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## The 1983 Invasion of Grenada

by Phuong Nguyen

(History 1140)

**T**he Invasion of Grenada in 1983, also known as Operation Urgent Fury, is a brief military operation that was heralded as a great triumph by some and harshly criticized by others. Although the Invasion of Grenada is infrequently discussed today in modern politics, possibly due to the brevity and minimal casualties, it provides valuable insight into the way foreign policy was conducted under the Reagan administration towards the end of the Cold War. The invasion did not enjoy unanimous support, and the lessons of Grenada can be applied to the global problems of today.

In order to understand why the United States intervened in Grenada, one must know the background of this small country and the tumultuous history of Grenadian politics, which led to American involvement. Grenada is the smallest of the Windward Islands of the Caribbean Sea, located 1,500 miles from Key West, Florida, with a population of 91,000 in 1983 and a total area of a mere 220 square miles (Stewart 5). This poor island nation has suffered an unstable history of constant regime changes. On March 13, 1979, a revolution occurred that ousted the government in power then of Sir Eric Gairy, and was replaced by Maurice Bishop, a thirty-four-year-old charismatic leader of a Marxist-Leninist party (Beck 11) called the New JEWEL (Joint Endeavor for Welfare Education and Liberation of the People) Movement (Davis). Although the previous government of Eric Gairy held a pro-western outlook, it was viewed as an authoritarian government that employed violence and oppression to maintain power (Davis). Prime Minister Gairy failed to solve the socio-economic problems of Grenada, and instead tried to hold onto power through oppressive measures, corruption, and rigged elections (Beck 11). Gairy passed laws to suppress dissent, such as “the Essential Services Act of 1978 that prohibited workers from striking; the Public Order Act of 1978 prohibited opposite political parties from using loud speakers without police protection; and the Newspaper Act of 1975 made it illegal for material to be published contrary to Gairy's government” (Davis). The ruthless Gairy regime paved the way for a bloodless coup by the New JEWEL Movement. The New JEWEL Movement was one of the political parties suppressed in the early 1970s under the Gairy government with the political goal of creating a socialist country, in which the working class controlled the political system (Davis). Having had enough of terror and oppression, the Grenadian people embraced the new government and enthusiastically welcomed the new Prime Minister, Maurice Bishop. A notable Grenadian journalist Alistair Hughes carefully emphasized, however, that “the Grenadian people had gone ‘Bishop, not socialist’” (Beck 11). In its goal to create a socialist nation, the New JEWEL Movement recognized the economic shortcomings of the poor, island nation. Maurice Bishop realized that Grenada had a small working class, an underdeveloped economy, and primitive technology. In order to resolve Grenada’s economic problems, the new government sought relations with countries that would help the country become more independent and in control of its resources (Davis). The New JEWEL Movement appealed to everyone for help after assuming power and placed the United States in high hopes of answering their requests. Receiving no adequate response from the United States (Burrowes 31), Grenada looked to forge ties with other socialist countries. Such relations enabled Grenada to receive the help it needed and open trade markets, which gave Grenada the opportunity to export nutmeg, banana, and cocoa to the Soviet Union, Cuba, Bulgaria, and other countries (Davis). Fidel Castro, the communist leader of Cuba quickly befriended the new socialist country and supplied them doctors, dentists, teachers, and drew the young Grenadian government closer as an international ally (Burrowes 31).

In the midst of the Cold War, as the United States was currently engaged in a war against communism, the coup in Grenada by an overtly socialist regime alarmed Americans. In April 1979, a few weeks after the coup, U.S. ambassador Frank Ortiz visited Grenada to warn Prime Minister Bishop that “the United States would not look with favor on any development of closer ties with Cuba.” He further threatened that if relations with Cuba continued, Grenada would see a decrease of American tourists to the island (Burrowes 31). To put into perspective the fear regarding Grenada’s relationships with other socialist countries, President Ronald Reagan proclaimed in a speech after the invasion that “Grenada we were told was a friendly island paradise for tourism –but it wasn’t. Grenada was a Soviet Cuban colony being readied as a major military bastion to export terror and undermine democracy” (Ronald Reagan: The Great Communicator). The U.S. not only viewed the Marxist-Leninist government’s rise to power as a possible threat to the peace and security of the Caribbean region (Davis), but a threat to the national security of its homeland as well.

Even more alarming to Reagan was the emergence of an international airport in July 1980 (Burrowes 12). Despite claims by the Grenadian government that the airport was built strictly for tourism purposes, Reagan was convinced that the construction of the airport was intended to be used as a military base for Russian and Cuban war planes. Whether Reagan truly felt threatened by the construction of the airport, or whether he used the airport as a convenient excuse to promote the planned invasion on the country, Reagan publicly questioned its use in a nationally televised speech on March 10, 1983 (Davis). He reasoned that such a small country did not need a 10,000-foot runway: “On the small island of Grenada ... the Cubans, with Soviet financing and backing, are in the process of building an airfield with a 10,000-foot runway. Grenada doesn't even have an air force. Who is it intended for? ... The Soviet-Cuban militarization of Grenada, in short, can only be seen as power projection in the region” (House Studies). Alarmists argued that “the airport under construction was a secret military airport for use by Cuba in its role as Soviet surrogate in Africa and the Middle East. It was supposedly being developed as a needed layover and refueling point” (Burrowes 36). Some critics of Reagan’s foreign policy towards Grenada viewed Reagan’s stance on the construction of the airport as a method to justify military action against the island nation. To assume that the airport was to be used as a military base for Cuba would require ignorance to the great economic benefits Grenada would earn from increased tourism. Maurice Bishop believed the island was a natural beauty and had great tourism potential. He saw the airport as one of the most important investments in Grenadian history as it would get the tourist sector on its feet and promote foreign investment in hotels and other industries affected by tourism (Burrowes 36). Bishop was encouraged by St. Lucia, a sister Caribbean island that opened its airport in 1972 and enjoyed a substantial increase in tourism. In 1970 St. Lucia only received 29,529 tourists, but by 1980, had about 85,000 stay-over visitors. This contrasts with Grenada’s gradually declining number of tourists as they only had 29,434 tourists in 1980 (Burrowes 35). Besides the economic benefits of building an airport, the airport in construction had no military features and was helped financed by countries in the European Economic Community (Burrowes 131). Furthermore, contradicting Reagan’s statements that a small Caribbean nation did not need a 10,000-foot runway, other countries in the region, such as Barbados, had a 11,000-foot runway, and Guadeloupe, which had a 11,500-foot runway. These nations were not suspected of engaging in covert military operations with other communist countries because they had a non-communist form of government, thus earning a United States stamp of approval (Davis).

In the backdrop of the Cold War, United States international policy was conducted with a blind eye to anything labeled “communism.” Entering the presidency, Reagan aimed to restructure the way foreign policy was conducted. Following the embarrassments of the Vietnam War and the Iranian Hostage Crisis, Reagan wanted to restore confidence in the United States military (Davis). To reinvigorate faith in the military, Reagan structured his foreign policy to follow three tenets: “to restore ‘America's military credibility,’ pursue ‘peace at the negotiating table wherever both sides

are willing to sit down in good faith,' and regain 'the respect of America's allies and adversaries alike'". Reagan proclaimed that "We will be seen as having greater strength throughout the world. We will again be the exemplar of freedom and a beacon of hope for those who do not now have freedom" (House Studies). His rhetoric shows that Reagan's agenda intended to prove America's power in international politics and to contain communism wherever it may spread. Reagan was not afraid to use military force and hoped to rid the nation of "Vietnam Syndrome," the prevailing condition at the time of Americans' fear of using military power (Burrowes 134). Reagan felt that in order to restore America's credibility, he must stand up to Soviet power and vigilantly check the Soviet's gains in third world nations. The Reagan Administration felt that the world perceived the U.S. military as weak, which welcomed increased challenges by the Soviet Union and other countries (Burrowes 128). One military analyst stated that El Salvador had been the focal point of responding to Soviet aggression, but when the situation there became increasingly complex, the Reagan administration determined that Grenada was the place to re-establish U.S. military credibility (Burrowes 129). Following Reagan's aggressive and redemptive approach to conducting foreign policy, it is logical to use a small and weak island nation, like Grenada, to demonstrate U.S. military strength.

The revolutionary events that took place in October of 1983 presented the Reagan Administration with the ideal segue to carry out a military invasion. A faction within the New JEWEL Movement headed by Deputy Prime Minister Bernard Coard, increasingly grew dissatisfied with Bishop's leadership. In September 1983, the New Jewel Movement voted to split power between Coard and Bishop (Burrowes 54). Rumors began to circulate of Coard's plans to kill Bishop, and on October 13, a meeting was held that resulted in the expulsion of Bishop from power and his placement under house arrest (Burrowes 56). Coard panicked and resigned power after riots broke out once the people knew of Bishop's confinement. A crowd of Grenadians stormed his home to free the former Prime Minister. Bishop moved to army headquarters, where he and his supporters were attacked by the army. Bishop and some of his prominent supporters were subsequently lined up against a wall and executed. General Hudson Austin, Grenada's army commander, announced himself as president of an interim government (Stewart 8). On October 19, General Austin implemented a "shoot-on-sight" curfew for anyone who left their homes (Burrowes xiv).

Amidst the chaos, Americans feared for the lives of 1,000 students in an American medical school located in Grenada. Too recent was the Iranian Hostage Crisis in Americans' minds that many were apprehensive of a potential hostage situation in Grenada. In a speech on October 27, 1983, Reagan declared, "If American citizens' right to life or liberty is threatened, America has the right to intervene!" (Davis). According to interviews of medical students from St. George's University of Medical School in Grenada, the danger was real, but did not necessitate an invasion as Reagan proposes, because their safety was guaranteed by the Grenadian government itself. Two days after the rescue of the students, Jim Jensen of CBS News interviewed three St. George's students. One young man, Michael Kane, who went through the ordeal explained, "an officer for the Grenadian army had spoken to us twice during the curfew and explained that we would be protected from any problems from civilian Grenadians and that they would also not harm us" (Medical Students Interview 1983). One dissenting congressman, Ohio Democrat Louis Stokes, insisted, "Not a single American child nor single American national was in any way placed in danger or placed in a hostage situation prior to the invasion" (Magnuson). Although the Grenadian army had no intention of hurting the students, the three students interviewed by Jim Jensen described the damage inflicted by fighting forces. On campus an empty dorm was hit with mortar, and another student described a bullet going through a fellow student's pillow. As American paratroopers descended to rescue the medical students, one student told of anti-aircraft guns shooting at airplanes dropping off the paratroopers about twenty to thirty feet from the perimeter of the campus (Medical Students Interview 1983). The students indeed faced genuine danger within the St. George's campus due to

the generally violent nature of combat and the Grenadian's need to defend themselves against foreign invasion, but if it hadn't been for the United State's attack, they could have been safely escorted home without protest from the Grenadian army.

The United States concluded major military forays by the end of the fourth day of Operation Urgent Fury on October 28. General Hudson Austin and his bodyguards were captured on the 29<sup>th</sup>, leaving potential resistance forces leaderless. The new interim government was led by Sir Paul Scoon. The invasion was seen as a quick and concise victory. There were eighteen American casualties, and Major General Norman Schwarzkopf, deputy commander of the invasion force, reported that 160 Grenadian soldiers and 71 Cubans had been killed during the invasion (Magnuson). At the conclusion of the military operation, Reagan addressed the nation with a somber yet victorious tone (Reagan: The Great Communicator). A post-invasion poll conducted by the Washington Post and ABC News showed that 63% of Americans approved the way Reagan handled the presidency, the highest level in two years, and his gain was largely attributed to the Grenada invasion (Magnuson). In addition, an ABC-Washington Post survey showed that 71% of Americans favored the invasion, while 22% opposed it (Beck 2). Congress also supported Reagan's decision to invade. A Congressional study group concluded that most of them felt that the students had been possible targets for a hostage situation. House Speaker Tip O'Neill reversed his denouncement of Reagan's decision, observing that "a potentially life-threatening situation existed on the island," justifying the use of military force (Magnuson). According to media polls, the United States invasion of Grenada was popular among many Americans, but critics publicly voiced their opinions as well. According to a Times article written days after the invasion, "Just outside the White House on Saturday, a youngish crowd of at least 20,000 gathered to demonstrate their displeasure with the Grenada adventure and with U.S. military involvement in Central America." (Magnuson). The dissenters were not alone in their belief that America should not have intervened in Grenada. Within a week of the invasion, seventy-nine governments expressed disapproval of the invasion (Beck 2). On November 2, 1983, The United Nations General Assembly voted 108 to 9 to condemn the American attack as a flagrant violation of international law (Davis). The international community clearly felt that the invasion was uncalled for and the violence against a small, weak country to be unethical. The disparity of opinions among foreign nations and America could possibly indicate the difference in information received regarding the Grenadian conflict and the threat felt by the United States because of the Cold War, which was not experienced by opposing nations.

Some critics believe that the United States carried out extensive propaganda to justify their attack on a small nation in order to bolster their image, and others contend that the threat to national security was valid. U.S. government-published documents show an abundance of incriminating evidence of Grenada's military alliance with Cuba and the Soviet Union. A United States Department of State publication includes a picture with the caption, "The Cubans and Soviets sought to conceal their involvement in the military build-up of Grenada and their use of Grenada as a staging area for sending arms to Communist revolutionary groups elsewhere. One method of Concealment was to use false shipping labels for arms. This photo shows a crate of ammunition labeled 'Cuban Economic Office' (Lessons of Grenada 7). Another picture in the same publication shows a warehouse full of arms and ammunition. The caption read: "The Soviets and Cubans were planning to use Grenada as a support base for guerilla movements throughout the region. The vast amount of arms and ammunition found in Grenadian Army warehouses were far in excess of Grenada's own needs." (Lessons of Grenada 8). The State Department publication also lengthily described the wrong-doings of the New JEWEL Movement. The U.S. government document charged the Bishop government with Marxist indoctrination, deception, repression, arbitrary and routine imprisonment of opponents in its efforts to create a Communist state. It goes on to claim that under the Bishop government, life for Grenadians went from bad to worse as the New JEWEL Movement successfully convinced many countries that they were innocent revolutionaries working to build a just society when they militarily

aligned with Cuba and the Soviet Union to serve as a launching pad for spreading communism to other countries (Lessons of Grenada 1). Other U.S. government publication also denounces Maurice Bishop and overturns arguments made in favor of his leadership. In June 1983, Bishop visited Washington, D.C. to mend relations with the U.S. Some view his attempts to contact the U.S. as earnest attempts to establish friendly relations that were largely ignored and derided by the U.S. Another U.S. Department of State book argued that Bishop's visit was nothing more than a public relations campaign and internal documents prepared for the trip show that Bishop planned to pressure on the U.S. government by gaining support of Congress, the media, and black Americans (Sandford 135). Constant inconsistencies between independent and governmental sources illustrating the Grenadian conflict cause the invasion to be highly controversial. Despite the various agendas pursued, the interests of the Grenadian people fail to be at the forefront when conducting foreign policy. A CBS poll of Grenadian public opinion showed that 91% of Grenadians approved of the United States intervention (Lessons of Grenada 11). However, the authenticity of the statistic is dubious considering its source and the tendency of the American media to broadcast the interests of the current administration in power as well as popular American sentiment. Maurice Bishop was a highly popular leader favored by the Grenadian people. One St. George's medical student recounted his conversation with a Grenadian civilian, who said that she'd rather die than live under the new government replacing Bishop (Medical Students Interview 1983).

The American invasion of Grenada was successful in achieving Reagan's foreign policy objective. The intervention involved all three tenets of his foreign policy in that it was anti-Communist, demonstrated military power, but still allowed the United States to work with its allies in the region (House Studies). In examining the economic repercussions of the military invasion, Grenada duly suffered as well as the United States in obligations to help rebuild Grenada. Grenada's economic and political system collapsed after the military operation, and many Grenadians were left unemployed and hungry. Severing ties with socialist countries, Grenada was forced to depend on U.S. aid to rebuild its economy. Ironically, the United States helped complete the 10,000-foot runway, the original cause for concern (Davis). Grenadians also expected the United States to continue the Marxist-inspired social projects, which included medical clinics, adult-education courses, and housing assistance (Magnuson). The newly elected Prime Minister Blaize recognized the importance of sustained U.S. aid to Grenada and endeavored to identify itself Reagan's administration and foreign policy objectives. The Reagan administration infused Grenada with substantial aid to repair the damage caused by the military invasion and to stabilize the economy. By September 1986, American aid to Grenada totaled about \$85 million (Relations). One U.S. Caribbean specialist shrewdly noted, "Whatever we give here has to be matched in the neighboring island states. Otherwise they will draw the undesirable conclusion that the best way to receive U.S. aid is to turn Red and then be rescued" (Magnuson). The burden of immense and sometimes unforeseen costs of a military invasion falls on working Americans. The millions of dollars in aid given to Grenada ultimately come from the paychecks of American taxpayers. This directly impacts the U.S. economy as well. Instead of engaging in costly foreign interventions, the U.S. could use the money to bolster its own economy.

Although the invasion of Grenada addressed a national security concern, some evidence suggests that a military operation was not needed and that Grenada posed no real threat to the United States. The Grenada conflict was fortunately a brief and militarily successful operation, yet it is only one of countless forays into foreign nations that resulted in significant international backlash and expensive economic consequences. Instead of using violence to achieve world power, the United States would benefit much more through friendly relations with other nations and open trade. With a history of constant meddling in other nations' affairs, it is no surprise that the United States suffers from a negative image abroad, as other countries have witnessed the narrow-minded and shortsighted approach America takes in order to establish power. When the former Deputy Prime and now

political prisoner Bernard Coard was asked whether he felt any hostility towards the United States as a result of its role in his lifetime-imprisonment, he answered, "Why should I? This happened under Ronald Reagan, for God's sake! As I just said, this all occurred during and as part of the raging, final decade of the Cold War. It must be seen in that context and with that perspective" (Bernard Coard Tells a Mouthful). Indeed, the United States was intensely fearful of the Communist threat during the Reagan Administration, but hopefully America will learn from past mistakes and realize that fear can overpower logic and that military force should not be used to prop up governments simply because it is suitable to American interests.

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