The U.S. Invasion of Grenada

By Stephen Zunes | October 2003

It has been exactly twenty years since the U.S. forces invaded Grenada, ending that Caribbean island nation's four-year socialist experiment. An island nation no bigger than Martha's Vineyard, with a population that could barely fill the Rose Bowl, was defeated with relatively few American casualties. President Ronald Reagan's decision to occupy the country and replace the government with one more to his liking proved to be quite popular in the United States, with polls indicating that 63% of the public supported the invasion.

On this anniversary, it would be worth looking back at the Grenadan revolution, the U.S. invasion and its aftermath, and the important precedent it set for "regime change" through U.S. military intervention.

Grenada's Revolution

One of the tiny island nations that grew out of the British colonies in the eastern Caribbean, Grenada—like its neighbors—was populated by descendents of black African slaves. The original inhabitants, the Carib Indians, were wiped out during the early stages of colonialism. Receiving independence in 1974, the island was ruled initially by the despotic and eccentric Prime Minister Sir Eric Gairy, whose murderous secret police—known as the Mongoose Squad—and his passion for flying saucers, the occult, and extra-terrestrial communication had brought him notoriety throughout the hemisphere.

On March 13, 1979, in an almost bloodless coup, a young attorney named Maurice Bishop seized power with the backing of the New Jewel Movement. They proceeded to impose an ambitious socialist program on the island inspired at least as much by Bob Marley as Karl Marx. In the next four years, while most Caribbean nations suffered terribly from worldwide recession, Grenada achieved a 9% cumulative growth rate. Unemployment dropped from 49% to 14%. The government diversified agriculture, developed cooperatives, and created an agri-industrial base that led to a reduction of the percentage of food and total imports from over 40% to 28% at a time when market prices for agricultural products were collapsing worldwide.

The literary rate, already at a respectable 85%, grew to about 98%, comparable to or higher than most industrialized countries. A free health care and secondary education system were established, the number of secondary schools tripled, and scores of Grenadans received scholarships for studies abroad. There were ambitious programs in the development of the fishing industry, handicrafts, housing, tourism, the expansion of roads and transport systems, and the upgrading of public utilities.

What excited many in the American progressive community was the government's openness to decentralization and appropriate technology, which allowed small-scale American entrepreneurs access to development planning alongside those preferring a more traditional, centralized, capital-intensive model. It was an accessible revolution, close by and carried out by English-speaking people influenced more by Black Power and New Left politics than by Soviet-style communism.

Though he would have likely won any popular vote, Bishop never held free elections as promised. The opposition newspaper was repressed and there were some political prisoners, though the overall human rights record was not bad compared to most governments in the hemisphere during this period. On the international scene, Grenada largely supported Soviet policy, including the invasion of

Afghanistan, though not to the degree of subservience as Eastern European countries. Relations were closest with Cuba, which brought in hundreds of skilled laborers, medical personnel, military advisers, and development workers, though there were also good relations with Western European nations, Canada, Mexico, and Venezuela.

Ultimate control remained in the hands of the party and the popularity of the regime was centered on the charismatic personality of Prime Minister Bishop. At the same time, the development of parish and zonal councils along with "mass organizations" insured a degree of grassroots democracy and a reflection of the government's desire to create a "popular socialism." However, the New Jewel Movement also included a minority of hard core Marxist-Leninists like Bernard Coard, who led a military coup on October 19, 1983 and placed Bishop and other leading moderates under arrest. In response, there was a nationwide general strike and other protests. When a crowd of Bishop supporters liberated the ousted prime minister and his allies from prison, army troops massacred dozens of protesters and executed Bishop and two other cabinet members.

President Reagan immediately implied that the Cubans were behind the coup and the killings. In reality, Cuban President Fidel Castro had condemned the coup and declared an official day of mourning for the late Prime Minister. Strongly worded cables from Havana underscored the Cuban government's concern, threatening a cessation of Cuban assistance and a declaration that Cuban forces on the island would fire only in self-defense.

On the morning of October 25, U.S. troops invaded the island, ousting the government and taking full control of the country within three days.

U.S. Hostility toward Grenada

The United States had long sought to overthrow the New Jewel Movement. Immediately following the revolution in 1979, the Carter administration granted asylum to the exiled Prime Minister Gairy, who used the U.S. as a base for anti-government radio broadcasts. After the U.S. refused to provide aid for military defense and offered only limited economic assistance, Bishop turned to Cuba for help. The Carter administration then launched a campaign to discourage U.S. tourism, forbid emergency relief aid, and refused recognition of Grenada's ambassador.

When the Reagan administration assumed office, American hostility increased. Economic assistance through the World Bank and the Caribbean Development Bank was blocked, aid from the International Monetary Fund was restricted, and participation in the Caribbean Basin Initiative was not even considered.

When Prime Minister Bishop visited the United States in June 1983, President Reagan refused to see him and offered to send only a secondary official. The Prime Minister eventually received an audience with National Security Adviser William Clark, who reportedly did not know where Grenada was located. Reagan administration officials later argued that such peace overtures by Bishop were a major factor in his overthrow. More likely, it was the lack of a favorable American response that led coup leaders to conclude that such moderation did not pay off and that Bishop must therefore by removed.

Reports from the *Washington Post* indicated that since 1981 the CIA had engaged in efforts to destabilize the Grenadan government politically and economically. In August 1981, U.S. armed forces staged a mock invasion of Grenada on the island of Vieques off the coast of Puerto Rico. As in the real invasion that would come later, paratroopers secured key points on the Grenada-sized island followed by a marine amphibious assault with air and naval support, totaling almost 10, 000 troops. Striking similarities in the geographic code names during the exercise to actual locations on Grenada were hardly coincidental. It is not unreasonable to assume that a U.S. invasion of Grenada was planned at least two years prior to the revolution's self-destruction, which gave the United States the excuse it had been waiting for.

The Rationalizations for the Invasion

The U.S. invasion of Grenada was the first major U.S. military operation since the end of the Vietnam War. Indeed, it may have in part been a test of the so-called "Vietnam syndrome," the purported "afflic-

tion" that makes it difficult for the American public to support U.S. military intervention without a just cause. As with Iraq, the initial justifications for the invasion proved to be either highly debatable or demonstrably false, yet it still received bipartisan support in Congress and the approval of nearly two-thirds of the American public.

The major justification for the invasion was the protection of American lives. Reagan administration officials falsely claimed that the island's only operating airport was closed, offering the students no escape. In reality, scores of people left the island on charter flights the day before the U.S. invasion, noting that there was not even a visible military presence at the airport and that customs procedures were normal. Regularly scheduled flights as well as sea links from neighboring Caribbean islands had ceased as of October 21, however, though this came as a direct result of pressure placed on these governments to do so by U.S. officials. Apparently, by limiting the ability of Americans who wished to depart from leaving, the Reagan administration could then use their continued presence on the troubled island as an excuse to invade. The Reagan administration admitted that no significant non-military means of evacuating Americans was actively considered.

Particular concern was expressed over the fate of 800 American students at the U.S.-run St. George's University School of Medicine. The safe arrival in the United States of the initial group of happy and relieved students evacuated from Grenada resulted in excellent photo opportunities for the administration. It appears, however, that the students' lives were never actually in any danger prior to the invasion itself.

Grenadan and Cuban officials had met only days earlier with administrators of the American medical school and guaranteed the students' safety. Urgent requests by the State Department's Milan Bish to medical school officials that they publicly request U.S. military intervention to protect the students were refused. Five hundred parents of the medical students cabled President Reagan to insist he not take any "precipitous action." Staff members from the U.S. embassy in Barbados visited Grenada and saw no need to evacuate the students.

The medical school's chancellor, Charles Modica, polled students and found that 90% did not want to be evacuated. Despite repeated inquiries as to whether Washington was considering military action, he was told nothing of the sort was being considered. As the invasion commenced, Dr. Modica angrily denounced the invasion as totally unnecessary and a far greater risk to the students' safety than Grenada's domestic crisis. Vice-chancellor Geoffrey Bourne and Bursar Gary Solin also declared their steadfast opposition. The U.S. media focused great attention on the students who were first evacuated and "debriefed" by U.S. officials who generally supported the invasion. However, virtually no attention was given to those who stayed behind, who tended to be more familiar with the island and who largely opposed U.S. intervention. There were no confirmed reports of any American civilians harmed or threatened before or during the invasion. It was three days after U.S. troops initially landed before they decided to take control of the second medical school campus, raising questions as to whether the safety of Americans was really the foremost priority.

A second major justification for the invasion was the reported Cuban military buildup on the island. President Reagan claimed that U.S. troops found six warehouses "stacked to the ceiling" with weapons that were earmarked for Cuban military intervention in Central America and Africa. In reality, there were only three warehouses that were only one-quarter full of antiquated small arms that had been confiscated a few days earlier by the coup leaders from the popular militias. Furthermore, Grenada was a most unlikely place for the Cubans to have stockpiled arms: Grenada is three times further from the Central American isthmus than is Cuba itself and only marginally closer to Cuban bases then in Angola, more than 12,000 miles away

Despite administration claims to the contrary, less than 100 of the 750 Cubans on the island were military personnel. Furthermore, despite initial press accounts that the U.S. assault was resisted almost exclusively be Cuban forces, it appears that the bulk of the resistance to the invasion was done by Grenadans. Many observers speculate that this was the primary reason for the refusal by the Reagan

administration to allow media access to the island during the initial phases of the invasion when most of the fighting took place. The U.S. estimates that only about 35 Cubans died, but has never released Grenadan casualty figures.

A major concern for the Reagan administration was an airport under construction on the southern tip of the island at Port Salines, near the capital of St. George's. President Reagan repeatedly charged that it was to be a Soviet/Cuban air base. However, it has since been acknowledged that its sole purpose was for civilian airliners. Like other Caribbean islands, the tourist industry is an important source of income. The existing airport at that time was too small for jet aircraft and did not have facilities for instrument landings, resulting in the occasional stranding of tourists for days at a time during bad weather. Nighttime landings were also impossible. To make matters worse, the airport was on the opposite side of the island over a range of mountains from the capital and most tourist facilities.

While many of the new airport's construction workers were Cuban, the contractor was Plessey, a British firm underwritten by Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's government. Canadians, Finns, and Grenadans were also involved. As was pointed out by Plessey officials at the time, none of the necessary components for a military airfield were being built, such as bomb-resistant underground fuel tanks, sheltering bays for parked aircraft, or fortified control towers. Nor was the length of the runway excessive, as the Reagan administration charged. Three neighboring islands had even longer airstrips.

Originally the United States had been asked to help build the airport, which had been in the planning stages of more than 25 years, but had refused. After the invasion, however, the U.S. assisted in finishing the almost-completed project.

A third major pretext cited for the U.S. invasion was a request for intervention by the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), the charter of which allows for "arrangements for collective security against external aggression." However, since Grenada was a member of the OECS, there was no external aggression. The article stipulates that decisions for such actions must be unanimous among member states, which was not the case, since Grenada, St. Kitts-Nevis, and Montserrat did not support it. In addition, the United States is not even a party to the agreement. Finally, the treaty specifically states that the rights and obligations of OECS members under other treaties—such as the charters of the United Nations and the Organization of American States, that specifically prohibit such armed intervention—are not affected.

Only a token force of 300 troops from these islands was involved, and only in policing functions in areas already secured by American forces. It was later revealed that the "urgent request for assistance" by these Caribbean states actually came after the U.S. asked for it and U.S. officials drafted the formal invitation letter, which they gave to selected conservative Caribbean leaders to sign.

Reasons for the Invasion

Why, then, did the United States invade? Many believe that Grenada was seen as a bad example for other poor Caribbean states. Its foreign policy was not subservient to the American government and it was not open to having its economy dominated by U.S. corporate interests. A show of force would cause states with similar leftist nationalist ideals to think twice. If a country as small and poor as Grenada could have continued its rapid rate of development under a socialist model, it would set a bad precedent for other Third World countries. In short, Grenada under the New Jewel Movement was reaching a dangerous level of health care, literacy, housing, participatory democracy, and economic independence.

Of particular concern was the influence Bishop and his supporters—who were greatly inspired by the Black Power movement in the United States—could have on African-Americans. A successful socialist experiment by English-speaking Blacks just a few hours by plane from the United States was seen as a threat.

This invasion was also an easy victory for the United States eight years after its defeat in the Vietnam War and just two days after the deadly attack against U.S. forces in Lebanon. It established

the precedent for "regime change" by U.S. military intervention and served as an ominous warning to the leftist Sandinista government in Nicaragua that the Reagan administration could go beyond simply arming a proxy army like the Contras and actually invade their country outright.

It also led to a sudden rise in President Reagan's popularity, according to public opinion polls. Despite the fact that the invasion was a clear violation of international law, there was widespread bipartisan support for the invasion, including such Democratic Party leaders as Walter Mondale, who would be Reagan's Democratic challenger for the presidency the following year. (In his successful challenge of incumbent Connecticut Senator Lowell Weiker that year, Democratic Senate nominee and future vice-presidential candidate Joseph Lieberman attacked his moderate Republican opponent for having raised Constitutional objections to the invasion of Grenada.)

The Invasion's Aftermath

World reaction to the invasion was overwhelmingly negative. A United Nations Security Council vote to condemn the invasion was vetoed by the United States, which cast the sole negative vote. The General Assembly also voted against the invasion by a wide margin. President Reagan dismissed such criticisms as simply reactive anti-American sentiment, though most of the states in the majority of the UN General Assembly vote also condemned the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan four years earlier. There was strong criticism from America's allies, particularly Canada, which had a sizable contingent of foreign aid advisers in Grenada.

The invasion could not have been better timed. The Grenadan people were so embittered and divided by the coup and subsequent killings that resistance was only a fraction of what it could have been had the invasion come two weeks earlier. Similarly, opposition in the United States, which could have pointed to a progressive and popular Grenadan government under Bishop, had to acknowledge that the successor regime was brutal, unpopular, and illegitimate. Public attention was focused on the bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut, Lebanon a few days earlier that had killed 242 servicemen, so popular sympathy and support for the armed forces was unusually high.

In Grenada during the ensuing months, the mass organizations were dismantled, the labor unions were re-organized, over half of all medical personnel were expelled, investment and tax codes were revised to favor foreign investment, and cooperatives and states enterprises were sold to private interests. Billboards that had inspired the population to work for justice, equality, development, and national sovereignty were quickly replaced by those designed to inspire them to buy American consumer products.

The quality of life for most islanders deteriorated in the period following the invasion despite infusions of American aid. This was most apparent in the health care field, where not a single pediatrician remained in this country where 60% of the population was under 25, nor was there a single psychiatrist to care for 180 mental patients. (Seventeen patients and one staff member were killed when the U.S. bombed the mental hospital during the invasion.)

The U.S. invasion of Grenada prompted witch-hunts throughout the Caribbean for those with leftist sympathies. Countries that thought they had the right as sovereign nations to receive economic and military assistance from whomever they pleased realized they had to reconsider. The day after the invasion, for example, Suriname closed down the Cuban embassy in its capital and expelled its diplomats.

Upon taking over the island, most foreign doctors, teachers, and other civilians were summarily arrested and expelled by U.S. officials. Shortly after the invasion, U.S. forces raided and ransacked the Pope Paul Ecumenical Center due to its supposedly "subversive activities" of aiding the poor. Hundreds of Grenadans were held for months without charge. Some suspects were shackled and blindfolded in violation of Hague Convention standards on the treatment of prisoners of war. The island's only radio station was taken over by the U.S. Navy. The right of free assembly was seriously curtailed, the press was censored, and writ of *habeus corpus* was abolished.

Over the next several years, U.S. forces loosened their grip and allowed for popular elections. Grenada

has joined other small Caribbean islands under the leadership of a conservative and corrupt elite. The current center-right government, for example, has engaged in some major irregularities in awarding contracts for public works projects to foreign investors with criminal ties and has set up offshore banking operations with little oversight. Although Grenada's economy has been expanding, poverty is widespread, and it appears that the country has little choice but to follow the neoliberal orthodoxy dictated by Washington and its allied international financial institutions.

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