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***THE GRENADA INVASION: "USE FORCE WHEN YOU SHOULD, RATHER
THAN WHEN YOU MUST"***

Core Course Essay

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Course 5603, Seminar "E"

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Introduction: Grenada in October, 1983

On October 25, 1983, a U.S. task force consisting of Navy and Marines, together with Army Rangers and the 82nd Airborne, was tasked with rescuing hundreds of U.S. medical students who were being held on the island of Grenada by the hard-line communist forces that had just executed Grenadian Prime Minister Maurice Bishop. Eventually, the task force was also charged with eliminating the communist Cuban presence from Grenada, thereby securing the island. This was Operation Urgent Fury. After four days of sometimes intense combat, mostly against Cuban forces, the students were rescued and all other U.S. objectives were secured.¹ What mix of factors shaped the U.S. decision to choose military force in Grenada, and why didn't the U.S. national security policy process give greater consideration to the usual sequencing of policy instruments,² such as the economic and political pressure advocated by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher?³ Former Secretary of State George Shultz offered a short, but not so simple answer: "The use of force obviously should not be taken lightly, but better to use force when you *should* rather than when you *must*; *last* (in other words, the use of force as a *last resort*) means *no other*, and by that time the level of force and the risk involved may have multiplied many times over."⁴ A review of the issues confronting

¹ Ashley J. Tellis, "Terminating intervention: understanding exit strategy and U.S. involvement in intrastate conflicts", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* Vol 19 (April/June 1996), 138

² John Blackton, advice for core course 3 paper, National War College, Washington, D.C. (21 November 1996)

³ George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993), 331

⁴ *Ibid* at 345

the key stakeholders who concluded that force “should” be used in Grenada makes clear that the decision was taken for a variety of policy reasons, taking into account political, bureaucratic and logistical concerns

The Stakeholders: Using force “when you *should*” in Grenada

President Reagan

When President Reagan announced the “rescue mission” to Grenada, his decision represented the first use of American combat troops in the Caribbean in almost 20 years and the first major use of American military force since the Vietnam War. Critics charge that, “the mission also rescued the Reagan administration from a series of embarrassing foreign policy failures”⁵ In the intervening years since the invasion, some analysts have indeed concluded that Grenada represented the “most successful single foreign policy event of Ronald Reagan’s presidency”.⁶

There is some truth to the charge that Grenada “rescued” President Reagan’s foreign policy. As the critics note, the Reagan Administration was faced with serious political concerns in the Western Hemisphere in the early 1980’s. The Soviets seemed to be winning the Cold War one small country at a time. Nicaragua had already joined Cuba in open emulation of the Soviet system. El Salvador was widely expected to be the next country to “fall” Then, “Grenada entered the picture as an example of what the Reagan administration feared might happen to the rest of the region if radicalism were allowed to

⁵ Terry Nardin and Kathleen Pritchard, *Ethics and Intervention: the United States in Grenada, 1983* (Pew Case Studies in International Affairs, copyright 1990 by the Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs), 2

⁶ D. Brentt Hardt, “Grenada Reconsidered,” *Fletcher Forum* (Summer 1987), 305.

flourish”⁷ To date, the United States had been powerless to stop this forward expansion, frustrating President Reagan’s overriding political objective for the region.

The moment seemed ripe for decisive U S. action when the President was awakened at the Augusta National Golf Course early Saturday morning, October 22, to learn that Grenada’s neighbors, all members of the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (the OECS) had requested that the United States intervene militarily to “dislodge the radicals”⁸ from Grenada. Reportedly, Grenada’s neighbors had been concerned that, under PM Bishop, there appeared to be a large, Cuban-sponsored military buildup which was vastly disproportionate to Grenada’s needs. With Bishop’s death, the OECS was worried that Grenada was now under the control of “even more radical Marxists (who) had launched a murderous reign of terror against their enemies. Unless they were stopped, the Caribbean neighbors said, it was just a matter of time before the Grenadians and Castro moved on *their* countries”⁹

Recognizing the Reagan Administration’s political concern for the spread of Marxism in the Western Hemisphere, and taking into account President Reagan’s ability to take decisive action,¹⁰ as well as his instinctive appreciation for the value of sending “signals” to allies and enemies alike,¹¹ National Security Advisor Bud McFarlane and Secretary of State George Shultz could be reasonably confident that the President would agree to honor the OECS request when they brought it to his attention early that Saturday

⁷ H W Brands, Jr , “Decisions on American armed intervention Lebanon, Dominican Republic, and Grenada,” *Political Science Quarterly* Vol 102 (Winter 1987-88), 610.

⁸ Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York Simon & Schuster, 1990), 450

⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁰ Shultz, 84

¹¹ Reagan, 266

morning in Augusta. As Reagan described it, “We couldn’t say no to those six small countries who had asked us for help. We’d have no credibility or standing in the Americas if we did. If it ever became known, which I knew it would, that we had turned them down, few of our friends around the world would trust us completely as an ally again”¹²

There was another, in some respects overriding reason why President Reagan agreed to intervene in Grenada the specter of hundreds of potential hostages, the American medical students who had been rounded up and threatened by the new Grenadian regime. Critics have charged that this was a false justification for the invasion, that the students were never actually in danger and that the Grenadian military leaders had, in fact, offered to let them leave the island¹³ Although a difference of opinion remains on this point, the threat that a potential hostage situation would have posed for the Reagan Administration should not be discounted.

All too aware of the role that the Iranian hostage crisis had played in destroying the presidency of his predecessor, and worried by the prospect of American hostages in Grenada, an exhausted and depressed Reagan is quoted in the Economist saying, “I’m no better off than Jimmy Carter.”¹⁴ In fact, the U.S troops who executed the Grenadian operation were instructed that their overriding objective was to rescue the American students. For members of the 82nd Airborne, the decision to invade Grenada came “totally out of the blue”, an emergency response to late-breaking events (the execution of Bishop and subsequent takeover by his hardline deputy, Bernard Coard) which had placed Americans in danger. It was to be a “permissive non-combatant evacuation operation”,

¹² Reagan, 451

¹³ Larry Speakes, *Speaking Out* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1988), 161

¹⁴ Nardin and Pritchard, 10.

where the 82nd Airborne expected to peacefully escort the students (who they understood had been rounded up and threatened by the Grenadians) off the island. They would not wait for another Iran hostage crisis because, “there isn’t much that you can do when there is a gun to somebody’s head.”¹⁵ Although the mission subsequently expanded to include destruction of the People’s Revolutionary Army (the PRA, which consisted mostly of hard-fighting Cubans) the primary mission, the rescue of the American students, took place through a show of American military presence in the first twenty-four hours of the invasion.¹⁶

The political concerns that confronted President Reagan when he decided to intervene militarily in Grenada seemed to point him inexorably to the choice of force in the first instance (rather than as a “last resort”) Put before a different President, these concerns could well have prompted a different reaction. Reagan, however, “with his instinct for simplification and the big story,”¹⁷ took less than twenty-four hours to conclude that the United States should launch a military invasion of Grenada. In the first place, Grenada’s Caribbean neighbors had asked for the military intervention to keep Marxist expansionism in check, a concern which Reagan also shared. In the second place, President Reagan was convinced that American lives were at stake. Force under these circumstances “should” be used, to have delayed could have closed off policy options as surely as if there had been a “gun put to somebody’s head”.¹⁸ Of course, another factor

¹⁵ Lt Col Charles Jacoby, interview by author, National War College, Washington, D C , 12 December 1996

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Donald T Regan, *For the Record From Wall Street to Washington* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovitch, 1988), 293

¹⁸ Jacoby interview

influencing President Reagan's decision was the realization that there was broad consensus among his highest level policy advisors, principally National Security Advisor Bud McFarlane and Secretary of State George Shultz, that military intervention should be used in Grenada.¹⁹

The Stakeholders Secretary of State Shultz and the State Department:

Reports indicate that Secretary Shultz and NSA McFarlane were among the leading advocates of intervention from the time they heard of PM Bishop's October 19 death.²⁰ In fact, in his memoirs George Shultz noted that, "The entire Grenada operation was driven by the State Department."²¹ Secretary Shultz and his policy makers at State, in the midst of the Cold War and mindful of the increasing Marxist presence in the Caribbean region, feared that the Grenada crisis could prove painfully reminiscent of their recent inability to prevent Surinamese strongman Desi Bouterse (a creole army sergeant major who had overthrown Suriname's elected government in 1980) from rounding up and murdering over a dozen prominent citizens on December 8, 1982, and moving to turn Suriname into the first communist state on the mainland of South America

At that time, and with all other potential options considered and rejected, Shultz had also proposed utilization of a limited U.S. military presence. His proposal had been rejected by Secretary of Defense Weinberger and the Joint Chiefs, leaving the United States with no option but to do nothing of any significance in Suriname.²² Shultz recognized the reticence of Weinberger and the Joint Chiefs as a reaction to the continuing

¹⁹ Brands, 617, 618

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Shultz, 343

²² Ibid at 292-3.

legacy of Vietnam. “they instinctively opposed the small-scale use of American forces, fearing it might undercut their effort to equip themselves as a counterpoint to the Soviets”²³

However, Shultz also saw that this reticence had the potential to hamper the United States’ ability to conduct foreign policy, in that it effectively took the military instrument out of the U S inventory of political tools. “Often, one hears the argument ‘Force should be used only as the last resort.’ This makes people feel good, and it sounds statesmanlike. In fact, I feel strongly that it is poor public policy and an unsound application of the law. The use of force, and the credible threat of the use of force, are legitimate instruments of national policy and should be viewed as such. Waiting to use force as a last resort would have meant possibly enduring hostage taking and having to use force then.”²⁴

With the legacy of the Vietnam war the use of force, or the threat of its use, had lost any credibility as an instrument of United States policy. The loss of this tool represented a bureaucratic problem for George Shultz, who felt it was necessary for the United States to take decisive action in Grenada and therefore needed to bring the rest of the United States government around to this realization. The appeal for U.S. military assistance to repel the Marxist forces in Grenada, made by Dominican Prime Minister Eugenia Charles and the other members of the OECS, helped George Shultz tremendously in this effort. Despite credible charges that the OECS appeal had in fact been drafted in the U.S. Department of State,²⁵ and that foreign service officers had orchestrated the

²³ *Ibid*

²⁴ *Ibid* at 345

²⁵ Brands, 614

meeting at which the OECS agreed to request U S military assistance, the appeal nevertheless provided the Reagan Administration with some claim to a legal authorization for the invasion,²⁶ as well as proof that the U.S. was not acting unilaterally in Grenada, but rather with the complicity and approval of the other island nations in the region. When President Reagan was awakened Saturday morning with news of the OECS request for military assistance, Secretary Shultz and NSA McFarlane were at his side in Augusta, briefing the President and recommending that the OECS request be granted. The President agreed. Ultimately, so did Secretary of Defense Weinberger and General Vessey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The Stakeholders Secretary of Defense Weinberger and JCS Chairman Vessey:

Although his memoirs give little indication that Defense Secretary Weinberger had any misgivings about the advisability of the Grenada invasion,²⁷ other accounts indicate that the Secretary had serious political and logistical concerns about the operation. Foremost, of course, was the legacy of Vietnam, which “ . illuminated the dynamics by which limited wars tend to carry within themselves the potential for unproductive escalation and, by extension, the ever-present possibility of entering into a quagmire. This fear ... is one of the permanent legacies of (Vietnam). It is not surprising that policy makers ever since have become increasingly wary of committing military forces in situations where the political dimensions of intrastate disputes are overly complex and the military conditions uncomfortably fluid.”²⁸

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Caspar Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace: Seven Critical Years in the Pentagon* (New York: Warner Books, 1990), 101-133

²⁸ Tellis, 118

Always aware of the overriding political concerns generated by the Vietnam legacy, Weinberger and the JCS seemed to feel they needed to provide a cautionary counterweight to an aggressive State Department and White House and their inclination to advocate “early” military intervention²⁹ According to one account, Secretary Weinberger continued to evince little enthusiasm for the intervention, even after the the death of PM Bishop had forced the JCS to “reluctantly” agree to participate.³⁰ Weinberger’s overriding political concern, still reminiscent of Vietnam, appeared to be the fear that intervention in Grenada would “whet the administration’s appetite for riskier operations in Central America ”³¹

Aside from their political concerns about intervention in Grenada, Secretary Weinberger and General Vessey had serious logistical concerns about the feasibility of the Grenada rescue mission The specter of the Iran hostage rescue mission of 1980 provided potent memories of the cost of failure. Moreover, the Grenada crisis had developed so quickly that the U S forces tasked with executing the rescue operation had virtually no time to prepare Consequently, accounts indicate that as late as Sunday afternoon, October 23, Secretary Weinberger remained adamant that there had to be far greater preparation and a much larger force before a rescue operation could begin, Secretary Shultz interpreted Weinberger’s protests to be the equivalent of advocating “no action at all ”³² Shultz understood that Vietnam continued to present a potent deterrent to the use of American force in anything but the most limited of operations. He nevertheless felt that

²⁹ Jacoby interview

³⁰ Richard A Melanson, *American Foreign Policy Since the Vietnam War the search for consensus from Nixon to Clinton* (Armonk, New York: M E Sharpe, Inc , 1996), 169

³¹ Ibid

³² Shultz, 331

there were compelling reasons to intervene, and argued forcefully for the intervention, tasking State Assistant Secretary Langhorn Motley with “bringing the Joint Chiefs along. He (Motley) convinced them that the problem was severe. And he showed them the way to get out quickly once the job had been done. He convinced them that .. if we didn’t go in quickly, we would have to do so eventually under much worse conditions.”³³ If his memoirs are a reliable reflection of his state of mind at the time, then Secretary Weinberger agreed with Secretary Shultz that military intervention was the correct course of action for Grenada in October 1983.³⁴ If this was not the case, then Secretary Shultz’ bureaucratic maneuvering was nevertheless sufficient to compel Weinberger and JCS Chief Vessey to agree to the operation

Conclusion: Grenada after the Invasion

By most accounts, the Grenada invasion was a success. The students were rescued, casualties were light, the Cubans were expelled, and the Grenadian people were appreciative. The Grenada operation sent many signals: “(P)eople began to get the message: Ronald Reagan is capable of action beyond rhetoric.”³⁵ Finally, even Surinamese strongman Bouterse got the message. “He threw out the large Cuban contingent and all but broke diplomatic relations with Cuba”³⁶ In the estimation of many, the Reagan Administration had succeeded in employing force “where it should” in Grenada. And the result of that decision resonated throughout the region, and the world.

³³ Shultz, 343

³⁴ Weinberger, 101-133

³⁵ Shultz, 344

³⁶ Ibid

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