

Hindsight

Case:

H30

Logline:

Geographical Interest:

Haiti

Topic:

Tagline:

Title: How Haiti Turned into A Disaster

1. Hook

It was a ticking time bomb.

The tectonic plates on which Haiti rests move 2 cm per year relative to each other. On the fault line just below its capital, stress had been building up for 250 years. [0]

January 12th, 2010 was a day like any other.

In Haiti's massive textile factories, its sugar plantations, and countless small businesses, people had been working all day. It's a quarter to 5, and people were getting ready to head back home.

It had been warm that day, but a about an hour earlier, a cool refreshing breeze had set in from the east.

[0][0]

Haiti was oblivious to the looming catastrophe.

The clock struck 4:53 pm.

It lasted only 35 seconds.

The whole city was covered in a cloud of dust.

In under half a minute, anywhere between tens to hundreds of thousands of people were killed. [0]

People were trembling, as the severity of the event had yet to sink in. But there wasn't a whole lot of time.

Then the aftershocks hit. Again, and again and again.

This is a reoccurring reality for Haitians. The country is frequently struck by droughts, hurricanes, earthquakes, and tropical storms. [0]

And Haiti is extremely ill prepared.

The 2010 earthquake left the country in ruins. The cost of reconstruction surpassed the country's annual GDP. [0]

The international community, however, provided billions (\$13.5B) in aid, but much of this went missing. [0] [0][0]

Corruption, hunger, and mismanagement. Haiti appears to be destined to face continuous hardship. Nearly half the population faces acute hunger. [0] And street gangs control over 60% of the country's capital. [0]

This is Haiti as we know it today. But once, it was the crown jewel of the Americas. It's hard to imagine, but under the colonial administration of France, Haiti was an economic powerhouse. They were the most lucrative colony on earth. [0] Its production of sugar and coffee was larger than all the British West Indian colonies combined. It outproduced the entire Spanish empire in the Americas, and one in eight French citizens derived their income from Haiti. [0][0]

The farmlands of Haiti were exceptionally fertile.

And Europeans had imported hundreds of thousands of slaves to sustain this economic miracle. [0]

This island was one of the most priced pieces of land on earth.

The slaves revolted, in the largest successful slave uprising in history, and they gained control, turning Haiti into the Latin American country to gain independence.

It seemed like Haiti would prosper. But somehow, even with such incredible prospects, they turned into the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere.

This is how Haiti turned into a disaster with Hindsight.

2. Bumper

3. Body

Spanish settlers arrived on the island in 1492, and over the course of the next 25 years decimated much of the indigenous population. [0]
European colonizers imported hundreds of thousands of slaves to harvest sugar, coffee, and timber, and in 1664, the French established an outpost on the western third of the island. Business was booming, and the society was highly stratified. A small elite was ruling a vast majority of slaves.
In 1791, thousands of slaves joined in a secret voodoo ritual on a beach (Northern Haiti), as a tropical storm was coming in on the horizon. The lightning and thunder were taken as auspicious omens. Later that same night, they revolted en masse. [0]
They took up arms against their masters, and within weeks, the rebellion numbered 100,000 slaves. It had begun as a local uprising but had now evolved into a full-scale revolution.
12 years later, the French withdrew, and Haiti became the first Latin American country to gain independence. They were a country led by former slaves, turning them into a beacon of abolition, self-determination, and equality. But this was in a time where the abolition of slavery was highly controversial and before its time. [0] It was tough for Haiti to establish diplomatic ties.
Its new leaders rested the colossal task to revive the economy without relying on slavery. 12 years of war had devastated the country's agricultural output. But to make matters worse, Haiti was forced to pay \$21 billion dollars in reparations to France. [0]
Haiti was diplomatically isolated, and now deep in debt. Many European nations had put economic sanctions on the former colony, as did the United States. None of these great powers were willing to recognize a country that was led by slaves, as they still relied on slaves in their own countries and colonies.
In the first 120 years of Haiti's existence, they spent 80 percent of its revenues on paying off their debt to France. [0] And most of their exports were destined to Western countries, who didn't wish to see the slave country thrive.

Under Abraham Lincoln, in 1862, the United States recognized Haiti as a sovereign country. And at the beginning of the 20th century, they would get more actively involved. [0]

It is the prelude to the first World War. Haiti was paying of massive debts from France, Germany, and the United States, mostly to finance infrastructure projects.

They had allowed a small group of Germans to settle on the island, and they were exercising immense influence on Haitian politics. This made the United States nervous. Haiti wasn't a stable country, to put it mildly. They went through 7 presidents in only 5 years, and the U.S. feared that Germany would leverage this instability to gain strategic access to the Caribbean.

In 1915, the United States occupied Haiti. [0][0]

This started a nearly two-decade period under U.S. occupation, which actually brought significant economic benefits to Haiti. The U.S. military built roads and communication infrastructure. They built bridges, harbors, schools, and hospitals, and they controlled the country's previously abysmal treasury.

This led to Haiti seeing some rare economic growth in the 1940s and 50s.

But then, this guy emerged:

François Duvalier, or better known as Papa Doc, was a voodoo priest turned dictator.

Before becoming president, he was a doctor in Haiti's countryside. His experiences had acquainted him with the everyday concerns of people, the central role of voodoo in their lives, and he learned how easily the loyalty of people could be bought. His patients called him papa doc, and this name he brought to the campaign trail. [0]

He won in a landslide election that was widely believed to have been corrupt.

Papa Doc practiced magic and sorcery, and this helped him to become popular with the common people.

But almost every presidential election in Haiti is followed by a coup.

A year into his presidency, he managed to quell the first revolt, and Papa Doc realized that more attempts would undoubtedly follow. [0]

Papa Doc realized that most presidents are ousted by the military. So immediately after the attempted coup, he severely limited the military's power and he set up the Presidential Guard. This is the "Tonton Macoute" – a paramilitary force consisting of volunteers. They lived of extorting their fellow countrymen, and they hold the power of life and death in their hands.

This brutal militia helped Papa Doc protect himself from conspirators.

But Haiti still had the façade of democracy.

In 1961, elections were held.

Papa Doc could not run for reelection, as this is strictly prohibited in the constitution. But that didn't matter. He ran and won with an official tally of 1.3 million votes for him, and zero for his contestants. After this fake display of democracy, he declared himself president for life.

Haiti was extremely isolated and dirt poor.

The 1960s were the decade of development. The world economy was growing at the fastest rate in history. In Europe and Asia, countries had recovered from World War 2. Baby boomers entered the work force, the world was relatively stable. This led to an average global GDP growth of 5% per year. The highest in recorded history. [0]

The real economic growth of every country in the world grew, except for Haiti. [0]

Its most fundamental problems were economic mismanagement and corruption. [0] The only thing Papa Doc managed to enrich was himself.

In 1971, he died, and his son took over.

Jean-Claude Duvalier, nicknamed "baby doc", was only 19 years old. Under his rule, corruption became even worse. The government engaged in drug trafficking. They stole humanitarian aid, and they did things I don't even dare to say out loud. [0] The World Bank later estimated that during Baby Doc's rule at least 36% of government's revenue was embezzled. [0]

Haiti was going through an exceptionally dark time, and in 1986, the Haitian people bravely stood up against their leader.

Baby Doc knew he couldn't hold on to power. He stole \$120 million dollar from the Haitian treasury and he fled to France.

France granted him 7 days of exile, which he had to use to look for another country that would take him, but no one did.

Baby Doc continued to live the sumptuous lifestyle that he had gotten used to. He had a magnificent chateau just outside of Paris, and a luxury villa on the Côte d'Azur. He had speedboats, a collection of jewels, art, and he had several fast cars, including a Ferrari Testarossa. [0][0]

It pained France to have him, but they also feared that prosecuting him would lead to further unrest.

In Haiti, the first internationally recognized democratic elections were held, and they were won by Jean-Bertrand Aristide. It was the moment for Haiti to shine. 8 months later, Aristide was overthrown. [0]

Democracy was short-lived, but Haitians kept trying.

One leader was elected, another installed. The United States, at some point intervened again, and the United Nations made an attempt a few years later. in the 1990s and early 2000s, no local or foreign initiatives managed to create lasting democratic institutions. On top of this political turmoil, about every 2-3 years on average, there was a natural disaster. Floods, hurricanes, severe droughts. The economy saw almost no growth, there was rampant inflation, an AIDS epidemic, they had massive debt, and there was widespread corruption. [0][0]

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In 2010, Haiti was dirt poor and traumatized. And 13 km below the ground, the stress on this fault line was suddenly and violently released.

It had a magnitude of 7.1.

In the first nine hours, there were 32 aftershocks. 12 of which had a magnitude of 5.0 or greater. In the days that followed, dozens more were recorded. [0]

Two weeks later, right under the coastal city Petit-Goâve, the strongest aftershock to date was recorded. It had a magnitude of 5.9, costing the town nearly 15% of its buildings. [0]
Their housing and infrastructure are substandard. The environment is degraded by decades of deforestation and poor land management,[0] making Haiti particularly vulnerable to natural disasters.
The exact number of victims of the earthquake is disputed, but it's probably in the vicinity of 200,000 people. 1.5 million more became homeless. [0]
The humanitarian aid that the world made available in a matter of weeks is a glimmer of hope in this story. But a shadow was cast over all the good that was done, when the news broke that billions of dollars went missing.
Then, in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, a cholera epidemic broke out. A disease that was brought to Haiti by UN peacekeepers from Nepal. This killed tens of thousands of people, and it infected hundreds of thousands more. [0]
Haiti is just a collection of bad news. After 2010, the misfortune wouldn't stop.
They are continuously hit by natural disasters, and they struggle to establish a stable political system.
After the assassination of Moïse in 2021, there have been no elections. The richest and brightest manage to escape, and the poorest are chained to no hope. Can this ever be turned around? Let's take a look.
The main economic advantage of Haiti is its proximity to the United States – still the largest export market for manufactured goods. Haiti today has an economy that's similar in size to South Korea and Taiwan in the 1970s:
These three countries all lack natural resources. But South Korea and Taiwan managed to prosper for the same reason: export-led industrialization.

In 2020, Haiti reached a record unemployment rate of 15%. [0] It has a population of nearly 12 million. This is a massive and cheap workforce that could allow Haiti to become an export powerhouse to the United States. They need to leverage their proximity and preferential access. Starting off with manufacturing clothes, shoes, simple electronics, or something similar. This strategy has lifted many countries out of poverty in the last few decades, and it's already happening on a small scale.

80% of Haiti's exports are clothes, and this makes up 10% of its GDP. It's a start, but there still is a huge untapped potential. [0][0]

4. CTA

Which of these two videos appeals to you the most? Let me know by watching it next.

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