

EXCERPT FROM ROUNDTABLE ON GRENADA INVASION

Vanderbilt University
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Moderator: Les Payne, deputy managing editor, Newsday:

We're not discussing some ossified history here, we are discussing Grenada as a case study. We are discussing it in terms of its implication for U.S. foreign policy as it is playing out now. We have some elements of how important it is in terms of the projection of the U.S. power, and most importantly perhaps to this group is the media implications, how that story was covered and not covered. How poorly it was covered, how the press interacted with the military... All of this is part of a continuum so we will look at all of the aspects of that.

And this year of course marks the 20th anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Grenada, but Grenada is a more interesting story for reasons

quite beyond the fact that it is an anniversary. I'm not very much of an anniversary editor or reporter. I don't believe in really doing anniversary stories just because they're anniversaries unless they are a prism through which we can look at something that is relevant to today.

There are a number of reasons why Grenada is important. One, is it allows us to examine the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union as it was played out in the Caribbean. And for us to go back and remember the Cold War is very important. Some folks may, and I'm sure we will today, see some comparison between what happened in Grenada during that time and what is happening now. One of the big differences of course is there is not a Cold War, there are not two superpowers armed to the teeth at each others throats. What you have is one superpower armed to the teeth with enough nuclear weapons to destroy a country many times over.

The second reason why it is important for us to examine what happened in Grenada 20 years ago is that we had there a small socialist group headed by Maurice Bishop that staged the first armed coup in the English speaking Caribbean. The socialist New Jewel Movement overthrew a core American prime minister and caught the Carter administration completely by surprise. And this gets us into the quality of the U.S. intelligence on the ground at the time. It's one thing at that point to have spy satellites, as this country did. But we didn't have on the ground access to know what was in those shacks and what was at the airport, for instance.

A third reason is that Grenada is important because it allows us to study how the U.S. carried out a regime change in the Caribbean. When the 1983 invasion was staged we were told it was necessary not only to protect the lives of some 300-odd American medical students on the island, but also to confiscate arms of limited destruction capability that had been given to the Bishop government by the Soviet Union and Cuba.

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*Les Payne,
deputy managing
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Left to right: Saint George Crosse, Don Rojas, Tonyaa Weathersbee, Gregory Kane and Elmer Smith

The fourth reason is that Grenada is important because, since we are journalists, it allows us to examine how well the press performed its duty in informing the American public during the crisis. So Grenada's a case that will allow us to look at all of these important issues and others that are on your mind and on the minds of our presenters as well. We have a very impressive panel here to dissect the Grenada issue. However before I present it, I would like to just take a few minutes to set the stage for our discussion.

At about 4:15 a.m. on March 13, 1979, a 35-year-old Maurice Bishop and 43 members of the New Jewel Movement moved on the government of Prime Minister Eric Gairy. The loose knit, socialist-oriented party had been a nuisance to the Gairy government and before the prime minister departed on a trip to the U.S. he ordered that they be arrested. The rebels decided to act first, possessing only 25 guns among them. Many of them were antiques and pre-World War I weapons. In fact some of the weapons were made in 1870.

Maurice Bishop and his men rode into St. George's which is the capital of Grenada, in a small truck and two cars – one of which was rented. This was not exactly Bastille Day, or even Fidel Castro coming down out of the mountains. The toughest resistance the Grenada rebels met that day was from a few growling dogs.

The 44 rebels seized the airport and radio station then set fire to the barracks of Gairy's 200 man army, driving the brave warriors off into the night. They called many of the townspeople by telephone to notify them of their takeover of the government.

"The crew took us by surprise but they certainly did not take Cubans by surprise" said an American official in the U.S. embassy on the nearby island of Barbados. "We knew of Bishop's plan," the official said, "but we didn't think he would be able to pull it off."

The U.S. knew that the New Jewel Movement was Marxist. The Carter administration knew that Bishop's group would very likely hook up with Cuba and the Soviet Union. At the time of Bishop's coup the U.S. had other problems in the Caribbean. There was the situation in Nicaragua and the CIA was working mightily in Jamaica to undermine the growing relationship between Michael Manley and Fidel Castro. The CIA ended up driving Manley from office. So it was bogged down in other parts of the Caribbean in 1979. And it was against this backdrop that the Bishop-led New Jewel Movement staged its armed coup in Grenada and got into far more geopolitical, Cold War trouble than they could have imagined was possible.

The way Maurice Bishop told the story to me is that shortly after the coup he asked the U.S. for arms and economic aid. The Carter administra-

tion admitted that Prime Minister Gairy ran a corrupt, oppressive, ruthless regime with little regard to human life or democracy. Still, the Carter administration turned down Bishop's request for help. Actually Bishop was offered \$5,000.

Within 48 hours Castro had delivered crates of AK-47 rifles to the New Jewel Movement to protect itself against Gairy's threat to retake the island with the help of mercenaries. Castro was so quick to supply arms that the State Department theorized that perhaps Cuba had actually staged the coup, which it had not. The Carter administration toyed with the idea of a blockade but settled for increasing the U.S. military presence on nearby islands.

But things began to unravel in Grenada without much help from the U.S. On Oct. 13 1983, the Grenadian army, controlled by former Deputy Prime Minister Bernard Coard, placed Maurice Bishop under house arrest and seized power in a bloody coup. Shortly after that happened, the U.S. invaded with some 1,800 troops – an invasion that we have assembled an impressive panel to discuss.

Our first speaker is Don Rojas. Don is the general manger of WBAI radio, which is a very

important radio station. Specifically in this capacity he leads the largest community support of economic, non-commercial radio station in the country with a staff of 250 producers, journalists and engineers and has a signal reaches over 20 million people in the New York area. Mr. Rojas is a former director of communications for the NAACP in that capacity he supervised the department staff of communications and public relations professionals and was responsible for the totality of the internal and external communications system and structures of the nation's oldest and largest civil rights organization.

Most importantly, Mr. Rojas, from 1979 to 1983, worked in Grenada as the editor-in-chief of the national newspaper and as the press secretary to Prime Minister Maurice Bishop. Before that he served the National Urban League as its assistant director of communications for two years and later went on to become the assistant editor of the Baltimore Afro-American.

Presenter: Don Rojas, former press secretary to Maurice Bishop

Thank you very much Les, and thanks to DeWayne Wickham for this kind invitation to be here and to spend some time discussing Grenada. Looking at the Grenadian events twenty years ago, the historical content, it's an honor for me to be in the company of colleagues I have a lot of respect and admiration for. A whole generation has passed actually since those tragic events many of us remember so vividly I will be very brief in my opening remarks so we will have time for an exchange. For me personally those four years were some of the most exciting challenging, and rewarding years of my life. I had known Maurice Bishop; we had gone to school together, at the Wesley Hall Primary School boys' college in Grenada. We were boyhood friends growing up in Grenada in the 60's both of our families were close to each other. My father and his father were very close friends as well. Maurice was a few years older than me. He was sort of the leader of the boys around school who looked to and admired him. Even as a 17-year-old teenager, he demonstrated



Don Rojas, former press secretary to Maurice Bishop

leadership qualities. Maurice went off to study law in England. I came to the United States in 1968 and went to college here. We lost contact with each other up until the mid-, late-1970's.

We reconnected to the start the formation of the New Jewel Movement in 1973. Maurice had come to the United States fairly often in the 70's to organize support groups among Grenadian and Caribbean communities in New York and as far south as Washington, DC. At the time of the March 13, 1979 coup that ousted Eric Gairy, I was working at the New York Amsterdam News and was also very active in the demonstrations of support for the coup in the New York area in the days after the overthrow of Gairy regime.

Several months later in September of 1979 Maurice Bishop came to address the United Nations General Assembly. And I had the opportunity to meet with him then and interview him for both the newspaper and also a black radio station in New York, WLIB. Through the course of the interview we got to chatting about the media needs of the young revolutionary government in Grenada. Maurice invited me to go back to Grenada to assist him and assist the New Jewel Movement and the revolutionary government in building a people's owned and controlled media infra-structure.

I took him up on his invitation and in a matter of 10 days I was in Grenada and served the Grenada revolution for four years, exactly four years to the day. The first two years in the capacity of editor-in-chief of the paper of the revolution; and in the last two years as the press secretary to Maurice Bishop. In that capacity I was responsible for organizing all of his media contacts and running his press operation in terms of his ministries and also functioning as his speech writer. So I had the opportunity to work very, very closely with someone I had admired from when I was a young boy in growing up in Grenada.

I traveled around the world with Maurice and became a close confidant. I also got to know very well many of the other leaders of the New Jewel Movement and the revolutionary government including Bernard Coard, the deputy prime minister. Under Bishop's leadership Grenada became almost overnight a terror on the stage of world politics. Bishop's charismatic

leadership resonated throughout the region and throughout the world he became a recognizable young leader of the New Jewel Movement and he was a hero of liberation movements throughout Latin America.

Nineteen seventy nine was a seminal year in world history. Why was it big? The Grenada revolution came at a time when the U.S. had vowed never to allow another socialist state in its backyard. The Caribbean was the private lake of Washington and then here comes out of the blue a revolution in an English speaking country that is predominantly black and according to the state department itself, is a part of the geopolitical affiliations of pro-Cuban in the middle of the Cold War. What happened on Grenada was seen by some as potentially having an influence on the political thinking of the African Americans and this was stated in documents that were put out by the state department at the time.

As for the impact of what happened in Grenada on the Caribbean region, the ouster of Gairy was unprecedented. What happened in 1979 was a military coup against a government in the region and the creation of a new social economic system that was based on principals of quality, and equity and justice, social justice. It sought to empower the masses of the Grenadian people in a process of popular democracy. That is to say to involve them and mobilizing them in the running of their own affairs from the military level, to the parish level, then the national level.

From the very beginning the United States government saw Grenada as a threat, not a military threat but as a threat to the region. If Grenada's revolution succeeded it could in fact create a dangerous threat to the U.S. in that part of the world.

The revolution was an attempt to break the stranglehold of Grenada's economic dependence on Europe and the United States. We knew it was going to take a long time to do, to show concrete results, however in the short span of four years the revolution was able to register some very impressive gains for the Grenadian people in terms of their quality of life. The standard of living for the masses had risen over that four year period and not just by our own statistics but by the United Nations measurement as well.

The new airport that was under construction then, and which was used as pretext for the invasion on the grounds that it was intended to be a military base for Cuba and the Soviet Union, was very close to the main shipping lanes for oil shipments from Venezuela into the United States. It was that geo-political reason that was used to fabricate an argument not unlike the fabrications coming out of the Bush administration as justification for the recent invasion of Iraq. The Reagan administration fabricated the argument at the time that Cubans were building a military base in Grenada in addition to the airport. It also put out the propaganda that a submarine base was being constructed in Grenada. At the time of the invasion the airport was about 70-75 percent completed, having been built with the help of Cuban personnel and equipment.

I recall very well when Bishop made the request of Fidel Castro to assist in the construction of the airport and Castro replied to him at the time although Cuba could not provide cash it could give us bulldozers and people to help. Within a month after that conversation a Cuban ship arrived in Grenada unloading some hundred of trucks and pieces of heavy equipment, as well as contingent of engineers and construction

workers to begin the process building the airport which was absolutely critical to Grenada's economic growth.

Without an international airport Grenada could not develop its tourism industry could not expand on its trade so its economic potential would remain underutilized. So the airport, which today of course is functioning as it was always intended to as commercial airport, is critical to the economic functioning of the country. Les Payne:

Next we'll go to Saint George Crosse, to look at the events surrounding the invasion from another perspective. Mr. Crosse was born on the island of Grenada and came to the U.S. to get an education when he 17 years old. His first job in the U.S. was picking strawberries on the eastern shore of Maryland for \$3 a day, two bologna sandwiches and all the Kool-Aid he could drink. He recovered from that. By 1966, Mr. Crosse – by then a U.S. citizen – was the first black to seek the office of sheriff of Baltimore City. In 1968 he ran for Maryland's 7th district congressional seat. He didn't win he was defeated, but was a political pioneer in Maryland. Today both of those positions are held by African Americans.

After Ronald Reagan was elected president in 1980, he appointed Saint George Crosse to be the special advisor to the secretary of HUD for minority affairs. Mr. Crosse worked in the office of inter-government relations which is HUD's liaison with state, local and tribal governments and national organizations. In 1983, President Reagan appointed Mr. Crosse to be his personal representative and special ambassador to the nation of St. Kitts-Nevis, which had just gained its independence from Great Britain. From that vantage point he had a pretty good view of the events that unfolded nearby in Grenada.

Presenter: Saint George Crosse, former special ambassador to St. Kitts-Nevis:

Thanks to my friend DeWayne Wickham for asking for me to be here. I think that both Mr. Payne and Mr. Rojas have gone very much into what happened. But you

Saint George Crosse, former special ambassador to St. Kitts-Nevis



may be interested in knowing that on Sept. 19, 1983, not only Prime Minister Maurice Bishop but Mr. Rojas and I were all in the nation of St. Kitts-Nevis where they were getting their independence.

I was representing the Reagan administration, but at the same time that I did not forget that the first air that I breathed was Grenadian air with its mixture of clove and nutmeg and other things. And it was the same sort of air that Maurice Bishop started his life on when he left the womb of Alimenta Bishop five years after me. But when I was there at Bastille in St. Kitts, as brother Rojas will tell you, we were there around midnight when they were going to take down the flag and sound the bells and start the independence of St. Kitts-Nevis. Sitting right next to me was Prime Minister Maurice Bishop. I looked at him and I said, "Mr. Prime Minister how is everything in Grenada."

He said, "OK." And then he said what's your name?

I said St. George Crosse. He said: "That's a great name in Grenada." I said: "Yes, I was born there." Then I asked, "When are you going to have elections and have the people to use the right to vote?" He said, "When I get good and ready."

That's the way in West Indian parlance that he said it. And the tragic thing about the whole situation was that this young prince, who had real ideas for what nationhood should be, one month to the day – on the 19th of October – was taken out and shot with some of his supporters. He was killed or executed by someone who was supposed to be one of his brothers. I'm talking about Deputy Prime Minister Bernard Coard. As a Grenadian I shed tears because I had come to really admirer Maurice Bishop. At the same time, being an American and being someone who was apart of the Reagan administration, I realized that the Reagan administration was using what was going on in the West Indies, and in Grenada in particular, as its way to say to the Soviet government and Nicaragua, and the people in Cuba, the people in any other Caribbean or Latin American nation that were thinking of bringing the Soviet Union into that area, that it

was not going to be allowed to happen.

There was a speech that Maurice Bishop gave in 1979 in which he said that the revolution was going to be a good revolution. It would bring improvements in the welfare and education of all Grenadians. I truly believe that this is what Maurice Bishop intended to do. He was a Marxist, but he was not the same kind of a Marxist that Bernard Coard was. And when Coard saw this, when he saw that Maurice Bishop was what I call "a kinder and gentler" type of a Marxist, he decided that it was not going to happen. And that was what ended up with the assassination of one of the most talented leaders of the Caribbean.

I would dare say that Mr. Rojas is blessed that he is here because if Bernard Coard had gotten his hands on him he would've been dead also. Now what has happened since that time, well one of the mistakes and yet I guess, Ronald Reagan was doing just what he knew best, was to go out and bring Eric Gary out of a forced retirement and brought and put him back into power and of course that was sort of Americas way of trying to kill what Maurice Bishop had begun. I still say today, and I'm going to end shortly, that Maurice Bishop would have been one of the best leaders in the West Indies and in the Caribbean. He would have been as celebrated as Eric Williams (Barbados' former prime minister) because he was a man who really thought about the people. Now what we have left as a result of the assassination of Bishop and his several of his supporters was the arrest and conviction of 17 people. These were the people who led the coup against Bishop and who were supposed to have been behind his execution. They were given life sentences and with one exception they remain in jail today.

Now many people are looking at Grenada saying it's the nation that's holding political prisoners. But from my knowledge of what is going on in the West Indies and particularly in Grenada I think that, and brother Rojas knows better than I do, I think that people think that what Bernard Coard and those who acted with him got was what they deserved.



TONYAA J. WEATHERSBEE is an award-winning columnist for The Florida Times-Union in Jacksonville, Fla., and a columnist for BlackAmericaWeb.com. She has appeared on ABC's Nightline, and her work has been published in newspapers throughout the country. She has reported on the influence of people of African descent in Cuba and Haiti.

GREGORY KANE has been a columnist with the Baltimore Sun since 1995. He has won several awards and was a Pulitzer finalist in 1997 as co-author of a three-part series of articles about modern slavery in the Sudan. Kane is also a columnist with BlackAmericaWeb.com.



ELMER SMITH is the editorial columnist for the Philadelphia Daily News where he has been employed for 22 years.

He has been a journalist in Philadelphia for 31 years, starting his career with the Philadelphia Bulletin.

For the past 24 years, Smith has served as an adjunct professor of Journalism at Temple University where he was trained as a journalist.

