

Operation Urgent Fury: The Role of American Diplomacy in the U.S. Invasion of Grenada

Gigi TSIKLAURI*

Abstract

This article explores the role of American diplomacy during the Grenada crisis in October 1983. Although the invasion is usually viewed as a military operation, American diplomats spearheaded the decision. George Shultz, Secretary of State at the time, argued in his memoir that the entire Grenada operation was driven by the State Department. Following a coup on the island staged by an extreme Marxist group and subsequent murder of Prime Minister Bishop and some of his government members, a shoot-on-site curfew was declared and the situation was becoming chaotic; endangering hundreds of American medical students in Grenada. The U.S. request to facilitate the students' evacuation was not met by the Grenadian authorities. The Organization of East Caribbean States members, fearing that the Grenadian scenario could affect their countries, formally requested the United States to intervene militarily. In response, President Reagan authorized military intervention. The American diplomats were assigned a role of civilian control on the island during and after the invasion and facilitated the peaceful evacuation of the American students. The U.S. military left the island shortly thereafter, and the Governor General appointed the Provisional Government. In one year the Grenadians held the Parliamentary elections and elected a new government.

Keywords: Diplomacy, Grenada, intervention, Reagan, the Cold War

Introduction

The U.S. invasion of Grenada in 1983 October has been extensively studied by scholars. Many variants of the motives, consequences, and legalities of this military operation have been presented. The objective of this article is to explore the roles played by the U.S. State Department, the Secretary of State and Foreign Service Officers during the crisis and the events that unfolded on a little island with a population of less than 100,000.

When Grenada declared its independence from the United Kingdom in 1974, the United States recognized the new nation and diplomatic relations were established the same year. The United States found the replacement of Grenada's civilian leader, Prime Minister Eric Gairy in 1979 by a revolutionary group called the New Jewel Movement (NJM) led by young Grenadian Maurice Bishop "troubling" as "nobody seemed to know exactly where the New Jewel Movement and Bishop were coming from" (Gillespie, 1995, p. 285). In reality, the NJM agenda was dominated by socialist and nationalist ideas: the Bishop regime suspended the constitution, did not call early elections- turning instead to the Cuban model of "revolutionary democracy" - and began violating human rights regularly (Shultz, 1993, p. 324).

"A Little Island Called Grenada"

"A little island called Grenada", in the words of then-Dep-

uty Assistant Secretary of State Gillespie, chose to side openly with the Socialist bloc and especially Cuba, announcing that Cubans would build an airport in Port Salines and for that purpose bring hundreds of Cuban construction workers and military advisers to the island. The airport in Port Salines was viewed as a serious threat in Washington. In March 1983, in his televised Address to the Nation on Defense and National Security issues, Ronald Reagan demonstrated an aerial photo of the Port Salines airfield under construction with 10,000 foot runway and posed a question which he answered himself: "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 into the region" (Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, 1983). Grenada and Cuba were the only Latin American countries to vote in January 1980 against the United Nations resolution condemning the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. No doubt, fighting Communism in every corner of the world was a top priority of Ronald Reagan's foreign policy agenda during both terms of his Presidency but the forms of this fight were largely determined by specific conditions in particular cases.

In an apparent coup in October 1983 Prime Minister Maurice Bishop was placed under house arrest by a group led by his Deputy, Bernard Coard, who believed

* Ph.D. Student, Faculty of Education and Humanities, International Black Sea University, Tbilisi, Georgia
E-mail: TsiklauriG@yahoo.com

Supervisor: Regina AKOPIAN, Dr., Invited Lecturer, International Black Sea University, Tbilisi, Georgia
E-mail: rakopian@gmail.com

Bishop was no longer following the party line. Bishop was later executed by the coup organizers with some other cabinet members after his release by a crowd of loyal supporters. Coard and General Hudson Austin took over power in Grenada and declared a 24-hour shoot-on-sight curfew.

The United States Responds

At midnight on October 21 President Reagan "OK'd an outright invasion in response to a request by 6 other Caribbean nations including Jamaica and Barbados" (Reagan, 2007, p. 189) and on October 25 American forces landed on Grenada at two points, securing both airports on the island. In his personal diary entry for October 28, President Reagan commented that the American forces were "wonderful and most effective". They captured about 700 Cubans, while most of the Grenada military faded into the population, leaving weapons and uniforms behind and on November 2 "Grenada was declared at peace. Hostilities were declared officially over with the Marines on their way to Lebanon and a number of Army units being withdrawn" (Reagan, 2007, pp. 192-193).

Nevertheless, this seemingly "lovely little war", as the Washington Post correspondent Richard Harwood called it with a hint of sarcasm (Harwood, 1983), for the United States was preceded by tough decisions forged in hot inter-agency debate sessions and meetings with regional leaders requesting assistance. In these efforts the American diplomats played a lead role at all levels of decision making and talks. With the tension escalating, the safety of hundreds of American students of the St. George's Medical School on Grenada was of top priority. The murder of Prime Minister Bishop demonstrated that the Coard faction was increasingly inclined to use violence to advance their control and agenda (Pindar, 2010, p. 13).

Two events from the not-so-distant past had a tremendous impact on the decision-making process in Washington. The Vietnam War experience was still vivid in the memory of Americans and the Defense Department. American military leaders were reluctant to hastily authorize the engagement of American servicemen in an operation beyond the U.S. borders. Although the hardly legitimate self-proclaimed government of the country of about 100,000 with its weak People's Revolutionary Army led by General Austin and the limited Cuban contingent could hardly put up any meaningful resistance to American Rangers and Marines. On October 22nd, Supreme Allied Commander Atlantic (SACLANT) Admiral Wesley McDonald, who was placed as an overall commander of Operation "Urgent Fury," requested about four weeks for the operation planning of the invasion. Apparently even the highest level American military were still experiencing the Vietnam syndrome effect. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Craig Johnstone had to remind him that the President was about to issue an order and the Admiral needed to prepare to comply

with that order unless he wanted to be out of the Navy (Gillespie, 1995, p. 303).

With about 1,000 American medical students stuck on the island, chilling recollections arose of the 1979-81 444-day-long Iranian hostage crisis. Obviously the key U.S. decision makers considered the possibility of the American medical students being taken hostage on Grenada amid growing chaos and violence. Shultz and Assistant Secretary of State Langhorne Motley were increasingly convinced that the situation on the ground was deteriorating into total anarchy and conditions were ripe for hostage taking. Shultz noted that he knew what Ronald Reagan's reaction would be to such a development in Grenada: "he would not stand still while American hostages were held for 444 days. In fact, he probably wouldn't stand still for a week" (Shultz, 1993, p. 328)

The debacles of Vietnam and the Iranian hostage crisis offered contradictory lessons to the decision maker. The former induced fears of open-ended military engagements, while the latter mandated immediate and resolute action despite little or no time for planning. And along these two contradicting lines the decision makers placed their views when they considered the invasion option. However, on October 23 yet another unexpected factor emerged - bombing of the Marines barracks in Beirut with heavy casualties. This tragic event in Lebanon did not thwart the decision on invasion of the previous day but rather solidified it, probably for political reasons.

The Role of American Diplomacy

In his book *Gunboat Democracy: U.S. Interventions in the Dominican Republic, Grenada and Panama*, Russell Crandall portrays Secretary Shultz as the key player in President Reagan's decision to invade Grenada. According to Crandall, Shultz had almost exclusive access to the President during a golf trip October 20-22 in Augusta, Georgia. Unlike the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Shultz urged the President to take military action and to "strike while the iron is hot" (Crandall, 2006, p. 140). In fact, Secretary Shultz himself writes that President "held firm against the Pentagon's desire for more time to prepare. His firmness probably was bolstered by the fact that, by chance, he had been in Augusta with McFarlane [President Reagan's newly appointed National Security Advisor] and me, two strong supporters of the action, and was insulated somewhat from the Pentagon's reluctance" (Shultz, 1993, p. 344). Motley considered Grenada as his operation and believed that "it was unique in several respects: it was the first successful use of force after a considerable period of time; second, that operation was initiated out of the State Department" (Motley, 1991, p. 38).

The United States had no Embassy on Grenada but the Ambassador on Barbados, Milan Bish, was charged to keep track of events there through occasional visits and other means. Milan Bish was a non-career (political) appointee, a wealthy entrepreneur and long-time Re-

publican and Reagan supporter from Nebraska. However, the State Department found that Bish had prohibited Embassy political and U.S. Information Agency officers from even visiting Grenada to do the normal contact and reporting work with his rationale being that “these are Communists; therefore, they are evil and not trustworthy; therefore, we shouldn’t talk to them”. Secretary Shultz noted with sadness, “unfortunately, our Ambassador to Barbados was inexperienced in government and diplomacy” (Shultz, 1993, p. 327).

Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Caribbean Affairs Tony Gillespie was dispatched to Barbados to coordinate the diplomatic efforts on the ground. Soon after his arrival on October 19, Gillespie met with the Prime Minister of Barbados and traveled to meet other leaders of the island nations, members of the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), who unequivocally expressed their concern that “this is the beginning of something terrible in the Eastern Caribbean and the United States will have to help” (Gillespie, 1995, pp. 290-291).

With no sources on the island, the American diplomats counted on their communication line with the British High Commissioner in Barbados and the British Ambassador in Washington. The former provided Gillespie with some reports from the British Consul in Grenada concerning the situation on the ground and location of the American students and his Deputy delivered an oral message from Sir Paul Scoon, the Governor General in Grenada, “We need help” (Gillespie, 1995, pp. 293-301); the latter provided Motley with detailed information in writing on the Grenada constitution (discarded by Bishop in 1979) and the precise line of authority that was invaluable in “defining the options for helping the Grenadians establish a government on their island in the event of U.S. intervention” (Shultz, 1993, p. 327).

Gillespie instructed the Embassy in Barbados to set up a Task Force, including Consular Officers, with night shifts but quickly found that the Embassy “was deficient in several respects - in terms of numbers and in terms of capacity” and reported to Motley in Washington that “the Embassy staff in Bridgetown was not sufficient to deal with this situation” requesting additional personnel (Gillespie, 1995, p. 299). Foreign Service Officers with prior experience of serving in the Caribbean were sent to Barbados and, Gillespie relied on Deputy Chief of Mission Kim Flower to gather a group of volunteers willing to travel to Grenada.

After some difficulty, a group of Consular Officers and Political Section Chief Ken Kurze arrived in Grenada. Kurze was authorized “to negotiate with the Grenadian Government whatever might need to be done” (Gillespie, 1995, p. 295) but soon found that his main point of contact, a Grenadian Major, was giving conflicting messages on a request to bring in cruise ships and evacuate the Americans from the island. The United States “chartered Pan American planes, but the Grenadians wouldn’t let them land. There were some cruise boats in the Caribbean chartered but the Grenadians wouldn’t let the ships dock. Every effort, therefore, made to pro-

tect American citizens was met with rebuffs. It was a show of chaos with ineptness” (Motley, 1991, p. 40).

“We’ve Already Won. Let’s Show Some Style”

On October 23, two days before the invasion, Gillespie was appointed as the U.S. Ambassador to Grenada, temporarily, he was told, with a primary mission to exercise civilian control over the intended military operation, set up the Embassy and be in charge of civilian matters after the invasion. Issues Gillespie handled when he landed in Grenada and began work included liaison with Governor General Scoon, whose written request became one of the legal grounds for the invasion, making the arrangements to get the Cubans out of Grenada (dead, wounded and alive), dealing with the media, including morning impromptu press briefings on daily basis, but also such bizarre tasks as transmitting the messages from the Soviet Embassy to Moscow as the Embassy personnel destroyed communication equipment fearing the assault and helping the Soviet Ambassador and Commercial Attaché sell their Mercedes 300 S convertible and Toyota Camry respectively before their departure (that was one of their major concerns) (Gillespie, 1995, pp. 313 - 317).

As the military operation began Secretary Shultz instructed Undersecretary Eagleburger to explain to the Soviet leaders what the Americans were doing and assure them that the operation was not aimed at Cuba. A sophisticated plan of evacuation of Soviet and Cuban diplomats and some Cuban military was negotiated with Moscow and Havana Evacuees would be delivered to Mexico City and picked up by an Aeroflot plane dropping off the Cubans in Havana and proceeding on to Moscow. But during the boarding a piece of rather unusually voluminous “passenger baggage” was inspected and on top was found a fully loaded AK-47 with a round in the chamber. Inspection of other bags revealed more AK-47s, handguns and a grenade. The Soviet Ambassador was embarrassed and claimed the weapons must have belonged to Cubans.

For some time Gillespie and people on the ground discussed with Motley and others gathered in the control room in Washington whether to proceed with boarding (the weapons would not be allowed on board) or, as some hardline NSC staffers proposed, detain and interrogate the diplomats. The airlift was continued after a young diplomat present in the reminded his senior colleagues that setting such a precedent could reflect badly on American diplomats serving around the world. As Motley put it, “We’ve already won. Let’s show some style” (Shultz, 1993, pp. 338-339).

Outcome and Perceptions in Grenada, the world and the United States

When assessing the events of October 1983, some

Grenadians preferred to use the term “rescue operation” rather than the word “invasion”. Grenadian journalist Alister Hughes was unequivocal stating that he regarded this as a rescue operation, and had not heard any Grenadian who had expressed any other view (Crandall, 2006, p. 160). Governor General Scoon appointed a Provisional Government headed by an interim Prime Minister and in 1984 Parliamentary elections were held.

Initially the British and Canadians were unhappy with the United States invasion into Grenada. Prime Minister Thatcher was furious and had a tense phone conversation with President Reagan. The Canadian Ambassador in Washington at a private meeting went even so far as to accuse “the U.S. of terrible, imperialist behavior, beating up on little guys” but after the U.S. troops landed in Grenada, the Canadians changed the position and a Canadian military plane delivered equipment in support of the American operation (Gillespie, 1995, p. 354).

The intervention had a ripple effect in the region and elsewhere. A few days after the military operation the Suriname leadership reversed the country’s pro-Cuban course, threw out the large Cuban contingent and broke diplomatic relations with Cuba. In few weeks after the operation Nicaraguan comandante Tomas Borge called on the U.S. Ambassador and told him that if the U.S. ever wanted to evacuate its citizens, the comandante would facilitate their departure. The Secretary of State received reports of Syrian concerns they might be next. In Shultz’s words, “Latin Americans in particular saw that if a country went nose to nose with Uncle Sam, Fidel Castro could not, or would not, come to its rescue” (Shultz, 1993, p. 344).

All American students were safely evacuated from the island. The arrival of the first aircraft with the American students from Grenada (Gillespie, 1995, p. 330) was televised live by major American broadcasters. The entire nation watched how the very first student went down the stairs, fell to his knees and kissed the American soil. Shultz notes with relief, “at that moment, I knew that we had won a clean sweep: on the ground in Grenada and in the hearts of America” (Shultz, 1993, p. 340).

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