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Haiti Changed the World

THE
LAST DAYS
OF
FRANÇOIS
DUVALIER

*Power, Paranoia, and the Slow Death
of Haiti's First Dictator*

Verified narrative nonfiction — every claim sourced and labeled

RÉGINALD BAILLY

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This is verified narrative nonfiction. Every factual claim in this book traces to a documented source, and the confidence the record supports is printed with the claim: HIGH, MEDIUM, LOW, or DISPUTED. Where sources conflict, both versions appear. Where the record is silent, this book says so rather than inventing. No quotation in these pages is invented; no dialogue is imagined. Each chapter ends with its sources.

Series: Haiti Changed the World — Season 2, Package 1

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CHAPTER 1

The Illusion of Immortality

In Haiti, power had always worn a human face. Presidents came and went, generals rose and fell, and governments collapsed with predictable violence. But by the late 1960s, François Duvalier had transformed power into something else entirely—something closer to destiny. To challenge him no longer felt like opposing a man. It felt like defying fate.

For more than a decade, Haitians had been taught that “Papa Doc” could not die.

The image was deliberate, constructed layer by layer. Duvalier dressed almost exclusively in black, spoke slowly in nasal monotones, and rarely smiled. He styled himself as the embodiment of the nation’s suffering and its avenger, a physician who had descended into politics to cure Haiti of its historical enemies. Through speeches, symbolism, and terror, he fused the state with his own body. Haiti did not merely have a president; it had a living incarnation of authority.

None of it was improvised. The journalists who watched the persona take shape at close range—Bernard Diederich reported from Haiti for fourteen years before the regime expelled him in 1963—documented how methodically it was assembled: the costume, the cadence, the calculated stillness [Source: Diederich & Burt, *Papa Doc*]. It was, like everything Duvalier built, a diagnosis followed by a prescription.

The white coat, after all, had been real. Before politics, Duvalier had been a working physician, a doctor whose service among Haiti's rural poor earned him the nickname the whole nation would one day learn to pronounce carefully: Papa Doc (HIGH confidence). The regime took a biography of healing and converted it into an image of paternal, inescapable authority. How that transformation looked from inside the medicine is a story for a later chapter; here it matters because it made the myth intimate. Haiti was not being asked to obey a stranger. It was being asked to trust its doctor.

Whispers circulated in Port-au-Prince that he practiced Vodou sorcery, that bullets could not pierce him, that his enemies fell ill simply by being named. These stories were encouraged, never denied. In a country where folklore and history were inseparable, myth became a weapon more effective than any army.

And yet, behind the palace walls, the body sustaining this illusion was already failing.

What was wrong with him can be stated with unusual precision for a regime so secretive, because the core of it was chronic and long observed: Duvalier had lived with diabetes since early adulthood, compounded over the years by heart disease (HIGH confidence). Nearly everything else about his condition—how far it had progressed, what it had already cost him—was hidden, rumored, or reported secondhand.

By the end of the 1960s, François Duvalier was no longer the same man who had seized power in 1957. Once energetic and methodical, he had become physically diminished—moving slowly, speaking less, appearing only when absolutely necessary. His frailty in these final years

is consistently reported by observers, though no medical bulletin ever confirmed it (MEDIUM confidence). Public appearances were rare and carefully staged. When he did emerge, he was often seated, his posture stiff, his expression unreadable behind thick glasses. The fullest picture of the palace in this period comes from Elizabeth Abbott, whose account of the regime's decline rests heavily on insider interviews conducted after its fall [Source: Abbott, *Haiti: The Duvaliers and Their Legacy*].

Officially, nothing was wrong. The state-controlled press continued to describe him as vigilant, tireless, and fully in command. The scholarship on the regime's cult of personality attests the apparatus that surrounded the silence: portraits hanging in schools, offices, churches, and police stations; children reciting pledges to him by name; civil servants swearing oaths of loyalty not to the constitution, but to Duvalier himself (MEDIUM confidence) [Source: Trouillot, *State Against Nation*]. Some later retellings go further, describing ministers, generals, and clergy swearing loyalty to the Duvalier bloodline itself. That more dramatic formulation rests on thinner sourcing (LOW confidence), and it is best read as the kind of story the regime would not have minded anyone believing.

The idea that he might be ill—let alone dying—was unthinkable, and dangerous to say aloud.

Health, in Duvalier's Haiti, was political. To suggest weakness in the president was to imply weakness in the state, and weakness invited rebellion. Rumors of illness had, in the past, been met with swift punishment. People disappeared for less.

This was more than censorship; it was self-preservation folded into daily speech. A nation that had learned the price of a careless sentence learned to discuss the president's health the way sailors discuss a storm still below the horizon—by its signs, never by its name.

Still, rumors spread.

Taxi drivers whispered about canceled meetings. Market women noted the long silences on national radio. Diplomats noticed that requests for audiences went unanswered for months. American embassy reporting from these years registered the same pattern—a president increasingly difficult to see, a government increasingly difficult to read (MEDIUM confidence) [Source: FRUS, 1969-1976, Vol. E-10]. Even within the regime, only a small inner circle had direct access to Duvalier, and that circle was shrinking.

The National Palace itself seemed to reflect the change. Once a place of constant movement—officials, guards, messengers—it grew quieter. Corridors were closed. Certain rooms were sealed off. Security increased, but visibility decreased. The palace became less a seat of government than a guarded sickroom.

Duvalier's illness did not soften his rule. If anything, it sharpened it.

As his physical world narrowed, his mental world darkened. Old grudges resurfaced. Former allies were reevaluated as potential traitors. Military officers were rotated, dismissed, or quietly eliminated. Loyalty was no longer assumed; it had to be proven again and again.

Fear, already the regime's foundation, became its oxygen.

The Tonton Macoutes—his paramilitary enforcers—continued their patrols through the capital and countryside. The force had been created in 1959 out of the *cagouards*, the hooded squads of the regime's first years, and institutionalized as a militia officially titled the Volontaires de la Sécurité Nationale, the VSN (HIGH confidence on the institution and its role; most sources date the formalization to 1962, though one account places a renaming as late as 1970). Their presence was a reminder that even if the president was unseen, his reach remained absolute. They answered not to laws or courts, but directly to Duvalier. Their authority flowed from him alone, and as long as they acted in his name, they were untouchable.

This was the paradox of Duvalier's final years: the weaker his body became, the more total his grip on power seemed.

Foreign observers struggled to reconcile the two realities. Intelligence reports noted signs of declining health—diabetes, cardiovascular problems, possible neurological damage—yet the political structure he had built showed no visible cracks, or none that were allowed to show for long. Challenges did surface: in 1967, a purge and public execution of Presidential Guard officers at Fort Dimanche; in April 1970, a Coast Guard mutiny whose ships turned their guns on the capital itself. Each was crushed before it could become a mass protest or a real contest for power, and each crushing only deepened the myth of invincibility rather than breaking it. Haiti appeared frozen, locked in a permanent present where change itself had been outlawed.

But beneath the surface, time was running out.

Duvalier understood this better than anyone.

He had spent his career studying Haiti's past: the coups, the assassinations, the sudden reversals of fortune. He knew that regimes often collapsed not when they were strongest, but when their leaders died unexpectedly. The question that haunted him was not whether he would die—but what would happen immediately afterward.

The answer terrified him.

Without him, the delicate balance of fear, patronage, and repression could unravel in days. The military might seize power. Rivals within the regime could turn on one another. Exiles might return. Foreign governments might intervene. Everything he had built could vanish the moment his heart stopped.

For a man obsessed with control, this was unacceptable.

He was not starting from nothing. The constitution he had rewritten in 1964—approved in a referendum whose ballots came pre-marked “yes” and whose official result approached unanimity (HIGH confidence)—had made him President for Life, and it contained the clause on which everything now depended: the president's right to name his own successor. The legal instrument had been waiting for years. What it lacked was a name.

The solution he would choose was radical, unprecedented in modern Haiti, and almost absurd in its audacity: he would attempt to make his power hereditary.

But that decision was still forming, incubating in the quiet hours of illness and isolation. For now, Duvalier clung to the image he had so carefully constructed—the immortal father of the nation, watching, waiting, judging.

To the public, Papa Doc remained eternal.

Inside the palace, he was counting his days.

And as his body betrayed him, the illusion of immortality became not just propaganda, but necessity. The myth had to survive even if the man could not. Because in Haiti, once the illusion shattered, the reckoning would be swift—and merciless.

The question was no longer whether François Duvalier would die.

It was whether his regime could outlive him.

The answer, already in motion, would change Haiti for decades to come.

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(per `01-Research/season2\_p01\_research\_foundation.md`; “matrix row” = that file’s §2 Fact-Checking Matrix)

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