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Hate in Haiti

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These days, when we think of brutality in a foreign land and the prospect of military intervention, the Balkans come to mind. But it was not so long ago that Haiti was the greater concern. There, lest we forget, the U.S. did intervene -- in September 1994.

The idea was to reinstall Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who had been deposed by the Haitian military three years before. That much was accomplished. Eighteen months later, though, nearing the U.S. withdrawal, Haiti's prospects looked gruesomely dim. Stanley Schrager, the U.S. press attache in Port-au-Prince at the time, told Bob Shacochis, author of "The Immaculate Invasion" (Viking, 408 pages, \$27.95): "The next couple of years here are going to be ugly. Officially, we're leaving and we gave them their chance. Unofficially, it's going to be a great tragedy. Why did we even bother?"

In fact, the blood-dimmed tide that Mr. Schrager and others foresaw did not come to pass. But the current news from Haiti is hardly encouraging -- not for Haitians still trying to shore up democracy or for U.S. policy makers who spent so much political capital and treasure trying to help them. The country is still desperately poor. Politically, it is paralyzed by corruption, electoral dishonesty and violent factionalism. Why did we even bother?

This is one of the questions that drove Mr. Shacochis to compose this fine, though flawed, account of Operation Restore Democracy, as the intervention was called. Written as a Graham Greene-like travelogue, "The Immaculate Invasion" gives a ground-eye view of soldiering in the new age

of what the military calls "Operations Other Than War." Such operations, Mr. Shacochis insists, are "a foggy swamp-bottomed no man's land . . . an empty space in an army's traditional reality, where there are no friends or enemies, no front or rear, no victims, and likewise, no defeats and no true endings."

Mr. Shacochis looks for Haiti writ small and finds it in the northern town of Limbe. A prize-winning fiction writer, he captures the textures of Haitian life and the arc of its many moods. He describes the "fetid, suppurating, inexplicably inhumane harborside slums" and how, as the U.S. invasion drew near, "the country felt like it was being microwaved, cooked from the inside, incubating lunacy."

Among ordinary citizens, the first rush of liberation was greeted with ecstasy. Somber funeralgoers, spotting a U.S. patrol, "reinvented themselves in one great conclusive boom of divine elation and deliverance." But for others the U.S. presence ignited spasms of vengeance. "The dark was always opening and closing on Haiti like the jaws of Jonah's whale." Insanity itself was "veiled with triumph."

Mr. Shacochis insinuates himself into a U.S. Special Forces unit -- eating, sleeping and patrolling with them over the course of the operation. Although he has inherited the antimilitary ethos of his Vietnam generation, he admires the Green Berets. "Liberty's own ambassadors," he calls them, "the optimistic face of what presidents and pundits wanted to describe as the New World Order."

The book's central argument seems to be that Operation Restore Democracy failed because U.S. policy was confused and irresolute from the get-go. He lays special blame on what he says was the CIA's decision to suckle a dubious political organization called the Front for the Advancement and Progress of Haiti (FRAPH), trying to make it a player on a par with Mr. Aristide's so-called people's party.

According to Mr. Shacochis, FRAPH was made up of thugs who had served the military regime. This may well be so, but to argue that U.S. support for it sank the operation requires more evidence than is presented here. Worse, the "blame FRAPH" argument draws attention away from the charge the author skittishly lays at the feet of the Haitians themselves, who, he intimates, were unready to practice the democratic freedoms America was handing them.

Mr. Shacochis also underplays the role that voodoo plays in Haitian culture, although he does show the Green Berets' taking it seriously. He describes

them imitating spirits to bolster their control at night, reversing their night goggles, "which turned the eyeholes into twin cones of ghoulish green light." But he closes off further discussion by saying dismissively that this side of the country -- voodoo -- was "the Haiti of nightmares and myths and bad movies and the wet dreams of racists."

At one point, Mr. Shacochis speaks to the fugitive Haitian freedom fighter Marc Lamour. "The only way Haiti can be saved," Mr. Lamour says, "is for the Haitian people to have a national conscience. I want each Haitian to say, I will not do this because it will hurt the country." Adds the author: "The international community could help, he believed, but not that much."

Mr. Lamour offers a lesson, and Mr. Shacochis lets it resonate. But by exaggerating the skullduggery of U.S. intelligence, the author leaves the impression that dysfunctional places like Haiti can be saved if only we could get our act together. Somehow, one comes away from "The Immaculate Invasion" with a different sense of where the blame lies.

Mr. McGowan is the author of "Only Man Is Vile: The Tragedy of Sri Lanka."