The Grenada intervention: 30 years later

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Dr Gary Williams, of the University of Essex, was awarded a British Academy Small Research Grant in 2006 to research into 'US-Grenadian relations 1979-83: revolution and intervention in the backyard'.

On 25 October 1983 the United States, supported by several Caribbean nations, intervened in the tiny eastern Caribbean island of Grenada. President Reagan gave three reasons for the intervention: to protect innocent lives (including around one thousand Americans), forestall further chaos, and assist in the restoration of law and order and governmental institutions. Codenamed Urgent Fury, the operation followed the violent collapse of the Grenadian People's Revolutionary Government (PRG) which had seen the Prime Minister and seven colleagues executed and a shoot-on-sight curfew imposed by the military. Grenada's Eastern Caribbean neighbours were shocked and concerned and requested assistance from the United States to remove the new military regime in Grenada.

Revolution

Grenada gained its independence from Britain in 1974 under the autocratic and repressive rule of Eric Gairy, the dominant figure in Grenadian politics since 1951. In March 1979 he was overthrown by the opposition New Jewel Movement (NJM) in a coup, or 'revolution' as they called it. The NJM were a radical party whose leadership was composed of young intellectuals who had been influenced by the ideas of the Black Power Movement, African socialism and Marxist-Leninism.

The Caribbean reaction was mixed. Grenada's smaller neighbours deplored the use of force and worried that they would be next. The larger and more distant countries gave the new People's Revolutionary Government (PRG) the benefit of the doubt based on promises of elections and a return to constitutional rule. The US did likewise and hoped that the realities of being in power would moderate some of the PRG's more radical views. However, within a month the constitution was suspended, political opponents detained, elections postponed indefinitely, and arms received from

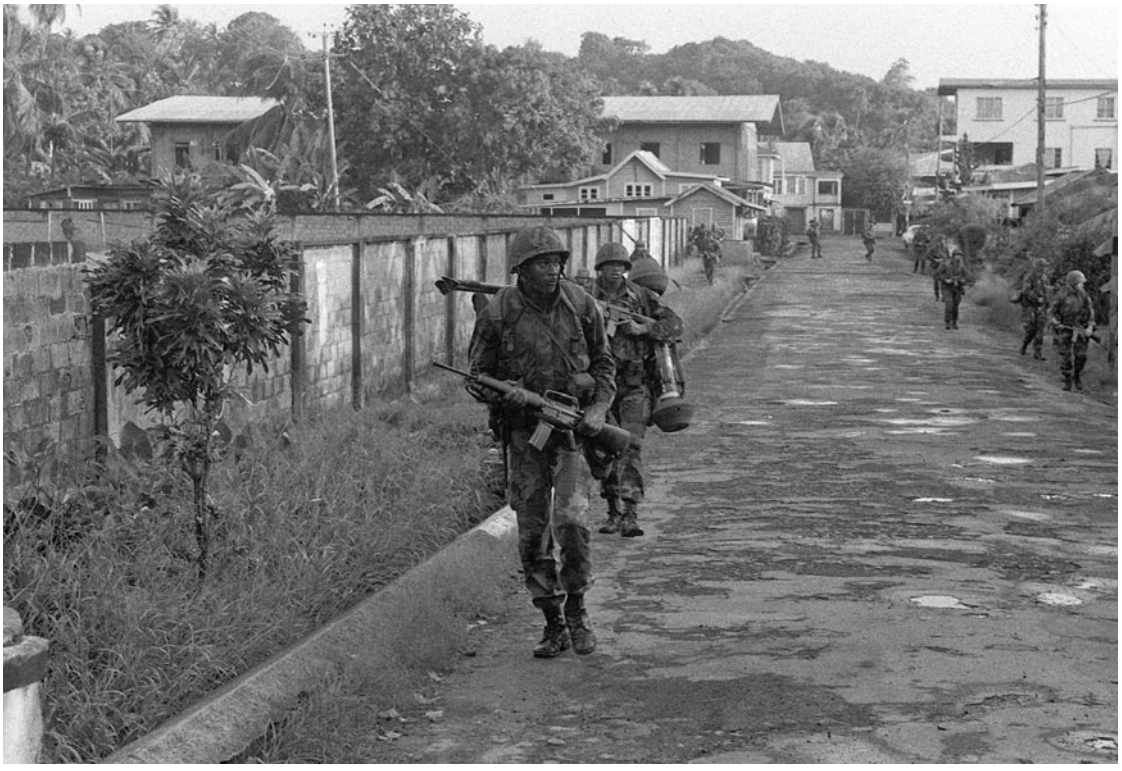

Figure 1. *American troops on patrol in Grenada. Photo: courtesy Ronald Reagan Library.*

Cuba and Guyana. Washington instructed their Ambassador to Barbados to inform PRG Prime Minister Maurice Bishop that the US would 'view with displeasure any tendency on the part of Grenada to develop closer ties with Cuba'. Bishop made a defiant speech on Radio Free Grenada: 'no country has the right to tell us what to do or how to run our country or who to be friendly with... We are not in anybody's backyard, and we are definitely not for sale.'[1] The PRG quickly established close links with Cuba and courted the Soviet Union, Eastern bloc, North Korea and radical third world countries like Libya and Iran. Health, education and basic infrastructure improved as the PRG set about transforming society. Relations with the US remained frosty as Washington adopted a distancing policy and increased aid to neighbouring countries. Under President Reagan, policy hardened into political, economic and military pressure, as Grenada was viewed as a Soviet-Cuban surrogate and therefore a matter of national security.

The revolution devours its children

By mid-1983 the revolution was running out of steam; the majority of Grenadians had become disenchanted with the authoritarian PRG, the showcase international airport project was consuming most of the foreign aid received, and the army and militia were demoralised. The Central Committee acknowledged that there was a serious problem, identified Bishop's weak leadership as the cause and proposed Joint Leadership between Bishop and his hard-line Marxist-Leninist Deputy Bernard Coard, the prime mover behind the revised leadership structure. Bishop initially agreed but later changed his mind and asked for the issue to be reopened; he was charged with defying the will of the Party and being 'without redemption', and placed under house arrest on 13 October. This staggered Grenadians who were unaware of the crisis. On 19 October hundreds of Bishop's supporters marched to his house and freed him. He led them to Fort Rupert, the army's headquarters, but when military forces arrived to retake the Fort around 40 people died in the ensuing violence, many after jumping over the walls to escape. Bishop and seven colleagues were lined up against a wall and shot. A Revolutionary Military Council (RMC) was established and the island place under curfew.

The consensual Eastern Caribbean response was horror and condemnation. Bishop's death led to a convergence of thinking in the Caribbean and Washington. On 21 October the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), joined by Barbados and Jamaica, issued an invitation to the US to 'depose the outlaw regime in Grenada by any means'. In Washington plans for an evacuation of US citizens switched to full-scale military intervention; regional support for such action was desirable and in the OECS they had supporters who were 'way out in front' and pushing the military option harder and faster than the US was prepared to respond. A request for assistance was also later received from Grenada's Governor General, Sir Paul Scoon, the only remaining representative of constitutional authority.

American and British diplomats visited Grenada to discuss the evacuation of foreign citizens but the RMC were evasive and stalled for time, insisting that everything would be back to normal soon. The larger CARICOM (Caribbean Community) organisation was sharply divided: the OECS members argued for a military solution, but the likes of Trinidad, Guyana and Belize ruled out the use of force and external involvement in favour of economic and political sanctions.

The UK had been invited to participate by the OECS, but concluded that action would depend on US involvement and the message they were getting from Washington was that they were proceeding cautiously and London would be consulted. Hence there was genuine surprise when a telegram from President Reagan arrived the evening before the intervention saying that he was giving 'serious consideration' to the OECS' request, followed a few hours later by one saying that he had decided to respond positively. Prime Minister Thatcher phoned Reagan and

Figure 2. *Overlooking the capital St George's, Fort Rupert was the site of the 19 October 1983 executions. (The fort has now reverted to its pre-revolution name of Fort George.) Photo: the author.*

[1] Quoted in Gary Williams, *US-Grenada Relations: Revolution and Intervention in the Backyard* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 39-41.

Figure 3. *President Ronald Reagan and Prime Minister Eugenia Charles of Dominica take questions at a White House press conference, having announced the US-Caribbean intervention in Grenada on 25 October 1983. Photo: courtesy Ronald Reagan Library.*

asked him to call off the operation 'in the strongest possible language'. She argued that military action would endanger rather than protect foreign nationals, London had not received a formal written invitation from the OECS, and most of CARICOM had rejected a military solution. Her plea fell on deaf ears and Urgent Fury started just hours later. Victory was inevitable and within three days over 6,000 troops had landed and all major military objectives been achieved.

Aftermath

Although widely criticised internationally, the intervention was enormously popular amongst those who mattered most – the people of Grenada. Many viewed it as a 'rescue' and a chance to start again, especially economically and politically. Just as Cuba had viewed Grenada as a showcase for what their foreign aid could achieve, the US were keen to demonstrate their generosity; $3 million of emergency aid was provided in November and a further $57 million was received in 1984. This money was spent largely on infrastructure and health, education and welfare programmes, but ironically the US also contributed towards the cost of completing the Cuban-built international airport – now vital for its tourist potential, rather than military potential as Reagan had dramatically claimed just months before. Britain, stung by criticism that it had failed its friends by not participating, provided £750,000 of aid and a one million pound interest-free loan; in 1985 a five-year £5 million aid package was announced. Grenada also received assistance from Canada, Venezuela, South Korea and Taiwan, and regional and multilateral agencies.

Washington's aim was to put Grenada on a firm economic footing that would engender long-term growth. Foreign investment was seen as crucial, as the domestic sector was too small to provide the capital needed, but Grenada's weak infrastructure, high taxes and perceived political instability meant that private investors largely steered clear. By 1988 US bilateral aid was winding down and the Grenadian government was encouraged to look to multilateral agencies. Since then, Grenada has become a primarily tourist-based economy; after a slow start to the 1990s, economic growth improved, only to be reversed by the impact on tourism of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks and Hurricane Ivan (2004) and Hurricane Emily (2005) which damaged 90 per cent of the island's buildings and devastated export crops. The country has struggled to recover, with unemployment now running at 30 per cent and the national debt reaching near unsustainable levels.

Restoring democracy

Restoring democracy after four-and-a-half years of the PRG and several decades of Gairy was a significant challenge. As the sole remaining representative of constitutional authority, Governor General Scoon assumed Executive Authority and established a nine-member Advisory Council headed by Nicholas Braithwaite, a former senior bureaucrat in the Ministry of Education (and future Prime Minister). Scoon and the Council stated their intention to hold elections within one year. Existing political parties were resurrected – Herbert Blaize's Grenada National Party and Eric Gairy's Grenada United Labour Party – and four new parties established. In US and Caribbean eyes the possibility of Gairy winning the election had to be removed; it would severely undermine the rationale of the invasion and mark a return to repression and corruption, and probably trigger political unrest and economic instability. The Prime Ministers of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, St. Lucia and Barbados, took the initiative and engineered the formation of a coalition entitled the New National Party, something the individual parties had proved unable or unwilling to do themselves. The coalition duly defeated Gairy in the 1984 election, winning 14 of the 15 seats. However, it was plain that managing the differing ideas about power-sharing, political strategy and personal relationships over the long-

Figure 4. *An abandoned Cuban airplane rusts away at Pearls airport, as a relic of the revolutionary years. Photo: the author.*

term would be a serious challenge. Grenadians also had high expectations, making it clear that they wanted strong leadership and political stability, and a government that was going to solve the problems of high unemployment, rising cost of living and poor infrastructure. Although the government did manage to restructure the economy, rebuild government bureaucracy, establish a new police force and bring Bishop's killers to trial, it could not overcome its internal differences and disintegrated after three years. From the ashes emerged the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and The National Party (TNP) and a reorganised NNP. Since then, the NDC and NNP have dominated Grenadian politics, both enjoying terms in office. For the most part the invasion achieved its aim of restoring democracy; six free and fair elections have been held since 1983 and a functioning parliamentary democracy established. However, as one Caribbean academic recently concluded, 'neither party has translated formal democracy into a deeper substantive democracy', which is what the US and OECS nations envisaged all those years ago.[2]

Reconciliation?

Whilst a new economic and political start may have been achieved, the traumatic and confounding events of October 1983 still haunt the island. Seventeen individuals (the Grenada 17 as they became known) were tried and convicted for their role in the murder of Bishop and his colleagues; 14 were sentenced to death, later commuted to life, and three given long sentences. A project by senior students from the Presentation Brothers College in Grenada about what happened to the bodies of Bishop and his colleagues which were never found, revealed via interviews the level of resentment, pain and anguish that still existed.[3] The student project attracted media interest, and in 2001 the government set up a South African-style Truth and Reconciliation Commission into events during the revolutionary years. After many delays the Commission produced its Report in 2006; it concluded that there was a 'lack of will and desire, and even blatant refusal on the part of many – those who have done wrong ... and those who have been wronged – to actually forgive and forget.'[4] The Report did not add any new knowledge but did call for a retrial of the 17, something their supporters and human rights groups had long argued was necessary as the original trial and appeal were allegedly unfair. In February 2007 the British Privy Council, the highest court of appeal for former British colonies, ruled the original sentencing invalid and ordered a re-sentencing of the 17 by the Supreme Court of Grenada. The Court ruling released three ex-soldiers immediately, re-sentenced the others to 40 years with a parole review within two years; having already spent 21 years in prison it was expected that they would be released by 2010. The thirtieth anniversary year of the 'revolution' proved to be a controversial one; on 29 May 2009 the airport was renamed after Maurice Bishop as the government had promised in their election manifesto, and on 7 September Bernard Coard and his 13 colleagues were released from prison. Although Bishop clearly played a part in the events of October, Coard is generally considered as the evil villain, scheming to overthrow the charismatic Bishop who for Grenadians was the Revolution. Coard gave several interviews on his release talking about his torture in prison, the trial's shortcomings and blaming Bishop for reneging on the joint leadership decision which led to things 'getting out of hand'. He also stirred up the most emotive of issues – the whereabouts of Bishop and his colleagues' bodies – accusing Washington of having them. Whilst his supporters claimed his release was the closing of a chapter in Grenada's history and that it was time to move on, his release also demonstrated that emotions run deep for many people affected by the events of October 1983 and that there can be no closure or reconciliation. The final releases also demonstrated that for approximately two-thirds of the population, who have no memory of the revolutionary years and intervention, the heated discussions about the release of the prisoners were of little relevance.

[2] Wendy Grenade, 'Party Politics and Governance in Grenada: An Analysis of the New National Party (1984-2012)', *The Round Table*, 102:2 (2013), 167-176.

[3] Young Leaders of Presentation Brothers College, *Under Cover of Darkness* (St. George's, Grenada, 2002). Sections of the project pamphlet are reproduced in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report.

[4] The Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report, *Grenada: Redeeming the Past: A Time for Healing* (St. George's, Grenada, Government Printery, 2006), p. 53.