

# Operation Agent Fury: The 1983 US Invasion of Grenada

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Region: [USA](#)

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*The purpose of this article is to analyse the reasons behind the U.S. led invasion into Grenada during the latter part of 1983, from a U.S. decision making perspective. Codenamed Operation Urgent Fury, the U.S. decision to invade Grenada after the overthrow and subsequent killing of the Grenadian President Maurice Bishop evoked widespread criticism from several different outlets.[1] Acknowledging such perspectives, this essay will seek to examine and explore the decision making process behind the invasion.*

*A prominent component of this article will be the investigation into what particular models of foreign policy decision-making and diplomatic practice were utilised by the Reagan led administration in relation to their decision to invade Grenada in 1983. The rationale behind the decision will be fully scrutinised as will the bureaucratic politics involved and the organisational structure of the Reagan administration. The main players in the Reagan administration will also be discussed, with some clearly more supportive of the invasion at the time than others.[2] However, prior to engaging in an in-depth analysis of the complexities that existed behind the decision to invade; a brief overview of the situation within Grenada prior to the invasion will first be provided.*

A common perception of Grenada at the time was that it was a communist buffer zone, essentially a subordinate of Cuban and Soviet control.[3] The accuracy of this statement has certainly been debated intensely since, but nevertheless at the time, such a perception of Grenada existed within parts of the democratic world and crucially within the Reagan administration in Washington.[4] The tension between the United States and the Grenadian leadership had been a common theme for many months prior to October of 1983. A matter of contention between the two sides was the construction of a landing strip in Grenada that the Grenadians claimed was built primarily for tourism. However, the U.S. believed the strip to be a Cuban or Soviet inspired military venture and therefore deemed it as a direct threat to national security.[5] The tension between the nations continued to gather momentum and soon the U.S. would act.

Ultimately, President Reagan's policy on Grenada stemmed from a deep anti-communist stance that he had taken since his inauguration into office, and as Melvyn P. Leffler opines "although Ronald Reagan hated communism, he did not fear it, not nearly as much as many of his predecessors. He was supremely confident of the superiority of American values and of the American way of life".[6] Therefore, Reagan's deep distrust and distain for communism would dominate his thinking behind Grenada, as will be outlined later in the essay. Patently obvious is the fact that the situation in Grenada prior to the invasion of the United States was uncertain at best. Indeed the overthrow of the communist leaning Maurice Bishop "brought to power individuals thought to be even more radical, notably the former deputy prime minister, Bernard Coard".[7] These game changing events took place

on the 13<sup>th</sup> of October, by the 25<sup>th</sup> of that month Reagan had given the order to invade and the U.S. operation in Grenada was truly underway.[8] Thus as the decision to invade Grenada grew ever closer for President Reagan and his aides, a clear picture of the situation within the region has now been provided. As this article will now outline utilising the Rational actor model, the actual decision making process behind the invasion of Grenada was anything but straightforward.

The approach to the invasion of Grenada by the Reagan led administration was dominated by a number of key issues. To begin with what were the key goals behind the decision and who considered the consequences of the impending operation? In terms of an overall logic behind the invasion Reagan and his comrades since coming to power in 1981 had adopted a hard line approach to any perceived communist threats, and now Grenada was viewed as one.[9] As already outlined the situation within Grenada had become increasingly unstable and there were now a number of factors that President Reagan and his aides had to take into account. Firstly if the United States were to intervene in Grenada what would be their primary logic in doing so? There are many conflicting arguments as to why the U.S. intervened in Grenada.[10]

The reason as espoused by Reagan in a speech to the nation on October 27<sup>th</sup> 1983 was that there were over 1000 U.S. citizens on the island and "concerned that they'd be harmed or held as Hostages, I ordered....military action".[11]

Therefore taking into account the remarks by President Reagan was their safety the sole rationale behind the decision to invade or were there other mitigating factors? Another interesting perspective on the decision to engage Grenada was that the U.S. saw the turmoil in the country as the perfect opportunity to reemphasise its strength and control over the region to both Cuba and Nicaragua.[12] Clearly the rationale behind the decision to invade was not confined to one specific area. Another train of thought for the logic behind the military operation was that while the Reagan administration was understandably concerned for the welfare of the American citizens on the island, they perhaps availed of their predicament and exploited their plight to advance their own agendas.[13] Hence an argument could be put forth, that a continuing pattern of the Reagan administration was their pursuit of U.S. interests in the region, which is plainly evident from the previous illustrations and Grenada could conceivably be viewed as another illustration of this theory.[14]

Therefore, perhaps it is clear that U.S. interests in the region emerge as being of central significance to the overall decision making activity behind the invasion. However is it accurate to decipher from these examples that the invasion was centred on this rationale alone? Alternatively, were the reasons involved in the decision to invade so simplistic that no further examination is necessary or were there other elements that have yet to be considered?

Clearly President Reagan and his close aides believed that the invasion of Grenada was a necessary step, but there were certain factors behind their decision that deserve further examination. One particularly fascinating perspective on the U.S. decision to invade was that some people saw the invasion as a possible remedy to the Vietnam syndrome of the 1970s.[15] This perspective while interesting, is not substantiated by much evidence and therefore while taking it into account, it doesn't fit into the Rational actor model for the President or his enemies during this period.

However, perhaps a more logical reason behind the U.S. invasion of Grenada in 1983 was the terrorist bombing of Beirut on October 23<sup>rd</sup> 1983, that saw over 200 U.S. marines lose their lives.[16] Certainly the blow of such an unprecedented attack on U.S. personnel shocked many but was it decisive in the thought process behind the Grenada campaign? Undoubtedly the devastation caused from the Beirut bombings evoked angry responses, yet the important point to remember is that irrespective of the bombings the evidence suggests that the invasion of Grenada would have went ahead nonetheless, considering the precarious circumstances that existed on the island during this period.[17]

In spite of this, one must acknowledge that the bombings in Beirut certainly affected the mind-set of the cabinet and media alike and while there was undoubted pressure placed on the President to demonstrate a show of force, Grenada was already in the pipeline prior to the horrific bombings in Beirut.[18] Therefore, the overall thinking behind the campaign is difficult to truly comprehend due to the volatile events that surrounded the invasion, but unquestionably Grenada had been on the administrations radar for a long time. Another factor one must take into account while examining the Rational actor model is whether the Reagan administration considered all options available to them prior to the invasion and were all these possible outcomes fully contemplated. One interesting aspect of the invasion was its legality and in this respect Beck argues that "the American operation could not be justified under international law".[19] Taking this opinion into account, it must be questioned whether the Americans sought to explore the diplomatic channels before deciding to invade?

A crucial factor behind President Reagan's decision to invade was the role of the neighbouring nations of Grenada. In this regard an alliance of states pleaded with Ragan to intervene and he promptly obliged to their request.[20] Certainly it becomes apparent that the Reagan administration had a number of options before them prior to taking the decision to invade. However, did they consider the diplomatic approach? From the evidence obtained it appears that this option was never truly under consideration or if it was brought up, chiefly by the Secretary of Defence Caspar Weinberger it was swiftly shot down.[21] Therefore, if one is to truly interpret the rationale behind the decision to invade Grenada by the Reagan administration the most logical place to start is with President Reagan and his core political beliefs. As Russell Crandall observes "the Reagan administration viewed its battle with communism as one, pitting good versus evil, and Grenada was too close geographically and too easy militarily to pass up".[22]

Essentially the overriding logic behind the decision making involved in the invasion of Grenada centred on the President's personal distain for communism. The evidence above all points to this conclusion, however while other factors such as the safe keeping of American civilians and the plea from neighbouring nations were also prominent in the decision making process, an overall sense of the Reagan administration wishing to strike a blow to communism (The Soviet Union and Cuba) was perhaps the strongest rationale behind the administration's decision to invade Grenada.

As the invasion of Grenada marked a significant event in the decision making policies of the Reagan administration, the decision to invade was by no means confined to the Rational actor model. Indeed what of the Bureaucratic politics involved in the decision? An interesting point is made by Jervis who contends that "bureaucrats policy preferences are determined by their positions in the government".[23] Whereas Allison pointedly remarks "individuals become players in the national security policy game by occupying a position

that is hooked on the major channels for producing action on national security issues".[24] Both perspectives are enlightening and offer a unique insight into the bureaucratic nature of political decision making. In this respect the role of the main protagonists in the Reagan administration at the time in terms of Grenada is decisive.

Certainly a crucial factor for engaging with Grenada was the well flagged communist threat, however did those within the inner circle of the Reagan administration all believe that invading Grenada was the wisest course of action? While in terms of the Bureaucratic model did the main participants in the administration seek to advance their own agendas as historically had been the case in other administrations?[25] Jack Vessey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff along with Weinberger after hearing of Bishop's death elected to turn around a U.S. carrier that was destined for the Middle East and ordered it to sail towards Grenada.[26] This act clearly illustrates their belief that the situation within Grenada had turned to a worrying extent by the time of Bishop's demise. However, were their actions reflecting a fear of an outbreak of Cuban and Soviet inspired communism on the island or were they motivated by something altogether different? Certainly their actions reflected apprehension of what had occurred on the island, but they clearly didn't signify an approval for an invasion.[27] Weinberger in particular is a curious case, as Secretary of Defence it was his job to assist President Reagan on these matters, yet he was severely hindered in his role by a fear of a repeat of the horrors of Vietnam.[28] Clearly such uncertainty would not be of any use to the President on this occasion.

<Hence, after showing initial reluctance to see U.S. personnel endangered in pursuing foreign military action, Weinberger concluded that Grenada now represented a major threat to U.S. security in terms of its communist leanings and therefore, aligned his decision making with that of the President.[29] The extent to which he fully supported the campaign may never truly be known, however perhaps a more accurate reason for his support of this campaign stemmed from the fact that the U.S. forces were unquestionably superior to their foes and therefore would secure an easy victory in all likelihood.[30] An interesting fact remains that both Weinberger and Vessey conveyed their disapproval at the prospect of the impending invasion quite openly and only after receiving assurances from the president over the plan for the invasion did they drop their reservations and unite behind the decision.[31] While unquestionably a crucial component in the Reagan administration, Weinberger's opinions were certainly not akin to some of his colleagues who will now be discussed.

There were a number of strong personalities within the confines of the Reagan administration, all were highly skilled in their own right, yet their perspectives on different issues varied and Grenada was no exception. One of the more prominent personalities in the administration was Secretary of State George Shultz. His outlook on Grenada grew "increasingly in favour of a full-scale invasion," as the fallout from Bishop's removal gathered momentum.[32] In terms of Shultz, his relationship with Weinberger was always defined by mistrust and rivalry.[33] Clearly influential, Shultz's role in the decision to invade is fascinating. His relationship with Reagan was undeniably close and the two were at times inseparable during the period when the decision to invade was made.[34] Indeed Shultz himself commented on the decision to invade stating that the President took the decision to invade on October 22<sup>nd</sup> in the presence of Shultz and National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane.[35] What is patently obvious from these examples is the support Shultz held not only for the campaign but also towards Reagan. His close relationship with Reagan ensured that the invasion would be supported by many within the administration.[36] Another

member of the Reagan administration, Robert McFarlane would also be an influential component in the decision making process behind the invasion.

Along with Shultz, McFarlane was one of a privileged few who actually knew of the invasion from the moment the President had ordered it.[37] In addition to this, he was also a firm believer in taking affirmative action in the region and clearly both he and Shultz held much sway over the decision making process involved in Grenada and therefore can be strongly linked as being central characters in the overall decision to invade. What is interesting to note from these examples is that both Shultz and McFarlane were among the leading supporters of intervention in Grenada, from the time of Bishop's death, whereas Weinberger and Vessey argued and campaigned for a more cautious approach.[38] Clearly the more influential players in the administration (Shultz & McFarlane) had the President's ear on this occasion. Nevertheless, the primary point in this matter is difficult to truly comprehend as the decision to invade involved many differing personalities. Instead one must acknowledge that the basis for a decision was not as clear-cut as it initially appeared and therefore it should be recognized that achieving consensus in any Presidential administration is always shrouded in difficulty.

An interesting aspect of the Reagan administration was that it was dominated in the main by hardliners who viewed military action as being crucial in many cases.[39] In terms of the bureaucratic politics involved in the decision making of the administration, this had a number of direct consequences particularly in relation to Grenada. The personalities involved in the administration were essentially complex characters whose primary objective was to ensure that the U.S. could reclaim its role as the world's policeman.[40] Certainly once the situation within Grenada had escalated to a worrying degree, some of those within the bureaucratic circles of the administration sought to avail of this uncertainty to champion their own personal goals. Interestingly, it was characters like Motley, Shultz and McFarlane along with Casey who came to the fore in this case, while the more cautious characters of Weinberger, Bush and Vessey were seemingly obliged to panther to the party line.[41] Perhaps what these examples truly underline is the fine margins that exist within any Presidential administration at any particular time. Certainly some within the administration had the wherewithal to play the bureaucratic game better than others, yet ultimately once the decision was made all within the administration fully supported and were united behind the mission to send the firmest of messages to Cuba and the Soviet Union through Grenada.[42] Ultimately, what can one deduce from the bureaucratic politics involved in the decision to invade Grenada? Undoubtedly fragmented the decisions were based on as much personal agendas than any actual damning evidence into actions within Grenada. Therefore did the bureaucratic politics involved force the President's hand or were his sights already fixated on Grenada? President Reagan had long viewed Grenada with suspicion and in fact prior to the intervention his view of Grenada was that it was "a virtual Cuban colony".[43] Therefore, however influential the various bureaucratic actors were in influencing the President on Grenada, it was he who had always championed the invasion.[44] Hence, while unquestionably important the role of bureaucratic politics in the decision to invade Grenada should not be given undue substance. Nevertheless, the bureaucratic politics were indisputably effective, but what of the organisational process in the decision making behind the invasion?

The Reagan administration was certainly a change from the previous Carter led administration, not afraid to use force one could put forth the argument that it was also quite shrewd in attacking a weak nation such as Grenada to fulfil its objectives.[45] In terms

of the Organizational Process Model in relation to the decisions surrounding the Grenada invasion, the Reagan administration was undeniably sure of its actions. One of the primary functions of any President before embarking on a foreign military intervention is to inform the various bureaucratic departments of this impending decision. For Grenada, Reagan failed to do this. Graham T. Allison argues that an "overriding fact about large organisations is that their size prevents any sizeable central authority from making all important decisions".[46] If one were to take Allison's assertion as being accurate then perhaps the stance taken by the Reagan administration during the decision process making behind Grenada may have been justified. During his Presidency Reagan liked to be in control of key foreign policy decisions and to achieve this he felt it necessary not to inform Congress of what actions he was carrying out in the name of the United States, to an extent Grenada was a similar case.[47]

However would the incursion into Grenada fit within the legal parameters afforded to the President? In terms of his decision to keep the Congress out of the decision making process behind the invasion, one could argue that this was clearly in violation of section 3 of the War Powers Resolution.[48] Clearly Reagan felt that the bureaucratic bodies that surrounded him were too large to control so he instead decided to keep them out of the decision making process if at all possible. One may wonder how Reagan managed to validate such secrecy behind this operation. The approach adopted by the President in this regard represented a political masterstroke as he was able to depict the situation in Grenada as being of critical importance to the United States (as U.S. civilians were on the island) and this therefore "justified the invasion and the secrecy surrounding it".[49] Certainly the President would utilise all the experience he had garnered to keep the surrounding organisational bodies on the periphery of the invasion, but would his tactics prove successful?

Clearly the invasion into Grenada had been a thought out plan that went into operation after the overthrow and subsequent killing of Grenadian President Maurice Bishop. In terms of the Reagan administration were their plans adversely affected by organisational bodies that were beyond their control? This is an interesting point to consider, as generally the basis behind any decision making in a period of crisis would be to seek to utilise all the resources of outside departments that were available to the government.[50] However, the invasion of Grenada and the decision making that took place prior to it, endeavoured to halt these organisational bodies from influencing the decision making process.

Perhaps a reason for the reluctance of Reagan to trust these organisational institutions was the fact that Democrats controlled the House, while Republicans controlled the Senate and therefore as a Republican President his decision making may have been debilitated by the possibility that his plans may have been foiled by political opponents.[51] Nevertheless taking an overall look at the situation that faced President Reagan at the time, one can draw many differing conclusions. For instance, it is quite obvious he perceived that influential bodies such as the Congress and Senate would fail to back him on the invasion and therefore took appropriate action to counteract this, which in his view was keeping the operation a secret. In the case of Congress influential members were summoned to the White House on the 24<sup>th</sup> of October, the invasion would take place the following day and had already been ordered by Reagan days previous to this.[52] Clearly Reagan was in control and no organisational body or bureaucratic fellow would foil his plans to invade Grenada.

What of his interaction with key military figures? Certainly Reagan valued their opinions on the invasion and to an extent he left the specifics of the operation in the hands of military

personnel that undoubtedly had greater knowledge in this area than he did.[53] His relationship with the military therefore contrasted greatly with other organisational bodies due in no small part to his belief in their ability to get the job done. The basis for the decision had been made and now all that was left was to apprise the soldiers of their orders and let them rid Grenada of the communist threat.

Once underway the U.S. led operation within Grenada proved to be an intervention that "caught the American public, the world community, and even the Congress by surprise".[54] In many respects this intervention was an event that the American public had craved since Vietnam, the invasion illustrated American military might and to those still suffering of a hangover from Vietnam this proved to be the perfect remedy.[55] The reasons as espoused by Reagan and co however, were not met with universal favour. Indeed, international reaction to the intervention was negative and after only a week had passed "seventy-nine governments had condemned, repudiated or in some way expressed disapproval of the American action".[56] Clearly the military invasion had the support of many; however others were seemingly appalled by the operation. Ultimately, President Reagan's decision making process sought to nullify the impact of the Congress and Senate respectively by only informing them of the specifics of the operation at the final moment. The role of the media during the period surrounding the invasion is also worthy of note. Throughout this period the President had developed a deep mistrust of the media and therefore he restricted their coverage of events within Grenada to suit his own ends.[57] Perhaps Reagan could foresee the international reaction or perhaps he just liked to have the decision making for any military intervention kept in the hands of those whom he trusted. Whatever the case, he carefully deconstructed the control that the Congress and Senate would normally wield which in turn helped assimilate his personal plans for Grenada and the invasion that ensued.

In summary, the decision to invade Grenada encompassed a number of contrasting and diverse factors. Clearly President Reagan was suspicious of Cuban and Soviet plans for the island and perhaps he believed that the island would be a communist buffer zone if U.S. forces didn't act. If true was this the sole purpose of the mission? Publically President Reagan cited the plight of over 1000 U.S. medical students on the island and the immediate danger they faced as being the primary motive for the decision to invade. However, this essay has showcased a number of possible objectives for the invasion from the apparent communist threat, to the endangerment of U.S. civilians to restoring U.S. prestige in the international arena. All in their own right can be validated, yet they can be disparaged to an extent as well. In terms of the historical analysis of the invasion, this essay has sought to utilise the three key models of foreign policy decision making: the Rational actor model, the Bureaucratic politics model and the Organisational theory model to gain a clear insight into the complexities that existed behind the decision making process for this invasion.

Clearly the decision making in any crisis is shrouded in difficulty and Grenada would be no different. While the differing personalities within Reagan's administration disagreed on elements of the operation, by the time the order was given they were all united behind the President and his aims for Grenada. What were his primary objectives for this operation?

After studying all the sources, the primary conclusion to derive from the decision to invade Grenada was that the President's personal distain of communism, coupled with an unstable Marxist leadership and apparent danger to American civilians provided the perfect remit to invade Grenada. While there were questions of legality involved it must be noted that there are "a number of clauses in the Constitution that place ultimate responsibility for the

conduct of foreign policy firmly on the president''.[58] Taking this into account, this article has clearly outlined the various dynamics that encompass any military intervention, for Grenada President Reagan was the primary shot caller and in terms of being a success, Grenada undoubtedly restored pride and prestige to U.S. foreign military actions that to an extent had been missing since the dark days of Vietnam.

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