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PROGRAM NPR Dateline STATION WETA Radio  
NPR Network

DATE April 13, 1983 4:30 P.M. CITY Washington, D.C.

SUBJECT Military In Central America

JOHN STOCKWELL: ...a very small, very pleasant isolated country. It's about one-third the size of Austin, Texas.

PRESIDENT RONALD REAGAN: On the small island of Grenada, at the southern end of the Caribbean chain, the Cubans, with Soviet financing and backing, are in a process of building an airfield with a 10,000-foot runway. Grenada doesn't even have an air force. Who is it intended for?

SANFORD UNGAR: When President Reagan spoke to the nation last month about the threat of Soviet and Cuban subversion in the Western Hemisphere, he warned of danger not only in Nicaragua and El Salvador, but also in the tiny Caribbean island state of Grenada.

This is NPR Dateline. I'm Sanford Ungar.

Few people on the outside world paid much attention to Grenada until 1979, when Maurice Bishop, the leader of the so-called New Jewel Movement, staged a coup against the authoritarian regime of the former prime Minister Eric Gairy.

Miles Frechette, Officer of Special Projects in the Latin America Bureau at the State Department, says the new regime was quick to break its promises of reform.

MILES FRECHETTE: You will recall that that was a government that said that it was coming in to reestablish democracy and human rights, and whatnot. And in our view and in the view of other independent observers, they have gone in exactly the opposite direction.

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So, we're concerned about internal developments in Grenada.

UNGAR: Human rights.

FRECHETTE: Human rights, yes. Lack of free assembly, lack of elections, at least a hundred political prisoners, no free press, that sort of thing.

Now, a bigger, larger concern is the concern about the fact that the Grenadans seem to be developing a relationship with the Cubans and with the Soviet Union that would allow facilities on Grenada to be put at the disposal of those two countries. I'm referring now specifically to a large airfield which is being built there.

UNGAR: They say that's for tourism.

FRECHETTE: It could be. But let's talk about it a little bit. First of all, that airfield is not economically justifiable. If they had gone to the World Bank or some other multilateral lending institution, the institution would have said, "Do you have enough beds to accommodate all the people who are going to fly in?" And the answer would have been no at the time they started building it, and it's still no. And won't be yes until possibly the end of this decade and into the early 1990s. So the economic justification is lacking.

Secondly, it is a very long airfield and it's being built to heavier specs, heavier specifications than are needed for commercial activity.

Now, way back in 1981, Mr. Strachan (?), a minister in that government, said quite openly that if the Soviets wanted to use the field for some purpose or another, they would make the field available.

UNGAR: Do we know who's building the airfield?

FRECHETTE: Well, it is being built with assistance from a number of sources. But the major assistance is being given by Cuba.

The field will probably cost in the neighborhood of \$80 million, and at least \$30 million is being provided by Cuba. Not in terms of money, but in terms of work force. They have had between 300 and 500 men working there full-time.

UNGAR: So they're doing the actual construction?

FRECHETTE: That's right. And let me tell you that I

don't think that the Cubans do these things for nothing. The Cubans have a real interest in having a field in Grenada because they, of course, ferry their troops to Angola in IL-62 aircraft. These aircraft now fly from Cuba to the Cape Verde Islands and then on to Angola. It would be far more practical for the Cubans if they could fly to Grenada, refuel on Grenada, and then go in one hop on to Angola.

UNGAR: So you think it becomes a security threat in the Caribbean.

FRECHETTE: That is correct.

UNGAR: In general.

FRECHETTE: That is correct.

Let me point out that the President, in his speech of March the 23rd, showed photos of a large base that's being built in a place called Point Catavane (?) down on the sort of southeastern edge of Grenada. Now, this is a base that'll accommodate between 800 and 1000 men. What is that for? The Grenadan army isn't there. Most of it is posted elsewhere. Some of the things that we worry about is the possibility that the Cubans and the Soviets may simply stockpile arms and equipment there at that base that could then be deployed rapidly from the airfield that's being built.

UNGAR: The Grenadan government claims that the United States has plans to attack the island or is somehow engaged in covert action to try to overthrow the government. Is there any substance at all to those allegations?

FRECHETTE: Let me tell you that they've been making that charge right from the beginning. And as happens with most people who cry wolf, there will come a time when nobody will believe them anymore. This accusation is just one of a long series. We've heard it all before.

UNGAR: And you don't believe there's any covert action being conducted by the CIA or other American agencies against the government in Grenada.

FRECHETTE: No.

UNGAR: Miles Frechette keeps track of Grenada for the U.S. State Department.

At the time of the 1979 coup, Desima (?) Williams was a Grenadian graduate student in Washington. She helped take over the embassy on behalf of the new government, and now she is

accredited as Grenada's Ambassador to the Organization of American States.

I asked her about the Reagan Administration's allegation that her country is a source of instability and subversion in the Caribbean.

DESIMA WILLIAMS: It's totally false. It's very misleading. Our country is stable, more stable than it has ever been. The rising end to unemployment has created economic stability. The political process is dynamic. People are becoming involved in the mass organs of popular democracy, the women's movement, the trade union movement, the youth movement, the farmers movement, the young pioneers, the militia.

UNGAR: What about this large airfield that's under construction, we're told? And apparently there's a new military base being built that some people think might be used for foreign troops or for a stopping point for foreign troops.

WILLIAMS: Airport, yes. Large airfield, no. Military base, no. The purpose of those statements, in our view, deliberately misleading statements, false statements, pure distortions, are intended to create a kind of hysteria and a displeasure in the minds of the American public towards the Grenada revolution and its government and its people.

Yes, we are constructing an airport. The Grenada international airport will be well in keeping with the size of the airstrips in Antigua, a country of similar size with as much dependence on tourism as is Grenada. The airstrip will be the same size, of 9000 feet, as the airport in Curacao. It will be smaller than the airstrip in Trinidad or in Barbados, which are both 11,000 feet.

So that our airport, first and foremost, is an ordinary and standard-sized international airport for international tourist traffic.

UNGAR: What about this allegation that the airfield in Grenada might be used by Cuba to ferry troops to Angola?

WILLIAMS: They have been finding ways to meet each other and work together long before the Grenada airport was being constructed. Cuba does not need Grenada's airport to arrive in Angola, and it has proven so.

UNGAR: Some people that I've spoken to have said that Grenada has an unusual number of political prisoners these days, that you have perhaps a hundred or more people who have been held in jail without being charged with any crime. Is that so?

WILLIAMS: Yes, we have had political detainees. The Grenada revolution has been confronted by a counterrevolution, most all of which is supported by the United States CIA. We have had to take measures necessary to protect people. And all of these people who have been detained have been treated in the most humane way. They have come before tribunals. And the vast, vast majority of them have been systematically released. And in fact, the figure is much lower than a hundred.

UNGAR: What is the figure now?

WILLIAMS: The last figure I was given was 49.

UNGAR: You mentioned that you believe that the CIA has attempted to destabilize your government. Do you have evidence of that?

WILLIAMS: Well, in 1981 we discovered such an attempt, such a plot. And in February of this year, the Washington Post revealed that the same plot to which we have referred was in fact in the making, had been presented to the Senate Intelligence Committee. And according to The Post, it was called off.

But we have evidence to the contrary, that in fact the Central Intelligence Agency of the United States has been and continues to meddle internally in Grenada's affairs.

UNGAR: Can you describe any of that evidence for us?

WILLIAMS: No, we have not released any of that information at this time, so as not to compromise our sources.

UNGAR: Desina Williams, Grenada's Ambassador to the OAS.

With the economy of their own country weak, many Grenadians live on the larger, wealthier island of Trinidad, 90 miles away. Trinidadian Ken Gordon, editor of the Trinidad Express, says that Bishop's government has a mixed record, but at home in Grenada it appears to be popular.

KEN GORDON: In balance, the man lowest on the ladder in Grenada is better off now than he ever had any prospect of being under Gairy. That's my view.

UNGAR: Now, the State Department says it's concerned about human rights violations on Grenada. Is there cause for that concern?

GORDON: I think rightly. So we hear, because there've been gross violations of human rights. The most outstanding

instance being the editor of the newspaper The Voice, one man called Leslie Bare (?), who has been incarcerated for the last two years, and no charges have been brought against him.

UNGAR: How about this airfield that's being built on Grenada? Does that seem to be a threat in the region?

GORDON: If the Soviets, if they thought that it was a logical way to expand their influence by interfering with U.S. shipping, where something like two-thirds of the oil, I think, that comes into the United States passed out here in the Atlantic, if they fled that Grenada lent itself as a base in which to step up that harassment, I don't think they'll hesitate to use it.

Let me remind you that Surinam isn't far away from Grenada. And when Cuba becomes involved in countries like Grenada and Surinam, then I'm certain that their self-interests are involved. Cuba doesn't have the kind of money to throw away. Cuba is looking for support to survive, itself.

I would not at all be surprised if part and parcel of the signs that we're seeing now led to an encouragement of similar type revolutionary activity taking place in other islands of the Caribbean. And Grenada could be well used as a base for this. And I think the governments in the Caribbean should recognize that this is a very real possibility.

UNGAR: Newspaper editor Ken Gordon spoke to us from Port-of-Spain, Trinidad.

To learn how the Grenadians themselves reacted to the barrage of attacks from the Reagan Administration, we turn to John Stockwell, a former CIA agent who's now a consultant doing business on Grenada and was there at the time of the President's latest speech.

JOHN STOCKWELL: The first reaction of the Grenadians is that it's funny. At the same time, they also have solid evidence of U.S. Government involvement with Gairy, the former dictator, and his people training in Florida and a neighboring country in the Caribbean to do subversion. So they know that if President Reagan says this twice on national television in one month, that he's obviously preparing the American public for a covert action.

UNGAR: But you've not seen evidence, personally, yourself, of American covert action and sabotage in Grenada.

STOCKWELL: No. No. I've seen the sabotage. I haven't seen, personally, the evidence of the United States. You know, I haven't watched someone carry a bomb out of the embassy.

UNGAR: But you suspect that the United States is involved, on the basis of your own experience in the CIA.

STOCKWELL: Precisely. And of course, you know, this is what makes the covert action possible, is that they are in the business of running covert actions, and they run lots of 'em, hundreds a year. And the public's ability, or journalists, people from the outside, their ability to document these things, of course, it's very hard to do.

UNGAR: Is there any real reason why Grenada and the United States should become enemies?

STOCKWELL: Sandy, it's my thesis that the United States seeks out key places and designates them as enemies. We did it to the MPLA in Angola. We did it to Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam after he had been our ally during World War II. And many other places.

Grenada's three sources of income are spices sold to the West, Western tourism, and the largest U.S. medical school outside of our borders. It's a designated enemy. President Reagan needs another point in the Caribbean, in addition to Nicaragua and El Salvador, to wave at the American people, in the sense of a big lie, to justify the military budget and the aggressions that we've got going down there.

UNGAR: John Stockwell once supervised covert actions in Angola for the CIA. He's now a business consultant, author, and lecturer.

[Clip of song, "God Bless You Grenada"]

UNGAR: With us now is Richard Feinberg, who was a member of the State Department's policy planning staff during the Carter Administration, responsible for Latin American affairs. He's the author of the forthcoming book "The Intemperate Zone: The Third World Challenge to U.S. Foreign Policy."

Mr. Feinberg, why does the United States get so excited and so involved in an adversary relationship with a tiny place like Grenada?

RICHARD FEINBERG: I think the Reagan Administration is concerned about Grenada primarily because of what they see as the close ties to Cuba, and through Cuba to the Soviet Union. There is, in fact, a fair amount of Cuban influence in Grenada now, some security people, some economic ties. Bishop travels regularly to Havana to consult with Fidel Castro.

UNGAR: But when the United States picks a fight like this, doesn't that just increase Cuban influence? I mean increase the attractiveness of Cuba for the Grenadians.

FEINBERG: Exactly. The basic question is, how does one deal with radical nationalist governments in the Third World, or particularly in the Caribbean Basin? What is the best approach? Is the best approach a high-profile denunciation and aggressive tactics, or is the best approach to think of ways to reduce the nationalism, to reduce the anti-Americanism, to gradually wean the countries or governments away from close ties to the Soviets and the Cubans?

And I would argue, in general, that policies of confrontation tend to be counterproductive. We see this in Nicaragua, and I think we're seeing it in Grenada. What confrontation does is that it elicits more nationalism and causes the governments to tend to turn towards Cuba and the Soviet Union for a security umbrella to protect themselves against the United States.

UNGAR: Of course, it does seem to go over well with some of Grenada's neighbors in the Caribbean. We know that there are other heads of government there who are quite supportive of what the President has done. Mrs. Charles in Dominica, for example, has apparently expressed her support. We heard from Ken Gordon, a newspaper editor in Trinidad, that some people in the Caribbean are pleased that the Reagan Administration has warned about this.

FEINBERG: Governments in the region are concerned about the behavior of the Grenadian government, both in terms of the ties to Cuba and in terms of the cancellation of elections. I don't think, though, that most of them approve of the tactics of the Reagan Administration. In fact, they've been pretty vocal in telling Reagan that this policy of very public and hostile verbal confrontation is really counterproductive, for the reasons that we have just been talking about.

UNGAR: What do you think about this point of covert action? The Grenadians themselves, John Stockwell, the former CIA agent, just told us he believes it, that the CIA is involved in an attempt to overthrow the Bishop government in Grenada. Do you think that might be so?

FEINBERG: I don't know. My best guess would be is that the issue was certainly talked about and thought about at high levels in the Reagan Administration. But I sense that they, at least, backed off of any large-scale plan. I would suggest, in large part, because Bishop is firmly in power. And so from the purely practical point of view, I don't think it's possible to overthrow him.

UNGAR: And, of course, there's concern because Eric Gairy lives in the United States, in San Diego, and the United States is accused of sort of encouraging him to try to return or



try to overthrow Bishop.

FEINBERG: Yeah. From the United States's point of view, such -- because we feed this fear by a very high-profile, hostile, verbal aggression against the Grenadians, it enables Bishop to make these accusations and to make them fairly credibly to his own countrymen and in the region. And all that does is strengthen his own power base in the country.

So that that's just one more reason why this sort of very public confrontational approach is counterproductive.

UNGAR: Just one last point, very quickly. Is there reason for concern about subversion that might start in Grenada?

FEINBERG: Subversion to the rest of the region, I think, has to be dealt with primarily by firming up governments and economies in the other countries, going to the source of unrest.

UNGAR: Thanks very much, Richard Feinberg, a senior fellow at the Overseas Development Council.

That's NPR Dateline for today.