
Afterword: *Chimère*, the “N” word of Haiti

By Richard Sanders, editor, *Press for Conversion!*

Some words are a political litmus test. One example is the slang term *chimère*. This is the “N” word of Haiti. It is used there today in much the same way that the word “nigger” was used 50 years ago in the U.S.

Chimère is an insulting invective that expresses utter contempt and hostility for people of a certain colour, class and political persuasion. Using it can amount to a verbal hate crime; it expresses and incites malice and hostility against an identifiable group.

This swear word—whose original meaning is usually translated as “monster” or “ghost”—is an aspersion or vilification that dehumanizes Haiti’s desperately poor, black citizens. It stigmatizes the destitute as villains.¹

But this derogatory term is more than just a cheap shot or a rude put-down against members of Haiti’s impoverished majority. This invective is hurled like a projectile against poor young black men who live in some of the world’s most wretched “slums.”

Chimère is also a verbal brickbat with a sharp political edge that has been used to inflict harm upon fans of Haiti’s deposed president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide. In particular, the term is wielded to smear and defame supporters of the elected Lavalas government, especially those who dared to stand up for democracy during and after the 2004 coup. In other words, it is used to debase and vilify pro-democracy advocates who suffered the horrors of the coup’s reign of terror. It also maligns, in one fell swoop, all of their friends, families and neighbours.

But *chimère* packs even more to its wicked punch. This reproachful curse slanders with connotations of brutally violent and criminal gang activity. It insinuates that all youthful Aristide supporters are actually vicious and delinquent hoodlums and thugs.

Chimère is therefore a sophisticated verbal assault against the poor—a readily accessible linguistic weapon in the propagandist’s toolkit. By hurling this obloquy, insult is added to injury, and the poor are blamed for the

horrific persecution that they are forced to suffer for supporting a government that they elected.

During the coup regime’s rampage, *chimère* was a poisonous mark used to identify people for abuse. Once scarred with this opprobrium, innocents were targeted for imprisonment, torture and even execution. Many went into hiding when fingered with this epithet.

Who uses this loaded word?

Users of the term *chimère* reveal more about their own biases than about the subjects of their abuse. It is therefore a useful exercise to examine who unthinkingly throws this word around.

Not surprisingly, the U.S. government agencies that coordinated the 2004 coup—such as the State Department,² the U.S. Agency for International Development³ and the military⁴—all embraced the pejorative label.

They acquired the term from their clients among Haiti’s wealthy elite. Fronting for this class was the notorious Group of 184. In a letter to then-U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, this CIDA-funded paragon of Haiti’s lofty establishment, equated their country’s elected president with terrorism, saying:

“[The] U.S. has had a firm no-dialogue policy in dealing with terrorists; it is therefore unthinkable to us that the U.S. Government expects our members to enter into a dialogue with Jean Bertrand Aristide who has unleashed his ‘*chimères*’ (thugs) against fellow countrymen.”⁵

The coup-regime’s prime minister, Gérard Latortue, did not shy away from employing the term. Although he “denied that partisans of Fanmi Lavalas are being persecuted, he reasserted the determination of his government to fight those he labels ‘*chimère*.’ He is reported saying his priority is arresting ‘*chimère*,’ rather than convicted, rights violators still at large. He said the government will not direct its attention to cases of convicted violators until this task has been completed.”⁶

The Latortue regime’s priorities were clear. Not only did they prefer jailing pro-democracy supporters to tracking down convicted criminals, they

were’t even about to pursue the rebel leaders whose forces had released so many human rights violators from Haitian prisons in February 2004. In fact, Latortue publicly praised the rebels’ leadership, calling them “freedom fighters,” while David Lee, Canada’s ambassador to the Organization of American States, “nodded his head in approval.”⁷

The contorted views of Latortue’s Canadian-backed regime were widely propagated thanks to the G184 whose leaders and members owned and controlled most of Haiti’s major media. And, as U.S. lawyer and human rights investigator, Brian Concannon, Jr., has commented, Haiti’s right-wing press helped transform the meaning of *chimère* to suit the needs of the elite during the pre-coup period:

“Lavalas opponents...decline to distinguish between political dissidents and suspected common criminals.... This...is exemplified by use of the word *chimère*.... It was traditionally applied to brutal criminals in Haiti, but in the lead-up to the 2004 coup d’etat, its usage was expanded to include any member of the urban poor who demonstrated in the streets or joined Lavalas. The anti-Lavalas press routinely refers to political prisoners—with no documented history of violence or criminal activity—as ‘gang leaders,’ or links them, with no evidence, to gang activity.”⁸

And, as another U.S. lawyer, Thomas Griffin, noted in his landmark human rights report in 2004, “hardly any young men (from pre-adolescent youngsters to men in their thirties),” from the “extremely poor sections of Port-au-Prince,” leave their neighbourhoods “for fear of being arrested as a *chimère*, the derogatory label given to them by the pro-government media.”⁹

One of worst abusers of the term *chimère* was the National Coalition for Haitian Rights—Haiti (NCHR-Haiti). This elitist, Haitian organization—funded largely by the U.S., Canadian and French governments—liberally sprinkled its reports with exaggerated and fabricated stories of the evil *chimère* bogeymen, who lurked in the dark shadows of the country’s poorest neighbourhoods (where NCHR-Haiti

officials were not welcome and therefore refused to venture). Even after the 2004 coup, when so many impoverished Haitians were being terrorized for supporting the ousted Lavalas government, NCHR-Haiti “continued to cite abuses by ‘*chimère*,’ whom they call simply ‘Aristide gangs,’ without documenting the connections.”¹⁰

NCHR-Haiti’s partisan views were taken by Amnesty International (AI) which also mimicked its reprehensible use of the term *chimère*. Kevin Pina, a U.S. journalist and long-time Haitian resident, explains that AI was “unresponsive to the situation in Haiti by virtue of their reliance on a partisan anti-Lavalas organization.... the National Coalition for Haitian Rights or NCHR who were the same ones falsely accusing people of crimes to justify their killing.... NCHR served as a network of rubber-stamp police informants for the interim regime of Gérard Latortue. They manufactured evidence of crimes to justify...locking them up—without ever having an honest trial....

“AI...went so far as to use the same language as NCHR to describe the situation. They used the word *chimère*...to describe armed groups they claimed were loyal to Aristide and the Lavalas movement. This word is a highly-partisan term used by those who supported Aristide’s ouster, especially NCHR, to create a climate of terror and fear after February 2004. Anyone accused of being a *chimère* was marked for death or imprisonment without trial. Yet here was AI, a purportedly independent human rights organization, using the same politically-charged language. I found it disgraceful.”¹¹

AI was not the only organization that shamelessly followed NCHR-Haiti’s political and linguistic lead. Although supposedly concerned with democracy, human rights and the dispensation of charity to Haiti’s impoverished masses, several Canadian groups spread NCHR-Haiti disinformation and thus helped prepare public support for the coup that deposed Aristide’s elected government. Then, ignoring the coup’s illegality, they covered up the many atrocities that followed.

Just three weeks after the coup,

during a firestorm of human rights abuses in Haiti, Canadian organizations spouted the NCHR’s perverted brand of anti-Lavalas rhetoric to welcoming ears on Parliament Hill. Addressing the Foreign Affairs committee, top officials of the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace, Oxfam-Quebec and the International Center for Legal Resources invoked the dreaded *chimère* bogey monster a dozen times.¹² And, like others who habitually used this slang, they studiously avoided the reality that Aristide had been kidnapped. They also denied that a Canadian-backed coup had just overthrown Haiti’s democracy. What’s more, their analysis neglected to mention the thousands of Lavalas supporters then being raped, jailed, exiled or killed by the regime that Canada’s government was so proudly supporting in Haiti.

Leading Canadian government apologists for the 2004 coup also threw around the *chimère* epithet. They included Liberal MP Denis Coderre, who was Prime Minister Paul Martin’s “special advisor on Haiti.” On CBC radio, Coderre—with his typical eloquence—blurted out a slander equating *chimère* with the whole of Lavalas, a mass movement cum political party which—having won two landslide elections—put Canada’s Liberal Party to shame:

“[T]he minute I became Minister for La Francophonie in December 2003, the dean of the University [in Haiti] through the *chimère* – Lavalas, the armed force of Mr. Aristide, break the two legs of the dean.... We were not there to make Mr. Aristide out. He left and I don’t know what the history will tell how that it happened, but Canada was not involved in there but Mr. Aristide make a pretty bad thing in Haiti.”¹³

And then there is Claude Boucher, Canada’s ambassador to Haiti during most of the coup period. During a CPAC TV presentation, in which he admitted working with Haiti’s top rebel leaders (including Guy Philippe), Boucher also blurted out the invective “*chimère*.”¹⁴

Considering the sheer audacity of the Canadian government’s violent affront against Haitian democracy and human rights, we should not be surprised that its top officials would also stoop to vicious name-calling as well.

Sticks and stones do break bones, but sometimes names too can hurt.

References

1. Agence Haïtienne de Presse, April 19, from Haiti Human Rights Record, *Americas.org*, April 30, 2004. <www.globalexchange.org/countries/americas/haiti/1820.html>
2. See these examples: Foreign Press Center Briefing, U.S. State Dep’t, Mar. 10, 2004 <fpc.state.gov/fpc/30329.htm> and “Haiti: Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - 2004,” Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, U.S. State Dep’t, Feb. 28, 2005. <www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2004/41764.htm>
3. “Overview of Humanitarian Assistance to Haiti,” U.S. Agency for International Development, March 5, 2004. <www.state.gov/p/wha/rls/fs/30184.htm>
4. “Multinational Interim Force-Haiti,” U.S. Southern Command, U.S. Dep’t of Defense, Mar. 17, 2004. <[www.southcom.mil/PA/Media/Releases/PR040317\(update\).pdf](http://www.southcom.mil/PA/Media/Releases/PR040317(update).pdf)>
5. G-184 open letter to Colin Powell <web.archive.org/web/20041016021300/group184.org/colin_powell_jan9_04.html>
6. The etymology of “villain” is instructive. The Middle English “*villain*,” Old French “*villain*” and Late Latin “*villanus*” simply meant a serf or peasant bound to the lord of a villa. But, so frequently was it used as a term of abuse by those who looked down upon the poor, that its humble meaning was lost. See <www.answers.com/topic/villain>
7. “Drugs and Politics in Haiti,” Haiti Info. Project, July 24, 2007. <www.haitiaction.net/News/HIP/7_24_7/7_24_7.html>
8. Brian Concannon, Jr., “Haiti’s Political Prisoners Exemplify Challenges of Democratic Transition,” *Power and Interest News Report*, Sept. 11, 2006. <www.pinr.com/report.php?ac=view_report&report_id=552>
9. Thomas Griffin, “Haiti: Human Rights Investigation: Nov. 11-21, 2004.” <www.law.miami.edu/cshr/Cshr_Report_02082005_v2.pdf>
10. Tom Reeves, “Return to Haiti: The American Learning Zone,” *Counter-Punch*, April 14, 2004. <www.counter-punch.org/reeves04142004.html>
11. “Seeing ‘BANDITS’ in Haiti: An interview with Kevin Pina,” WVUD, Nov. 12, 2006. <www.atlanticfreepress.com/content/view/2155/81>
12. Standing Cttee., Foreign Affairs & International Trade, Mar. 25, 2004. <cmte.parl.gc.ca/cmte/CommitteePublication.aspx?COM=8730&SourceId=76218&SwitchLanguage=1>
13. *The Current*, CBC radio, May 15, 2006
14. CPAC, Nov. 9, 2004. <www.jafrikayiti.com/Boucher%20dit%20travailleur%20avec%20Guy%20Philippe%20&%20Tatoune.wmv>