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Invasion Caps 4 Years of Tension Between Ministate and the U.S.

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The invasion yesterday of Grenada caps a four-year history of tense relations between the world's foremost superpower and a mountainous eastern Caribbean island ministate so tiny that one almost needs a magnifying glass to find it on most maps.

Underlying the Reagan administration's publicly stated reasons for the invasion is long preoccupation with what it regarded as Grenada's role as a Cuban and Soviet surrogate working to spread subversion through the Caribbean region.

That has been a matter of concern through the administrations of two U.S. presidents. On two occasions—under President Carter in 1979 and then under President Reagan in 1981—the United States considered launching covert intelligence operations against Grenada. This simmering anxiety finally came to a head last week, when Prime Minister Maurice Bishop and several of his key aides were executed by an insurgent military group.

The Reagan administration, in particular, has been preoccupied with Grenada. In two major policy speeches last March, the president singled it out as a threat to U.S. national security and charged that a controversial airfield being built on the island with Cuban help "can only be seen as [Soviet and Cuban] power projection into the region . . ."

The roots of this concern go back to March 13, 1979, when Bishop and a group of young militants calling themselves the "New Jewel Movement" overthrew a notoriously corrupt government and installed a Cuban-allied leftist regime in the former British dependency that has a population of 110,000 and a land area twice the size of the District of Columbia.

From the outset, most U.S. policy makers regarded Bishop as an un-abashed disciple of Cuban President Fidel Castro. Bishop's coup, coming at a time that the United States was beginning to grapple in earnest with leftist insurgencies on the other side of the Caribbean basin in Nicaragua and El Salvador, touched off fears in Washington that an island-hopping ripple of turmoil emanating from Grenada would create yet another arena of friction and competition between the United States and Cuba.

A minority of U.S. officials and others sympathetic to Grenada's internal economic and social problems always has contended that the suspicion of Bishop was an overreaction and that his radical, anti-American rhetoric never was matched by actions that could be regarded as a serious threat to U.S. interests.

There even were signs that after an unofficial visit here last June, Bishop was trying to improve his relations with the United States. In fact, while no one knows what really caused last week's bloody events in Grenada, there has been considerable speculation that Bishop's death resulted from a power struggle touched off by militant members of his movement fearful that he was becoming too moderate.

This revisionist view of Bishop as a moderate within the context of Grenada's internal politics appears to have provided part of the justification for the United States and six Caribbean countries to band together in the invasion against what Reagan yesterday called a "brutal group of leftist thugs."

The controversy over Grenada always has been linked to concern about the potential volatility of the chain of islands stretching 2,000 miles through the Caribbean Sea between the Bahama islands and Trinidad.

The smaller islands, in particular, chronically have been unable to support their populations. During the late 1970s, as Britain began cutting back its financial aid to its former dependencies, these ministates began to experience leftist agitation, labor strife and other forms of confrontation with government.

As a result, U.S. officials have been concerned for some time that the pattern of upheaval tormenting Central America could be repeated in the islands.

Grenada became the symbol of that fear when the new Bishop government in its first week sought U.S. aid, was warned by a U.S. envoy against possible relations with Cuba, then immediately turned to Havana for arms, military advisers and other aid.

At the time, a U.S. envoy was dispatched to deliver a protest. The Grenadans angrily rejected the American "interference," and relations began under an instant chill that was to persist until the present.

The United States conducts its relations with Grenada through the U.S. ambassador in Barbados, who also is accredited to several of the smaller islands. But the Carter administration permitted its ambassador, Sally A. Shelton, to visit the island only twice; when the Reagan administration replaced her with Milan D. Bish, it deliberately refrained from seeking to have him accredited to Grenada.

The Carter administration, after deciding not to try covert action, adopted a policy of arms-length hostility. Its most specific action was to refuse help for Bishop's ambitious plans to build a new airport capable of handling large jets.

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The United States feared that the airport could serve as a refueling and staging point for transport ferrying Cuban troops to and from Africa and arms destined for leftist guerrillas in Central America.

However, Bishop could point to a series of studies by international lending institutions arguing that the airport was essential to development of Grenada's trade and tourism. He also was able to note that, in addition to Cuba, other countries, including the members of the European Economic Community, were aiding construction of the airport over U.S. objections.

When the Reagan administration came into office, the level of U.S. hostility increased markedly. It, too, considered a covert operation but was dissuaded by objections from the Senate Intelligence Committee and fears of a hostile reaction among Caribbean countries friendly to the United States.

The administration has resorted to other measures, such as trying to bar Grenada from using U.S. funds donated to the Caribbean Development Bank and excluding Grenada from participation in its Caribbean Basin Initiative.

Reagan also expressed his alarm over Grenada's course in his two speeches earlier this year. On March 10, he ridiculed the argument of a "so-called expert that we shouldn't worry about Castro's control over the island of Grenada—their only important product is nutmeg."

He added, "It isn't nutmeg that's at stake in the Caribbean and Central America. It is the United States' national security."

Then, in his so-called "Star Wars" speech March 23, the president showed an aerial photograph of Grenada's airfield construction and said: "The Soviet-Cuban militarization of Grenada can only be seen as power projection into the region

The first hints of a possible change came with Bishop's visit in June. He repeated his past warnings that the United States intended to invade Grenada, and he ridiculed the idea that the United States had to send a "spy plane" to obtain photos of the airport, noting that it regularly is photographed by thousands of American tourists.

In the main though, he listened carefully to the concerns of American sympathizers about the repressive tactics of his government and promised improvements, including holding elections. He also made clear repeatedly that he wanted a dialogue with Washington.

After much hedging, an obviously reluctant administration finally gave him a 40-minute session with William P. Clark, then Reagan's national security affairs adviser. According to U.S. sources, Clark rejected Bishop's proposal for a joint U.S.-Grenada commission, but held out the possibility of greater American flexibility if the tone of Bishop's rhetoric became friendlier.

Bishop is described by American friends as having returned home determined to respond in a way that would test the administration's sincerity. And, in the months since, U.S. officials acknowledge that the anti-American quotient in his government's rhetoric had softened noticeably.

But whether it actually would have meant improved relations is a question made moot by events that began last week with his death and culminated with the invasion.