

Thirty Years After the U.S. Invasion of Grenada, the First Neoliberal War

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This past Friday, October 25, marked the 30th anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Grenada. There were many meanings and consequences of that invasion, not just for Grenada itself, or for the wider Caribbean region (including the increased militarization of the region in the aftermath, the importation of U.S. national security doctrine, and the scandalous collaborationism embodied by Dominica's then Prime Minister, Eugenia Charles, and Barbados' then Prime Minister, Tom Adams—and the advent of the Caribbean Basin Initiative), but also meanings and consequences for the onset of the “new world order” of the post-Cold War period which was just a few years away. (From a personal perspective, the revolutions in Grenada and Nicaragua, where I spent months in the 1980s, formed an important foundation of my own development and impelled me in certain directions with my own studies.)

Merely two days after the attack on the Marine barracks in Beirut (October 23, 1983), Ronald Reagan ordered the invasion of Grenada. An opportunity for intervention presented itself after infighting in Grenada's government exploded into full view, with the execution on October 19 of [Maurice Bishop](#) and seven others, including cabinet ministers, who were all executed by firing squad along with an unknown number of supporters of Bishop who had earlier freed him from imprisonment. The immediate culprits of this internal coup were the Deputy Prime Minister, Bernard Coard (released from prison in 2009) and the head of the People's Revolutionary Army, Hudson Austin. Reagan had prepared for action against Grenada, and now the time seemed ideal.

The Propaganda for a Manufactured Emergency

“In 1979 trouble came to Grenada. Maurice Bishop, a protégé of Fidel Castro, staged a military coup and overthrew the government which had been elected under the constitution left to the people by the British. He sought the help of Cuba in building an airport, which he claimed was for tourist trade, but which looked suspiciously suitable for military aircraft, including Soviet-built long-range bombers.” ~ [Ronald Reagan, address to the nation, October 27, 1983](#). “In Grenada, our military forces moved quickly and professionally to protect American lives and respond to an urgent request from the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States. We joined in an effort to restore order and democracy to that strife-torn island. Only days before our actions, Prime Minister Maurice Bishop had been brutally murdered, along with several members of his Cabinet and unarmed civilians. With a thousand Americans, including some 800 students, on that island, we weren't about to wait for the Iran crisis to repeat itself, only this time, in our own neighborhood — the Caribbean.” ~ [Ronald Reagan, November 4, 1983](#).



[The historical actor? Regan being apprised of the situation as the U.S. invasion of Grenada gets underway. Breakfast ensued.]

The U.S. clearly did not invade *because* of the rift in Grenada's government. As Stephen Zunes explained on the 20th anniversary of the invasion, there were at least [four U.S. rationalizations](#) for launching "Operation Urgent Fury," which had already been rehearsed on the Puerto Rican island of Vieques two years prior to the invasion, at the same time as the CIA began a campaign of destabilization and sabotage of Grenada, augmented by Reagan's policy of blocking loans from international financial institutions to Grenada. Of the four justifications advanced by the Reagan administration for the invasion, all four were false (a *modus operandi* that may have served as an inspiration for the two Bush presidents and later Obama, in concocting fictions that supposedly justify intervention, but that never stand up to any serious scrutiny). These were:

1. That 800 U.S. medical students in Grenada were in immediate danger, and required evacuation. In actuality, officials at the medical school refused to issue a call for help when the U.S. government tried to pressure them to do so; 500 parents cabled Reagan asking him to not undertake any aggression; 90% of the medical students said they were never in any danger and did not want to be evacuated; and even visiting U.S. diplomats from Barbados found no danger. The medical school was not even a priority for invading U.S. troops.
2. The U.S. also claimed, again falsely, that there was a Cuban military buildup in Grenada, and that this somehow posed a direct threat to the U.S.
3. Reagan also advanced the bizarre theory that a new airport under construction in Grenada, by a major British firm, to accommodate larger passenger jets needed to boost the tourism industry, would somehow become a base for Soviet "bear bombers".
4. The U.S. also tried to justify the invasion on the basis of an invitation issued by the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (somehow this "invitation" was to be seen as legitimate, whereas the Afghan invitation to Soviet forces was not), in a direct violation of the OECS' own charter. In fact, the OECS had no authority to issue such a request.

The End of the "Vietnam Syndrome"



[From left to right: Daniel Ortega (Nicaragua), Maurice Bishop (Grenada), Fidel Castro (Cuba).]

While it is a fact that the U.S. has been at war almost continuously since it gained independence from Britain, there have been brief periods of a few years every now and again in the past 200 plus years where U.S. troops were not mobilized on some international adventure. The period between the end of the Vietnam war and the invasion of Grenada was one such period, and Ronald Reagan was elected on a sweeping tide of bruised and thus ultra-jingoistic nationalism and fanatical anti-communism, with the promise of reversing what rightly appeared to be the start of a global tide rising against U.S. dominance. Not just literally fighting communists where it was feasible—as in very small and almost defenseless locales such as Grenada—Reagan also spearheaded the neoliberal era that continues to the

present, with its rollback of trade unions and collective bargaining, the deregulation of the economy, the financialization and de-industrialization of the U.S., and the upward flow of capital toward the already wealthy.

In addition to the lasting political and economic damage inflicted by the invasion and occupation of Vietnam, ending in 1975, the U.S. was soon faced with a quick succession of events that its leadership read as either lethal threats or tactical defeats that required a response:

1. The [January-April 1979 revolution in Iran](#), that overthrew a U.S.-supported dictator in a region of the world that was/is critical to U.S. geopolitical and economic strategy. This was soon followed by the famous “hostage crisis” that lasted 444 days, and the superbly botched covert military operation ordered by President Jimmy Carter that failed to even come remotely close to rescuing the 52 U.S. Embassy hostages in Tehran.
2. [The March 13, 1979, revolution in Grenada](#), that swept out the de facto dictator (and UFO enthusiast) Sir Eric Gairy, and brought in a socialist government led by the New Jewel Movement (Jewel was an acronym meaning: Joint Endeavour for Welfare, Education, and Liberation) and the popular and charismatic Maurice Bishop. Grenada soon turned to Cuba for advice and assistance, and later also joined Nicaragua, in forming a regional bloc of revolutionary states that was a precursor of what Hugo Chávez would foster roughly twenty years later, the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our Americas (ALBA).
3. The July 19, 1979, victory of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) in Nicaragua, which also allied itself with Cuba and Grenada, and tossed out a dictatorial dynasty long supported by successive U.S. administrations.
4. [The Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan](#) beginning in December of 1979.

Ronald Reagan, elected in 1980, promised to end the alleged “Vietnam Syndrome” that conveniently imagined the U.S. as suffering such debilitating moral and psychological trauma after Vietnam, that only vastly increased military spending and redeployment of U.S. military forces overseas could cure it. Reagan began a massive increase of defence spending which included the development of new weapons which are still in use by the military, from [Tomahawk cruise missiles](#) to [B-2 stealth bombers](#), down to the [Humvee](#) and the [Military Internet \(MILNET\)](#), not to mention equipping U.S. troops with new helmets modeled on the Nazi German style. His paradigm of dominance through military power also became the template for successive administrations, with the attendant drain on the public budget, the minimization of social spending, and increased foreign indebtedness. Reagan was really quite the innovator.

Reagan, who developed such an obsession with “communism” in “America’s backyard,” that some officials said he spent the majority of his working hours in the White House dedicated to the defeat of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, could not tolerate that an English-speaking Prime Minister, in the British Commonwealth, in *America’s Mediterranean*, could so confidently stand up to *Pax Americana*. It was Maurice Bishop who declared (in words echoed 25 years later by Bolivian President Evo Morales):

“We are not in anybody’s backyard, and we are definitely not for sale. Anybody who thinks they can bully us or threaten us clearly has no understanding, idea, or clue as to what material we are made of. They clearly have no idea of the tremendous struggles which our people have fought over the past seven years.

Though small and poor, we are proud and determined. We would sooner give up our lives before we compromise, sell out, or betray our sovereignty, our independence, our integrity, our manhood, and the right of our people to national self determination and social progress.” ([source](#))

And it was Reagan who effectively declared that in Grenada, Caribbean socialism would meet its first literal graveyard. In a [1981 commencement address at West Point](#), Reagan declared the “Vietnam syndrome” to be a “temporary aberration,” ominously adding: “The era of self-doubt is over....Let friend and foe alike be made aware of the spirit that is once more sweeping across our land, because it means we will meet our responsibility to the free world. Very much a part of this new spirit is patriotism”. With that, Reagan launched the opening assault that would see an unbroken chain of presidential administrations to follow replicating, reproducing, or elaborating upon his template. [George H.W. Bush called the conquest of Grenada “a proud moment,”](#) one [supported by an overwhelming majority of U.S. citizens](#), judging the invasion part of a cure to the “legacies of Vietnam and Watergate [that] still haunted the conduct of our own foreign policy,” adding, “today America really feels the future is bright”.

As former New York Times correspondent and author [Stephen Kinzer](#) recently related,

An orgy of self-congratulation followed the triumph. A total of 8,612 medals were awarded to participants — most of them to desk officers who never came within a thousand miles of the island. “Our days of weakness are over!” Reagan exulted in a speech to the Congressional Medal of Honor Society in New York. “Our military forces are back on their feet and [standing tall](#).”

Of course, Grenada functioned as a convenient distraction for the massive loss of 241 U.S. Marines and other troops in Beirut just two days before the invasion of Grenada. The total death toll was nearly 300 that day, including French forces. Endless rows of U.S. caskets hardly looked like “standing tall,” thus best to stage a distraction that might give some meaning to the idea. Its reputation suffering badly after Vietnam, and [its future less than assured](#), the Marine Corps benefitted particularly from the attack against Grenada.

Standing Tall Again: Dismissing International Law, Talking Humanitarianism

Reagan was [utterly dismissive](#) about the fact that the [United Nations General Assembly voted 108 to 9 in condemning the U.S. invasion](#) of Grenada as a deplorable and flagrant violation of international law. He said [it didn’t even upset his breakfast](#). This would be the same callous disregard for international law shown by George H.W. Bush (Panama), Bill Clinton (Kosovo), George W. Bush (Iraq, Afghanistan), and Barack Obama (the drone wars, Libya, and the recently threatened aggression against Syria). Reagan’s template, of the U.S. as the world’s most powerful rogue state, was thus established.

What was also telling about the U.S. condemnation of international condemnation itself, was the (re)emergence of a “humanitarian” narrative for imperial intervention. [State Department spokesman John Hughes](#) stated: “We find it sad that the United Nations sees fit to deplore actions taken for humanitarian reasons, to save innocent lives and protect human rights”. Indeed, it was under Reagan that the concept of “humanitarianism” began to take many perverse terms, so that sustaining an army of brutal mercenaries to fight the Sandinistas in Nicaragua could be officially termed “humanitarian assistance”.

As for the morale of U.S. imperialism, blasting tiny Grenada was just what the doctor ordered. Endless chest thumping ensued, as if an elephant stomping on a mouse would impress the world as an impressive win. Obscenities were painted on the walls of the Cuban ambassador's residence in St. Georges. With words carved into the cement wall of temporary mortuary at the airport, U.S. Marines declared: "Heaven can wait, because [we're raising hell.](#)" U.S. journalists were banned from conducting live coverage of the invasion. U.S. PsyOps troops roamed Grenadian villages in their jeeps, with mounted speakers blasting "[Eye of the Tiger](#)"—presumably an effort to win local hearts and minds by being as abrasive and obnoxious as possible. Yet, nothing—not even the spin of a second-rate Hollywood actor serving as President—could top the hilarious lunacy of this [CIA comic book on Grenada](#):



[Part of the cover of the CIA's propaganda comic book, "Grenada: Rescued from Rape and Slavery," an example of the CIA's "humanitarian" narrative. Click on the image for the complete pdf of the comic book.]

"Restoring Democracy"



[One side of a U.S. flyer distributed in Grenada by the invading forces.]

One of the purported goals of the U.S. invasion was to "restore democracy" to Grenada. Prior to Bishop, however, one could hardly paint a glowing picture of the successes of Western-imposed democracy. However, it was under Bishop that Grenada made some [dramatic gains in realizing social and economic rights and popular democracy](#), like no other nation in the Caribbean at the time, and few in the world:



[After the revolution, a billboard remains reminding Grenadians of the New Jewel Movement]

...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 literacy 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 Grenadians 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..... 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."



[Another billboard from the time of the New Jewel Movement and its revolutionary democratization of education.]

We should also be clear that while Sir Eric Gairy had been elected as Prime Minister of Grenada, leading the aptly-named GULP (Grenada United Labour Party), he was authoritarian by any sense of the word: political opponents were persecuted and jailed, and as if to echo Haiti's Tonton Macoutes, Gairy had his own infamous "Mongoose Gang".

For those interested in learning more about the Grenadian revolution, from the inside, please see the following 20-minute part of a 55-minute documentary which came out in 1984, *Grenada: The Future Coming Towards Us*, kindly made available by [Asierramoore](#):

Grenada, a Template for the New Wave of International U.S. Assaults

There is much to be gleaned from the U.S. invasion of Grenada in terms of the reengineering of the new imperialist policy of the U.S. that has dominated since then. The main features of the Grenada template, in no particular order of importance, are:

1. The creation of "urgency" and "emergency" out of a situation of seeming local chaos that somehow posed a threat to "U.S. interests".
2. Reestablishing the messianic vision of the U.S. as a "rescuer" of "oppressed" peoples in primitive countries.
3. The fabrication of what Eldon Kenworthy called "carefully scripted docudrama".
4. The management of the media, and the conversion of war into spectacle.
5. The adoption of the language of humanitarian rescue and human rights.
6. "Restoring democracy" as a justification for regime change, with the calculated result being the fostering of regimes supportive of U.S. power.
7. Armed aggression in open defiance of international law and the renunciation of peaceful, diplomatic engagement.
8. The exploitation of local political divisions.
9. The use of the financial institutions of global neoliberal policy as instruments of U.S. policy in securing regime change.
10. Interventionism supported by a campaign of vastly increased military spending on the development of new weapons.
11. Winnable wars abroad to better create unity at home.
12. Justification for the maintenance, and enhancement, of the military-industrial complex.

However, Grenada was also somewhat of a bridge between "old" and the "new" U.S. imperialism previewed above. The "old" was represented by the fixation on "rolling back" international "Communism" as part of a series of proxy wars in the U.S.' rivalry with the USSR. Also "old" was the language of "America's backyard," of the "natural" place to be occupied, with all those countries that Americans condescendingly refer to as "down there." In addition, speaking directly and primarily of threats to U.S. interests, and to U.S. lives and property, harkens back to invasions and occupations that the U.S. had been undertaking in the hemisphere for several decades already.



[Always making time to praise themselves?]

Lessons for the Left of Today, From the Left of the 1980s

Another substantial change that occurred after the 1980s, and thus was not witnessed yet during the invasion of Grenada, was the emergence of a pro-imperialist Western left. This is now a “left,” that includes everyone from self-declared “Marxists” to anarchists to Trotskyists, who apparently believe that socialism will be fulfilled by adopting and internalizing the political agenda and discourses of liberal capitalism. Again, during the invasion of Grenada, this migration toward neoliberal ideological principles had yet to be observed. The left was unified in its anti-imperialism.

I say this in large part based on personal experience, as a direct and very active participant across a wide range of leftist groups present in Toronto at the time; everyone from the parliamentary New Democratic Party (NDP), to the the two Communist parties, the several Trotskyist factions, various Cuba and Nicaragua solidarity committees, and a range of Christian activist groups and student associations. I attended virtually every meeting, assembly, and rally that took place around Grenada, that also included a sizeable portion of the politically active West Indian community. Had I kept all of the printed materials generated from these events and organizing, it would be a small library. Thus I say with relative confidence that there was *no discussion* along these lines:

- That maybe because Bishop had already been overthrown by his comrades, who had “killed their own people,” that we should support Grenadian freedom and democracy by treating the U.S. military as if it were a tool of *our* aspirations;
- That anti-imperialism should take a back seat when human rights are threatened and, after all, the U.S. didn’t murder Bishop.
- That because some Grenadians seemingly welcomed U.S. forces, that we should also support the invasion.
- That *our* preferred ideals of democracy find expression in liberal democracy.

If anything, there was a firm belief that even with Bishop gone, the Grenadian revolution would have continued, largely following the same lines domestically, but with fewer attempted overtures to the U.S. Some even argued that the execution of Bishop was the direct result of years of U.S. destabilization, thus conceptually marrying the U.S. invasion with the overthrow of Bishop himself. Others, like Cuba itself, while denouncing the coup against Bishop, did not see this as in any way superseding or rendering irrelevant the opposition to U.S. imperialism and its designs on the region.

Therefore it is with considerable nostalgia that I look back on this period, this before the Western left’s spinal cord had been surgically removed and its head compressed into its waist, forming a monstrous human starfish that reaches out in all directions (having little of its own). However, to end on a more productive note, the Latin American left has never been stronger, more dominant, and more unified in significant part thanks to the legacy of Ronald Reagan and the repellent memories of Reagan’s rule that are still alive across Central and South America and at least parts of the Caribbean. As for that sinister airport in Grenada, it was built after all, and is now [officially named](#) after Maurice Bishop.

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