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SUBJECT Lack Of Intelligence On Grenada

BOB EDWARDS: A frequently raised question about the U.S. invasion of Grenada is whether U.S. forces had adequate advance information about the situation on the island.

Administration officials say U.S. forces encountered more resistance than expected, especially from Cubans on the island. Once there, a U.S. intelligence failure.

NPR's Ted Clarke explores that question in this report.

TED CLARKE: In responding to charges that there was an intelligence failure, the President's supporters do something rather unusual. Instead of refusing to talk about intelligence sources as is customary, they say quite openly that the U.S. had no agents on the ground in Grenada.

Here's how National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane put it last Thursday.

ROBERT McFARLANE: Well, I think when you don't have any intelligence resources there at all something can't fail that isn't there.

CLARKE: And yesterday, House Minority Leader Robert Michel left the White House meeting prepared, like McFarlane, to tell reporters that no one was gathering intelligence for the U.S. in Grenada.

Michel speaks with some authority as an ex-officio

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member of the House Intelligence Committee.

CONGRESSMAN ROBERT H. MICHEL: As a member who knows so little bit about how we're gathering information these days that a sole reliance on technical equipment is not sufficient. The human on-site intelligence is really required to buttress what you get from your technical means, and that was not done in any way shape or form, frankly, in Grenada, and it was one of those quickly organized operations.

CLARKE: Here's one possible explanation for this unexpected willingness to declare openly that America had no spies in Grenada.

It helps to explain away some major miscalculations in the American invasion effort. It was cited by Congressman Michel as one reason for the accidental U.S. bombing of a civilian hospital last Tuesday. It was cited by Robert McFarlane as one reason the U.S. didn't know that Cubans were on the island in such force.

But, if it's true that no intelligence agents were working for the U.S. in Grenada, and you can never be sure about such things, but if it's true you have to wonder why not. After all, President Reagan has said for some time that developments in Grenada posed a threat to U.S. national security.

In a nationwide address last March, he said....

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

The Caribbean is a very important passageway for our international commerce and military lines of communication. More than half of all American oil imports now pass through the Caribbean.

CLARKE: Given this concern on the part of the President, shouldn't the CIA have made sure that people were put in place in Grenada to provide intelligence?

Ray Cline, who was Deputy Director of the CIA from 1962 to 1966, says it's not that easy, not nearly that easy. Dr. Cline is now a Senior Associate with the Georgetown Center for Strategic and International Studies. He says one problem is the small size of Grenada and the small number of people who could be recruited as spies.

DR. RAY CLINE: How many Grenadians do you suppose there are who could be found outside Grenada who could be persuaded to go back and be an agent for the United States Government? That's what you would have to do in order to infiltrate this society, and I think it's unreasonable to expect that, with the resources we have and the money we spend, which is -- we're outspent compared to what the totalitarian countries spend -- to expect our intelligence agencies to cover all the countries in the world in advance as you have to do to have agents in place when crises occur is just unreasonable.

CLARKE: But, in this case, we had some warning. The President had those photographs that he showed the nation last March.

DR. CLINE: That was months ago.

CLARKE: Are you saying that's not enough time?

DR. CLINE: God, man, surely you understand that to take an agent, to train him, to brief him, to tell him how to behave securely, to give him a good cover story as to why he's in the place he's in in a society that's run by a military dictatorship, it's very likely to take years. That's the way the Soviet Union does it. They spend 10, 12 years putting an agent in place.

We tend not to have very deep agent resources because we find that's hard to do. But if you -- the idea that you could have taken the pictures of an airport and then dispatched a bunch of agents down there to find out what was going on is so naive it just makes me wonder what the media thinks you do in gathering intelligence.

It's not sending a reporter to take a television picture. It's sending someone to pretend to be a part of the military dictatorship in that area and worm his way into the confidence of the highest command and then tell him secrets and then let him get back to the United States safely. That's a tough job, and it can't be done overnight.

CLARKE: Other intelligence experts agreed with Dr. Cline that it would be tough to cultivate sources in Grenada quickly. At least one said it was not outside the realm of possibility. And, of course, it's always possible that spies could be recruited in ways other than the one Dr. Cline described, especially if reports of widespread dissatisfaction with the Grenadian military council are true.

This is Ted Clarke, in Washington.