Obituary: Baby Doc Duvalier

Like father, like son

Jean-Claude (Baby Doc) Duvalier, ruler of Haiti, died on October 4th, aged 63

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WHEN the job of dictator of Haiti fell to his lot in 1971, Jean-Claude Duvalier did not want it. “What about Marie-Denise?” he asked. His bossy elder sister would make an ideal tyrant for this dilapidated, sun-scorched, miserable western end of the island of Hispaniola. And she was desperate to do it, too. Or what about Simone, his mother, already First Lady in the gleaming white National Palace in Port-au-Prince? Even his father, the much-feared Papa Doc, had been heard to say that his fat, gormless son was “not the best option”. But when the time came, Papa Doc’s successor had to be a man; and so the grim paternal hand, small and wiry as a claw, descended on Jean-Claude’s ample shoulder. “I’ve chosen him”, the posters said.

The people of Haiti had not had that pleasure. They endorsed the choice, though, in a referendum that passed by 2,391,916 to one. The machinery of terror set up by Papa Doc, reinforced by tontons macoutes (“bogeymen”) armed with sugar-hacking machetes, obviously held good. And Jean-Claude’s life of indolence, which consisted of snoozing through any instruction, rampant all-night sex romps and platefuls of grilled spiced pork washed down with 7-Up, was jolted up a bit.

He was 19, and had no idea what a ruler-for-life was supposed to do. His father, consumed by the revolution he was visiting on Haiti, never had time to train him. His childhood was that of most spoiled rich boys, punctuated by bursts of close gunfire—once during a Mardi Gras parade.
and once, killing the chauffeur of his limousine and two of his bodyguards, as he walked into school. He did not seem either bothered, or alerted. It became apparent only later that he had ingested many of his father’s ideas: of Haiti’s ruler as a version of God, or in his case God the Son; of its people as flawed, confused and barely rational, needing the slap of firm rule; of Haiti as a fief, and its paltry revenues as his own bank account; of marauding macoutes as his back-up plan of choice; and of his own ideology, Jeanclaudisme, as something to make “hearts beat and chests swell”.

Early on, he was happy to let himself be led by the forceful women round him. The habit took hold. At first it was his mother who dragged him to cabinet meetings (through which he slept) and fired ministers right and left. Then, after he had fallen in 1980 for the wildly sexy Michèle Bennett, a woman he saluted as “really dangerous!”, she did the firing. She also sent his mother packing, after months of screaming arguments all round the palace.

Jean-Claude already had a taste for stylish dressing and nice cars; but marriage to Michèle accelerated the plundering of government departments, to the tune of $16m in the first three months of 1981 alone. The cash went on furs, jewels, shopping trips to Paris, Givenchy gowns, champagne parties and gold-and-lapis lazuli fittings for the palace bathrooms. Few Haitians at the time enjoyed sewerage, or a paved road. The more miserable they were, though, the more foreign aid came in, to be smartly diverted into Duvalier pockets. There was simply no incentive for the playboy dictator to improve things. In fact, the reverse.

Dancing with the devil

Some Haitians thought Michèle had put an evil spell on him: not least because she was a rich pale-skinned mulatto, whereas Papa Doc had preached and practised noirisme, favouring the poorer blacks. Whatever she had done, voodoo haunted the palace. His mother danced frenziedly at night ceremonies, and his father was said to have made a pact with the devil to keep the Duvaliers in power. Jean-Claude had little time for that. He would rather swim, dance, play cards, shoot doves, or zoom bulkily on his Harley-Davidson round the lawns. Perhaps it was this disrespect for the spirits, as well as wholesale kleptomania, that led by 1980 to the collapse of the Haitian economy, the flight of thousands of boat people to Florida and, eventually, to food riots that forced Jean-Claude and Michèle out in 1986, their Louis Vuitton bags stuffed with so much art, silverware and cash from the central bank that there was no room for his clothes.

They left on an American plane. He was not a friend America wanted, yet he was useful: a source of dirt-cheap non-unionised labour for American businesses, which swarmed into Haiti in the 1970s, and a warmish anti-Communist in Cuba’s back yard. Whenever outside pressure was applied he would reform a little, relax curbs on the press, set the macoutes to tree-planting.
and appoint more liberal ministers, only to fire them, and have opponents killed, as soon as backs were turned. Stupid he might appear, but he played the United States as carefully as, in the opulent salons of the palace, he played his viola.

He returned to Haiti in 2011, surprising everyone. Exile, he said, had broken him. Certainly it had broken the bank; Michèle had divorced him in 1993 and taken all the money, Haiti’s money, and he was living in two borrowed rooms in Paris. He came in the wake of a most terrible earthquake in which 300,000 Haitians had died and the palace, with much of the city, had collapsed, claiming that he wished to help. He did nothing useful, but stayed to dine out and drive fast cars round the hills north of Port-au-Prince. A Haitian judge found all charges against him voided by the expiry of the statute of limitations.

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