter Sunday in 1916 but for being in Trieste. That sort of thing stuck in my mind and was one of the landmarks, one of the guardrails of my thought in ethics and in politics. What matters is the individual. What matters is human kindness. Can I read something from Life and Fate?

Q: Of course.

NORTON: And life...this is from Life and Fate, the great novel of Vasily Grossman. I feel very close to his somewhat Chekhovian ethics. And this is from that book.

Remember, this is the Maoists saying James Joyce was guilty because he didn't participate in the uprising in 1916. This is with the words still fresh in my mind of this woman in Paris later on who said that, "Why do you attack Stalin's crimes - all of the tens of millions of people he killed. Some of them, after all, were enemies of the people."

Q: Who said that?

NORTON: It was a woman - just a conversation. Somehow I learn more from conversations than books. I, as I said, learned slowly to pay attention to what's around me.

Q: She said, "Why do you concentrate on the crimes of Stalin when some guilty were taken away?"

NORTON: Yah.

Q: Let's get your reaction to that. Sounds like a foolish question. Let's hear that.

NORTON: That's like the Maoist saying, "Where was James Joyce?" In other words, he was candidate for the Gulag. "Whenever," said Vasily Grossman, "we see the dawn of an eternal good...whenever we see this dawn, the blood of old people and children is all we shed.... Human history is not the battle of good struggling to overcome evil. It is a battle fought by a great evil struggling to crush a small kernel of human kindness." I swore when I left, wanting in some way unimaginable to me to contribute to the reform of the world, that I never would sacrifice truth to the advancement of a cause no matter how good. I swore that, and I kept my oath.

Let me go to another passage from Vasily Grossman. "Let's begin with man; let's be kind and attentive to the individual man - whether he's a bishop, a peasant, an industrial magnate, a convict in the Sakhalin Islands, or a waiter in a restaurant. Let's begin with respect, compassion, and love for the individual - or we'll never get anywhere."

He speaks from my heart.

In Paris after leaving Ireland I became involved in post-1968 left-wing politics. I was a fellow traveler with the Ligue Communiste Rï¿½volutionnaire, a Trotskyite organization. At one moment, a very critical moment in my life when I met Toto Bissainthe with whom I stayed for twenty-two years, we'll talk more about her, I suddenly realized something: that none of my comrades were friends. None of them, I would never want any of them as friends. Somehow, and I didn't quite understand it, something was wrong. Of course what was wrong was the absence of the spirit I have just been talking about. It's not necessary to say what I imagine they would say about those words. I don't see, however, that those people who have been inspired by those words have caused as much suffering as the people who have not, who believe that violence is necessary. A positive aspect of history, its midwife not its butcher.

"You can't make omelets without cracking eggs." How many times has Lenin's expression been repeated? How many people who have repeated it realize that they are eggs? Do they look in the mirror and see an egg? Their child, an egg? That's all?

Q: You said earlier that during the awakening of the 60's there was the Vietnam issue, the Civil Rights issue, and there were various options among those who sought something else. The one you chose was political activism. Were you disillusioned with the Trotskyite movement?

NORTON: This is not a play where you have to choose between honor and love. I was bemused. I chose love and revolt rather than violence and power. I chose myself. I chose to be the poet who would contribute as he could to further the betterment of society, a society of which I was a part. To live the ethical life. I did not reject...how could I? I learned so much from Marxism. Marx will come back. Marx may be buried, but he is not dead. When I was in college, not in graduate school, there was no mention of Marx in the books. You could get a doctorate in sociology widh not having even read, let alone denounced or refuted Marx. He just didn't exist, you know? He just disappeared. Class exists. Class conflict exists. Class struggle exists, come on. Economic determinism exists. So, I mean, Marx slapped me in the face, "Wake up!" How you make your living shapes how you live, what you think about life.

Now, the ultimate benefit of it for me was basically paying attention to reality - real situations. Gradually I realized that the concrete analysis of concrete situations was exceptional, that it wasn't particularly practiced by official Marxists because they had an ax to grind. The defense of the Soviet Union, the defense of their particular political faction. It's not easy to make an analysis, and if your general is truth and not Commandante Zero, you're going to get into conflict, and I assumed that conflict. I assumed it fully. So, I mean, it was no disillusionment with Trotskyism. It was, oh, something's missing, and I didn't really figure it out until much later. It all has to do with human rights. It has to do with the Republic. It has to do with forms and forums. It has to do with respect for forms and forums. I learned that after I left with Toto to wend my way towards Haiti.

Q: No disillusionment with the movement that you embraced. Do you see this as part of a moral, a spiritual, an intellectual evolution, or do you see it as a path taken with an option that perhaps you look now rather than other...

NORTON: No, no, no, it's wonderful. It was a wonderful choice that I made. It was enormously instructive. It helped me. I had at least the wisdom or the luck to stop. I met Toto, who was pure love and revolt and not violence and power the summer I was going to go to camp to learn how to use arms. I stopped.

Q: Let's just get to chronology. You were in Ireland and then you ended up in Paris...

NORTON: 1972.

Q: You were married. There was Toto. We don't need to get into that.

NORTON: Well, I obviously got divorced.

Q: Sorry, you went to Ireland in '69.

NORTON: '69, and then...

Q: What got you to Paris?

NORTON: And then in 1970 I came to Paris. Began work - the job I held until 1979. I taught English as a foreign language. I had some experience in linguistics - teaching, as a matter of fact, Japanese teachers of foreign language how to teach English as a foreign language, so it was a logical choice. At that time I was teaching English in businesses. I got to meet the French people in the way most people didn't because I taught chief executives, workers, hair dressers, engineers, publishers, secretaries, writers...it was wonderful. I could sharpen my techniques of interviews. I realized I had a gift for interviewing and I would teach basically through interview - help people say what they had to say but to say it in a foreign language, and it was quite wonderful. I stayed until 1979.

And then, of course, having met Toto who, just to be brief, was, in my opinion, the greatest artist that Haiti ever produced - actress, singer, writer.. She didn't think she wrote well, but she wrote marvelously well in Creole. You know, when people meet a genius, something happens. I mean, I had the enormous privilege of living with a genius for twenty-two years with all the ups and downs and I don't need to go into that... Toto married Haitian and French culture, Creole and French culture. She would recite Rimbaud, Bateau Ivre, just like that. She was one of the founders of Les Griots, that put on Genet's Les Negres (The Blacks). She was in the original cast. She played Beckett.That's an example. She did Moliere. She sang in an opera. Under the hardest taskmistress of my life, I began to write in French.

Q: This interview is about you, but we have to find out what brought Toto to France. How did she...

NORTON: She left in one of the migrations before Duvalier. She went to New York and then she went to Paris to pursue her studies. And she was a natural, and so quite quickly she was in movies and she was in, well, not so many movies, and theater. And then in the 1970's she began singing. That's when I met her, and she began discovering herself as a Haitian and putting together these marvelous groups to sing Haiti and to sing against tyranny wherever it was. And, of course, I began to do what I could for her. It was a movement to liberate Haiti where, you must understand, there was a very definite correspondence between my past and my present.

I remembered my musical past, remembered when I was a jazz fan, and I wrote songs for her. And I wrote words and music for her. And things for her shows - the poems that she would recite - in French. And so, she was a hard taskmistress. She would never tell me what was the matter. She would just say, "This is shit." Why is it shit? So I just kept going back and back and back to the drawing board and found out it was shit indeed.

Q: We're talking about the texts that you wrote for her songs.

NORTON: Yah, well for whatever. For whatever. Several of them were recorded. Most of them she didn't like. She liked the writing I did for her theatrical performances.

Q: What was the reception for her in France?

NORTON: Fabulous. Fabulous, especially beginning with 1976, but she had a destructive streak in her. She would have been quite famous. She appeared on television. Our readers don't know who Jacques Chancel was, but she had an hour devoted to her ...it's like NBC for an hour-long show. The Humanity Festival of the French Communist Party, ten thousand people stood up and applauded.

Q: Could she walk by and be recognized by people?

NORTON: No, I don't think so. I don't think so. She wasn't a star. She was a counter-culture star, yah. Anybody who knew anything about music...she did Vodou songs, but she did fusion with jazz musicians, with African drummers. And she had a stage presence which was beyond belief.

Q: Did your own political activism fade as your knowledge...

NORTON: No, it didn't fade. It stopped. Immediately, immediately. And took a quantum leap. I realized it was absolutely crazy, and that you don't engage your life with people you don't even like. I mean...

Q: Immediately when?

NORTON: In 1972. And I still kept thinking what to do, how to do it, and I was wound up in her activities and then writing myself, writing poetry. These are my works. All of those. But that's...my real me.

Q: We're looking at a bookcase with manuscripts. About fifteen different manuscripts which is Mike's basic work.

NORTON: Right. The conquest of the West, basically. That's the first four volumes. And then a journal from Haiti and then other writings.

Q: As I see, these are manuscripts. Some things were published.

NORTON: I published a little book in Spanish in 1998. I was in the Dominican Republic and I fell in love with the Spanish language. I wrote a little book in Spanish that I published in Cuba - a book of poems. Curiously enough, I think one of the best things I ever wrote. Crazy, crazy. I like that little book very, very much. Out of despair, out of anguish, I wrote that book. But that's another me. Another me is in Eschatology, my latest book of poems, which should be published in 2008.

Q: OK, Mike, we've got you in 1972 in Paris. You've turned away from political activism and you've turned...

NORTON: Political activism of that sort.

Q: Of that sort. Let's get you from '72 to '79.

NORTON: Well, Toto was particularly committed. She was Haitian. She was a descendant of Roi Christophe, King Christophe who built the Citadel. She was all fire. She was storm. She was sincerity and force. Somebody who never let anything pass. In Paris that meant getting into fights with Parisian racists every day. And never let anything pass. Do you understand what that means? I want you to consider that. Never let anything pass. Never. If anybody says anything in your presence which is base, mean, patently false, you pick that up. She would throw that in their faces. She was never violent, never raised her voice. But she never let anything pass. No injustice was tolerable. She would act on the spur of the unjust moment.

It became unbearable. And the tug of Haiti was so strong. Jean-Claude Duvalier was still in power. She made some trips to Haiti where she became known as a singer of French songs because her idea was to introduce the best French songs to the Haitian public. But of course it was a bourgeois public. And also she needed money because we were always dirt poor. We never had any money. And she would sing Brassens. She would sing Ferrï¿½. Oh, she sang Ferrï¿½ better than Ferrï¿½, oh! Piaf better than Piaf. Brel. She was a marvelous interpreter of the French repertoire. But then the family there found her somewhat worrisome. So they told us that we were banned. We, I say, because at one moment in, what was it, 1975, was the first time I went back to the United States, in New York, where she gave a concert - a benefit for Haitian refugees. And because of that, family members in Haiti claimed that the Interior Minister had put us on the black list. So...

Q: Black list meaning what. Banned politically?

NORTON: From going to Haiti. Both of us.

Q: But she went?

NORTON: No. So she didn't go any more. After 1975 or 1976. That lasted until the early 80's when another, less reactionary part of the family informed her that it was false. We never were on a black list. She never was in exile. It was not true. She was a pain in the ass because she never let anything pass.

Q: So this was the family who gave her this false message...

NORTON: Early on, in the early 1960's, one of her first trips back to Haiti when she first sang, she would sing the song of revolt of the anarchists. Leo Ferrï¿½. She was an anarchist. She would sing them in Creole translation, and Franï¿½ois Duvalier wanted to see her. Wanted a command performance and she refused. And the part of the family that later prevented our coming to Haiti for many years pled with her that, "We'll be killed." So she went. And there, she sang the same songs to his face. You know, revolt against tyranny, and after, she went to salute Papa Doc. And Papa Doc says, "You know, you really told those white people off." The limits of art, let us say. Papa Doc Duvalier considered himself a revolutionary up there with Ho Chi Minh. So, I mean, if you're talking against tyranny, you're not talking about him. So anyways...

Q: Was he so easily duped?

NORTON: He wasn't duped at all. He didn't want any problem. She was...

Q: She was flattering him.

NORTON: That's how he interpreted it.

Q: So he was duped.

NORTON: No. I decide I am flattered when you insult in general terms the tyrant. I'm not a tyrant. I'm against tyrants. I'm with you. We're together. Black against white.

Q: And your observation of Toto in France, "never let anything pass." Was there anything resonant with your own childhood?

NORTON; Well, everything was "let pass" like in most American childhoods. We let everything pass. We don't sneeze. Of course. She was a very difficult person.

Q: But you did react in Minneapolis.

NORTON: Yah, but it took years, it took years, it took years, it took years. I reacted sometimes, generally after the fact. She never let a heartbeat pass. Try it some day. Don't let a heartbeat pass. Don't go home and then come back. Don't let a heartbeat pass. You probably won't even know you're deeply offended. You probably won't even know that what the person said is ignoble. She knew. She reacted. Very difficult to live up to, after that. I didn't measure up. I mean, I did what I could. It wasn't good enough.

Q: But she accepted you and lived with you...

NORTON: I don't know why.

Q; No, come on. Why?

NORTON: Because I think she saw in me what I would become. And because I was a little bit of it already. Because I was pretty smart and because I was of help to her. Because I was mad about her. Because I was eager and innocent. Because 1+1=3, or Infinity.

Q: She was the leader and you were the follower.

NORTON: Oh, you couldn't follow Toto. I mean you'd walk on the street with someone who's always ahead of you. She just walked faster. And she had a goal. And she knew where she was going. And fearless. Fearless. I remember, and we'll come back to this in 1987, the terrible day of November 29, 1987 when the general elections, the first in which democracy may have been possible. I'd like to come back, since we're talking about democracy, to see about the Republic, before we get to Haiti. I just want to say one thing about her fearlessness and then trace my itinerary from Paris to Haiti. And then just a word about what I was already on the way to learn. I'll talk about the American way of life, and then when we talk about Haiti, I'll talk about the Jewish tradition.

And it was 1987, November 29, 1987. She was in Pï¿½tionville lined up with others to cast their ballots. Already that summer hundreds of people in the countryside had been killed by the army, which didn't want these elections. The army that the U.S. Embassy and the U.S. government necessarily supported and believed in, and they wanted to run the country after Duvalier had been ousted.

Q: This is the FRAPH militia [Front for the Advancement and Progress of Haiti]?

NORTON: No, we're in 1987. We're not in this...it's complicated.

Q: Duvalier's army.

NORTON: Duvalier's army that ousted him, but Duvalier's army that wanted to take his place, obviously, and did for a while. And so, all of a sudden, shots rang out and a car with gunmen drove by, scattering the voters. Elsewhere, voting stations were attacked. People were killed. Dozens and dozens and dozens. The toll that day, I don't know, dozens and dozens. When you think of massacres in Rwanda or even in Iraq, it doesn't amount to much. But during the summer, hundreds and hundreds and hundreds had been killed by the army commandos, death squads, and so forth.

After, when I came back, it was a long, long trip I made around town reporting for the radio. And she was embarrassed. She said, "I didn't stand up to them." And then somebody who was there said, "You didn't stand up to them? We picked you up off the street unconscious because you ran after them with your fist raised shouting insults at them in their face and you were so intensely irate that you lost consciousness." Toto Bissainthe. Buy her records. You can still get them. So, we left Paris. Her sister - she had a sister who lived in Martinique - and there we stayed for a couple of years.

Q: OK, '79 now?

NORTON: '79 and we left for...I continued teaching English as a foreign language and getting to know Martinique. I worked on the plantations. I worked across the different class lines and color lines. I was one of the very few who knew the black population as well as the bï¿½kï¿½, descendants of the French colonists. I was sharpening my skills analyzing the society, a society rather different from the one that...

Q: The bï¿½kï¿½ is what we would call Creoles?

NORTON: Creoles, yah. And five years. And then we had friends in the Dominican Republic and that's right next to Haiti, isn't it? And then we went to the Dominican Republic to wait.

Duvalier fell too soon. The Americans pushed the army to get rid of him. Too soon for the democratic forces to mature. Maybe they never would have. Knowing them from the outside, they never had their act together. They never had any program. And later I realized to a certain extent that the Duvalierists were right. That the so-called democrats just wanted to take their place. They had no plan. They had no thought for Haiti. There was no language for a revolution that wasn't Marxist. You have to realize that. This was a political revolution. You're going from a slave society in isolation - a state that was militarized that then became a dictatorship that had at its origin slogans "liberty, equality, fraternity" and used words like "the republic" and "legal system" and all of that, but it was just a show. The state was basically an instrument of repression, repression in the service of oppression.

Q: Was it in some cases the language of the early nineteenth century?

NORTON: Yah, but, again, it's the language of whom? Whose language was it? It wasn't the language of the people. We'll get to that when we talk about the fall of Duvalier and what prospect it opened for Haiti and how I saw myself in that perspective and how the United States blinked and then blindfolded itself. Do remember, if we're talking about blinking and then blinding, I just skimmed the diary of Ronald Reagan the other day, and he talked briefly about the army ouster of president Leslie Franï¿½ois Manigat. I don't recall exactly, but in his diary, and it's in two entries, he calls him "Margrat," or something like that.

Come on. Don't excuse this sort of ignorance. No French president would make such a mistake. No French president could ever reach the height of power being so ignorant of the world. The Founding Fathers were cosmopolitan and isolationist. For going on two centuries, almost every American leader has been been provincial and all have been interventionist. So, Haiti, a dust particle in the world, close to the nose of the United States, tickling it, making it sneeze. Neither nose nor dust particle will go away. We'll talk about that. And so Duvalier fell and we crossed the border in the small plane piloted by the man who later would become Aristide's pilot.

Q: I'm going to be an annoyance here. Is there anything here we've missed from the departure from Paris to Martinique to the Dominican Republic? Anything we need to add to get you up to that date of entering into Haiti?

NORTON: Something was developing in my thinking about politics, about the complete irrelevance of Marxist thought to the development in Haiti. It forced me to turn. And it wasn't far from me - the key to a revolution in Haiti. As I said, the difficulty of the democratic movement, so-called democratic movement, to effectuate a political revolution in a country like Haiti was seriously compromised by the lack of a tradition. They didn't know how to think it through. They didn't have an eighteenth century enlightenment the way the Founding Fathers had to think it through. Even if it's mechanically. Mechanism...it's a machine, the Constitution, that's turned into an organism through wisdom, through interpretation. It came out of the eighteenth century. The background of the Haitian democratic movement was either liberal, which means non-thought. We'll have political parties and then elections and then we'll run the country. And we'll get foreign aid. Or Marxist. Now, Marxism was dying in its official form. This was in 1986. It was kept alive by Cuba and being kept alive worrying American policy makers. So maybe in a sense, American policy makers were right not to trust the democratic movement to take power. Something had to be thought through.

I looked into myself and I realized that this foreigner that was myself - foreigner in the United States because I felt so out of it - was American. And then, just jumping ahead a little, in October 1986, a couple of months after the ousting of Duvalier, I saw the army in power, with a couple of civilians who were soon ousted. The Constitution, oh, so badly written. The result of so many contradictory forces but written in the public eye. The sessions were broadcast on the radio, so something from the people's point of view came across.

Nobody expected anybody to turn out. For the election of the Constituent Assembly in October, 1986, most of the people I talked to prophesied one percent. I said, "No, no, there's something there. I think ten percent."

Thirty percent came out, and how they turned out! In white, in a rage with dignity in a country that is supposed to be anarchic (whatever thameans), and disorderly (whatever that means), lining up for hours in the hot sun dressed in ceremonial white to cast their ballot for a Constituent Assembly.

Q: October '86.

NORTON: It was in October...was it the tenth? I don't remember. October '86, yah.

Haitians do not ordinarily line up. They line up for the sacrament. They line up to vote. What we're talking about is not democracy; what we're talking about is the Republic. What is a political movement? What is politics? What is a constitution? What is the republic? What is democracy? Those were the central questions that I addressed when I crossed the border, and I guess the school was the Founding Fathers and the American way of life which I discovered to be my way. It was obviously not popcorn and the bleachers. I'm sorry. I have nothing against baseball. It's just it's not my thing. Not rock and roll. I'm a marginal person; I like jazz. I don't like violence. I don't like the arrogance. It is not so-called family values, in God we trust. As I said, I left the United States because I felt wanting in strength, unable to stick it out in the detours of the American way of life. But the American way of life is civil liberties. The American way of life is justice. The American way of life is rule of law. Respect for the individual. Allowance for difference. Belief in redemption, second chances. Not human kindness, but aren't we a short step from that?

Q: Is this an ideal or a reality as the American way of life?

NORTON: I think that in certain respects it's a reality. Obviously, at this particular junction in history, the republic may be in the last phase of the Republic. It's obvious that the signs are there. That the leaders are not, I won't say democratic, I'll say republican. They do not believe in the Republic - in the ideal of the Republic - in guaranteeing the rights of minorities, in checks and balances, and in promoting the greatest possible freedom, and insisting on accountability for acts taken.

Q: How is this different from democracy?

NORTON: Democracy is, this is Kant, democracy is a form of sovereignty. Republic is a form of government. It comes right out of Immanuel Kant. I was very struck by that. Don't confuse the two. The Republic protects democracy, but it doesn't give all power to the majority. It is a system that guarantees, or that attempts to guarantee, the greatest possible freedom and justice for all with respect for the individual. It's not about prosperity. It's about happiness.

May I just say one word about the pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness? Happiness in the eighteenth century meant virtue. And virtue meant public virtue. You have the right to be a good citizen, to pursue that ideal. The ideal of a good citizen. It's not getting high, eh? It's not 250 television channels. It's not a credit card. It's not a vacation. It's permanent. It's permanent. You pursue life, liberty, and happiness permanently. Again, happiness being public virtue. The Republic is of citizens not of consumers or producers or owners.

Q: Let's dwell on that for a minute. I think in Locke it was life, liberty, and property. I think.

NORTON: Yah.

Q: Why do you think that they took out property and put happiness?

NORTON: Because I think happiness, in Jefferson's sense, was broader. To be a citizen, you have to have the right to property. Now, what is property? You can be a socialist and believe in the right to property. A socialist community maintains property rights. Just the definition that Marx gave to capitalistic property is private ownership of public wealth. No, no, no, no, no. No private appropriation of public property. No expropriation.. No, no, no, no, no. Property: my house, my books, my ticket, my passport. Property. That's property. That's mine. Meum, tuum. That's what it is. Socialist property would prohibit private parties from owning the local electricity company, from monopolizing the air waves, from becoming the gatekeeper of the Internet, from controlling the flow of information. Excuse me! Private property is not the right of insurance companies to control the health insurance market. That's a public... Katrina did not destroy houses and streets and schools - 300,000 houses - Katrina destroyed a city. What is a city? It is a public good. It is relations between people. It is my grandmother up the street who will take care of my kids so I can go to work. I don't have flood insurance. Well, OK, really you should have thought of it but maybe you didn't have enough money.It is the responsibility of the federal government to promote the general welfare of its citizens, to ensure domestic tranquility, to secure the blessings of liberty, etc. The Preamble of the Constitution is not legally binding. But the Constitution is a means to the end the Preamble spells out. A city was destroyed in the United States of America and it is still unrehabilitated. What?! A city was destroyed, and citizenship was, too? Is this not a scandal that shouts the direct answer to your question in the face of the world? This is the Republic? Res Publica. Public good. Public thing. New Orleans was my city, too. Jazz was born there. Jazz, which, with the Constitution and the Blues, is one of the three major contributions of America to world civilization.

I hear people recommending that people who can't find jobs in New Orleans go somewhere else. 4.5 per cent unemployment nationally. What kind of inhuman idiocy is that? A city is more than its inhabitants. A sea is not a countless number owaterdrops. It is the responsibility of government officials to be their brothers' keeper, as Obama said. That is what ensures national security. We'll leave it there for today.

Q: Let's stop. This is the end of interview number one. It's Dan Whitman interviewing Mike Norton. We are September 6th, and we have ended at the point where Mike crossed the border into Haiti in 1986. We're going to take up from that point on the next interview.

Q: OK, this is the second session in Dan Whitman interviewing Mike Norton in Caguas Puerto Rico, 6th of September, 2007. Now, Mike, when we left, we had just gotten you over the border from the Dominican Republic to Haiti during a tumultuous period. Describe to us what was going on in Haiti and what took you there and what happened to you.

NORTON: It was in August. I think it was August 16, 1986. It was the day that Balaguer came to power again. I've often thought of how interesting it would be to write a book on Balaguer, Trujillo, and Franï¿½ois Duvalier. One lesson I think you can learn from Balaguer is that cynicism in politics cannot be successful in a value vacuum, in a power vacuum. Duvalier lost power. That's the son of Franï¿½ois Duvalier, Jean-Claude Duvalier - in February, exactly on the 7th of February, 1986. Every attempt since then or almost every with two exceptions have been attempts to reestablish the dictatorship. And, on each occasion, doomed to failure, whether the dictatorship did or did not have popular support, was headed by a dictator with or withoupopulace rapport.

The two exceptions that come to mind are when Supreme Court Justice Ertha Pascal Trouillot, who was a provisional president, handed over power to Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 1991 and in 2006, when the current president, Renï¿½ Prï¿½val, began his second term. His first term is a bit ambiguous - the term that took him from 1996 to 2001, since he was really bench-warming for Aristide. So it's really difficult to say whether he wanted to establish a dictatorship or not. I think he wanted to get out of it alive, which is a strange position for somebody who wants to be a dictator. He didn't want to be one. He wanted out in one piece.

Q: Later we'll ask the question: If that's what he wanted, and he always said so, then why did he run for president?

NORTON: We can get to that later, but quickly to answer your question, because Aristide wasn't there. So the regime of Franï¿½ois Duvalier was inherited by his son, Baby Doc, they called him, Jean-Claude Duvalier. I don't know why they called him Baby Doc. So idiotic. Just nicknames.

Q: Because of his pudgy face, I think.

NORTON: He was, but he didn't end pudgy. He was a good-looking guy, finally. Completely in the hands of his wife who was a grasping upstart from the, what they call petite bourgeoisie, which means not petit bourgeois but a bourgeois who is not very wealthy and who wound up air conditioning the national palace, that enormous building, that enormous birthday cake within view and smell of the slums of Port-au-Prince, the capital. Air-conditioning it so she could wear her furs. She wasted a lot of money. The slight prosperity that had begun in the 1970's after Baby Doc took power - after Jean-Claude Duvalier, excuse me, took power - frittered away when the assembly industry started collapsing.

And since 1980 until today, if I'm not mistaken, Haiti has been in a depression. A 27- year long depression. Sometimes they gain a point or two in GNP, but what does that mean. They're so far from where they were 25 or 30 years ago that it will take a long time, if ever, to regain that GNP. The regime, I think, couldn't continue. Popular discontent. Human rights movements all over the world and the United States collaborated - was a willing collaborator with the Haitian army to oust Jean-Claude Duvalier. The democratic movement, as I already said, was by and large outside and I think unfamiliar with the terrain and especially unequipped with the language - to deal with the situation. How to develop a country like Haiti. Most statistics for Haiti are unreliable. It is difficult to tell you how many people are unemployed. They say, according to the latest census, that there are eight million people. Maybe more now. We don't know how many are unemployed. Most of the people are unemployed or underemployed.

Q: The latest census was quite a long time ago, was it not?

NORTON: No, under Aristide, the last term. Most of the population is underemployed or unemployed. Underemployed means, you know, living hand to mouth. That means scuffling - going from house to house to get a bowl of rice or something, corn meal, corn mush. Most of the population is still supposedly in the countryside but it's very difficult to distinguish the countryside from the cities because it just goes back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. Most of the population is illiterate. The countryside has deteriorated. Most of the country, 95%, is a desert. The chances for recovery of this sick nation are very, very, slim. But it has gotten worse, what I have just described, this current Haiti. In 1986, it was well under way to deterioration. But the despair had turned into anger and into hope. And, to the surprise of everybody, the people didn't just accept their newly won "freedom from oppression." They took things into their own hands.

The U.S. and the Haitian military had opened a Pandora's box. Once out, the people did not want to climb back in. The powers that be underestimated their demand for a better life.

The ports that had been closed for security reasons under Duvalier were opened. A flow of used goods came to the country creating this extraordinary population of middlemen, stimulating the growth of the informal economy. Few people have gone into studying the relationship between the desire for democracy and this extraordinary free enterprise atmosphere where anybody could become a small businessman. All you needed was a little capital and you could buy your cans of Carnation and your soap, your pots and pans and your Crest and your Marlboros and you could sell them on the street corner and turn a dollar. How much do Haitians live on a day? People talk about one dollar a day. That's nonsense. There's no way of knowing, no way of converting how Haitians or what Haitians live on a day. That's nonsense. People survive and there is no monetary equivalent of survival.

You don't have any money for a week, but every day maybe you'll scrounge and get a bowl of rice at your friends'. Most people wake up hungry in Haiti. Most people are born, and this is very important, with 99% of their potentiality nipped in the bud. That is called oppression. That is not repression. Repression is political. Oppression is the situation. It's the sky falling in, falling down on your head. The sky has fallen on the head of Haitians. It is one of the most oppressive societies you can imagine. I will not go over all of the figures - the illiteracy, the death rate, the infant death rate, the maternal death rate, the AIDS. All of that, you know, goes up and down. It's a disaster. All of the wells in Haiti's main town, Port-au-Prince - metropolitan Port-au-Prince - all of them, there are about twenty of them, are polluted. People who can drink water that comes out of the earth, and there's less and less of it. And since there is no zoning, what there is of it is polluted.

Q: The supposed income figures...did the importance not change when subsistence agriculture disappeared for many people?

NORTON: I think that's another question. I don't think we have time to go into an economic history of Haiti. What is important, I think, is the relevance of statistics in a country like Haiti. The donor nations - please don't let me say international community, let's say donor nations and if I say international community please chastise me - the donor nations have to get a handle on this slippery creature. The Human Development Index tells us what? In which countries is the humanity of human beings the most and least developed? Americans are more fully human than Haitians? Speak of ethnocentrism! The UN experts cannot factor hospitality and solidarity and courage into the scores. How do you get a handle on a society? You get a handle on it by means of figures. That's all. How are we going to judge if there's any improvement? Well, that the average income has increased, say, by fifty cents or whatever is absolutely ridiculous. In Haiti, things don't function that way. I guess that would be the major theme of what I have to say about Haiti. Things don't function our way.

Q: Words matter, and your definitions up until now of republican and other things are key. What is it that is pejorative about the term, "international community?"

NORTON: A community for me is something that is close-knit, that's organic. Something more than based on interest. Shared values. History. What it's supposed to mean is an international bloc - a bloc of nations that's acting in a similar way toward Haiti. Community, for me, is very special. A community is living - it's a living tissue of relations. The donor nations act as a bloc of interests.

Q: When the so-called Friends of Haiti used to meet on a regular basis - I think it was, I'll get it wrong, Canada, EU, France, Spain, US, perhaps Mexico - how were they not behaving as a community?

NORTON: Well, their representatives may have had coffee at their meetings. It was not a coffeeklatsch. They did not represent a community. I know what a comity of nations is. I don't know what a community of nations is. I don't know what that possibly could mean. Not in today's world.

Q: So, are you saying that the various nations that have embassies in Haiti and that are donors are acting out of self-interest and failing to coordinate with...

NORTON: No, I'm not saying anything like that. I'm saying only, and we can talk about the behavior of the donor nations or international bloc. Just the word, "community," doesn't seem to me appropriate for nations. It just doesn't seem appropriate. A bloc. Friends of Haiti. When I say self-interest, I'm not talking narrowly. It's obvious that with certain exceptions, there's not much economic interest in Haiti for anybody. OK. Donor nations, friends of Haiti, etc. The international financial institutions need to get a handle on Haiti. And from the very beginning, you're dealing with a stubborn obstacle. You don't have reliable statistics.

People say that the last census was correct. I'm not sure. I'm not sure. I don't know how they did it. When people take opinion polls of Haitians, I don't know how they do it because Haitians are not used to answering questions. They're used to evading. I don't know. It has no scientific validity for me is what I'm saying. But it is a necessity for the international donors to have some way to get a handle on this country. And it has not, until this day, been able to get a handle. Willy-nilly. Either through innocence, through ignorance, or through indifference. It has not been able to. It has never read the situation correctly.

Let us begin with 1986. I arrive with Haiti in turmoil. There was enormous hope: the creation of associations forbidden under Duvalier - hundreds upon hundreds upon hundreds of associations - labor unions, neighborhood political action committees, economic groupings, you name it, farmers, youth groups, an incredible number of them - floating on the dream of economic betterment because of all of these products that are flooding into Haiti - second hand clothes, food goods of all sorts. The hope was contagious and, at unequal rates of disillusionment, doomed, either to dissipate or to be transformed into the raw material of charlatans. Uncontrolled imports of goods destroyed Haitian manufactures. Imported rice is less expensive than locally grown rice. Finally, the middleman bubble burst.

Q: Duvalier had repressed political activity. What made it possible for these groups to become visible?

NORTON: The hope that the country would change, that misery would change into prosperity.

Q: Were they taking great risks in being public?

NORTON: Not after the fall of Duvalier, although very soon on the army did begin acting repressively. In March. There were shootings in the streets. There were repressive acts. It's obvious that the army didn't want what General Namphy, who was leader at the time, called bamboche. La bamboche dï¿½mocratique - the democratic spree, wild party...

Q: N-A-M-P-H-Y.

NORTON: The wild democratic party - funfest, drunkfest - to get out of hand. Well it did get out of hand. There were enough people in Haiti - thinkers, intellectuals, politicians - who saw that the way towards a new power would be through elections in spite of the army. And so, a Constitution was written. I can't remember the exact figures, but a Constituent Assembly was elected in October 1986, by an enormous number of people in comparison to what was expected. And then when the...

Q: This was for the referendum on the Constitution.

NORTON: Yah. And then came the referendum day the 29th of March 1987 in which you had, I don't know how many people came out, certainly the majority of the Haitian electorate. And, manifesting the same order, the same respect, for one another. The same rejection of disorder and anarchy. The same quasi-religious attitude toward casting their ballots. Yes, it passed. Now, this was the new Haitian republic.

The Constitution is very badly written, as I already mentioned. Everybody can block everybody else. And it's so complicated that, for it to be fully effective, it would take forever. I don't think it's fully effective yet, because certain institutions have not yet been able to take root, local assemblies and departmental assemblies and interdepartmental assemblies. And they come up again and again and again, and there are so many elections it's maddening.

Q: True...the Permanent Electoral Council became the Provisional Electoral Council...

NORTON: Right, and there was no Provisional Electoral Council provided by the Constitution for two elections. The Provisional Electoral Counsil was for the first election, scheduled for the 29th of November 1989. Anyways, it was a mess. But it was the charter. It was a constitution, that is to say a document that designated a distribution of power that, unfortunately, in a lot of ways was short circuited.

Q: Was the military whole-heartedly behind this or were they tolerating it?

NORTON: No, they tolerated it. They never accepted it. But still I don't think they got it. They didn't get it. They were not particularly intelligent. Don't forget that subsequent dictatorships were composed of reduced factions of the army because every time one faction of the army took power, it demobilized the other. So the army was continually reduced in its capacity to govern. They didn't get it. They didn't get it. It was suicidal. But, as I said, the dictatorial tradition was so strong in Haiti and the alternative to that dictatorial power was not really apparent. So the electoral campaign began.

We're now in 1987 and we're heading toward the 29th of November 1987. Bloodshed. Bloodshed in the countryside. Hundreds of people massacred by death squads. The army with auxiliaries. The night before the 29th of November, the electoral counsel under siege canceled some elections in some of the departments but decided to go ahead with the other... How can you have partial general elections? They had a partial general election, and it ended, of course, in blood at the polls.

Q: Referendum March 29th, general election November 29th. Is that correct?

NORTON: Right, and then Henri Namphy holding power and new elections were called for January 1988.

Q: So what was the announced result for the so-called general elections?

NORTON: There was none. They were canceled. No election. It was the end of the great naivetï¿½. It was the end of the massive, massive, spontaneous, joyous movement toward a new world. It wasn't a coup de grace. It was a kick in the stomach.

In Haiti, I wept twice: the 29th of November when I came back from the house of a politician who was running for president and he was already working with the military and I understood it was over.

The second time was in the year 2000, April 3rd, year 2000, when the radio director, opinion maker in the camp of Rene Prï¿½val and, at one time of Aristide, Jean Dominique, was assassinated. Jean Dominique is another story. But there are so many stories, I don't know that I'll ever have time to talk about Jean Dominique and why I wept when he was assassinated. It's not the same thing. Jean Dominique was, however, the leader of the free speech movement in the early '70's. He took Jean Claude's liberalization at his word and pushed for a democratic regime. He was a pioneer of the political revolution in Haiti. I wept because the tradition was cut. And the hope was cut. It was all over for me. There was not a glimmer of hope.

But Jean Dominique's own relationship to power was anything but clear. In early 2000, Jean Dominique was turning from Aristide. He was becoming critical. It was a heroic moment; it was a moment of heroism, in my opinion. I think he was so proud, he didn't realize he was courting death. I don't think he believed he was. But he had turned against the man he had believed he could influence. His belief was very misguided and very harmful to the country, but that's the way it is. He died heroically.

Q: Skipping around a moment, could we discuss the language of threats, both by gesture and through innuendo in the local language, Creole, that makes people's intentions clear among nations and which seems to obscure those intentions to outsiders.

NORTON: Well, that's part of the character of this country, which is not just different from the countries that are donor nations but distinct. It has to do with another kind of culture. It has to do with how this country, in which the human rights movement was born more than two hundred years ago, has survived. The French revolution brought liberty, equality, and fraternity to everyone except blacks. And Haitians said no to that when Napoleon, in 1803, decided to reestablish slavery. And this French-trained army, with its French ideals but with its Haitian interests, defeated the French army, the strongest army in the world, through superior soldiering.

People say, "No, it's not true. The French soldiers were sick - had yellow fever." On the other hand, I reply the yellow fever mosquito was Haitian and was enlisted in the Haitian army to defeat these foreign troops. I'm not joking. The sand of Iraq is on whose side? The jungles of Vietnam were on whose side? War isn't just people and guns. It's also place. Haiti defeated France to make the French words a reality - liberty, equality, fraternity - well, not exactly. The Haitian generals militarized Haiti. They installed a perfect imitation of the French masters. No, an imperfect imitation. For whatever evil slavery represented, it was a means of production. It did make people and countries very wealthy. The re-imposed lack of freedom in Haiti did not make people very wealthy. It was squandering. It was ostentation. It was madness. It made it impossible finally for Haiti to transform itself from an agrarian to an agrarian industrial society.

Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, Haiti has been cursed with fewer and fewer resources, less and less forest cover with more and more despair, with weaker institutions, etc. Now...

Q: Well it wasn't as rich as before. The first few decades of the nineteenth century Haiti retained a relative wealth. Was this just inherited from the previous system? Also, that they remained wealthy and, in fact, conducted conquest.

NORTON: Now that's in 1822. That's another part of Haitian history. That is the imperial design of the early Haitian generals to unite Hispaï¿½ola. Haiti had, I believe, the largest standing army in the western hemisphere in the early part of the nineteenth century and was considered a threat to the security of the United States which did not recognize Haiti until, I believe, after the Civil War. I think the great Frederick Douglass was the first U.S. ambassador to Haiti, and I am generally sparing of the use of the word, "great."

Q: Now since we're in history for a moment, what was the role of Haiti in permitting the U.S. to acquire Louisiana? Much has been said about this. There've been some simplistic things. Napoleon lost his re-supply center. Therefore, he became discouraged... I know it's much more complicated than that.

NORTON: Well, let's come back instead to your original question about the language and the otherness of Haiti. This is a country that was founded by an uprising of slaves. This is an uprising of slaves. It is the only verifiable example of a successful slave uprising in the history of humanity. The other successful one may or may not have been historical. That is the one that is recorded in Exodus in the Bible. It has been an inspiration down the ages.

The Haitian example was not nothing. This was an achievement that should put Haiti on the map and in the schoolbooks of all students of world history. I'm just looking at a History of the World, by J. M. Roberts. The importance of Haiti in the movement toward equality is not spoken of. World history books don't talk about that. French education doesn't talk about that, and, of course, in the United States it's little known. The American black community is so alienated from its roots. Haiti was not unimportant. On the contrary, it was a great event in the history of the human spirit. It degenerated. It deteriorated. The lack of insight of its leaders. They didn't understand that the French masters were not just cruel slave drivers; they were also makers of wealth, creators of wealth. It didn't just go to spoliation. It built cities in France. The slave trade built Liverpool. Sugar built Nantes in France. How much wealth? A very important amount went to the construction of European civilization on the backs of the slaves. In Hispaï¿½ola, the richest country I think in the world at that time, it was the most productive of wealth. Then the country withdrew into itself. It was the victim of an international boycott.

The ideal of the republic, institutions that guarantee rights and demand/enforce obligations, for the new leaders of Haiti, all of that was just western BS - trappings of western civilization. Continuing the tradition - that is a safe tradition - shucking and jiving. You pretend you're Western. You've got the Republic. You've got this literature and music and art and all of that. You've got a court. You've got an emperor. You've got a king, whatever you have. You speak French. But, in fact, you don't believe a word of what you're saying, but you're really good at convincing the other person that you're on their side.

Whereas the country operates according to another set of criteria altogether. Vodou - the Vodou religion, the Vodou culture - dominates the spirit of everybody in Haiti whether he be bourgeois or peasant. You don't have to practice it. It's a way of being in the world. It's a mode of being in the world different from our mode of being in the world. It implies another conception of causation. It implies another way of conceiving of life and death. Of what is divine, what is sacred and what is not. Of how you speak, when you speak, what you speak, when you speak, who you are. Another conception of individuality. Another conception of collectivity.

Haiti is Carnival. The soul of Haiti today is in Carnival where once a year individuals meld into this extraordinary creature. I say creature because when you're part of a hundred thousand people moving, you don't know which way, you lose control. You lose your mind. You become part of another body and that body's the collective body in which you participate in a form of communion in Carnival. You're recharged. Now whether Carnival is taking place or not, it's there. The so-called disorder of Haiti is the disorder of a Carnival which is not anarchy, which is not even disorder. It's another kind of order, another way of setting things to rights. Haiti sets things to rights in a way which is different from how Western countries set things to rights. Western countries set things to rights with laws, rules and regulations, obligations. You know, rules of the road, even rules of thumb...unequivocal language.

It is the language I've been trying to speak to you in, succeeding or failing, but I'm not trying to hoodwink you. I'm trying to make myself understood. Myself understood, that's a mouthful. Who am I to make myself understood? A Haitian makes Haiti understood when he speaks, and when you try to make something like that, a Carnival, understood, you don't know whether you're coming or going. There is no guarantee that the language you are hearing is unequivocal. I'm not saying it's not unequivocal, but there's no reason to believe that it's not equivocal. The faces are masked, the masks are faces, the faces are masks. You don't know. You don't know if people are telling you the truth because truth is not a value in itself. It's instrumental. Truth is instrumental. It furthers my cause - survival, power, whatever. That's what truth is.Truth is not transcendent. Truth is pragmatic. So lies are estimable if they're successful. You never know.

I could give you hundreds of examples - politics, daily life, wherever you wish. Haiti by definition to Western eyes is always wrong. Haitians have to set things to rights in a hostile world, a world that arrogates the right to call Haiti to account. They have to set up a false front because they are unacceptable to the standard bearers of Western civilization. Haitians do not believe that the world likes them. They're probably right. It becomes a little megalomaniac: "We were the first black republic," etc. "We whipped the ass of Napoleon's army." We, we, we, but that was two hundred years ago.

Few Haitians know or care to know about nineteenth-century Haitian history. And the founding fathers of Haiti are mythological figures. That's normal because that's the kind of being Haiti is, legendary.You speak in public. You are overheard. Now my parents spoke in Yiddish. They knew they were overheard, but they didn't know they were understood. Haitians make themselves understood to foreigners in French. Haitians - in the apparatus called the state, with its judicial system and foreign relations-speak French. Yet only a small fraction of the Haitian people speaks French, a smaller fraction fluently, correctly. Everyone speaks Creole, which is not bastardized French but an example of a new language family. New, that is to say five hundred years old, called Creole. We have Creoles - English Creoles, Dutch Creoles, Papamiento, Talkie-talkie. We have Portuguese Creole. We have French Creoles. In the Caribbean, French Creole and its dialects, its versions. It's spoken by, I don't know, tens of millions of people. That's a hell of a lot of people. It's not a bastardized version of French. It uses old French words. It's not a mixture of African dialects and French. Its origin is in a contact situation where you have slaves who speak a variety of languages, and a slave-holding class. And they have to get together. They have to talk among themselves. It's a pidgin that becomes a mother tongue.

So everyone in Haiti speaks Creole. OK. I could speak Creole to a Creole speaker and be overheard by a foreigner. I could, but it would be like my parents speaking Yiddish. Nothing guarantees that the foreigner doesn't understand my language. I understand Creole. Missionaries, and there are thousands of them coming down to convert the heathen, understand Creole very well. What do I do to ensure that, overheard, I am not understood? I speak in code. Everybody understands that it's Creole, but not everybody understands the meaning of the words. You have to be prepared psychologically, culturally to capture it. This kind of language, this coded language, is the language of an in-group which is under threat of destruction by an out-group. In Haiti, what's awful, of course, is that the out-group is, to a certain extent, interiorized by the in-group. I could give you some examples if you like.

I'll give you one example. On the 29th of February, 2004, Aristide was forced into exile at gunpoint, figurative or real. We can go a little into what I think is the background of that later. What we're talking about now is a country that uses one language to speak to the foreigner, and another to itself. And it can, in its use of language, have its cake and eat it too, communicate and subvert communication simultaneously.

Aristide said he signed his prepared resignation, and then went off. And then later said, "I was kidnapped." Now, there is an already well-known use of the word "kidnapped." Now I don't understand why the ears of people didn't perk up when they heard that word, "kidnap." How inappropriate. I don't enter into the question of whether he left willingly or not, whether he is a courageous person or a coward, whether he accepted the invitation to leave or was carried onto the airplane. I don't know. I wasn't there. Kidnapped? He was exiled. He was banished. He was expelled. He was forced out. He was overturned. He was humiliated. He was an awful lot of things, but he wasn't kidnapped. And nobody said, "What is he talking about? Is he nuts?" No, he's kidnapped. Take it at face value, kidnapped. This is a code word. You recognize it as a code word because it stands out.

When Aristide, after a visit abroad, comes home and congratulates the people who were in his absence keeping the peace. When the people who were keeping the peace, that is to say the so-called popular organizations, ruffians, his hirelings, when they had just killed nine people in various raids... I mean, wait a minute. Thank you very much. Keeping the peace? Well, peace is a code word. It's used in a different way. Lavalas. Marvelous use of the word Lavalas. Lavalas is the name of his movement. Lavalas in Creole is a flash flood. The rain falls and there are no trees and there's no vegetation. It fills up a ravine and rushes torrentially carrying everything before it. Nothing can withstand it. And the next morning it leaves detritus in the streets. It leaves behind a terrible mess - dead dogs, dead cattle, dead babies, houses, doors, garbage. That's a lavalas.

How to turn that into something positive. He said he wanted to point out that the people is an unstoppable force, but he gave it away, didn't he? He gave it away for those who had ears to hear. Now, poor America, poor international community - a community of ignorance - couldn't understand that. It's not important. It's only language. He says hell on earth is going to rain in Haiti. The toilets are going to overflow, and it's going to leave a terrible mess. This is nihilism. Trouble is on the way. That's what he said.

Q: "Ba-yo sa yo merite."

NORTON: That's something else. That's understatement. That's not the coded word. When he came back from the UN after insulting the Pope basically calling him a racist and got wind of the coup d'ï¿½tat, which he didn't believe because Haitian leaders seldom believe the worst. They believe that they're unmovable objects. He gave a speech telling the people to be alert, that something is afoot and ba-yo sa yo merite means "Give them what they deserve." And then he went on into a kind of ecstatic extolling of the order of burnt tires, how sweet a smell it was. OK. It's understatement. He's telling them to take charge of their revolution and, if necessary, execute the enemies of the people with flaming tires.

Q: Now there's a lot of controversy over that phrase. I think that you either recorded it, or... There are some people who claimed he never said it.

NORTON: OK. I'll tell you one thing. First of all, he said it. I heard it. But let me tell you, as forewarned as I was having been involved in Haitian affairs since 1972 and then having lived and worked day after day in Haiti since 1986. In 1991 when he gave that speech - that's 20 years after my venture into Haitian affairs - when he gave that speech, I reported it. And I didn't give that sentence in my report. I didn't say that he said, "Give them what they deserve. How sweet is the odor of flaming tire necklaces," because I didn't believe I had heard it. I had censored myself unconsciously because I couldn't believe, literally, I couldn't believe my ears. No, he could not have meant what he said. What did he say, then? What did he mean? He didn't mean ba-yo sa yo merite was that the enemies of the people deserve to be reeducated or something like that, that the sweet smell is of church incense. He said what he meant. I couldn't believe my ears. He was speaking unequivocally.

Let's come back to ransom. I will come back to kidnapping because, for me, it is his last masterpiece - I'm not talking about his subsequent speeches on New Year's Day which have been interpreted variously - I think it's just so perfect. So perfect, first of all, because it's a code word. Second of all, because no one, outside the circle of those it concerns, got it. Not his supporters, the Randall Robinsons of this world. (Hazel Robinson, his wife, was on Aristide's payroll.) In good faith or bad, defenders of Aristide behaved as though his use of the word "kidnap" is in no way bizarre.

To be kidnapped means what? Gangsters spirit you away. You are sequestered. A ransom is demanded of those who care for you. A ransom is paid. If the ransom is not paid, suffering will occur. If the leader identifies himself with Haiti, as Aristide does and says so many times, who is kidnapped? What is kidnapped? Haiti is kidnapped. And if its leader is not returned safely soon, suffering will occur. How strange the rash of kidnappings that occurred after his "kidnapping." "I was kidnapped." People who know how to listen hear. If you don't know how to listen, you don't hear. Who cares?I tried in my Associated Press reports to mention something about this double language. Nobody seems to have picked it up.

I was in Haiti from 1986, first a reporter for one of Haiti's main radio stations. I had an evening program that began as, quite simply, a review of the headlines for the English-speaking community that I translated from the newsroom. I learned how to be a reporter there, and then I started getting ambitious. And then I realized since it was 10 o'clock and the owners did not mind, I could do whatever I wanted. And so I started thinking and I started doing. And every night I broadcast what I called "The Evening Chronicle" where, for 45 minutes or longer I just went on and on. I tied in all of the events of the day and tried to explain what the political revolution in Haiti was.

Q: This is a crucial part of this interview - how you developed as a commentator, as an observer. Let's close the chapter on the theme of double language. The question I've been wanting to ask: is it double or is it multiple? Do Haitians understand this type of innuendo and do most foreigners just misunderstand? Or is it the type of language that has a multitude of different meanings even to Haitian listeners?

NORTON: Remember what I said, I never know what the other person thinks because, don't forget, this is a country under the shadow of slavery. Do slaves tell you what they really think? Freed slaves tell you what they think when they have the paranoiac, or not necessarily paranoiac, impression that slavery's going to be re-imposed? When the country's militarized and there's no law and there's no recourse for justice? When the truth leaves you vulnerable to the malignity of your neighbor? Why should they tell you what they think? I used to get very angry at my bosses who would come down and would walk with me and would say, "Ask that woman what she thinks." Why would she tell me what she thinks?

So I don't know. I know that some of my friends agreed with me. Some of my Haitian friends who, at that particular moment were transparent in their discussion with me. Others were prudently quiet, which I interpreted as agreement. Others no. And, so far as the international / donor nations are concerned, they didn't get it at all.

Q: The question is, did most or all Haitians get it when these equivocal words were given - the word, "kidnapping," the word, "I love the smell of tires or the smell of..."

NORTON: Again, what does it mean, "to get?" If somebody else is in the room while I'm speaking to you and I say, "Get up," and I look at you, you'll get up. The other person will not get up. Does that mean that other person didn't get what I said? Well, yes and no. I directed my words to you. When he said kidnapping, he was speaking to his followers. He wasn't speaking to the people at large. He wasn't speaking to people elsewhere. He figured cleverly enough that his supporters abroad would take it as a colorful synonym for ousted, manhandled and forcibly ousted.

Q: Now he said, "Please keep the peace," when he went to Quebec in the year 2001...

NORTON: Absolutely to his followers. People didn't even pay attention to him by the end.

Q: When you say people: outsiders?

NORTON: No, in Haiti. The myth of Aristide's popularity is worth discussing, too. Aristide was swept into power in a 1991 landslide. Unfortunately we don't know how many people voted. I myself criticize myself for not perking up my ears because I'm a formalist. When we get to talk about the Constitution, we can talk about that. I was not faithful to my principles. I should not have said he was elected. I should have said he was swept to power by a plebiscite. In an election you count votes. An election respects the individual. Every vote counts. It's not true in fact, but morally every vote counts. Every vote is counted whether it counts or not. Every vote is counted. That means I, who cast that ballot, count. I am a citizen like you. I'm poorer than you, but I'm just like you. I'm equal. Hey, equality. And that gives us, at that moment, liberty. Maybe not at other times but...OK. Not to count the ballots, not to be able to count the ballots, is an infringement of my individual rights. To accept it saying well, "You know, Haiti is a country that has no democratic tradition. It's better than nothing, and he won, didn't he?" The American political establishment was completely blind, deaf, dumb, blind, lame, quadriplegic, lobotomized in 1991. They foresaw the victory of Marc Bazin, former World Bank project officer, Mr. Clean, etc. He was really presentable.

He was a priest - Aristide was not a parish priest - he was a priest, he was a Salesian father who gave these fantastic sermons - participative sermons. He was absolutely spellbinding, with his gifted use of language. Unfortunately the United States put their money on Bazin the way they put their money on the army in 1987, not foreseeing for one moment that, hey, with the fall of Duvalier, you opened the ports, you opened the floodgates. And you not only opened the doors of prosperity, relative prosperity, but of hope, of a heretofore obstructed future. Hope in a country that is oppressed means freedom. A country of slaves that has been humiliated. You are opening Pandora's box. You don't want Pandora's box opened.? Well, you don't get rid of Duvalier, or do something else. I don't know. But if you do open Pandora's box, judge whether or not you can co-opt whoever comes out. What was sad, tragic, pathetic was that it had been and would have been possible to co-opt those fugitives from despair.

There was nothing socialist, let alone communist, in the movement for Haitian democracy. Nothing was more foreign to it. The Soviet Union was already going to collapse. What was this fear? And so a normal transition from a dictator to a dictatorial army formed, by the way, trained by the United States in the 19 years of its occupation on the model of the Marine Corps. These are the people that are going to provide the transition to democracy? The Marines?

Anyway, that was the American policy, of course. Warned as they were by some journalists that the coup d'ï¿½tat reaction would occur in 1987, they didn't listen. Or perhaps they didn't care. Or perhaps they didn't know. Or perhaps they wanted it. I'm talking about the Americans. In 1991, it was a different story. Aristide was a different kettle of fish, in my opinion. Also co-optable, but you had to understand him. You had to want to understand him. Is it important to understand if you formulate policy? They didn't understand. So, Marc Bazin was going to win hands down.

I remember Jimmy Carter coming down and he was worried because Aristide, after all, was a rabble rouser. Now, Jimmy Carter believed, I believe, that Aristide was losing, but that he had enough supporters to cause a great deal of damage to the country. And in his own peanut farmer way, he went and talked to Aristide. This was marvelous. This set up a belief that never disappeared. Because Aristide interpreted Jimmy Carter's plea to him that he be peaceful. That when he loses he not unleash the hordes. It was a plea. And Aristide, of course, since every word is in a double language, took it as a threat. Nobody understands anybody. I believe that Jimmy Carter spoke unequivocally. I believe it was a plea. He had been misinformed. Aristide won. I will never forget that. Thousands and thousands and hundreds of thousands of people - poor, middle class, wealthy, black, not-so-black, mulatto - everybody, almost everybody, voted for Aristide in 1991 and it was clear why.

Why wasn't it clear why to the Americans? You have to ask them, but I have two or three ideas. Let's take the...without ascribing evil intentions. The U.S. comes into a weird country. It's the other side of the looking glass. The sentence does come before the trial. I mean, off goes their head. It really is that way. Who's going to tell you the truth about such a country? What they call in French interlocuteur valable. What would it be in English?

Q: A credible interlocutor.

NORTON: An "interlocutor" is a character in a minstrel show...

Q; An informant.

NORTON: A credible one. So, who are credible informants? I'm an American. Simon Pure. I go to talk to ministers of the protestant churches. I talk to bishops of the Catholic church. I talk to leading representatives of the business community, especially them. I talk to some politicians who present well, rub shoulders with civilization. Americans abroad do not know who they are talking to, because they do not know who they are. An American abroad is an American, whatever his or her color. When you're in the United States, the diversity of Americans is enormous. A black American is an American but he's quite different from the Amish of Pennsylvania. You put an Amish in Haiti or a black American in Haiti, they'd be the same. Haitians call foreigners blancs, white men. It doesn't mean white color; it means foreigner. But it also means white. So what you get in Haiti when you get, for example, an African American diplomat, is a white black man.

And I'll tell you a story later, the funniest one I remember, about a white black man of renown. Who do you talk to to get a hold on this crazy country? We talk to business people. Of course, these business people invested in Marc Bazin's campaign. He was an absolute shoo-in. Now I covered the beginning of Marc Bazin's campaign in 1991. I knew Marc Bazin personally.

Q: You'd been sending material to the AP for how long?

NORTON: Well, I began at AP with the coup d'ï¿½tat against Leslie "Margrat," remember? And then shortly after, I was with the BBC and gave these pundit performances. But Toto Bissainthe was somebody and because of her, I knew everybody. I knew many politicians already in Paris. People who became heads of parties I already knew. I had relations with them, so I was introduced, I guess as no other journalist was, I was introduced in the bourgeoisie, in the political class, and since I chose to live in poor quarters, in slums, after the death of Toto in 1994, I knew the people, too. I knew everybody. So...

Q: You were covering...

NORTON: Yah, the send-off of Bazin's campaign was another example, too, of this other world we're talking about - this Alice in Wonderland sort of thing. It was in St. Marc, his hometown, I believe. There I was in the town square. There were so few people, I said, "I'm not even going to cover this." Bazin doesn't exist. A buddy came up to me and said, "How many people do you think are here?" I said two thousand, I don't know. People were hanging out of the windows. Do we call them down "participants"? I don't know. They live here. Have they come to see Marc Bazin? I was overheard, but before I left, just to make a test, I asked one of Marc Bazin's supporters, "How many people do you see here? How many people have turned up for the opening rally of Marc Bazin's presidential campaign?" He looked around and said, "Seventeen thousand."

OK. They were very mad at me. Marc Bazin didn't speak to me for a year and a half because of that. I didn't even do an article on the rally. But the figure got into the radio station where I used to work because of my buddy who asked me how many people I saw there and because people trusted me.

Another thing, I used to have this little gadget from Radio Shack because I used to always measure. You press a button and it'll tell you how many meters to the nearest wall. So what I would do is I would measure and then I would multiply by the number of people I estimated per square meter. And when the reporters saw me with this machine, they thought it was a counting machine. So they believed me because I had the technology which could give them an exact figure. Eh? Wonderland? Where objects are magical? Where numbers are emotional vehicles? Numbers are alive? And if you say it's not 17,000, you are guilty of attempted assassination.

Q: Did you say two thousand?

NORTON: I said two thousand, and my buddy picked it up. And other stations picked it up, and, what do you know, it's two thousand. But they knew it was me because they overheard me on the plaza because I was so silly, so naï¿½ve, and I never shut my mouth in Haiti, even during the coup d'ï¿½tat. I never shut my mouth. I was fearless. I didn't care, but I did care. I was hurt, personally hurt. But I was in Wonderland. How can you have any right to be personally hurt since your person doesn't exist? You're different. It's different. You don't exist in the same way. The last experience I had in Haiti was when Aristide was ousted for the second time, and there were these demonstrations organized by the bourgeoisie and utilizing students and pseudo students, etc.

Q: We're now in 2003, I think.

NORTON: 2003 and 2004. Aristide was very repressive. There were clashes between his thugs and this group of people. Their slogan to oust Aristide was - it's difficult to translate, but basically - grenn nan bounda. The English equivalent would be, "If you got balls, prove it." I found that not charming. Aristide had perverted the hopes of the Haitian people into a racket to keep them in poverty and to enrich his buddies and himself. He was an obscurantist. He sat on the throne of truth and he used it as a cuckstool, if you know what that is. That's the worst you can do. That is evil. He enjoyed the suffering of others. That is evil, for evil is not doing my pleasure. It's preventing you from enjoying yours. And that's what Aristide did. That's why he was evil. Evil. He perverted the last, best hope of Haiti. "If you've got balls, prove it." I thought that it was necessary to oust him. He was not an elected president in the year 2000 as he was in the year 1991. The elections were basically controlled. He lied about the results. He was an illegitimate president. There was no reason not to oust and it was necessary for the political health of the body politic to oust this poison but not "if you've got balls, prove it." I found...

Q: That was the slogan of those who sought to oust him.

NORTON: Exactly, my friends thought...my friends...I didn't have any friends by now. By now I had lost almost all of my friends because there was unanimity for Aristide in 1991 in spite of his very early deviation from the Constitution. I protested on television. I don't know what gave me the idea of doing that, but I was one of five or six people who criticized Aristide publicly. Everybody was afraid before the coup d'ï¿½tat. All of the others were for the coup d'ï¿½tat. I was the only one who wasn't because he was elected. There were other ways to do it. Aristide was furious with me. It was only the intervention of my friend and sponsor, Antoine Izmery, that saved my neck in Haiti.

So in the year 2003 and 2004, I thought that the repression in Haiti required something else, not "if you've got balls, prove it." It's just violence. It's just machismo. And at times the students were as violent as the others. It was violence, violence, violence when the only thing that can save Haiti is respect for the law and respect for the individual. Violence, violence, violence.

OK, so get rid of them and do what? Are you prepared? Are you better prepared than your predecessors to turn this miserable savanna desert into an inhabitable region of the earth? Are you prepared? Do you know a way to bring hope to these peoplwhich is not founded, as Aristide's was, on thievery? One thing often forgotten by Aristide's defenders: Aristide supported the pyramidal scheme of banking which destroyed the savings of I don't know how many millions of people and filled the coffers of people who knew enough to get out soon. Aristide, from the presidential chair, supported this.

Q: 2002, I think.

NORTON: Yah. So I lost their friendship. And what really sealed it, of course, first of all, I was opposed to Aristide in 1991 and everybody who was in favor of Aristide believed I was for the coup d'ï¿½tat. And then during the coup d'ï¿½tat, since I reported faithfully all of the misadventures of the army, the army thought I was trying to get them ousted. Because I'm not just a reporter. I'm a political activist. But, in fact, when I came to Haiti, I didn't have to be a political activist. All I had to do was tell the truth. Every enunciation was a denunciation. All I had to do was say how things were. That's what I did. So Aristide believed I had sold out to the military. The military believed I had sold out to Aristide. It was not too pleasant, but the taboos that maintained a certain cultural order prevented me from getting killed.

Q: And the count of the people...

NORTON; So I come back. Now, we're going to get rid of Aristide. And then I didn't quite agree with the grenn nan bounda, "If you've got balls, show it." I started counting the demonstrators. Now I know how to estimate the size of a demonstration. You take the number of people per square meter, which varies depending on how fast they're moving. If they're standing still, it can be two, three even if it's really like in an elevator. Generally, most police forces in the world will tell you that it's one and a half person per square meter, and you multiply that by the square meters of the distance traveled. I mean at any one time. How long is and how wide is the demonstration and then you get a figure. And then if it's two thousand five hundred, you say around two thousand five hundred. Now, when I said it was around two thousand five hundred, they said it was around sixty thousand. And since I was the AP and I was the BBC and I was the most read reporter in Haiti, most widely read, it went from bad to worse. Finally, I would stand on the street corner as the demonstration went by and count them one by one. And, of course, it was like running the gauntlet standing still. They were running but I was receiving the gauntlet. Death threats, insults, spat upon, pushed. It was an experience that was at one and the same time the most inglorious and glorious I had in Haiti. I was a hero and nobody knew it except me.

Q: In favor of what?

NORTON: The Republic cannot exist without truth. There is no human betterment without respect for the truth. Without striving for the truth, you cannot strive for the betterment of man. In a society of lies, of violence, of inherited inferiority where everybody is suffering from post traumatic stress syndrome, face the truth, tell the truth no matter what the cost. The republic needs the truth. It will flounder without the truth.

And so, that was my own. Of course, it's completely romantic or idealistic, however, I don't know. You can call it what you want, but for me, I was defending the last sputtering wick, the dream of a Haitian republic. Of course, what happened? As every time, when Aristide fell, a new regime took over. Corrupt - with the worst elements from all the past regimes. Of course. Corrupt, violent, no justice, no prosperity, nothing, no prospects. And then along came Prï¿½val and that's another story.

Q: Fifteen years previous, you described yourself as a political activist. You had certain objectives. You transformed into another type of person or creature. If I understand, you did not do what you did in the name of activism but truth. Were your objectives the same?

NORTON: Yes, I think so. Of course, the anti-capitalist struggle was a pretty big thing and it was another ambition which was absolutely unrealizable. And I was a Westerner. I didn't feel bad about participating in French politics. I didn't feel bad about that. It's the same capitalism. But in Haiti, Haiti's on another planet almost. It has its own specificity; but, also, Haiti is in the avant-garde of the capitalist disaster, a dump for the superfluous, the unwanted, its soil and its soul eroded. How could I be a political activist? It didn't make any sense, accord with my former understanding of political activism. I was a political activist for what I call the republic or the political revolution of Haiti, yes, but all I had to do was tell the truth. I didn't have to take arms or paste posters or propagandize for a party. I didn't have the inclination either. All I had to do was report.

Q: When you say you were opposed to capitalism, the reader of this text will form some impressions. They will have a sense of what that means. Do you want to answer the questions that these people...?

NORTON: Sure. Look, it's the system that governs, and has governed, the world for hundreds and hundreds of years. In my opinion, communist China, communist Russia, Stalinist Russia were variants of capitalism. Capitalism tried them out and found them wanting. Same with fascism. Tried it out and found it wanting. Imperialism still remains. Colonialism still remains. They're still working. The limits which capitalism doesn't recognize are not causing capitalism to collapse because of global warming. Not yet. Capitalism is the economic, social, political, cultural system that reigns, and it secures security for the rich and insecurity for the impoverished and the impoverishable.Capitalism lays waste to old worlds to build a new world in its image. It lays waste to lives, it produces mass migrations, a dead end for millions, garbage dumps. In our day, the truly Utopian demand, a demand the system cannot satisfy, would be full employment. The insecurity in the United States is a case in point. The job insecurity is terrible in the United States. 47 million people don't have health insurance. What is this? Katrina destroys a city of over a million people and it's still in ruins? Capitalism is for the profit of the few. It's private ownership of the public means of production. That's what it is. It's exploitation. Everybody knows what it means to be exploited. For the moment, we seem to have no alternative. We have certain ways of diminishing its negative aspects. Perhaps, I don't know, we can never get beyond that. Perhaps we can never move into a world system where exploitation will not be the rule, where private ownership will only be of private things. Perhaps not, I don't know. It's too big of a question for me, but I bet on it: it is my secular version of Pascal's wager. Why else should I give this interview?.

Q: Am I oversimplifying if I say you were an activist at one point? You became an observer at a later point. What is the role of an observer in hoping that things will evolve in a positive way? Does an observer become involved in those events or separate?

NORTON: Well, in Haiti, it was really most special because I had a calling card. I was the representative of The Associated Press and BBC in Haiti, the two biggest news-gathering organizations in the world. I was somebody. Wow. One time, we were threatened - the news wire services - of being expelled. Once. Called in by the information minister. I think it was during the coup d'ï¿½tat. Fuck you, basically we said. I didn't care. I knew they wouldn't do it.

Q: Do what? Take you do the airport?

NORTON: Yah, because it'd be worse. I mean it'd be worse for them. And at least they knew who I was. And they knew I was fair even though they didn't like it. You're implicated in events when you're reporting. I was there at the massacres. I was shot at. Nobody could tell me bullets weren't flying because they shot at me. Nobody could tell me that it wasn't true. I was there. I talked to the people. I talked to the army. I had contacts all over - in the army, among the thugs, among the killers, among the victims. I was everywhere. I tried to be everywhere. I felt the extremities of the country in my fingers and my toes. I was there. I was implicated. And I spoke. And I wrote it.

Q: Was anybody not a thug?

NORTON; Yah, a lot of decent people.

Q: Were there any political formations who were not thugs?

NORTON: Yah, yah, but they all had a tendency. I'm not talking about individuals; I'm talking about the political parties. They all had a tendency to thugdom because none of them really respected the Constitution. By respecting the Constitution, that is respect the idea of the Constitution. You have to have law and order. Haiti was the only place I have ever been where law and order was a left-wing demand, not a right-wing one as it usually is. Law and order, respect the individual, respect his rights, follow the rules, let them be transparent, let them be posted, and let those who infringe be punished. Is that so hard to understand? I was there. I was everywhere. I was implicated in all the events because I wrote about them every day. I made Haiti known to the world for almost twenty years. I was able.

I was finally evacuated from Haiti because of bad health. We can come back to that and talk about the American embassy. And I had sources in the national palace. I was evacuated to the hospital in Jamaica. From Jamaica, I called the office to tell them that Aristide was being ousted. I did. Two hours before anyone else. That's how embedded I was in reality. To be a reporter in a country, you have to be embedded in the country. You cannot come in and find your credible informants. You can't. It's an art. It's not so much a science. You feel the country or you don't feel the country. You know you can trust this person and you can't trust that. You feel that something bad is coming or you don't feel it. Now, there is a slight decline in insecurity in Haiti. I know how it works. The editor says, "What can we say about Haiti today? I have to say something." "Well, there is a slight decline." "Oh, OK!" "Haitians breathe free after two years of violence," headline.

Come on now. You don't understand the country if you believe that headline. Thugdom takes a breather. Thugs take a breather. They go underground. They wait until, you know, the heat's off and then they come back because the causes of their thuggery have not been eradicated. Why should the thugs be eradicated? Sure, they lose some of their people, but the number of thugs is legion in Haiti because despair and desperation and despondency are deep and deepening, because the traditional value system has been knocked out of whack. That's the kind of news you get out of Haiti. Haitians breathe free after two years, etc. And the U.N. applauds itself. They've done it. They have done it. They have caused the respite, thank goodness. But it's a respite. Nothing has been done in Haiti to change its destiny, which is self-destruction, annihilation. Aristide was a nihilist. He wanted his country poor. He told an Inter-American Development Bank representative, "Please Sir, don't take away our poverty. It's our dignity." Quote unquote. "Please, Sir. Do not take away our poverty. It is our dignity. It is our strength."

Q: When observing events, did it sometimes happen that you wished for an outcome other than the one that you saw? And if so, what was happening inside you as a professional? Example: in counting the people on the streets, you gave an accurate count. Would you have wished on that day that those who said sixty thousand had been correct?

NORTON: I guess this will tie into your other question. My implication. It's true I wasn't a journalist like other journalists. There was a certain militant aspect to me. I talked to people. I tried to reason with them. I mean, I gave my point of view. You're not supposed to do that, are you? To give your point of view. I talked to leaders and said, "What the hell is this? 'You've got balls, prove it.' This has to have dignity. This has to have meaning. This has to have a future."

"You've got balls, prove it" doesn't mean anything. I would talk. It didn't affect my reporting. I would like to believe so. I mean, who knows. Listening to my voice on this interview, I don't recognize it, so maybe I'm deluding myself. I would talk to everybody. I talked to everybody, and to the extent that I thought there was a possibility to be heard, I would give my opinion. And my reason, not my opinion. I hate opinions. You have an argument. You have a reason to believe what you believe. If you have reason to believe what you believe, it's not an opinion.

I believe that Mitt Romney will be the candidate. Why do I believe that? It's an opinion. I have no idea why I believe that. Maybe because he's a corporate man, because he looks clean, because he hasn't made any extraordinary mistakes.Maybe if I look, I could justify that but that's just rationalization. It's an opinion. If I give a reason, if I say, for example, there's no fundamental difference between Mitt Romney and Hillary Clinton, you better expect an argument. You better expect an argument concerning the nature of political parties in the United States, etc. That would not be an opinion. What do you call it?

Q: You gave arguments to Haitian individuals.

NORTON: To the leaders, all the leaders.

Q: Did you ever give any of your arguments to a visiting American in a small aircraft?

NORTON: Yah, that is one of the beautiful examples of, again, American innocence, American ignorance, American indifference abroad. Haiti is a small country. Haiti is, to those of us who care about the human spirit, who know what we mean when we say the human spirit, Haiti is a monument. Haiti is Mt. Everest because it is a landmark in the conquest of human liberty and human equality.

Geopolitically, what is it? There are carpetbaggers who come down to Haiti, and some of them with connections to well-known politicians, well-known groups of politicians. There's money to be made in Haiti, obviously. There's money to be made everywhere. I don't know. Can you sell air conditioners in hell? I don't know. I suppose there's somebody who can. Or, I don't know, flaming charcoal briquettes exported from hell ready to cook your beef in Texas? There's not much economic interest in Haiti, geopolitical interest, obviously. Stability of the region. Haiti is part of Hispaï¿½ola. Eight million people in Haiti, eight million, maybe more...sixteen million people in Hispaï¿½ola. That's a hell of a lot of people. That's the Dominican Republic and then you've got Jamaica and then, wow, Cuba. What about Cuba? Where's it going? You never know. And then there are more and more Haitians in the United States. That's a political factor. I mean, one of these days they'll get their act together and, like the Cubans, they'll start voting. They've already got a couple of elected officials in local offices. It'll come. It'll come. Haitians are smart, hard working.

Haiti is small, but it has geopolitical interest. It's in America's backyard. Its presence...you know, it's like somebody who doesn't cut the lawn. If it's your neighbor, you're going to catch all that ragweed. Haiti, to be precise, is a pain in the ass. And the problem, I think, with the United States is they try to solve it with containment - coast guard sending back the refugees. It's not a threat, in my opinion, but they send them back anyways. If they open the floodgates, of course there would be but...they send them back. Then there's the U.N. who'll stay there and provide an exoskeleton of security, contain the insecurity. The problem with that is you can limit the pain, but you can't make it go away. It's your ass, and it's your pain. It's less of a pain than in Haiti because they're the ones who are suffering, but it is your ass and you've got to cover it. Is what's going on in Haiti the way to cover the ass of the United States and the Caribbean? I do not think so.

I think there never was any danger of a communist takeover in Haiti. There was never any danger of a radical movement taking hold of power. Aristide was never a socialist, much less a communist. Aristide was an upstart who wanted to enrich himself and his cronies in order to be somebody. Poor guy with his inferiority complex and his manic depression. I once heard him name-dropping, not quoting, Plato and Aristotle in a talk with peasants. In one speech at the National Palace, he called Heidegger "the philosopher of peace." Pompous. Gifted, but not gifted to be president. Insincere, hypocritical, violent. Violent. Selfish. The antithesis of the democratic republican leader. He was not interested in economic development. If you're interested in economic development, you're like Castro, right? You've got a socialist/communist party. He developed with the means at hand an economy. If you don't, you don't stay in power. It's not the problem with Aristide. Proof of the pudding is his support of the pyramid scheme. I remember poor people coming to my house and asking my opinion on the pyramidal banking scheme. They said, "But it's supported by the president. I'm putting all my money into it." They lost all their money. Economic development is not a problem for the heirs of the heirs of the French masters of slaves. Imitate the master. It's an imitation of the master. To be an imitation, you have to have slaves, but real slaves, menials, mental slaves. That was Aristide. Why was I going into that? You have to understand this.

Down comes a well-meaning former ambassador. It was in 1991, a couple of months before the ouster of Aristide, and I accompanied Mr. Andrew Young on a small plane to Cap-Haitien. Andrew Young was making rounds, spreading the word of the Lord. And here I am between Andrew Young, charming fellow, and a much less charming fellow, Colonel Valmond, commander of the garrison in Cap-Haitien which is Haiti's second largest city. And here you have the perky, bright former ambassador talking to this sandbag, expressionless but very polite. Because here we've got Andrew Young. Now Andrew Young doesn't know that he's a white man. But Valmond is listening to a white man speak to him about the virtues of democracy. So he delivered the sermon on the virtues of democracy, how the country progresses when everybody rallies around the flag, the role of the military is, we have an elected president, you have a Constitutional duty, you have a Constitutional prerogative... End of sermon.

I liked Andrew Young and, I don't know, I couldn't take it. Andrew Young seemed like somebody I could talk to. Of course, I was wrong, but what the hell. I said, "Mr. Young, I sat and listened to you for five, ten minutes, and I can't believe such an intelligent man could be so silly. You were talking to a thug. Do you think for one minute that he takes you seriously? You? A big shot white man from up north? They're going to stage a coup d'ï¿½tat when they goddamn well feel like it, and you're not going to stop them with these blowhard words." He didn't throw me out of the plane on the way back. I was on very good terms with Alvin Adams who was the ambassador during the coup d'ï¿½tat, and I very often got together with him and we chewed the fat and I irritated him. But I loved him because he was so smart. And we got along fine. Was he in on the coup d'ï¿½tat? How was the coup d'ï¿½tat staged? Very complicated questions. What was the role of the United States in the coup d'ï¿½tat? I think there was a role, but it wasn't simple and we can come back to that. The Company is one thing, and the State Department is another. Maybe they act together; maybe they don't. It's never clear, and why should it be clear? It's much better to be confusing. Nobody knows what everybody else is doing. Nobody knows everything. It is often convenient for the left hand not to know the right.

The Haitians had the green light to oust Aristide at the end of September 1991. The army took the ball, ran, and ran, made the touchdown, and kept running. And wouldn't give up the ball. Three years later, the Americans had to put their foot down and say, "Stooge! You're a stooge! Don't you remember? Stooge." Haitians are not stupid. "Yes, Massa," and then they slit your fucking throat at night. That's the tradition. That's the people you're dealing with. "Yes, Massa," and at night they slit your throat. Got it?

And Alvin said to me, "Mike" - he liked to pull my leg - "You know what Ambassador Young said about you on his trip to Haiti? You're the most cynical guy he met in Haiti."

Needless to say, two or three months later in 1991, the coup d'ï¿½tat had taken place. I don't remember when Andrew Young came back to Haiti, but he didn't reject me. He was very nice to me, and his staff was very nice to me. Of course, he didn't say, "Hey, what'd I miss?" Innocent, ignorant, or indifferent? Please tell me. I don't know. The unequivocal language of those who represent western civilization. I don't know what politicians are getting at. Nobody does. I think history plays through them. They do things, and they don't really examine their behavior. Not the way we would like. I mean, they rack their consciences, but do they strain their brains? Why did the United States miss the peaceful intentions of the Haitian people after Jean-Claude Duvalier was ousted? Why did they put the future of the Haitian democracy in the hands of the military? Why did they not see that Aristide was a shoo-in as president and get to work immediately figuring out how they could reach this guy. Figure out, really, what he wanted. Not the prosperity of the masses, a fair deal, down with the bourgeoisie... My foot, he married into the bourgeoisie. My foot, he could have been bought out. Cynical? I don't know. Did they figure it out? No, he was going to lose. That's very comforting.

And then he had something against the Americans. From the beginning, they were threatening him. They don't want him in. They were going to get rid of him, he believed. And then, of course, the coup d'ï¿½tat. And then the uncertainty. What was the U.S. going to do with him? Bush, the father, I think cut off the resources, the Bank of the Republic resources in New York. There was a gasoline embargo of sorts. Aristide pushed for a full embargo. His supporters said the embargo now is doing nothing. In fact, it's destroying the country. I went out into the countryside when the embargo began, and I didn't know what I would find. I found that the small jobs in the city had been lost and that the contribution to the countryside which was to finance repairs for irrigation pipes and things like that were no longer coming. And therefore the whole tissue of economic life was being rent by this incomplete embargo, and what Aristide was going for was a complete embargo. And when I told a "friend," a radical priest. The whole priesthood was behind Aristide. Not for religious reasons, I can tell you that. We can talk about the theology of liberation in Haiti, if you like. When I told him, it was like, "Hey Father, I went out to the countryside and this is what I found. It's hurting." He said, "It's not true."

I said, "But listen to me..." He said, "It's not true. It's not true." And that was the end of our relationship. I never spoke to him again. And that was the end of my relationship with the radical priesthood in Haiti because their boy came to power - power hungry pigs. I repeat, power hungry pigs, not priests. Not people who care about the souls of their parishioners, their well-being, their happiness, their felicity. Power hungry pigs. They eat. They eat anything. And Aristide places priests and former priests all over the state and parastatal apparatus. And then those who have not been invited to the banquet break with him. In Latin America, Liberation Theology aimed at the disestablishment of the Catholic Church. It celebrated a homecoming, the return of the Church to the fold, to the people, most of whom are poor. It was an attempt to purify a church that had been contaminated by power, in particular the power of military dictatorships. In Haiti, it aimed at the establishment of one faction of a highly politicized Catholic Church, the anti-hierarchical faction, in the halls of power. But Aristide was no theologian. He used everybody, politicians and priests alike. He kept some people around him, many of them involved in the drug trade or in privileged public-private business deals. But the big social categories he lost. He finally lost them all. He lost the intellectuals. He lost the bourgoisie.He lost the towns and the countryside. He lost everybody except his thugs at the end. One of the priests was the brother of a prime minister under Prï¿½val. An enemy of the Aristidians. The prime minister's brother officiated at the wedding of Aristide and a Washington or New York Haitian-American lawyer.

Q: Mildred.

NORTON: Mildred. It was a January...I don't remember what year it was...and I covered it at his mansion outside of Port-au-Prince. The estate, the mansion was not a glorious affair. It doesn't compare with anything in Scarsdale, but it's an enormous estate. I don't know how many - ten, twenty acres. And there's a swimming pool. He ran a kind of orphanage - ran or misran it - milked charitable organizations for his own...

Q: Aristide Foundation, by the way.

NORTON: Yah, but the orphanage itself was called Fanmi Selavi - "The Family is Life." Incidentally there was no mother, and one father: Aristide. To read between the lines, Aristide is the Staff of Life. And then he dropped it when it no longer served his purposes.

Look, I was with Aristide at the Family is Life center when the president of the electoral panel announced his 1990 presidential victory on television. I was standing. He was sitting on a bench, hands folded, looking for all the world like a virgin on her wedding night. He looked up at me and said, "Youre not moved." I was dumbfounded, flabbergasted. For, in fact, until he opened his mouth, I had been exhilarated. The battle was on! The confrontation with Haiti's retrograde forces was inevitable. And this poseur was the guy who was going to lead the future to triumph over the past?

Back to the marriage: strains of the "Blue Danube." This is Haitian authenticity! The strains of the "Blue Danube," and then we were there. And then he got married. Poor Mildred kept casting a glance over at him. The guy was cold, frozen stiff. You know, never a touch, never a look of affection. I felt sorry for her. I said, "What's going on? This is a State wedding." This is a State wedding, of a dark-skinned man and a light-skinned woman. And then came the sermon because people were saying, "Eh, she's a mulatta." "Oh, she's from the bourgeoisie and Aristide is no longer with us." The people. That was a rumor. And this smarmy guy said, "It's not true. Aristide has married the Haitian people, will never divorce the Haitian people." This guy broke with him a couple of months later, obviously, but he gave one last shot at power. Never did he give an auto-, a self-criticism. Nobody ever gave a self-criticism. Nobody ever said, "I was wrong about Aristide because I was blind to X, and I was blind to X because I...." Magical. One moment I'm for him, the next minute I'm against him. No. Crazy, crazy excuses. "I thought he would do the trick and then he didn't." I said, "But Jesus Christ, you look into his eyes, if you can. Listen to his voice. Everything about him is phony. He's a wooden nickel. It's so obvious. Why don't you look at people?" People don't look at people. Categorizing people stands in the way of recognizing their individuality. People situate other people socially, and that situation is their identity.

So, how to understand Haiti? You have to understand all of this. You have to understand its cultural differences. You do not situate, and you do not identify the way Haitians do. You have to understand that you don't have a credible informant group. Groups are investments of interest. You have credible informants, but no group will give you a credible picture, a disinterested picture. And you have to weave something out of this. Now, should I go on with this theme? Should I tell you about my meeting with the DCM after Alvin left?

Q: Sure. Maybe the DCM story first. That's a very important story. But I also wanted to ask, though, can you give a sense in maybe this interview or the next one: how did the American embassy do throughout this period? Were there any individuals or periods of time where the embassy seemed to have more understanding of the situation and others really didn't? Or were they uniformly misled? But please tell the story of the DCM - the deputy chief of mission.

NORTON: It depended on the period. I found the ambassadors I had to deal with, especially Carney and Curran, open. We had very good relations. They listened to me. I don't think they were condescending, but they did not... I think they had difficulties with me because I had a very high reputation, but my point of view was basically that you're trying to force this democracy on Haiti and you're not going to succeed. You don't even know who these people are that you're trying to force something on. It's not even democracy that you're trying to force on them. You want them to be good little boys, and they're not good little boys. Haitian democracy is possible, but not on these terms. The investments in Haiti are wrong. The infrastructure development is wrong. You have to think of a different way of developing the economy of Haiti that is for the economy of Haiti. Sure, you may make more money when you have all these construction projects and you can get the money siphoned back to the United States and to the other countries that have these companies doing the infrastructure, but, hey, it doesn't cost very much. It's a small country. You can do a hell of a lot of good. There are a lot of Americans here who want to do good. Get your thinking straight.

Now, straight with respect to what? With the development of Haiti? Never that easy. It's always a jumble. You're suddenly altruistic - in the short term altruistic and in the long term you'll reap the benefit. That's what I believe. Just do it for a while. You know? There are a lot of bright people here. There's a lot of good will. In the embassy, out of the embassy, a lot of foreigners come down to Haiti. They love the country, and it breaks their hearts. They become attached to it in ways that change their lives. It's a marvelous country. Be altruistic for a while. Think it through. You want some people you can talk to? I can tell you who you can talk to. But that's not the kind of talk they really wanted to have.

Then, after 2000 when it was obvious that the legislature was a rigged legislature and that Aristide was not a legitimate president, there were all kinds of problems trying to come to some agreement so that Haiti could function. And then you had the OAS sending 1, 2, 13, 14, 20, 25, 26 delegations headed by Luigi Einaudi coming to Haiti. I remember the last time I saw Einaudi, I think it was one of his least successful, one of his last missions. We were walking together, and I was saying something to him. He was walking by and it was at the hotel, and suddenly a vase, nobody touched it, suddenly a vase tipped over and fell.

I said, "Mister Einaudi, Haiti. You're never going to reach your goal." If it was the real goal. I think it was a faï¿½ade. Let's get an agreement out of this. Come on. I'm sick of this pain in my ass. Get an agreement. I said to them, and to everybody I saw, "It will never happen." Why it will never happen I explained. I've given some of the reasons already. You don't understand these people. It's all or nothing. It's spit in the soup. You can't deal with them this way. It is just so much shucking and jiving. Do you understand shucking and jiving? No, they're white people. They don't know what it is. And if they're black people, they don't know what it is either because they're not in the United States, so they've forgotten what it's like to be invisible and to become visible by adopting the other person's image. So anyways, that was the standard spiel for a long time with variations depending on the event or the moment. OK, the DCM. I think it was when Alvin Adams left and there was a period before I think Carney came in, I can't remember.

Q: Leslie Alexander.

NORTON: Leslie Alexander was the ambassador.

Q: Chargï¿½.

NORTON: Well. maybe he was chargï¿½ before Leslie was chargï¿½, I can't remember. Anyways, he was a Vietnam War hero - bronze star, pilot - and he was bald and very, very clean. And he would go on to become a negotiator in what I believe then was still Yugoslavia. It was falling apart and he would negotiate. Anyways, my friend at the embassy, the public diplomacy officer - a very nice fellow, we were on very good terms, he respected my opinion - thought it would be a good idea for us to meet. I very often had these conversations with incoming diplomats. They would come and they would pick my brains, and then, of course, I would feel, "Oh, I'm so important." And then not feel so important after all. Anyways, I was very important and gave my very important spiel to this very important man. At one point, it was at the Olaffson Hotel, the scene of Graham Greene's racist book The Comedians. So there we were eating bad food.

Q: We: you and the...

NORTON: Me, the public affairs officer, and the DCM.

Q: Deputy chief of mission.

NORTON: Exactly. And there we were eating away. Me talking, more than eating. I prefer talking to eating. That's why I love radio more than anything else. At one moment, I noticed he was looking. I don't know if he was looking at a woman. His eyes were not making contact, and I said, "I have the impression that what I'm saying really doesn't interest you. Maybe we should just eat and forget about this. I came as a duty."

Q: What were you telling him?

NORTON: I don't know what it was I was telling him, but something like this. Basically my spiel for all incoming diplomats was, "Consider the country. You are going through the looking glass. These are the rules. They are not our rules. You got a different kind of people with different relations from the ones we are familiar with. It is, however, possible to establish democracy on this basis if, if, if..." Basically it was that with examples drawn from the particular crisis of the moment. I gave you one when the negotiation was under way. Haitians do not negotiate. They kill. I don't agree with you. Boom. Or they slander you or they defame you. I suffered that.

Q: So the DCM said what?

NORTON: I said, "Look, so why don't we just eat. I mean, I came here as a duty." And that's true - a duty. I didn't believe it. I never believed that whatever I said to dozens of diplomats and foreign visitors and State Department officials would ever do any good. I never believed it, but God, I tried. I tried to be convincing. I tried to be circumstantial. I tried to be precise and logical and coherent. I think I was. I think I was. "Don't you think," I asked the DCM of the day eating his soup of the day, "Don't you think it's important to understand a situation if you want to act in it and on it?" And he said, over his soupe du jour, "No. I have a mission."

For some reason, I didn't stop talking to diplomats after that. I should have. No, I shouldn't have. No. I kept on. I kept on doing it because I did sharpen my analytical skills. And my spiel became better and better and better as the months and the years wore on. I think I became more and more convincing. I mean, foreign Aristide observers were somewhat shaken up when they met me. Because I was supposed to be, according to the more idiotic of my critics, the "embedded shill" of the American embassy. That's nice.

Q: Many journalists came to Haiti knowing much less than you did, and their first stop is to you.

NORTON: Yah.

Q: Why did you share all of your information with them?

NORTON: Every bit of information, everything I had and some I couldn't use because of security reasons - I gave everything to everybody because I was not in the business of journalism. Journalism was not my profession. I was busy being a hero. I was on an extraordinary adventure, and my goal was to contribute a little bit to the betterment of a people I loved. That's all. I turned out to be a pretty good journalist, I think. I was, I think, an extraordinary journalist. A remarkable journalist. But I didn't give a damn about it, and so I don't miss it at all. I cared about Haiti, did and still do, without missing it.

When I left Haiti, I became an editor at the central desk. I hated it - hated every minute of it. It's not reporting. An edited AP story is as formal as a sonnet, in length and obligatory elements, like personalization and points of view that neutralize each other and produce what is called objectivity. I did reporting in Aruba, but you see, from the sublime to the ridiculous, I covered the Natalie Holloway case. You know about Natalie Holloway because I wrote about her. Well, the television coverage was overwhelming, but so far as the printed media, I was on top of it first. And I stayed on top of it. I was a pretty good reporter, but I didn't care. I didn't have a profession. I am somebody who will die without having had a profession. I have a vocation. I'm a poet. That's what I've never been unfaithful to. I've never gone without a day writing for forty years. Thinking, writing, dreaming, misunderstanding, being confused, revising - all of those things that make writing such an adventure.

I was profoundly committed to the Haitian adventure because it was my adventure in my imagination. Because it was up from slavery. Because I identified with the Hebrews who left Egypt behind and wandered, or were led to Mt. Sinai and then were found unworthy of the tablets of the law and then were forced to wander in the desert until they came to the land flowing in milk and honey.

And then the horror of history. But I told Ambassador Curran when I first met him - I think he misunderstood me - that there are two books that he should read if he wants to understand Haiti: one is Alice in Wonderland, and the other is Exodus (not the popular novel by Leon Uris, but Exodus in the Bible). There you have a portrait of a slave revolution, and the lessons are clear: if you do not obey the law, if you do not shape up, if you do not break off all relations with those who enslaved you, if you do not exteriorize your interiorized servitude and desire to dominate, if you are not literate, if you do not learn how to read (because, to be a member of the community, a man must come to the Torah and must be able to read that part of the Haftorah or he is not a member of the community fully), if you do not follow the law, if you do not break with the past, if you do not remember fully that you were slaves in Egypt, and therefore open your hearts to those who were slaves and are slaves, you will not enter the land flowing with milk and honey. You will wander in the desert.

Now Haiti has turned into a desert as the Haitian people have wandered. Its leaders were not of the caliber of Moses. They didn't respect the law. They didn't become literate. They didn't cut that terrible link with the master. The leaders continued - not only the leaders, it goes all the way down to the Vodou priest who, to cure an ill for a woman, forces her to have intercourse - it goes all the way down. If you don't stop imitating the master, you will never be free. What was the title of that book, now? By the French Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas. Difficult Liberty.

Difficult liberty. Eh? I believe that firmly. Everything for me in my life came together in Haiti: my love for this extraordinary woman, my belief in the capacity of people to become better, my admiration of the Haitian people - their courage, their intelligence, Ulysses-like intelligence, their Constitutionalism - and my attachment to the fundamental myths of the Jewish tradition, to get a move on and go. There's a bright future, but you've got to move. You've got to move. You can't stay still. And that becomes concrete when it means moving out of slavery towards the land of liberty. That's Haiti for me. I lived that day and night for twenty years, more.

Q: This is the end of the second recording of Dan Whitman, Mike Norton. Puerto Rico. The 7th of September 2007.

Q: This is tape number three - Dan Whitman interviewing Mike Norton in Puerto Rico. It's the 7th of September. Mike, can we start with some comments of the role of the U.S. government in the U.S. embassy? We're talking about Haiti now. They got, perhaps, some things right, some things wrong. They missed some cues. Were they helpful or harmful by their presence? Tell me your perceptions of that.

NORTON: I think that the earlier history of the United States' involvement in the Caribbean continued into the last parts of the twentieth century. One doesn't escape history. The past is in front of us. The United States, as I mentioned already, saw Haitian independence at the end of the eighteenth century as a threat - a threat to its own slave-holding institution. Haiti was, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, a sort of Cuba of the twentieth century. It had imperial ambitions to free the slaves and conquer territory and wealth. In 1822, President Boyer conquered the eastern two-thirds of the island - what is now known as the Dominican Republic. And so on and so forth.

The Haitian government, in order to obtain recognition from France and access to certain ports of trade, agreed to pay indemnities to the slaveholders and plantation owners who had lost their properties during the revolutionary war, and that cost the Haitian treasury a great deal up until the twentieth century. We don't know exactly when the last tax on coffee was paid to the French. The international community was hostile to this black community. I don't think we realize at this time the crudeness of racism in the nineteenth century. These were people who had defeated the colonial army of France, and they were nothing but savages from Africa. Actually, they weren't savages from Africa. They were savages from the Caribbean, and that attitude of savages in our backyard continued. The United States did not recognize Haiti's independence until, I believe, after the Civil War with Frederick Douglass, the first ambassador. But the hostility, the wariness, continued on. And arrogance.

Haiti was unable to enter the modern world because of its own militarized society, because of its own incapacity, the incapacity of its leaders to seize the main chance and become a nation like other nations. This due, obviously, to the terrible traumatism of slavery and its isolation. The United States saw the opportunity to put order into Haiti as it did in other countries - the Caribbean and Central America - in the first quarter of the twentieth century. And in 1915, the Marines landed and seized hold of Haiti for nineteen years.

The assessment of the United States' heritage in Haiti is double. It's ambiguous. On the one hand, they built government buildings that, to this day, house the government offices in downtown Port-au-Prince. They built the National Palace - large scale, to say the least. And other buildings. They began to build modernized roads. Of course, the revolt against American occupation cost the Haitians thousands of lives. There were forced road gangs. They helped build those roads. A sort of forced modernization developed. Forced modernization. We've seen similar things in Russia and in China, haven't we? In a certain sense, even in the United States. After all, what is slave labor? And the labor of the Chinese in laying the Trans-Continental Railroad. Signs of the times.

In any case, the modernization was also an opportunity for a new Haitian ruling class to develop a new nationalism in face of this neighbor that treated it with arrogance. And it left behind, the United States did, a watchdog. It's called the Haitian Army. The Haitian Army that was trained on the principles of the Marine Corps. The United States also, since the U.S. occupying forces were to a large extent from the south and this was the south of apartheid, privileged the lighter skinned Haitian bureaucrats and instilled or reinforced the black versus mulatto racism that would explode virulently after other troubles. Franï¿½ois "Papa Doc" Duvalier took power in 1957.

It's a long history that the United States accepted Franï¿½ois "Papa Doc" Duvalier because there was Castro. They made peace with this man, with this dictator, because they didn't want to make peace with the other dictator. To each his own son of a bitch. And the United States' choice of sons of a bitches was "Papa Doc" Duvalier, and he held the fort. I believe that Haiti cast the deciding vote in the expulsion of Cuba from the organization of American States.

The United States accepted Franï¿½ois "Papa Doc" Duvalier because there was Castro. Again, the thread through all of this is a certain selectiveness in what constitutes a credible informant. It doesn't necessarily have to be the mulattos as it was in the 1920's and '30's and let the devil take the hindmost. But a certain selectiveness in what constitutes a credible informant. Obviously, the credible informants for Washington were those that owed the most to Washington. That's one thing.

A pugnaciousness and impatience in relations. That continued. And a certain tendency toward exclusion. The best thing that could happen to Haiti with respect to the United States is that it disappear. It disappear. The boat people problem, of course, is another problem related to everything I have been saying. The economy of Haiti floundered and was less and less able to keep the Haitian people fed.

Many Haitians did become American residents and citizens, and this somewhat moderated, gave a somewhat narrower margin of maneuver, I believe, to American arrogance toward Haiti. I think the development of the Black Caucus in the U.S. Congress also put a limit on what you might call the natural tendency of American foreign policy to treat Haiti as though it were a bug that has appeared after a rock has been thoughtlessly removed. So, the problem, basically, for American foreign policy is, how to put the rock back on top of the bug. I think that just about sums it up. There's a bug, and there's a rock, and how do we get the rock back onto the bug. It's a mindset.

My idea is that there is no threat. Haiti will not threaten stability in the United States' south. Slavery no longer exists, I think. In fact, perhaps not in mind, the Black Caucus doesn't need Haiti to defend its people. There's no threat there. There's no internal threat. Haiti does not threaten the United States. The boat people. Well, when Clinton misled the Haitian people and more or less said, "Come to the United States," and tens of thousands of them did. That was a mistake of Clinton, and that was easily righted, corrected. There are a couple thousand boat people. They keep on going. They have been going, leaving Haiti, since the beginning of the twentieth century, at first to Cuba and to the United States later on. It's normal, and it's easily contained. The bug can be put back under the rock with no problem since the U.S. Coast Guard is patrolling with great efficiency the waters.

And then those who aren't picked up drown at sea. We don't know exactly how many do make it to Florida, but I don't believe it will be necessary to seed the Florida waters with sharks. The immigration authorities have their walls to build in the southwest. They don't have to seed the waters of Florida with sharks to prevent the Haitians from coming. Those who do come legally, and about eighteen thousand do come - family members - per year, quite a considerable population come to the United States legally because of family arrangements. It's a growing community.

I think that once the Haitian population gets its act together, as I already mentioned, some things could happen. Maybe the United States foreign policy will treat Haiti with more respect. I say more respect because, as I already mentioned, I believe as soon as I reached Haiti in 1986 and saw that the categories my American friends were using to understand Haiti were completely irrelevant. When I saw the enormous hope that Haitians had - hope based upon trading, free enterprise, small businessmen - Haitians are in the Haitian mode very individualistic. They don't like the state. They fled the state because the state, in their mind, is repressive. And, in fact, is repressive. They don't want to have anything to do with collectivization or any of that stuff. There was no way to understand Haiti in that sense. There was no way to understand Haiti, either, as a conflict, as a class struggle, since the bourgeoisie was basically import/export, mercantile. It was not a productive bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie had a lot of money, but there weren't that many of them - a couple hundred families. A couple hundred millionaires in a country of eight million. The biggest fortune in Haiti is about $40 million, not much in the modern world. In the U.S., the top one per cent owns as much as the bottom 90 per cent.

Basically, the peasantry was in disaggregation. You don't have class struggle between classes that are being declassed. So that's the end of that. The peasantry is not going to descend upon the capital and set up a Peasant People's Republic. You have to think about Haiti in different terms. And, well, if Haitians didn't have the terms, I guess you can't fault Americans for not thinking Haiti through. Too bad, but I don't think the United States had the credible informants to tell them what, to me, was so obvious.

Altruism, acting outside of the view that boxes you into your world. Think Haiti in terms of Haiti's needs and not in terms of the United States' geopolitical needs. In the short term and in the long run, the United States will benefit from the security of the Caribbean. Communist Cuba, have faith in your own system, will not last forever. That's obvious. Not because of the social benefits. People will not cease being communist in Cuba because they no longer are educated and have health care, but because of the one party system, because it's a police state and people don't like that. People have this tendency to express themselves, to communicate, and this is a world in which people can talk instantly to their neighbors on the opposite side of the world. The Cuban police state will collapse in due time, so take it easy, man. Take it easy, man. Pay attention to the case in point.

It would have been possible in 1986 and became more and more possible as time went on because Haiti did kind of launch itself into view. It had been under control by the Duvaliers for a long time as part of one of the bulwarks in the Cold War, and then suddenly the Haitian people, as I already said, popped out of Pandora's box and claimed what? Well, what somebody in Minnesota would clamor for. What somebody in Cleveland, Ohio, somebody in Topeka, Poughkeepsie, Tampa, Portland, Lord knows where, Santa Monica, Hollywood, too. Give us a chance. We want to work. We want to make a life for ourselves and our children. We don't want a repressive government. We want people who will represent us and who will be answerable to us for their deeds. Help us to develop our country. We've got a special problem here. We've got a problem of a country turning into a desert. An enormous peasant population that doesn't have the means to convert land into a productive instrument. We have many communities outside main population centers, and they're dying.

There are projects which may not require such a heavy outlay which may not bring so much profit to construction companies who come down from Canada, the United States, from who knows where, France built roads, to build asphalt roads. Just to give you an example, asphalt roads last about three years and take about twenty years to pay for. I'm not an accountant. That doesn't seem to make much sense to me. To build asphalt roads in a tropical climate. It's been going on for years. Corruption. Haiti is said to be one of the most corrupt countries in the world. I don't quite get that. Sure, government officials are corrupt, but there isn't that much money to steal. It's a small, poor country. The Haitian bourgeoisie, which in the press is generally characterized as monstrously indifferent to the country, as flowing with milk and honey, has reached the Promised Land behinits barricades in its fortresses in the lush, upscale suburb of Petionville-that is nonsense. The Haitian bourgeoisie is poor, poor, poor because wealth is not money in the bank.

There's no place to go where you can feel safe in Haiti. There's no river that you can walk along holding hands with your girlfriend. There are no outdoor cafes. I was in Paris. I was "dirt poor." Sometimes Toto and I, we spent a couple days eating popcorn. We were the wealthiest couple on earth. Not just because of our own particular happiness, you know? We lived in Paris, on Paris, because you had access to galleries. You had access to lovely parks. You could do a hundred things and not spend a cent. You bought a card and you took a bus and bused it all month.

What can you do in Haiti? You can live in your fancy house, and then, on the weekends, drive on these horrible roads. A number of my friends, rich and poor, died on those roads because of car accidents - terrible, terrible car accidents. You go to your seaside house and you jump into the water. And then what? You come back and...poor, poor, poor. The university is poor, poor, poor. The schools - there are a couple of good schools that cost a lot of money - but how do you get your kid to school? You need a convoy, Humvees, to get your kid to school safe?

And then there's the odor, the stench. What about smelling the fresh air in spring? Minnesota's spring has made me the wealthiest person on earth. For all my life, I just close my eyes and remember the smell of spring. That's wealth. You're poor in Haiti. Everybody is poor, poor, poor in Haiti. Petionville, which is a suburb, a hillside suburb outside of the capital, appears to the unpeeled eye to be relatively wealthy. There are stores, there are restaurants. Some houses are visible.

Of course, I remember when Aristide was running for president in 1991 and he came to Petionville, and the poor people of Petionville came out to greet him. They came out of these ravines. You see, there are no residential sections in Haiti. It's not like other Latin-American countries. There's no privileged section. You have a beautiful, big house and it's sitting in a slum. And the people who work in your house are slum dwellers, so you are in osmosis even behind your thick walls. Tens of thousands, the majority of the people in upscale Petionville, are poor and live in shanties. You just don't see them, and you don't see them because you don't look. And there's nobody there, and I'm talking about the foreign visitors, to tell you. Well, that's not quite true. There are a lot of people doing good deeds. A lot of NGO's, a lot of missionaries, but that doesn't really affect American foreign policy. Poverty in Haiti is not rife. Poverty in Haiti is universal.

Q: You stated earlier what you thought was the aspiration of the typical Haitian similar to the person in Santa Monica, Topeka, Poughkeepsie, to give them a chance, allow them to function, assure that the government is not oppressing their wishes. This is pretty close to the stated policy of the U.S. government for Haiti. Where is the discrepancy between word and deed?

NORTON: The discrepancy is the urgency of the moment. You have to formulate policy and you formulate policy not with reference to principle but with reference to interest. What has happened to the American Constitution? Today in the United States, internal insecurity - insecurity that comes from real threats - exaggerated, manipulated; but structural insecurity in the United States is fundamentally job insecurity, unemployment, the threat of losing your job in a fast-changing world, of not being able to keep up and of not being able to send your kids to college and of not being able to make your payments on the house and of not having health insurance. And, if you don't do what you're supposed to do, the punishment is severe. You lose your house and you lose a roof. You get sick and you die and suffer. You can't send your kids to college, you've got your kids' ignorance on your hands.

OK, that is the fact, and yet life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness and all of those principles,..there are reasons why the insecurity in the United States is increasing. It doesn't have anything to do with the Constitution. It has to do with policy which in the United States is based upon corporate interest. Corporate interest is not really 100% equivalent to checks and balances, is it? It's something else. It's called the economy. And the kings of the economy are not the subjects of a democracy. The United States is a plutocracy.

Q; So you're talking about principles of the U.S. Constitution that do not filter through to the daily lives on the micro level?

NORTON: No, they can't because something else is at stake. There is an Overt State, law-respecting if not law-abiding, there is a Covert State whose agents act outside the law. The State is schizoid. The tension in the democratic empire between the Republic and the Empire is not creative, it is a fatal flaw.

Q: If that's the way you see it, translate, if you would, that concept to the level of the U.S. government and Haiti.

NORTON; The problem for the U.S. in Haiti and elsewhere is how to act outside of your borders. You don't have to deal with the rest of the world on an equal footing. The Constitution is disabled. There is a U.N. Charter now for human rights. People pay lip service to it, but there are other considerations. The consideration for Haiti is geopolitical stability, and the only way that unimaginative Americans, fed/nourished by a century of 150 years or so of arrogance and ignorance and racism and what have you, is to put the rock back on the bug.

Q: You were there for eighteen years. Looking back at it, do you feel that this was a consistent explanation that reveals what the U.S. government was doing during those eighteen years? Were there ups and downs? Were there individual cases of moments of perception or moments of ignorance? Can you break this down into the details?

NORTON: Let me explain this to you. I'm not talking to you about individuals. I may have mentioned it to you already. I found several of the ambassadors with whom I had contact to be extremely intelligent people. I think they understood or could have understood. They may have disagreed with me. I know that at the end when the problem of negotiating a settlement with Aristide and the rest of civil society became the object of American foreign policy, and an article of faith. Keep the rock on the bug meant get people to agree and at least have a faï¿½ade of democracy.

I think that the diplomats, many of them, believed that it was possible. I never did. And so there were differences of opinion, but those differences were honest differences of evaluation. So I don't want to talk about individuals... There were some pretty stupid ones. I think I mentioned the case of the DCM who was on a bombing mission to North Vietnam. Some of them. There were hundreds of people working with the U.S. embassy, and I think you wouldn't even have to say that seven thousand missionaries were satellites of the embassy, too. Of course, many of them were selfless and many of them were not. I'm talking about the missionaries. Many were out to save their souls, the souls of the heathen, without having the slightest idea of what the soul was of Haitians. Many of them wanted to do good deeds but not leave the means to do good deeds in the hands of the Haitians. But that's not the point. The point is this, I'll give you in an anecdote.

Two State Department officials come to Haiti. Were they on the Haiti desk? I don't know where they were, but they were important enough to link up with me. Two of them. And they came and they sat down. I forget exactly when it was, but late on, though not all the way to the end when it really became apparent that no agreement was possible and that the only way to get on with the show would be to get rid of Aristide. The general questions, and I gave my usual spiel. And Aristide came up. I gave my character profile of the man which was incidentally, and we can come back to this subject, absolutely in contradiction to the New York Times profile of Aristide that was written when he came back to power - a puff piece if I've ever seen one. Obviously ordered up because the reporter was a good reporter, but he was ignorant and he was told, I suppose, to present Aristide as someone who had learned his lesson, who would keep his mouth shut, who wouldn't insult the Pope, he wouldn't call on people to scalp the bourgeoisie or do other horrible things. He was a changed man.

Q: 1995?

NORTON; I think it was. In any case, he was back in power. Hope against hope, the hope you see...The United States government was so hopeful about Aristide, at least the State Department was, I don't think the Company was. But both, I believe, thought Haiti was a nothing country. It was getting more publicity than it was worth.

But Haiti, for a journalist, was not a nothing country. I worked for The AP, The Associated Press, from 1988 or the fall of Manigat to the second ouster of Aristide. That's sixteen years. I must have written at least three thousand articles. That's not counting my colleagues, the news editors who came down to take a look at my...to taste my soup.

It's a colorful country. It's a wonderful country. There's Vodou, the people's smile, it's a photographer's paradise. You go down to Haiti, you can't stop taking pictures. Everything is colorful, strong, stark, violent, beautiful. Taste the life. It smells bad, but jeez. That's life. You know it's life. It's raw. It's wild. It's oof. Strong. It's strong. You know, you come from some kind of prefabricated, bleached suburb. Everything is well organized. You come down. You think it's anarchy, of course. You don't see the order. I mean, that's another one of the clichï¿½s - its "disorder." It doesn't have an infrastructure that's functioning but the order that people impose is extraordinary. The order that people impose in great slums like Cite Soleil is extraordinary. Giving the lie to all these smug people who see people living in infrahuman conditions - it's superhuman conditions they're living in. How people can make a livable enterprise out of living on a land fill at sea level with no plumbing and no potable water and no nothing and yet it's just bursting with life. It's just bubbling.

And, I tell you, if I had to choose between dying in an old folks' home or gated community in Florida and a tin hut in Cite Soleil, I'd die in Cite Soleil because I would hear children's voices. I would hear music. And I get used to the bad smells. And I'd die probably a little earlier than in the old folks' home, but maybe I would have had a taste of reality. Happiness.

So the two State Department men came down and they asked what I thought, and I gave my spiel and I gave my profile of Aristide - that Aristide was impossible, that he would never agree to anything and that his rivals for power were impossible and would never agree to anything. That's the way it is in Haiti, and I gave the reasons why and blah blah blah. And they said to me, "Mike, you really expect us to go back and to tell our bosses what you just told us?" What I had to say, and the future proved me right, was something that could not be heard. It could not be heard. It could not be heard because there was a policy. Because, as the DCM said, they had a mission.

I'll tell you another anecdote just to smooth any ruffled feelings on the part of the American diplomats. I tried to understand them. In one of our many meetings, Ambassador Alvin Adams and I discussed the possibilities. This was early on in the coup d'ï¿½tat. What can be done to find some compromise? Aristide is in exile in Washington learning how much money he can make making deals with the Black Caucus, preparing his return after shitting in his pants when he was ousted. I said that is very important because if you shit in your pants in front of a general who took the head of the coup d'ï¿½tat against you, you're full of hate and you lose it. Hate is a theme in Haiti which is very important. Bear with me. I'll come back to Alvin Adams.

Hate. I was just reading in a book this morning by A. C. Grayling. Grayling is a British philosopher - from his Meditations of the Humanist. It's a little chapter on hate, and he quotes Ortega y Gasset, the Spanish philosopher. "Hatred is a sentiment that leads to the extinction of values."

Aristide was full of hate, as many Haitians are, because of the gross injustice. Gross social injustice. (May I add that I lost my innocence in Haiti about the purity of the motives opeople who clamor for justice?) And it has made many nihilists - many of them into nihilists. From the very beginning, the extraordinary pain of having been a slave. When finally they felt a little power, many Haitians were nihilists, the idea being, "The only way you can make a new world is by destroying the old world." It's similar to, but in fact opposite to, the exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt, where the injunction was to separate yourself from the master, not to kill the master because you become those you kill. It wasn't a hate. It was to turn your minds elsewhere. Never to forget you were a slave, which is not the same thing as to hate for all eternity the master who made you a slave. Dessalines, his war cry was koupe tet, boule kay, "Cut off their heads and burn down their houses." That's how Haitian independence began. It was a common thread through all of Haitian history as though the only way you can start afresh is by destroying everything around you. It's curious. They seem not to learn the lesson because everything around them is destroyed.

OK, now what do you do that you've destroyed everything. Aristide was a hatred-filled person, full of hate, and all you have to do is listen to his speeches. He lost it. He lost it many times. He expressed his hatred, of course, sometimes in coded words, sometimes directly in his Creole speeches, lashing out at the bourgeoisie, at the mulattos, at the Pope, at the Westerners, etc.

Anyways, so there we were, Alvin Adams and I, discussing what the United States can do with Aristide. He's in exile. There are various Constitutional provisions which are too complicated to go into here, but one of them provides for provisional power while the president is out of commission. He's still president, but he's not governing. And there's another provision which, under other circumstances, entails electing a provisional president. And the legislature has to decide.

The United States preferred, quite rightly, that provision which enabled Aristide to be president of Haiti but without officiating. That's what we were discussing. Will the legislature do it? What do you think about this?

And, of course, I said, "I don't believe that that wise step will be the step that the legislature will take, and I'll tell you why."

So I went into the composition of the legislature, the influence of the military, the fear that was all through society, etc., and I was right. Finally, when push came to shove, everybody, even those who opposed the coup d'ï¿½tat, voted a provisional president.

Anyways, I said, "It's not going to work, Mr. Adams. It's not going to work. You can't do it." Poor man, I kind of got on his nerves. I was insufferable. I was insufferable on more than one occasion with more than one person. I was really insufferable. I was almost never wrong. That's not my fault. That's an insufferable thing to say, isn't it? I was wrong when I didn't think that the United States would invade Haiti. I was wrong because I was ignorant. I didn't understand the importance of the Black Caucus - the deals that Aristide had struck with them. But that's outside of Haiti. In Haiti I was never wrong, so I was insufferable - sometimes deliberately, sometimes unconsciously. Should I beg pardon? I was insufferable.

Anyways, Alvin blew up, and he said, "God damn it, Mike! You have the luxury of sitting there picking holes in everything I'm proposing. I have to do something. You don't have to do anything." Well, there you go. That's true. The United States has to do something. The State Department has to formulate a policy. Now that policy isn't in function only of Haiti and the welfare of Haitians. That's the way it is. There's no way around it. Now, if the Haitians knew how to influence that foreign policy theater, because their community in the United States was better organized, or if there was more unity in Haiti and more thoughtfulness about the question, perhaps that foreign policy would be more amenable to the welfare of Haiti.

Perhaps that altruism I talked about would be possible. Short term, not long term. Not unrealistic, pie in the sky, sentimental, bleeding heart altruism. A different way of looking at Haiti, endogenous, a development for Haiti. But if the Haitians aren't offering any solutions, if the Haitians aren't giving any projects, if the Haitians don't have their act together, the United States will go on its bumbling way. Bumbling, rambunctious way. Until you have what you have now, a U.N. security exoskeleton and foreign aid coming in as it will to do the same sort of old projects, and nothing good will come of it.

And if the Haitians today, in September, have a breathing spell that there's a little bit less insecurity, well it won't last. First of all, insecurity in Haiti is somewhat more than just being shot at or being kidnapped and raped. It's...a friend of mine, a very good friend of mine from the countryside, who was a welder and later became an artist, we were talking about poverty. And I said, "Poverty." I'm very sententious as well as being insufferable. "Poverty is not knowing what you're going to eat tomorrow." And he said, "Poverty is knowing you will not eat tomorrow."

Put that in your pipe and smoke it please when you think about insecurity in Haiti and that people in Haiti have a breathing spell. They will not eat tomorrow. Everybody moves because, if they don't move, they'll die because they have to scuffle in order to eat because they know that tomorrow they won't eat. They don't have the means and they don't have the services.

When there was a strike in the hospital - it's one of the low points in my career in Haiti was covering the hospital strike: the pitiful salaries, the janitors refused to pick up - I went down there and I found dead babies under the stairways. I found a dead baby in front of the residents' dormitory. Dead baby in the hospital, think of that. Job insecurity? There's job security in Haiti. You know you're not going to work. You know absolutely. You're sure of it.

Q: You've talked about Alvin Adams and you've avoided singling out individuals. Is it correct to say that there may have been ups and downs in talent and options made in Port-au-Prince, but that the options made in Port-au-Prince at the U.S. embassy were quite limited because everything was being driven by Washington? Is that your perception?

NORTON: My perception was that the policy was a sort of a feeling of fate. It doesn't matter whether you understood or not. In a certain sense, the DCM was right. It doesn't matter if you understand. There's a bug and there's a rock on it, or there's a bug and there's not a rock on it, so you've got to put the rock back on the bug. I mean what's there to understand? What's there to understand?

Q: Some people say that the perceptions of the U.S. embassy in Port-au-Prince were very different from the perceptions of the policy makers in Washington.

NORTON: Well, I suppose. As I said, in 1986 when the shit hit the fan, nobody was prepared. It was a stick in the eye of the Cold War. It was unsteady, we decided to get rid of Duvalier. But we got it in hand that the military would step in. I don't think people were prepared, and I know that among the diplomats in the embassy as well as among the journalists that came down, a slow increasing sensitivity to Haitian realities. Completely insensitive for the first years. The military, in fact, supported by the United States, did terrible things to Haiti. It became more complicated when the military really lost its hold on things and the United States decided well, yes, we better have an elected government without the interference of the military. People went out into the countryside. I think a lot of people got over the shock of the distinction between Haiti and the United States. It's quite a culture shock for Americans. As I already mentioned, it doesn't matter what ethnic group you belong to in the United States. When you step outside of the United States, you're an American.

Haiti is living in the rough. It's what is known as a "hardship post." It's not so far away as Sudan or something like that, but what makes it even worse is it's an hour and a half away. An hour and a half away from Miami and you're on another planet? You don't have to spend a couple million dollars to go into orbital flight. It's really some place else. It's very, very hard to understand. You have to spend a lot of time and I think a lot of the officers in the American embassy did. A lot of them were condescending. A lot of them were not. Maybe the minority were not, but they were there. People got to know Haiti when they were in USAID. You're out in the fields; you learn. In the international financial agencies, the IADB for example, whatever the result was before the repetition of the past there was a lot of discussion.

I discussed very often with these people, and I was very often delighted. We were on the same wave length. I was not, by any means, a loner in Haiti. Not by any means. The problem wasn't finally understanding. Once you decide you don't know anything, just open your eyes and shut up. Listen. Move around. Compare. Try to build your understanding from the ground up. It's not so hard to understand. Be prepared. Haiti is some place where you see a god walking in the street because they're possessed by a Vodou god. Haiti is some place where atheism, the great topic of the New York Review of Books these days, is inconceivable. It's inconceivable because people see God all the time. They touch him. They are even penetrated by him. And it's very confusing. It's very infectious.

I had a friend, a woman, who convinced me, rationalist of rationalists, that she was impregnated by a god, that her pregnancy was the result of one. She convinced me. There you go. Magic works when you're in it. People are terrified of black magic because the spells work in Haiti. A lot of people coming down to Haiti will say, "Ah, you talk about Aristide as though he were the devil. Stop demonizing Aristide." And my answer to them was this. "You don't believe in the devil, but Haitians do. And they know how to identify him."

So, there's no clash of civilizations. There is an incomprehension which is, at times, total. OK, you go down, you bathe in that, you immerse yourself in that. You try to maintain your own integrity. You are not...you are who you are. If you're lucky, you even, as I did, sharpen your own values. It's a wonderful opportunity to find out who you are by finding out who you are not, and in mutual respect. And then you have some ideas how this can be improved. And then you talk to the powers that be. But you're talking to the wall. That's the problem. There's no way to translate that understanding into a policy that's other than the policy that a great power might have toward a little particle of dust. There's no way.

Q: You're saying that on some occasions, diplomats and others from the outside did have these perceptions or were able to learn.

NORTON: Yes.

Q: If that's the case, why was the U.S. unable to do the right thing or unable to solve the problems that they might have?

NORTON; As I mentioned, because their eye wasn't on the ball. You invite them to play handball and they're playing checkers. It's another game. It has to do with, I don't know, getting Brown and Root down there to supply the troops who had landed in 1994, satisfying the Black Caucus, finding ways of making deals in the new Haiti, getting contracts, telephone contracts, dealing with the well-heeled Haitian lobby in the United States, reconciling the irreconcilable, pro-Aristide and anti-Aristide. It's listening to the Dominican Republic. It's doing a lot of things. Trying to figure out how you can make some money out of it. You know? What kind of contract can be given to which construction firms? All kinds of things feed into American policy. You give Aristide a chance, OK. See what you can do, and it doesn't work out. And you plop down and boot him out.

Haiti is not Aristide. Aristide said he was Haiti, but Haiti is not Aristide. Haiti didn't recognize itself in Aristide at the end. Haiti is a community, a collective, which wants to live. And, in order to help it live, you need thought and action, responsiveness to Haiti. American foreign policy is primarily responsiveness to its own needs. It's an election year. Can we risk an invasion? It's important.

Q: You mentioned at the end, I think you're talking about February 29, 2004.

NORTON: Yah. Why was the international left so easily duped by Aristide? The Haitian political revolution was the last revolution of the twentieth century in which the left believed it could believe. The last illusion of a belief addict, desperate for a fix. Aristide said what they wanted to hear: anti-imperialism, anti-capitalism, anti-ruling class, anti-Pope John Paul II. Stuff and nonsense. The left gobbled it up. Aristide believed in money, in power, in sex and in his manic grandeur. He was the political heir of Papa Doc.

Renowned leftists deduced Aristide's good intentions from their principles and from his statements of principle, disregarding the fact that he was unprincipled. The enemy of my enemy is not necessarily my friend.

Q: Tell me about the activities and the perceptions of the Black Caucus at the time.

NORTON: The Black Caucus was obviously the key to Aristide's return. Why did they decide to push for his return? I think there are a number of reasons. I think, personally, they were right in 1994. Aristide was the duly elected president, however bad he was, however horrible he was, whatever his motivations were. To be consistent, Aristide was elected and his term was important to respect. The army was stupid, criminal, and flaky. So, to return Aristide I believe was absolutely essential. Why the Black Caucus did that, I believe maybe some for principle, others because they saw the coup d'ï¿½tat as a result of American foreign policy or, put it this way, that the CIA dumped Aristide. And it was also a way of their expressing their own racism.

Maxine Waters told me once that she believed American policy was racist, and was an apartheid foreign policy. The American foreign policy was racist. Others because they were on the pay roll. They were on the public relations payroll. Aristide paid lots of money, millions and millions of dollars, to American lobbyists. I think that's the reason. Black solidarity. Hatred of American foreign policy, characterizing it as racist. Financial arrangements. And principle. And so they got him back. Now, the problem later was why they didn't recognize how bad he was. That, in fact, if they had brought him back on principle, they were to regret it. I'm talking now about the second term.

Q: Elected in the year 2000.

NORTON: Right. "Elected." And, I think inertia, financial arrangements, I think some were on the payroll, and inertia and financial arrangements. They kept on. And, you know, a lot of people had their irons in Aristide's fire. Danny Glover was in there in the palace a couple of days before the ouster. I remember talking to him and he finally found some financing for his Toussaint Louverturfilm project in Venezuela. Toussaint Louverture, one of the founding fathers of Haitian independence. It was in his interest to get along with Aristide. I don't think he saw Aristide as a dictator or didn't see anything wrong with what he was doing. I don't know. Paul Farmer, the Harvard doctor who treats AIDS in the central plateau. It was in his interest. People like that.

Q: Could you explain, in the interest of Paul Farmer...what's that?

NORTON: Well, I mean, he had the advantages, granted, that he was protected by the government, and the government could propose to the international financial institutions financing that would be finally directed to his institution.

Now, I suppose Farmer has his reasons for believing that Aristide was a progressive leader. He may have had his reasons. He may be sincere. But it is also the case that it was in his interest that Aristide stay on. And a lot of the people liked him, at first. Later on was another story. His so-called popular organizations - thousands, three, four thousand, not much more than that - in the capital city. It was in their interest that Aristide stay on because, thanks to him, they got jobs in the public enterprises - the featherbedding and all the kind of stuff. That doesn't make for a hell of a lot of people, does it? Three, four, five, six thousand. You know? It's not a hell of a lot of support.

The Haitian people were like the American people who voted for Bush in 2000. They wouldn't vote for Bush now. They certainly voted for him then - less than half of the American popular vote. Slightly less than half of the American electorate voted for Bush. Now does that mean that half the American people are stupid? Misguided, wrong, like the Haitian people, who voted in a landslide for Aristide certainly the first time. The second time, I'm not so sure with a strong opponent he would have won. But by the end, he had his thousands of thug government employees, intellectuals who had something to gain by his staying in power, Black Caucus, and fanatic Haitians abroad who didn't know anything about Haiti who just were very distraught about what their homeland was coming to and had hung on to Aristide.

Aristide's popularity abroad diminished, but it was enormous, I know, because during the coup d'ï¿½tat I gave weekly commentaries to the Haitian community in Montreal. They were rabid. They couldn't stand me. It was really funny. Once I even went to Montreal and had an open line. That was funny. One woman said, "I don't know why the presenter of this program says you're a great journalist. If you are in Haiti, you're not great."

Anything in Haiti is not great except Aristide, so that started to wear off, and I must admit, at least in Montreal to a certain extent, I persuaded people that there was something wrong about this guy. That he had made terrible mistakes in 1991. He didn't deserve being ousted, that is to say the Haitian people didn't deserve having their elected president ousted, but if he comes back and when he comes back, there are certain things that ought to change. Then later when they didn't, then the handwriting was on the wall because I said way back I don't know how many hours ago, it is impossible to patch together a dictatorship. You cannot build bricks without straw. There's something missing in Haiti. You can't, you know? You can't build a skyscraper out of sand and spit. The Haitian state has disintegrated. Haiti is a failed state. Haiti was a failed state a long time ago. Haiti was a failed state since Aristide demobilized the army in the year 1994.

Now that concept, the definition of which I found in a U.N. brochure, I don't know which one, I would read to my diplomat friends because I would say, "Haiti's a failed state." And they all said, "No, Haiti's not a failed state." "But look. This is what the UN says. There is no institution which covers the entire territory. No institution. No national institution. Not national education, not health, not the army, not the police, nothing. There is no order, the loosening of authority. It's a failed state." "No."

See, the resistance...Haiti can't be a failed state because, if it is a failed state, we must take certain measures. We are not prepared to take those measures. Therefore, Haiti was not a failed state. Haiti is now a failed state. Now everybody agrees. So, the result of all of this is that Haiti indefinitely will be under UN protection. Maybe there will be a revolt of Haitians or maybe people will be tired. The donor nations will get tired of footing the bill and then they'll pull out. And then they'll start all over again. They'll start all over again because nothing will stop the free fall except respect for the individual, and there's no reason to respect the individual. And there's no hope.

Q: You said the diaspora in Montreal. There's a diaspora in New York, Miami, in Orlando, a little one in Washington...

NORTON: And Philadelphia.

Q: Philadelphia. This is not a single voice. Do you have any sense of which diaspora community is thinking along which lines?

NORTON: No.

Q: And you mentioned earlier that the diaspora, if it could speak with a single voice, might have an effect.

NORTON: No, I don't really know the communities separately or all together very well anymore. I'm thinking especially Haitians who get elected to jobs on city councils, who become mayors, but who are Haitians and will have to be answerable to Haitians, and therefore can express Haitians' concerns about their homeland. I think that may take time. It may take too much time.

Time is running out. Time is running out. The population will double in a generation. It's a catastrophe. It's an ecological catastrophe. Will you have marauding hordes of people crossing from one end of the country on camels? There are no oases in Haiti. It's nothing. On the other hand, there's everything. If there were some tourist facilities. If there were a different kind of tourism. If the Haitian state promoted its own fabulous art. There is no national art museum. Haitian art is known worldwide, but Haitian art is not expensive because Haitian bourgeois don't buy it at Sotheby's or Christie's. That's how you get the value of a painting. It's what is quoted in the international auctions. Dominican painting, which is not the same, not as good as Haitian painting, or wasn't, I don't know what it's like now, is more expensive because it's pegged on international prices, but Haitians don't care for their own art which is fabulous. Unique. Haitian handicrafts are fabulous.

There are still remarkable tourist sights in Haiti. The citidel built by King Christophe in the early nineteenth century. I saw it for the first time, I was on a bus, and there it was perched above the clouds - this enormous wedge perched on the clouds. It took my breath away. It's more impressive than the pyramids and means more. What was a pyramid? A pyramid housed the mummy of a monarch; it was in praise of authoritarianism. And here you have this remarkable fortress in defense of liberty, and the only way you can get up there is on donkey-back.It's a crying shame. Jacmel - lovely coastal town in the south. Old houses that have to be rebuilt and renovated. Guest houses could be build. Labadie which is on the north coast which receives cruisers. I thought it would be something tawdry. No, it's not. Beautiful. Absolutely beautiful and respectful of the Haitian scene. For many years when you went to Labadie, you took all these Caribbean cruises, they didn't even say it was in Haiti. They were afraid people would be afraid.

OK, tourism is one possibility. Agro-industry is another, but for that you have to take a look at the food basin of Haiti which is in the Artibonite. You have to renovate the rivers and the streams. You have to organize the peasants. You have to set up industries. You can't be slovenly. There's a mango industry in Haiti. Just recently the mangos were forbidden entry because of some sort of bug. I don't know if it was slovenliness or not. But I tell you you have to realize you are in the modern world and there are standards. Now that depends on the Haitians. If the Haitians would say, "This is what we need. This is ours. Small is beautiful."

Q: In February 2004, two individuals left Haiti: Jean-Bertrand Aristide and Mike Norton. Can you tell us about the circumstances of your departure?

NORTON: The two departures did have something to do with each other, if I may say so. It's not because, having been a fervent supporter of Aristide, I was afraid of staying which those who led the movement to oust Aristide might have thought, although I don't think they thought that about me. I don't think I was of considerable importance. If I wasn't writing anything, they could not care less what I thought. I left because I was ill. I was very ill. I had been ill for more than a year, and I was carrying this tumor under my arm around with me. This tumor was delighted to stay on. It was growing, growing, growing, growing. I was tired. I was worn out. Not burnt out, but worn out. I was completely disgusted with the movement to oust Aristide. I believed in his ouster. I believe it was a necessary good for the country, but when I saw the people and I listened to their demands, I foresaw. It wasn't a prophecy; it follows as a bowel movement does a stomach ache. You don't have to be very intelligent. Just look at the people who are ousting him. The worst elements of reactionary regimes.

Q: Guy Philippe?

NORTON: Guy Philippe. It was more than Guy Philippe, my God. The ragtag and bobtail army of so-called soldiers had obviously been trained with the complicity of the Dominican Secret Services, and if the Dominican Secret Services knew about it, they were under orders from the Company. It was impossible. You don't train two hundred soldiers or twenty soldiers on Dominican soil without the Dominican Secret Service knowing. And the Dominican Secret Service and the CIA are hand in glove. Come on.

And, the bourgeoisie, more or less, I'm not quite sure who financed them. So they had the money and they had the permission and then they entered when things really got raw. Aristide had boxed himself in. The OAS had demanded certain things. In order for Aristide to give them what they wanted, he had to attack his own base, his own "popular organizations." His popular organizations, at least a part of them, turned against him in open revolt. The society wanted no more of him, and I was reporting all of this in this extraordinary upheaval.

It was Independence Day, celebrating independence from France and Gonaives was up in arms against Aristide. I'll never forget that. The people oGonaives did not celebrate. Gonaives is where the independence was declared. Aristide, in spite of warnings, decided to go out there. It was a town that was shut down. In its better moments, it was bleaker than the bleakest slum in the United States, but it attained its nadir when Aristide arrived. It was shut down. In order to get some spirit into this affair, he came along with I think it was Maxine Waters and her husband. I think she went up there with him. Mbeki wasn't there. It was too dangerous. It was crazy to go out there.

Q: He was in Haiti.

NORTON: He was in Haiti, but he didn't go out there. I think he was warned. He was quite right. Get this scene, on the public square these pro-Aristide bands which he had brought with him for the occasion from the capital. No locals appeared. And they were singing songs and scattering pictures of Aristide, etc. Music, rah rah rah Aristide. And on the roofs there were these black-masked policemen taking potshots at anybody they saw in the surrounding that had left his house. Simultaneously. Well, finally it ended and then there was a motorcade and groups/gangs threw stones and it was...the sky did fall on Gonaives that day. Heartbreaking.

I had already wept all my tears for Haiti, but I would have wept for Haiti on that day if I had had any tears left to weep. This is how you commemorate one of the greatest events in world history? The unloved president praised by glutton minstrels while your pretorian guard is shooting at the local population? I was ill. I was worn out. I saw no good coming. There was no sense. And I saw a window of opportunity, how I could somehow have closure. Lovely word: closure. The end of a book. Fin, you see it on a fish. Fin.

So I thought it would be poetic if I were to leave. So I knew he was going and I had one week or so before hinted to the American embassy that I needed help to get out. There was no way out. The airports were closed. Everything was... I had hinted to the American embassy that I was really very sick, and I really was. "Hey, I'm really sick." The public affairs officer was very preoccupied, I suppose by her pension plan. There was no responsiveness from the American embassy, and I had been very close, always, with the French embassy. I found it very much easier to speak with them. They were not playing the first role in diplomacy in Haiti. And since I love the French, I love Paris, and they were just nicer to me. All of them - the DCM's, the ambassadors, the political officers, with exceptions, of course. I just mentioned to my friend who was the DCM at the time of the French embassy that I'm really in bad shape. I have to get out of here. He sent, immediately, a cable to the defense minister in Paris, and the defense minister cabled him that I had authorization to leave Haiti on one of these Hercules.

And so the night before, I slept at the French embassy, and a motorcade crossed war-torn Port-au-Prince, and there on the airfield were two Hercules transport planes - an American and a French. Destination: the Dominican Republic. I went onto the French one. The American one? Damn their eyes.

In October 1993, as a result of what was known as the Governor's Island Accord, a cobbled-together agreement, which had as much chance of standing up as an agreement between two teenage potheads, to get a pro-Aristide government and Aristide would return at a certain time and the general would step down and la la la. Absolutely idiotic. There would be this American supply ship that would arrive in Port-au-Prince to begin the process. It was so stupid. I just don't have the time or the energy to go into this complex idiocy - this agreement that had been cobbled together at Governor's Island in New York City.

So here comes the ship and the rumor starts that they're soldiers. They're not suppliers. The militia that the army had used to control the country because the army was really small - only a couple thousand, seven thousand - and they got this militia - thugs, killers, former soldiers, out-of-work thieves, trigger-happy lunatics. They called that the FRAPH, which was a pun on the Creole word for "strike" or "blow." And they showed up and they paraded on the wharf. "If they come, we'll shoot." Somebody kicked the ambassador's car. It was incredible. It was so incredible. I have to speculate. First of all, this is the United States. The United States has informants. I know they had informants in the militia, the FRAPH. Don't ask me how I know. And this handful of thugs frightens off a supply ship of the United States?

Q: This is Harlan County?

NORTON: Yah, Harlan County. And has the gall to kick the black limousine of the ambassador of the United States? Now, I would say that somehow the thugs were encouraged, and that the American embassy was not aware of it unless, of course, they had some kind of deal with the car repair man to fix the body and it was some kind of... I would say that it was a show and that part of the embassy was aware of it and part of the embassy wasn't.

Q: Vickie Huddleston was in the car, I believe.

NORTON: Right. So the chargï¿½e was in the car. It must have scared her. After a while you could interview her. It would be one of the exciting points of her life. She was rewarded later with the ambassadorship to Madagascar, I believe, where things were calmer. I'm sure this was one of the high points of her life. It probably was. I think that the Company had arranged it and the Company wanted the army to stay on as long as possible.

Q: What happened to you on that day?

NORTON: Anyways, so there I was covering the event, on the spot as always, breathing the fumes and the dust, getting sunburned. I wasn't yet carrying the tumor under my arm. That was a recurrence of melanoma that I had in 1998, a tumor on my back. After the recurrence in 2003, I think I wanted to die because I didn't see any reason to go on living and so I didn't treat it. But I had an opportunity to die on the day in question.

I was with an editor from the central office of AP and we covered that event and we ran back and forth. Then we went along Seaside Boulevard. We had heard that a senator had arrived and had shuffled off to the embassy, so we thought we'd get a quote from him. You know, you need a quote from an American official to make the article look official. So off we went on foot to the American embassy which was not that far away.

There we are in front of the American embassy. One of the trucks full of militia men bristling with assault weapons followed us and parked across the street from us. I would say that presence was hostile. They didn't insult us. I want to be absolutely truthful, so, if this were a court of law, I couldn't say I had been threatened. But they didn't stop for any dead dogs, and they stopped right in front of us. Right in front of the entrance to the American embassy, across the street from us.

And my friend, especially, became rather upset, and we rattled the gates of the American embassy. "Let us in! Let us in! Here's our passports. We're Americans. You see across the street? These are threatening..." and they refused to let us in. We were turned away from the American embassy with a truck full of hostile thugs. We had our papers. We had a reason to be there. They hadn't any orders to allow anybody in. I suppose it was locked down. After all, somebody had kicked the limousine of the ambassador. I mean, they may kick the wall of the embassy. Of course, if they shot us dead in front of them, that would have been less important. That was a lesson not learned, but it was a lesson. I have not forgotten. You don't ask the U.S. embassy if you're nobody for special treatment at any time. You will not get it.

Q: The date of that incident?

NORTON: I believe it was the thirteenth of October, 1993.

Q: Mike, let's have a general comment from you, if you're willing, on the people you met in Haiti - whether they were American diplomats, whether they were Haitian bourgeoisie, Haitian workers, American politicians, other journalists from other countries, diplomats from the U.S. but also from France, Spain, Mexico, Canada, and the temporary visitors (some people call them the parachute visitors who come from international organizations or the press to have a look at things and to try to find solutions) - any general comments on the various strata of people you got to know?

NORTON: Again, it's such a varied group. The job of many of them was to come down and make an evaluation as objective, that is to say as fair-minded, as possible. That includes by and large the journalists. Not always. There were puff pieces that were op eds at the beginning, especially. With the troubles in '86 until the fall of Aristide, many of the journalists were embedded in the embassy. That was clear. It was a strange country and they didn't know what to do. So, gosh, you get the American ambassador and that's always the feather in your cap. For some reason, if you can get the American ambassador into your story, that's really wonderful. That's a contradiction, in fact. Your mission is to get a hold of the situation and not to promote a policy, and you don't get from diplomats an evaluation of the situation no matter how it's couched. It's always part of policy.

So, you have the press, which, in my opinion, in Haiti, improved, gradually leaving the bar stool, leaving the marine guards at the American embassy, and going out, talking to people, and getting to know the country. Again, I am not heavily criticizing that because it was a strange country unknown to most of them. You had to speak French to talk to the people, la crï¿½me, but basically you had to speak Creole or you had to have a translator. It's never really good, in my opinion, to need a translator. You need someone because you have to, because you don't speak Arabic or whatever. But you never know who's going to check up on the translator. You never know who you're dealing with.

Anyways, it was not easy for journalists, and so they took the line of least resistance. That became less and less true. As it became less and less true for the diplomats and the officials who were in Haiti, they became more and more sensitive to the complexity of the situation without necessarily committing themselves. Their commitment was to their job. That's true of everybody. Their commitment was to their job. It was their mission whether it was to tell the truth and nothing but the truth so help me God or my publisher or my editor or my career, or to see how things were going and how possible it was or was not to implement the policy. This being the case, you had some people who were wonderfully intelligent and not doofuses at all who let me know they didn't believe what was going on, especially the long period of negotiation. There were high officials who were very, very savvy and winked, but again, their commitment is to their organization. That meant that it was not always amusing to meet these people.

I had some good journalist buddies and we could laugh a little, but you don't laugh with officials. I remember there was once this assessment by CARICOM and a question period. The leader of the delegation, who was a foreign minister, I believe of St. Lucia, and he talked about the fledgling democracy in Haiti. That's one of the models/clichï¿½s. Haiti is a country without a democratic tradition, it takes time, etc. Of course, I always said, "It certainly takes time. Everything takes time, but you have to begin in order to say it will take a long of time." That never was the case in Haiti.

Well, with the referendum of the Constitution, that was year 1 or year 0, but it didn't last very long, did it?Anyways, phrases, phrases, platitudes, bromides, lack of humor, lack of wit. It wasn't very much fun. So I asked for a comment on the word, "fledgling democracy," and I asked him whether or not he didn't think it was rather an unfledged democracy and whether the bird metaphor was apt in the situation. "What do you think about the nest and that what you have in the nest is a bird's egg, and the creature moving about in the nest is a lizard?" He didn't laugh. He didn't think it was funny. Maybe you don't think it's funny.

Q: I do!

NORTON: Anyways, that was, in fact, Haiti. There was an egg in the nest and there was a lizard in the nest, and the lizard was about to consume the last best hope of the dead bird who had laid that egg. That sort of thing happened all the time. You couldn't get a rise out of these people. Dead serious. Dead serious because their commitment was to their job, their office, their mission. Not Haiti. There are lots of jokes in history, but history is no joke.

Q: You may have just answered this question, but I propose we end this third interview with your assessment of the OAS and how they behaved and what they achieved, if anything, in the last decade before Aristide's departure.

NORTON: Again, I'm not so clear about the motives. I'm not so clear about whether the objective was to get anything done or just to march in place. I don't know. It's obvious that their objective, which was to get people to sit down at the table and work on a negotiation, was a complete failure. Their persistence was remarkable and funny. Of course, it was a joke I could share with nobody. Luigi Einaudi was, I think, a smart man, but you couldn't get a rise out of him on the subject. He kept on coming back, kept on coming back, 25, 26 times, I don't know. It was completely ridiculous as though, how is it possible that these Haitians can be so stubborn? What's the matter with them? We're the OAS. We're big people. Who do they think they are? Haitians think a lot of themselves. They are the descendants of the freed and unfreed slaves who ousted the master, who defeated the French colonial army, the greatest army the world had ever seen. Well, of course a good deal of time has passed, but that megalomania is part of the Haitian character. That's who they are. I find that not funny. I find that touching. After all, Haitian independence is one of the glories of world history.

The problem, of course, is that Haitian leadership has not been a very worthy custodian of it. Who are these guys? They just don't come to reason. Lovely, another word, reason. Come to reason. They don't come to reason. I spoke to these people. Their reason is not your reason. Their criteria are not your criteria. These are people who are possessed by gods, who can be possessed by gods. Haiti is a country that has a greater population of dead spirits walking about than live bodies. This is a country that functions, to a large extent, on black magic. It's not what you think. This is a country of carnival. This is a former slave society. It's still a slave society in many ways. Haitians are not individuals in the way that you are an individual. Their individuality is lived in a different way. Who are they to defy the OAS? Who are those soldiers who took that ball, made a touchdown, and kept on running. What's the matter with them? Come on back!

Well they didn't want to come on back. As I said, they didn't understand that it's, "Yes massa," and when you turn your back, they jump on you and slit your throat. They didn't understand that, and that was funny. Their naivete, their subtlety. I mean, I don't know what they were doing. They're too subtle for me. Their subtlety in the face of this extraordinary distinction of cultures was enormously funny.

The last time I saw Luigi Einaudi was in a hotel where the negotiations were going on. I don't know. I like a lot of people I guess I shouldn't like. I like people. Why not confess it? I didn't like Aristide. He was just too evil and oof, he scared the shit out of me. But I liked a lot of soldiers. And I liked some of Aristide's followers. And I liked Luigi Einaudi. His persistence. He was doomed. I am not an excommunicator.

Q: What was he trying to do?

NORTON: Trying to get people to sit down at the same table. Of course, there was no table, in fact. Anyways, he was walking out of the conference room and I was beside him. And, as we walked in the hotel, a large vase leaned over and fell. Nobody touched it. And I said, "Mr. Einaudi, welcome to Vodou. Nobody touched that vase, you walked by, and it fell over. You're a big man."

Q: This will conclude the third interview - Dan Whitman interviewing Mike Norton in Puerto Rico on September 7th, 2007. One more interview to come.

Q: This is Dan Whitman interviewing Mike Norton. The fourth interview, this one in the afternoon of September 7th, 2007.

Mike, on April 3rd, 2000, an assassination took place - at the time, Haiti's best-known journalist, Jean Dominique. Can you tell me what went through your mind that day?

NORTON: Haiti's best-known journalist. That's the lead of all of our articles. It is, of course, extremely misleading. He was Haiti's best-known, we'll talk about what he was best-known as. Jean Dominique, "Jean Do" to his familiars. I was not one of his familiars. I knew him very well. I crossed his path frequently. I was often attacked on his radio station. Jean Dominique was not the legend that has been made of him. Jonathan Demme made a film. He called it The Agronomist. He was trained as an agronomist, but, again, this is my view of Jean Dominique, that's misleading. He had that capacity. He had a vision for the Haitian peasants. There's no question about that. He died trying to set up a peasant union, but he wasn't an agronomist. Jean Dominique was a political animal. Political in every fiber of his body. Anyways, in every fiber of the body I ever saw and came into contact with. Power. Power to decide. Power to guide. Power to control. Power to direct. All of those infinitives. Anything that had to do with power. He was not a politician, but he was a political animal. Jean Dominique was not a journalist. Jean Dominique was a power in Haiti, and that power that he manifested in the 1970's was magnificent.

It took a lot of courage to face off against the Duvaliers. Jean Dominique, by giving birth to the free press movement, announced the freedom to come, announced the new power, a power that would take into consideration the people, the vast majority of the people. Their needs, their desires, their aspirations, that would wrest it from the hands of a small minority. That small minority - the military, the upper class - was Jean Dominique's enemy. Jean Dominique had an idea of justice that was one of class justice. In many ways, he was as archaic as his opponents. He very easily dismissed people because of their association. On several occasions on his radio stations - he was an editorialist on his radio station - he would attack the international press, the wire services, as agents of imperialism. This was his opinion. It was never based on anything.

Jean Dominique was responsible for having several people thrown into prison. Enemies that belonged to that class, the hated class of the bourgeoisie and the military. The idea of a fair trial, of the truths appearing never was particularly one of his considerations. He wasn't interested in that. He was interested in a new class arriving to power, a class that would open the possibilities of the future to the vast majority.

Jean Dominique was not a journalist. He was the owner of a radio station and an editorialist. On occasion, if you wish, a journalist, but it was not his thing. He was not interested in ferreting out the truth. He was interested in denouncing. He was interested in forming an opinion. Jean Dominique was an opinion maker. Jean Dominique was also the eminence grise of Aristide for a while, and for the current president, Renï¿½ Prï¿½val. Jean Dominique did not have the scruples of a journalist. Jean Dominique accused. Jean Dominique led people to believe with his irony, with his sarcasm, and, at times, with his downright nastiness. All of this is not very politically correct to say about this man who, after all, did die heroically, and I'll come to that in a moment.

I cried two times. I wept bitter tears two times for Haiti during my stay. One was on the 29th of November 1987 when the army crushed the mass democratic movement as it was on the way to the polls, and the second was on April 3, 2000, when Jean Dominique was killed. The two events are very much tied together. Jean Dominique was the voice, in 1970, of a new future, of a new power, of a new distribution of power. In fact, that possibility had already been nipped in the bud in 1987, in my opinion. The leadership had demonstrated itself absolutely incompetent to lead Haiti anywhere than in a circle, a deepening circle, a deepening disastrous circle. People lost something - the hope, the certainty of ultimate victory. Jean Dominique announced that victory before the people took him up on it. They were tied together, but, in fact, in my opinion, it was dead before Jean Dominique was killed.

But Jean Dominique did die heroically. Jean Dominique, who prided himself on his independence of power, of course, because the power he attacked was dictatorial and he was advocating another power, was, in fact, working hand in glove with Aristide. He called Aristide "the Prophet" before he became president. He was Aristide's man. Aristide could count on him. He also had the ear of Renï¿½ Prï¿½val (1996-2000) when Prï¿½val was in power advising him, I think advising him to try to find an independent basis of power independent of Aristide. Jean Dominique tried to form an independent peasant union which was destroyed by Aristide.

(A word might be appropriate here on the biblical notion of false prophesy. From Jeremiah 14: " 'A lying vision, an empty divination, the deceit of their own contriving-that is what they prophesy to you! Assuredly,' thus said the Lord concerning the prophets who prophes'in My name though I have not sent them, and who say, "Sword and famine shall not befall this land"; those very prophets shall perish by sword and famine. And the people to whom they prophesy shall be left lying in the streets of Jerusalem because of the famine and the sword, with none to bury them.'")

Jean Dominique, gradually in the months before the election or the weeks before the legislative election in the year 2000, suddenly changed the tone. I noticed this the week before his assassination. I also noticed that he approached the American embassy. He wanted to interview somebody from the American embassy. He wanted to interview me. That meant, in his mind, he was trying to widen his base. He saw me as an antenna, as an extension of the American embassy. That's the way he thought. He wanted to interview me. He wanted to interview somebody from the American embassy. And in his programs, it became clear that some of the information that didn't come out before was coming out.

There was violence in the provinces, election-related violence, and he clearly stated that the perpetrators were members of Aristide's party. I couldn't believe it. This began about a week or so before his assassination. I couldn't believe it. I said, "Oh my God, what's happening?" What was happening was, for some reason, Jean Dominique didn't agree with Aristide anymore and began to see him as somebody who had to be stopped. One of the reasons was that Aristide was an advocate of black power. Advocate...he was using racism to try and win over the population that he was losing. One of his supporters, a former soldier and then senator, made incendiary remarks against Jean Dominique, and black power seemed to be on the rise. Jean Dominique was from an upper class mulatto family. He hated the bourgeoisie, but he was not a racist. He saw the handwriting on the wall, in my opinion, had ambitions, even though people close to him deny that he had presidential ambitions.

I don't see him running for president either, he was the fourth estate. I think he was moving toward a propaganda attack against Aristide. And he was killed on the third of April. He was killed while recovering his independent voice, and that was moving and that was great and that, for me, redeemed him in my eyes, for Jean Dominique was nothing for me more than a lackey of power of the Lavalas power for a number of years. And he saw the error of his ways.

And he returned to the fold. I was very deeply moved. I was deeply moved and moved to tears. The hope of Haiti was, I think, extinguished before Jean Dominique died, but that independent stand was heroic. Heroism was still possible in Haiti, and what Jean Dominique would have become was nipped in the bud.

Who killed Jean Dominique, I don't know, but one thing I can tell you, nothing I say will stand up in court, nothing happens in a country like Haiti, nothing of that nature can happen without the tacit approval or explicit order of the president. That's all I can say. Things don't just happen.

A man was asked to be Culture Minister by Aristide. He turned it down. The next day his wife was shot in the head. A friend of mine, outraged for some reason, invited to the palace, told Aristide off, said that she didn't believe he was going down the right path. She didn't agree and would not support him. A week later she was attacked by four thugs and was gang raped. Coincidence? What a strange coincidence. And the stories that don't come to mind readily which other people have certainly recorded, are legion. Coincidences? The president in Haiti, so long as he has power, is a mythological being. To be president is an obsession with people. They dream of it. I'm talking about people who have a certain amount of power or education. Literally dream about it.

I had one friend who later became president of one of the many electoral councils, and I asked him, "Now why did you take on this terribly difficult job?" He said, "Well, I didn't want it. The Catholic Church who chose me to be their representative on it did. Except that one night I was dreaming and I dreamt I was in church, and, as I left the church, I heard a voice saying, 'Where are you going, Mr. President? Where are you going, Mr. President?'" For him, this was a clear designation by heavenly powers that he be president of the electoral council, and that, he told me, is why he accepted. Every Haitian young boy dreams of becoming president obviously because it's a country which is very oppressed, where powerlessness is the rule and the president is the Supreme Power. Again, when I say supreme power, put S and put P in capital letters; it's mythological. It's not Mr. President. You don't dare do things in a country like that the way you do them in a country like the United States. Satire is very dangerous unless, of course, the president is losing power, in which case there are no limits to the hatred that is expressed toward him.

Q: On April 3, 2000, the president of Haiti was Renï¿½ Prï¿½val. Explain the relationship between Renï¿½ Prï¿½val and Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

NORTON: Renï¿½ Prï¿½val was an activist, attended Aristide's sermons before the fall of Duvalier. He joined a group of upper class people who were trying to concoct some presidential candidate after the fall of Duvalier. It was an upper class group, and they didn't want any of the presidential candidates already there. They wanted something new. They groomed Aristide, in fact. Aristide had the touch. Aristide had magic. Aristide had charisma. Aristide could rouse people. He certainly could in small groups. He was amazing. In large groups it was different, but in small groups he could inspire them in a kind of call and response interaction. Sermons. Participatory sermons using symbols that everybody understood but that couldn't make him blamable by the power in place. Remarkable man.

And they approached, and they made continual advances toward Aristide until finally Aristide, who I think always wanted to run for president, did run for president in 1990. Renï¿½ Prï¿½val was a member of his group, and when Aristide had to choose his partners, he chose Renï¿½ Prï¿½val to the astonishment of everyone associated with Aristide in the back halls of power, the total astonishment. Renï¿½ Prï¿½val was a street activist. He owned a bakery, I think. He had some job as an accountant. He was not particularly articulate, really very modest, and suddenly he's promoted to prime minister. Well, Aristide believed he could control him and Aristide wasn't wrong. Aristide proceeded, when he was president for the first time, to cut all attachment to the party that had nominated him, to any other party, and to begin his own thing in complete independence. It was, in fact, a movement that isolated him from his base, that weakened him finally when the new power had to confront the military.

Renï¿½ Prï¿½val didn't do a very good job according to the Parliament, and in August they tried to censure him. He was very clear. He said, "Censure me. I'm not going." And Aristide told the Parliamentarians in private, "If you censure him, I'm going to make a speech to the people and you'll see what happens."

The day that the censure was to take place, the Parliament wasurrounded by Aristide's thugs, and then it was really rowdy. Prï¿½val was not censured, and, when Aristide was overthrown by the army in September 1991, I think he went to the French embassy and spent many difficult, difficult months in the embassy until he finally was able to go into exile, returned and was Aristide's candidate and spent the next couple of years unable to find an independent political base in spite of the help of Jean Dominique. He didn't have any ideas. His ideas weren't that different from Aristide. That's part of it. He didn't have an independent personality, and since there were such great difficulties between the legislature and the executive, finally he shut them out or he called the closure of the parliament, and he appointed his own prime minister and ruled by executive decree. This caused all kinds of problems with the international community, but he went on until the end of his term.

Q: On April 3, 2000, who had the power?

NORTON: Aristide had the power, but Prï¿½val was in power. Look, I think it was shortly after he took power, gunmen attacked his sister, shot his sister. You know? That doesn't happen just like that. He was under a death threat. Today, he is president, overwhelmed by problems, short of imagination, and heir to all of the problems I already mentioned. But Aristide isn't there, so, if he fails, he has nobody to blame.

Q: The last point, maybe two, on the death of Jean Dominique. His widow, Michelle Montas, survived him and is currently the spokesperson for the Secretary General of the United Nations. Do you have a sense of where she fit into the whole constellation in early 2000?

NORTON: Michelle Montas was the journalist. She was the head of the newsroom. She has a degree from the Columbia School of Journalism. As I said, her husband was a power broker, not a journalist. He was an opinion maker. Michelle Montas ensured the integrity of the news that came out of their station which was Haiti-Inter. Jean Dominique controlled all.

Michelle Montas, I don't understand her reaction after. Perhaps it was fear. I don't understand why she has not made any accusations. Again, maybe it's fairness. Maybe she doesn't feel that there's any justification to, but, as I said, nothing happens in a country like Haiti without some sort of agreement from the president, and that man is Jean-Bertrand Aristide. I don't see any motive from any other sector of the society. Jean Dominique always attacked the supporters of the former dictatorial regimes. There was nothing special about April 2000. There was only one thing special about April 2000, which was that the country was entering a new electoral period that would culminate in the return to power of Jean-Bertrand Aristide, and her husband had changed his tune.

Q: Yesterday you suggested that "the state" marked a change in the Haitian culture and the Haitian values. You said just now that your hope for Haiti's future had been snuffed out or compromised long before that date, but can you see implications for the Haitian society tied to that date, the date of his assassination?

NORTON: If Jean Dominique had lived, if Jean Dominique had been able to lay out an alternative to Aristide's power, maybe things would have been different. I doubt it because Jean Dominique was archaic. They had no particular fondness for forms. Constitutional, legislative, or executive...I think maybe things would have been different, but the megalomaniac idea that somehow I know what's good for the country and I will be able to do what's good for the country...that's so common in Haiti and yet the poverty of ideas is also flagrant. I think it would have been another cult of personality.

Jean Dominique died at the summit, as I said, heroically, because he recovered his independent voice, which didn't mean that he became a lover of the truth or a lover of justice, but his idea of power changed. The reluctance or unwillingness or refusal of his wife to shake the bars, shake the gate of the presidential palace was perhaps a political move. The ethical stance would have been different.

I remember when, several years before, a very prominent individual was assassinated by the military. It was under the government of Pascal Trouillot, I think, in 1991, and that transitional president was governing with the State Council. One of the State Council members was gunned down. It was obviously complicity between the executive and...what had happened because the State Council and the executive were in a conflict of power. They didn't agree on certain things and who was stepping on whose toes? It was a tense moment, and in that tense moment, Serge Villard was gunned down. And I remember the funeral. I remember the Information Minister coming to extend his sympathy and pay his respects to the widow, Mrs. Villard. He came into the chapel and approached her. She refused to touch his hand. I think she got up and told him to go. That was not very political, was it?

Q: No.

NORTON: I was the one who called Mrs. Villard and told her that her husband had been wounded. I called her. I felt close to her. The admiration I felt for her transcends the categories that dominate Haitian mind. The ethical stand: you are a member of a government. I'm not saying that you killed him, but you are responsible for the death of my husband. I will not touch your hand, and I refuse to admit your presence in my presence. Isn't that what it means to be a human being? And to honor the memory of her husband? Shut down the political shop. Michelle Montas did not shut down the political shop, and that's all I have to say about it.

Q: Let's approach some conclusions. You've given a number of hours of your recollections, your trajectory from childhood until your departure from Haiti in 2004. Would you like to comment on, shifting gears here, now you've made a distinction between the press and journalism. You've made a distinction between the objectives of journalists as professionals and of diplomats as professionals. Can you comment on the difference of the mission of doing and the mission of observing?

NORTON: Yes. I think the case of Jean Dominique will exemplify the first distinction. The press is a power. Its goal is power. It influences. It is what publishers of newspapers do. It's why publishers buy newspapers: so that they can influence policy. It's a power. It forms public opinion which, in democracies, counts. No one's going to contest that the press is a power.

In Haiti, the press was a power for the democratic movement, and often very heroic. Jean Dominique, in fact, isn't the only one, but he gave birth to that new power. After the fall of Duvalier, dozens of radio stations sprung up. You could, and I did, from three o'clock in the morning until ten o'clock at night, listen to one radio station after another in a constant stream of news. I don't know of any other country where that is possible. My radios were on from from two forty five, I think it was, until eight or nine o'clock, until I couldn't stand it anymore. I went from one station to the other, one station to the other. What was happening? Hundreds of journalists were out on the street. Paid with pennies, struggling, and of course sometimes there were corrupt journalists, but by and large, the Haitian press was a power for democracy. Again, a power.

Journalists, it's different. In Haiti, and I think elsewhere, too, the distinction is forgotten. Journalists are workers. If they work hard, they may acquire authority. The goal of a journalist is to acquire authority. I trust him! Hey, guys, did you hear what he said? I trust him. He has authority because he's earned a badge.

So the press is about power, and journalism is about authority, and journalists are workers. And they should organize as workers and they have to often deal with owners of the media that want them to say one thing rather than another because their business is power. Their business is not the truth. Truth and power are uneasy bed fellows. For many years in Haiti, there was no ambiguity. The press wanted democracy. Except what is democracy? Well, we found out, didn't we? The so-called participatory democracof Aristide that Jean Dominique supported for many years was one form of democracy. His power, the power of his press, became for me ambiguous. But he was at least clear. Other stations didn't take such strong stands. So that's an important distinction.

In the United States there are embedded journalists, especially in Washington. Aren't there? And they are used as instruments of power. They have forgotten that their job is not just to interview State Department officials or Defense Department officials but to investigate the whole picture. The New York Times before Iraq is the best example, but also the series of anti- or the pro-Bush books by the Washington Post reporter, Woodward's more or less pro-Bush series of books. And then finally when the wind is turning, he comes out with a book contesting the wisdom of the leaders. He's in bed with them. He socializes with them. And I understand very well it's a temptation. You forget it and they become your pals. You forget that you're a journalist and that you're not a power broker.

Very often, I was tempted. I had a lot to do with everyone in power. I knew the presidents. I knew the ministers. I knew the politicians. I talked to them. Wow. And what if I said something, what if I reported an event that reflected badly upon them? In Haiti, they don't forgive.

Leslie Franï¿½ois Manigat was a personal friend for many years from before, from the 1970's. He became president in 1988 as the result of a rigged election. If Mr. Manigat reads this interview and hears that I believe that he was president because of a rigged election, an election rigged by the military, he will never speak to me again. Well, we're both pretty old. He'll probably never speak to me again anyways, but incredible. People called me on the phone and insulted me because I had put them in the same article as a political enemy. Can you imagine? "You put me in the same article with that SOB?" "But you didn't say what he said; you said the opposite." "But you put me in the same..." I mean, I put them in bed? That did not happen once. And then you lose a source. And then what do you do when something happens? It's very, very difficult.

When you're a journalist embedded in the country or embedded in the milieu, when you're a Washington Beat journalist, you have to have the source. If you don't have the sources, you don't have a job. And in my case, it was so easy. Sometimes it was dangerous. In the coup d'ï¿½tat, it was more than dangerous to report the misdeeds of the military. It meant that I had the militia at my door. That happened. You have to go into hiding. That happens. But you have to be clear. You're not the power broker if you're a journalist. You don't own your medium. You are a worker. You work for them. And sometimes at cross purposes because you have a different objective. You're lucky when you work together, but it's not essentially the case.

So far as the journalist and the diplomat, the diplomat has a mission to accomplish. He may not agree with it and he may inform the State Department or the embassy, that things aren't really the way they are believed to be, but he's there to represent his country. He's there to carry out a policy. And he will justify it whether it's justifiable or not.

A journalist, if he's worth his salt, has a mission to evaluate a situation - to get the facts, to interview the key players, to give the reader a sense of the lay of the land. He doesn't have a policy. If he depends upon the embassy, for example, as chief source, he will skew things totally. That happened often at the beginning of my career in Haiti for foreign journalists, especially the big ones, who came down and basically were informed by the American embassy and their credible informants. So these are distinctions - the distinction between the power and authority, the press and journalism, and, in between, the mission to accomplish and the mission to inform. They, when I speak like that, seem so separate, but when you are in the field, it's confusing.

Q: Confusing in what ways? In what ways can a mission of accomplishment and a mission of finding the truth intersect or contradict each other? And taking back to the comment about Adams...I had something to do...your belief of responsibility as a journalist...you responded to that before. I want to give you another chance to think that over.

NORTON: The diplomat may have a just evaluation of the situation, but it's only part of the picture. You're taken in, and also you're human as a journalist. You like these people. You trust these people. You don't realize, it's not that they're trying to pull the wool over your eyes, you're at cross purposes. They're not trying to abuse you. He's just giving a mission to accomplish as a piece of information. You know, it's not flagged as a mission to accomplish. You believe him, you trust him, and you assess the situation that way, too. And then you're lost because you can't take your cues from people who have missions to accomplish. That's how it's confusing. You can't take your cues from people...I'll give you an example.

I think it's a beautiful example. The 2000, it was the first round of the 2000 legislative elections. I was there with a very experienced reporter from the Central Bureau who had covered many elections in Africa. I had covered several in Haiti, but she had covered many in Africa. It was a mess. The dishonesty was patent. Ballot boxes burst open and ballots strewn in the street, miscounting, you name it. It was visibly a mess, but the international community wanted Haiti to go away. They wanted the pain in the ass to go away, but instead of taking Ibuprofin, they took morphine.

Now, morphine is hallucinatory. A very dear friend, who was Public Affairs Officer at the French embassy, took some French officials around and came back to me radiant saying, "This is one of the most beautiful elections I've ever seen." I thought I was going crazy. This was my very dear friend. The press, the big press - I think the Post, the New York Times, I'm not sure which ones, but the most important ones - reported a fantastic advance in the electoral experience in this country without a democratic tradition. It was a great election! Wow, they got a legislature afoot that is going to be legitimate and things are going to be good. And there won't be any more boat people, and we can turn our attention to what? But not to this little bitty country that's driving us crazy. And that's dirty and who knows what. We, The Associated Press, reported a shambles. We reported highly irregular voting, highly irregular tallying. My friend who knew from Africa said she had never seen something as bad, anything as bad, in Africa. Well, I've seen elections as bad in Haiti, but it sort of put things in perspective. And we stuck to the story.

The next day, I think it was at a press conference, we were blackballed, shunned by all of the reporters. I think one of the big editors, maybe it was the Washington Post, called our head office to complain about us. Luckily, the head office said, "They are the reporters in the field. We do not influence their reporting." Two or three days later, the IRI (International Republican Institute) came down. Porter Goss was the head at that time. Not exactly my cup of tea, but, God, at the time, Haiti was a political football between the Republicans and the Democrats, and so, it was in the interest of the Republican party to tell the truth. Oh, they saved our ass. They gave a beautiful, detailed report on the mishandling of the elections. And there we were. That was the end of the heat. We came out looking very good. We came out triumphant. I mean, The Associated Press had stuck to its guns. The directive was from the embassies, "These are good elections." They cannot not be good elections. They must be good elections. Therefore, they are good elections. Blinding well-intentioned people. Blinding competent journalists. You don't take your cue from the powers that be.

Q: Not to contradict you, but the United Nations, the OAS, the U.S., the EU, and a number of individual countries, Canada and others, questioned the tabulation process. I think what you're describing is not the tabulation but the actual day of election.

NORTON: I'm describing everything. All of that came after. I'm talking about reporting the event. I'm talking about the day. Not a week after when the powers that be said it's really not that good, is it? We can't cover this. I'm talking about the moment. This is the moment. If everybody on the ground had said it was really great, then it would have been really great. We didn't, and in came the IRI to add its power to the situation, and then so it wasn't great. So it was great and then it wasn't great.

We didn't take our cue from the IRI. The IRI didn't follow us; they had their own agenda. What I'm saying is that the reporters that took their cue from the embassies got it all wrong, didn't see. They may have looked, but they didn't see. They may have listened, but they didn't hear. I repeat, you don't take your cues from the powers that be.

Q: We'll add one anecdote from the day of the first elections. I think it was in May. A senior U.S. official, actually during the day of the voting, said, "I see that this is going south. I'm out of here." That's a quote. He saw what was happening. He never said it publicly, but his response was to simply depart, to say nothing. Mike, let's now go into the final question. What might be the various possible futures for Haiti, and why should we care?

NORTON: I'll begin on a positive note. Haiti will survive me. So the door's open. The door's open for a nation. The door's not always open for an individual. So what do I know.

On the other hand, if you extrapolate from the situation now, extrapolate with no unforeseen event, then the future's not bleak. It's pitch black. If the Haitians don't get an economic development program together, if the Haitians do not get their institutional problems solved, get some coordination between the legislature, the executive if they don't get a judicial system functioning, if they're not able to attract foreign investment and control the nature of that foreign investment so that it's appropriate for its own development goals, if the donor nations do not open a door of altruism, if if if if if, then it's hopeless. What does it mean hopeless? It means Haiti, as we know it, dies. It means Haitians will no longer recognize themselves. This is a subtle concept. I don't know whether I am up to treating it.

How does a country die? How does a people die? One thing we know is that oodles of peoples have died in the western hemisphere in the last five hundred years. It wouldn't be the first. The original settlers, the aborigines, were killed off. The Haitian people can die, too. How does a people die if they're still alive? It's by losing its identity.

I'll give you an example. The American people can sicken and wither away if the Republic dies and the American people no longer recognizes itself as a free nation. If the principal value of the American society is security - not job security, but security from, I don't know, the Huns, the Mongol hordes - then America will die. The American tradition will die.

In Haiti it's more delicate, because a Haitian is a member of a collective entity called Haiti. It's not a country. It's not a place really. Haiti is a state of mind in a certain sense, or rather a soul state. People participate in that. If that whole, if there is no longer a carnival possible in Haiti, if the collective body is no longer vital, if Vodou dies, if people get sick because of black magic and can no longer find the cure because the herbs that would cure have become extinct because there are no longer any trees to protect the vegetation underneath, if Haiti turns into a desert.

Haitians are from Africa. They're from equatorial Africa - Angola, Dahomey, places like that, the Congo - they're not desert dwellers. If there's no memory cultivated, if even the mythology of Haiti, if the extreme etiquette which governs peasant life is no longer possible to maintain. No population I've ever met is as polite as the illiterate Haitian. There's the tradition, there's an etiquette, courtly etiquette - if that dies - if on Sunday morning the slum dweller mother no longer braids the hair of her daughter and no longer makes sure that her pinafore is straight and simon pure clean, if that mother doesn't care any more about things like that, Haiti will die. There is only so much suffering that people can take. Haitians can take an awful lot of it, but at a certain moment, the suffering gets the better of life. Pain destroys creativity. Pain. Where were we. Pain...

Q: Destroys creativity.

NORTON: Stop there...

[Pause]

Pain is evil. The pain that Haitians can endure and have endured for centuries may become too great in which case Haitians will lose their sense of themselves, will turn into something else. The events of the last few years have shown one taboo after another falling by the wayside. Attacking a church. This was in 1988. Attacking a church. You don't attack churches. Stabbing a pregnant woman - that took place on the eleventh of September 1988. Stabbing a pregnant woman in the belly with a pig sticker. Certain things that didn't happen before. Kidnapping and torturing a foreigner didn't happen. Certain things didn't happen. There were certain limits.

Those limits are now extinct. Anything goes. That kind of insecurity may have a temporary low, but the taboo is dead. The harm has been done. When it is all right, when it is a daily occurrence to create such havoc, then the handwriting is on the wall for that society. Certain things can't happen, and, if they do, then that society cannot survive. It will become something else. I don't know what it will become, but Haiti, the Haiti that rose up and freed itself and proclaimed the universality of human rights - it's not the French that proclaimed the universality. Well, they may have said it. Instead, it's the Haitians that demanded it and won it. The universality of human rights. That will disappear from the face of the earth.

Q: Mike Norton, Associated Press, thank you for your remarkable comments.