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**‘Operation Urgent Fury’: Reassessing the
British Government’s Understanding of and
Reaction to the 1983 US Invasion of Grenada**

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**History Undergraduate Dissertation
2014**

**‘Operation Urgent Fury’:
Reassessing the British Government’s Understanding of
and Reaction to the 1983 US Invasion of Grenada**

Word Count: 9882



The countries that invaded Grenada¹

¹ Found at [<http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/grenada/caribbean-map.jpg>] (23/04/2014)

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Introduction

On the 25th October, 1983, the United States (US) invaded the Commonwealth Caribbean country of Grenada; a small island state with a population of just 110,000 people. Six days earlier, its Prime Minister, Maurice Bishop, had been murdered by members of the military after an internal dispute, led by a hard left group of ministers, had placed Bishop under house arrest. On Friday 21st, the US received a request from the Organisation of the Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) to intervene militarily to restore stability in Grenada. After consideration, Washington decided to respond positively. Following several days of fighting, US forces took control of the island, defeating a militia of around 2000 persons and a separate number of Cuban construction workers.² While President Reagan declared the mission, codenamed ‘Urgent Fury,’ a victory over communism, the invasion was condemned worldwide as interference in another country’s affairs, requiring the US to veto a United Nation’s (UN) Security Council resolution condemning their action.³ The British government, seemingly unaware of what was happening until hours before the invasion began, however, refused to condemn the US action despite disagreeing with it and only being consulted by them at the last minute.

While matters relating to US involvement have been extensively addressed, in contrast there has been little attempt to explain the specific reasons why the British government responded as it did to the invasion. This is despite it providing an unusual insight into the issues that guided Britain’s foreign policy priorities in the late Cold War. Instead, historical analysis to date attempts to understand and explain the invasion through alternate motifs, or seeks to fit it into a broader critique of US foreign policy. Particularly prevalent in this former body of literature are examinations of the legal foundations on which the invitation to invade was based, largely agreeing that its construct was ‘legally suspect.’⁴ Other studies explore the

² A. Payne, P. Sutton and T. Thorndike, *Grenada: Revolution and Invasion* (London, 1984), p.iii, p.vii, p.161

³ M. Adkin, *Urgent Fury: The Battle for Grenada* (London, 1989), p.319

⁴ C. Joyner, ‘Reflections on the Lawfulness of Invasion’, *American Journal of International Law*, 78, 1 (1984), p.143. Further examples discussing legality are: W. Gilmore, *The Grenada Intervention: Analysis and Documentation* (New York, 1984); J. Quigley, ‘The United States Invasion of Grenada: Stranger than Fiction’, *Miami Inter-American Law Review*, 18, 2 (1986-7), pp.271-352; G. Sandford and R. Vigilante, *Grenada: The Untold Story* (London, 1984)

implications for future US overseas military undertakings and the impact of the exclusion of the media from the island during and after the operation.⁵

The US justifications and motives behind the invasion have also been investigated in great depth. While President Reagan identified the need to protect American students studying in Grenada and to restore law and order, some authors have argued that Washington was guided by broader foreign policy concerns. Eldon Kenworthy has suggested the invasion was to demonstrate that the US still maintained a strong military capability following recent failures in Iran and Vietnam.⁶ Others have emphasised the administration's fear of another hostage crisis like that seen three years earlier in Iran.⁷ More broadly, the intervention has been understood as an attempt by the US to reassert its international dominance over perceived Soviet expansionism in an area historically seen as the US' backyard.⁸ Such conclusions fit into wider interpretations that contextualise the invasion within general US foreign policy at the time. These suggest that alongside other announcements in 1983, such as the Strategic Defence Initiative and the deployment of cruise missiles in Europe, the invasion was an example of the United States moving to assert global dominance in the Cold War after a period of accepted bipolarity.⁹

Of the literature that does address British interests in the invasion, there are only two specific studies. The first, written by Anthony Payne a year after the invasion, attempts to illustrate what the government knew of the intervention, its public response and the lessons learnt.¹⁰ However, it suffers from its propinquity to events and is only able to speculate, due to the

⁵ See J. Motley, 'Grenada: Low-Intensity Conflict and the Use of US Military Power', *World Affairs*, 146, 3 (1983-4), pp.221-238; H. Brands, Jr., 'Decisions on American Armed Intervention: Lebanon, Dominican Republic, and Grenada', *Political Science Quarterly*, 102, 4 (1987-1988), pp. 607-624; R. Pincus, 'Press Access to Military Operations: Grenada and the Need for a New Analytical Framework', *Pennsylvania Law Review*, 135, 3 (1987), pp. 813-850; H. Tumber, 'Journalism and the Invasion of Grenada Thirty Years On: A Retrospective', *The Round Table*, 103, 1 (2014), pp.55-64

⁶ E. Kenworthy, 'Grenada as Theatre', *World Policy Journal*, 1, 3 (1984), pp.635-651

⁷ Payne et al, p.155; K. Kurze, 'The Days Before the US Intervention: An American Diplomat's Diary', *The Round Table*, 102, 2 (2013), pp. 185-186; Adkin, p.108-9.

⁸ G. Connell-Smith, 'The Grenada Invasion in Historical Perspective: From Monroe to Reagan', *Third World Quarterly*, 6, 2 (April, 1984), pp.432-445; R. Pastor, 'U.S Policy Towards the Caribbean: Continuity and Change', in P. Dunn and B. Watson (eds.), *American Intervention in Grenada: The Implications of Operation "Urgent Fury"* (Boulder, 1985), pp.10-23; D. Thomas, 'The United States Factor in British Relations with Latin America', in V. Bulmer-Thomas (ed.), *Britain and Latin America: A Changing Relationship* (Cambridge 1989), p.78.

⁹ See: H. J. Wiarda, *American Foreign Policy towards Latin America in the 80s and 90s: Issues and Controversies from Reagan to Bush* (New York, 1992); P. Sharp, *Thatcher's Diplomacy: The Revival of British Foreign Policy* (Basingstoke, 1997), p.130

¹⁰ A. Payne, 'The Grenada Crisis in British Politics', *The Round Table*, 73, 292 (1984)

lack of public information, on the considerations that guided the government's response and the consequences of the invasion. Payne's narrative of what Britain knew about the invasion is also based solely on what the government publically declared at the time.

The second study, written in 2001 by Gary Williams, provides a more detailed account of what Britain knew and offers an explanation of Britain's reaction. In the answer it provides it reflects the wider consensus that has emerged in brief accounts of the invasion in more expansive reviews of 20th Century British foreign policy. Britain's concerns, G. Williams argues, were founded upon a number of issues, including the legality of the operation, the potential to endanger British citizens and the Governor-General (the Queen's representative on the island), allowing the invasion of a Commonwealth country, and the UK being kept in the dark by its most significant ally.¹¹ In reaching these conclusions he expands on various brief assessments previously highlighted within the broader body of literature, and condenses them into a single argument that continues to reflect the prevailing explanations for Britain's negative reaction.¹²

G. Williams does, however, challenge 'the conventional wisdom that Britain was "in the dark" about what was happening.'¹³ By highlighting how British diplomatic missions in the Caribbean believed an invasion was imminent, he suggests that Britain 'had all the pieces of the puzzle' but that the rapid pace of events 'meant that London could not pull all the pieces together in time.'¹⁴ However, his research suffers from a lack of access to now available Government files and is unable to provide detail of quite what Britain did know. G. Williams also discusses what the invasion meant for the 'special relationship,' concluding that it was simply 'a blip' in otherwise good relations.¹⁵ In a similar fashion, wider reviews of British foreign policy have also concluded that the invasion meant little for Anglo-American relations; such was the strength of the relationship between the countries and their leaders

¹¹ G. Williams, "A Matter of Regret:" Britain, the 1983 Grenada Crisis, and the Special Relationship', *Twentieth Century British History*, 12, 2 (2001), pp.222-4

¹² For broader foreign policy assessments of why the British government reacted so to the invasion, see: Thomas, pp.78-80; Sharp, p.118; D. Sanders, *Losing an Empire, Finding a Role: British Foreign Policy Since 1945* (London, 1990), p.181

¹³ Williams, p.208

¹⁴ Williams, p.228

¹⁵ Williams, p.229

during the 1980s.¹⁶ A conference on the invasion in October 2013 came to a similar conclusion.¹⁷

Where the conference did differ from the traditional narrative was in placing greater emphasis on Britain's concerns about the impact of the unilateral nature of the US decision on public opinion; particularly with regard to the imminent arrival of US controlled cruise missiles in the UK. The conference recognised that in historiography this had largely only been addressed as an afterthought, and sought to place greater emphasis on it.¹⁸ Despite this, the conference failed to expand on this issue or the invasion's relationship to other broader concerns.

Understanding of the British response to the invasion of Grenada has therefore, to date, been limited, and lacking in analysis of government documents due to their restricted availability. In August 2013, however, the UK National Archives released over 600 pages of material from the Prime Minister's Office files on the invasion.¹⁹ These allow for a broad reassessment of both the British government's understanding of events and what dictated their approach. As a consequence, it is now possible to provide a detailed revision of Britain's understanding on three counts; what the British government knew about invasion, why they opposed it, and what guided their public response. In answering such questions, this study will seek to contribute to a body of literature that has largely failed to deconstruct the invasion from a British perspective and thereby improve understanding of the UK's approach to transatlantic relations at the end of a period of US-Soviet détente.

The primary source materials for this study are extensive, not only due to the recent publication of relevant National Archive files, but also because of the release of similar records by the Margaret Thatcher Foundation. It therefore benefits, where previous historiographical examinations have not, from direct analysis of the governmental papers that recorded the process by which Britain formulated its response. Additionally, I have also been

¹⁶ See S. Howe, 'Decolonisation and Imperial Aftershocks: the Thatcher Years', in B. Jackson and R. Saunders (Eds.), *Making Thatcher's Britain* (Cambridge, 2012), p.246; Sanders, p.182; J. Baylis, *Anglo-American Defence Relations 1939-84: The Special Relationship* (London, 1984), p.194; R. Self, *British and Defence Policy since 1945: Challenges and Dilemmas in a Changing World* (London, 2010), p.90.

¹⁷ Own notes on 'The USA in the Caribbean: Thirty Years After American Fury', Senate House Conference (London, 24/10/2013)

¹⁸ Own notes. For historiographical examples see: Williams, p.223-4; Sharp, p.119; Baylis, p.192

¹⁹ Kew, The National Archives (TNA): PREM/19/1048 & PREM/19/1049

given access to the private archive of David Jessop, the then Director of the West India Committee.²⁰ Such newly available memoranda, according to John Tosh, 'are essential sources for historians of politics' for they reveal 'much that is scarcely hinted at in the official record.'²¹ However, documents alone do not explain the reasoning and action of individuals. As Tosh notes, such records 'are more concerned with decisions and their implementation than with the motives of the people who made them.'²² Thus as Kristina Readman stresses, while documents remain 'the crucial primary source' for high political history, they cannot be understood without recognising 'the importance of direct agency by individuals.'²³

It is for this reason that oral histories by the individuals directly involved in the British government's response to the invasion are used.²⁴ As Donald Ritchie notes, although 'oral history can be unconvincing,' it can also 'help to interpret and define written records and make sense out of the most obscure decisions and events.'²⁵ Thus while the oral evidence of those involved in the crisis may be self-serving, selective and agenda driven, it can when cross referenced with available documents, provide a clearer assessment of what guided the government's perception before, during and after the invasion.

Media reports and public speeches are also employed to supplement the archival and oral evidence, particularly to demonstrate how what was said publically and reported differed from that recorded internally by the government. Newspapers have therefore not been read for their facts, but rather to establish contemporary societal understanding of the invasion, and how those outside the government interpreted Britain's response. Select Committee reports are used in the same manner. Memoirs are also reassessed according to what the government documents reveal and revisionism highlighted. The subjectivity of such sources,

²⁰ The West India Committee was an organisation representing UK and Caribbean commercial interests in Britain, and contributed to policy formulation towards the region during this period. The archive largely consists of records of conversations Jessop had with government officials.

²¹ J. Tosh, *The Pursuit of History* (Harlow, 1984), p.74

²² Tosh, p.74

²³ K. Readman, 'Memoranda', in M. Dobson and B. Ziemann (eds.), *Reading Primary Sources* (New York, 2009), p.128

²⁴ Thanks to Dr. Kandiah of Kings College London, Dr. Williams of the University of Essex, and the Institute of Contemporary British History, for their permission to use the *Grenada Witness Seminar Transcripts (GWST)* (Unpublished, 2009). List of participants can be found at:

[<http://www.lse.ac.uk/IDEAS/programmes/africaProgramme/pdfs/ukGrenadaProgramme.pdf>] (14/04/2014).

Thanks also to Mark Williams for his interview.

²⁵ D. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History* (Oxford, 2003), p.118

rather than the information they provide, is therefore a focus of interest in this study, unlike in previous assessments of this topic.²⁶

The structure of this dissertation is formulated around answering the three key research questions outlined above. The first section seeks to establish what the British government knew of the invasion. Correspondence between regional diplomatic missions, the British Embassy in Washington, and London are assessed and the reasons for the government's apparent ignorance revised in accordance to what they reveal. The second chapter focusses on why Britain was so disturbed by the invasion. Based on the new material available, previous interpretations are reconsidered and Britain's reaction assessed thematically in accordance with the concerns expressed. From this it becomes apparent that for Britain the major issues had little to do with the Commonwealth or international law, but were broader and geopolitical in nature; relating to concerns about US policy, the Cold War and Caribbean Basin withdrawal. The third section explains how these wider foreign policy interests dictated the British government's initial public response and why this changed over the course of the week after the invasion. This study ultimately concludes by recognising that the government at all times was trying to protect what they believed were in Britain's best interests, and despite being caught unaware, its reaction to the invasion was a demonstration of careful and ultimately successful crisis management.

²⁶ Both Payne and Williams largely use such sources as the foundation of their evidence for lack of archival material.

Chapter One

The Grenada invasion appeared to catch the British government by surprise. At 1930GMT on Monday, 24th October, President Reagan notified the UK that the US was considering intervening. Less than four hours later, before the British had even sent a reply, the President told London a joint force were going to 'establish themselves' in Grenada the next day.²⁷ Following that, according to Lord Bramall, the Chief of the Defence Staff, 'all hell broke loose.'²⁸ Margaret Thatcher sent a message back warning against the invasion, then followed this with a direct telephone call. Reagan would later write in his autobiography that on the phone she was 'very angry' and asked him to call off the operation 'in the strongest possible language.'²⁹ *The Economist* alleged Thatcher went as far as saying that US-Anglo relations could never be the same again.³⁰

It is little wonder she was so furious. The British government appeared not to have expected an invasion. Geoffrey Howe, the Foreign Secretary, had told the House of Commons earlier that day that the British government was 'in the closest possible touch' with the US administration and Caribbean governments on Grenada, and as a result knew of no intentions for an American led intervention.³¹ It would later transpire that the Americans had been planning the operation with Caribbean governments for several days.³²

Historical assessment has tried to explain Britain's belief that there would be no invasion as a result of an apparent lack of knowledge.³³ This is founded on a view that both the US administration failed to keep Britain informed of its intentions and that British diplomatic posts provided insufficient information. Hugh O'Shaughnessy has suggested that Britain was 'hoodwinked' by the Americans.³⁴ Contemporary newspaper reports declared that 'the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) [had] got it wrong on Grenada.'³⁵ Such conclusions are largely speculative. They are based on public information and have not

²⁷ TNA: PREM/19/1048, J. Coles, 'Grenada' (25/10/1983)

²⁸ E. Bramall, *GWST*, p.18

²⁹ R. Reagan, *An American Life* (New York, 1990), p.454

³⁰ 'Britain's Grenada Shutout', *The Economist* (10/03/1984)

³¹ G. Howe, 'Grenada', HC Debate, *Hansard*, (24/10/1983)

³² Adkin, p.117

³³ See for example: Payne, p.406; Sanders, p.181

³⁴ H. O'Shaughnessy, *Grenada: Revolution, Invasion and Aftermath* (London, 1984), p.171

³⁵ Cambridge, Margaret Thatcher Foundation Manuscripts (TMSS): 132455, 'Prime Minister's Press Digest', (27/10/1983)

benefitted from sight of what the British government did receive. For it is clear from released British government files, that while the Americans did not consult or offer information to the British in the build up to the invasion, the UK was in fact receiving enough evidence from its Caribbean missions to suggest an American led invasion was imminent.

An assessment of the correspondence between London and its Washington embassy clearly shows that the US made little attempt to keep Britain informed. On Saturday 22nd, the day after it had been agreed the OECS would ask both Britain and the United States for their assistance in Grenada, the Washington embassy was informed by the Director of the State Department's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs that the US was 'proceeding very cautiously' and would 'consult Britain immediately' if they were to make any decisions.³⁶ They were told the same again the following day.³⁷ On why the Americans had moved an aircraft carrier off the coast of Grenada, the British were informed it was a precautionary move so they could evacuate US citizens if needed.³⁸ Finally, on Monday 24th, the day before the invasion, not only did the Under-Secretary of State for Political Affairs, Lawrence Eagleburger, tell the Washington embassy again that no decision had been made, but the Foreign Secretary reported to a meeting of the Cabinet Defence Committee that he had been in contact with the American Secretary of State, George Shultz, who assured him that they were 'not going to do anything.'³⁹ The first information about the US considering an invasion was therefore Reagan's telegram. Thus, as the Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC) correctly concluded: 'it was not the intention of the US government that the UK should be actively involved in the military intervention in Grenada, and that the timing, nature and extent of the information provided to the UK government were consistent with that position.'⁴⁰

Yet, from the moment the OECS began formulating its request for foreign intervention, the British government was informed by posts in the Caribbean that the US would most likely be involved. Following contact between Tom Adams, the Barbados Prime Minister, and British officials on the morning of Friday 21st, local time, reports were sent to London saying that the

³⁶ TNA: PREM/19/1048, 'Washington to FCO', no.3084 (22/10/1983)

³⁷ TNA: PREM/19/1048, 'Washington to FCO', no.3087 (23/10/1983)

³⁸ TNA: PREM/19/1048, no.3084

³⁹ O'Shaughnessy, p.171; Bramall, *GWST*, p.18

⁴⁰ 'Grenada', *Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC)* (15/03/1984)

OECS' desire for a multi-national intervention would necessarily mean US involvement.⁴¹ When the British High Commissioner in Barbados, Giles Bullard, at 1645GMT on Saturday 22nd then gave Britain official confirmation of the OECS' request, he also reported that that they already 'saw [the invasion as] predominantly American' and that British involvement need only be 'in token-form.'⁴² This alone should have suggested to London US participation was inevitable; for it was understood that military action would only occur if either Britain or the US agreed to it, as Caribbean nations did not have the military capability to undertake action without help.⁴³

Howe would later tell Parliament on Wednesday 26th that Caricom's (the Caribbean regional organisation) decision on Sunday 23rd to choose economic and political sanctions over military action, had suggested to the British government that no intervention would occur. Caricom's decision, they thought, would overrule the OECS' wishes.⁴⁴ Yet it is clear that on the same day as this verdict was reached, Britain was receiving information that a military build-up had begun in Barbados. The British embassy in Kingston reported that Jamaican troops were being flown that night to Barbados to 'serve as a nucleus for more.'⁴⁵ In Barbados, Bullard said that Adams had 'confirmed that US helicopters had been brought in last night,' and that 'there was already a US contribution to local military assessments.'⁴⁶ Even at the Caricom meeting, despite its conclusion, it was privately understood that the US had agreed to intervene in Grenada and British officials were asked what they had heard about the 'American invasion.'⁴⁷ At the same time, the media was widely reporting in the UK that the US was about to invade Grenada.⁴⁸ It is therefore clear that Caricom's position meant little to anyone except those in London.

Even greater evidence that an invasion was imminent came on Monday 24th. G. Williams reports that the Washington Embassy, prior to Howe declaring no knowledge of US plans to invade, sent a message to the FCO warning the British government to 'watch this space.'⁴⁹

⁴¹ Mark Williams interview (12/04/2014).

⁴² TMSS: 131322, 'Bridgetown to FCO', No.329 (22/10/1983)

⁴³ O'Shaughnessy, p.171

⁴⁴ G. Howe 'Grenada Emergency Debate', *Hansard* (26/10/1983)

⁴⁵ TNA: PREM/19/1048, 'Kingston to FCO', No.296 (23/10/1983)

⁴⁶ TNA: PREM/19/1048, 'Bridgetown to FCO', no.337 (23/10/1983)

⁴⁷ Williams, p. 217-8; TNA: PREM/19/1048, 'Port of Spain to FCO', no.177 (24/10/1983)

⁴⁸ See for example: 'US Marines Ready to Storm Ashore in Grenada', *Sunday Express* (23/10/1983)

⁴⁹ Williams, p.218

Bullard also reported that he had been told 'US military dispositions in the Eastern Caribbean are far advanced' and were only waiting on a political decision.⁵⁰ The most significant telegram however, was sent that evening at 2120GMT from the High Commission to both the FCO and the Ministry of Defence, reporting a joint briefing by Colonel Lewis (Barbados Defence Force) and Major General Crist (US Marine Corps) that an operation would commence from first light the next day.⁵¹ This message was sent two hours before that from Reagan first detailed the American's decision to invade. Coincidentally, at almost the same time as Reagan's message arrived, Bullard reported 'all the evidence here suggests that the operation is going ahead without us and that it could be mounted as early as first light tomorrow.'⁵²

John Edwards, the head of the FCO's West Indian and Atlantic Department at the time, recently claimed that information from the Caribbean of the possibility of American intervention reached the UK 'not quite in time' to warn the British government.⁵³ From the evidence presented above, it is clear this was not the case, or it was mishandled. To suggest that British Ministerial ignorance resulted from the absence of information or a lack of diplomatic reporting is to ignore the fact that London heard continuously from the Caribbean that a US led invasion was being planned. As G. Williams has argued, 'there were enough signs to suggest something big was going on.'⁵⁴

It is also apparent from the evidence that well placed British diplomats in the region thought an invasion imminent. David Montgomery, the Deputy High Commissioner in Barbados at the time, has recently confirmed this, declaring that for 'any casual observer...it was clear that the Americans were preparing for an armed intervention...Barbados airport became the scene of a second D-day.'⁵⁵ Yet only once, late on Monday 24th, did the British government express concern to the Washington Embassy that an invasion might occur.⁵⁶

The British government's shock when first hearing of the invasion should therefore be best understood, as the FAC suggested, as the UK 'reacting passively to events unfolding in the

⁵⁰ TNA: PREM/19/1048, 'Bridgetown to FCO', no.347 (24/10/1983)

⁵¹ TNA: PREM/19/1048, 'Bridgetown to FCO/MOD', no.212 (24/10/1983)

⁵² TNA: PREM/19/1048, 'Bridgetown to FCO', no.349 (24/10/1983)

⁵³ J. Edwards, *GWST*, p.17

⁵⁴ Williams, p.217

⁵⁵ D. Montgomery, *GWST*, p.20

⁵⁶ TNA: PREM/19/1048, 'FCO to Washington', no.1759 (24/10/1983)

Caribbean’ and ‘basing its reaction to those events entirely on the advice received from Washington.’⁵⁷ The report highlights how at no point during the weekend, Britain took any initiative of its own to ascertain the full intentions of Caribbean political leaders, or dissuade them from advancing their plans for military action.⁵⁸ Although denied, it is clear from the correspondence available that beyond seeking to emphasize to Caribbean leaders that they had not explored all possible solutions, the UK’s regional diplomatic missions were not instructed to report on the growing militarisation.⁵⁹ Equally no government ministers attempted to speak directly with Caribbean leaders, and it is clear the information and advice provided to London was ignored.

The best example of this passivity was the lack of any response to Barbados’ request for UK involvement in an intervention. Not only was Britain forewarned of this on the Friday morning, but was also asked repeatedly for a response.⁶⁰ None, however, was given as there was no formal written invitation. This was despite Bullard making clear that Prime Minister Adams’ request, although oral, was very much formal and genuine, and there was evidence that military preparations were building.⁶¹ London instead assumed the OECS would favour a resolution that didn’t involve military action.⁶² Yet Adams told Bullard as early as Saturday 22nd ‘that the minds of all concerned were made up and that it was beyond belief that anything could alter this.’⁶³ It is clear, as Montgomery has said, the government ‘simply failed to understand the strength of feeling of the people who actually matter: the OECS,’ for it was their future security that was possibly at risk.⁶⁴ As a result of failing to answer the request, any possibility of dialogue with Britain was ‘overtaken by the operation itself’ and diplomats found themselves frozen out of conversations about the invasion.⁶⁵

There was also no sense of urgency in dealing with the crisis in London. Little happened over the weekend. It wasn’t until the morning of Monday 24th, almost four days after the OECS’ request for military intervention had been reported, that any sort of high level meeting was

⁵⁷ ‘Grenada’, *FAC*, p.xviii

⁵⁸ ‘Grenada’, *FAC*, p.xviii

⁵⁹ TNA: PREM/19/1048, ‘FCO to Bridgetown’, no.295 (22/10/1983)

⁶⁰ TNA: PREM/19/1048, ‘Bridgetown to FCO’, no.345 (23/10/1983)

⁶¹ TNA: PREM/19/1048, No.329

⁶² TNA: PREM/19/1048, No.295

⁶³ Mark Williams Interview – quoting from private source

⁶⁴ Montgomery, *GWST*, p.21

⁶⁵ Williams interview

held between ministers and senior civil servants on the issue. The conclusion of this Cabinet and Defence Committee meeting, that they agreed with Caricom in pushing for negotiations with Grenada and sanctions, was so lacking in any understanding about the situation on the ground that Mark Williams, First Secretary in the High Commission in Barbados, commented that 'it seemed to us in Barbados that officials and ministers in London were living on a different planet.'⁶⁶ Further, London displayed no urgency in responding when the Americans finally did consult. Upon receiving Reagan's first message, a response was not sent immediately but merely drafted, following which the Prime Minister went to dinner. When Reagan's second letter arrived just before midnight, informing Mrs Thatcher of his decision to invade, only then was a reply to the first sent and emergency meetings held.⁶⁷

Such passivity, despite what was being reported, resulted from an overriding belief in the word of high level US interlocutors. For example, when Lord Bramall raised with Thatcher and Howe, the day before the invasion, his belief that an intervention was imminent, he received an incredulous response from the former: 'What on earth would make them do a stupid thing like that?' and an assurance from the latter that his American counterpart had said otherwise.⁶⁸ Later, Howe would tell Kenneth Dam, the US Deputy Secretary of State, that the British government's understanding that there would be no invasion had formed as a result of trusting American information.⁶⁹ Edwards would also inform Jessop that information from the US was believed over that provided from British officials in the Caribbean.⁷⁰ That the government tried to excuse their lack of knowledge by saying their regular contacts in the US administration 'were not themselves in possession of the information,' further indicates they believed primarily those they spoke to in the US rather than factual reporting from elsewhere.⁷¹

It is therefore clear that Britain's shocked reaction to the invasion was not because it lacked information about a potential military action. While the dialogue in Washington was limited, at worst misleading, arguably London was receiving enough information from the region to suggest a US led invasion was imminent. The government's anger was because it had

⁶⁶ Williams interview

⁶⁷ TNA: PREM/19/1048, J. Coles, 'Grenada' (25/10/1983); M. Thatcher, *Downing Street Years* (London, 1993), p.331

⁶⁸ Bramall, *GWST*, p.18

⁶⁹ TMSS: 128198, 'Record of Kenneth Dam's visit to Chequers' (07/11/1983)

⁷⁰ Beaminster, David Jessop Manuscripts (JMSS): 'Conversation with John Edwards' (11/1983)

⁷¹ 'Grenada,' *FAC*, p.10

believed its high-level American interlocutors, central to the UK-US strategic dialogue, over what was perceived to be lower level information from the Caribbean. It is therefore hard not to agree with the Barbados Prime Minister, when he later said that the British government ‘only have themselves to blame if they did not grasp what was going on.’⁷²

⁷² ‘Tom Adams Speech’(15/11/1983), quoted in ‘Grenada,’ *FAC*, p.lx

Chapter Two

The British government did not support the invasion. This was made very clear in Thatcher's protests to Reagan. However, it was not founded, as has been suggested, upon concerns relating to the Commonwealth, nor about whether such an action constituted a break in international law. While the UK government was worried about the impact the invasion might have on the safety of British citizens and the Governor-General, its negative reaction stemmed from other concerns; about how the absence of consultation, and invasion itself, might damage broader British interests relating to European defence, its policy of withdrawal from the Caribbean, and possibly indicate a change in its relationship with the US.

In his autobiography, Geoffrey Howe declared that the FAC report 'rightly observed' that uppermost in Britain's considerations was the reaction of Commonwealth States.⁷³ The same argument has also been made in secondary literature.⁷⁴ This is revisionist, for not one of the governmental documents released show that Britain was at all concerned about how the Commonwealth would react. If anything, communication between the Commonwealth Secretariat and the British government about Grenada implied Britain cared little for the Commonwealth's opinion. For example, in April 1983, in reply to a message from the Grenadian government expressing fear about an inevitable US intervention, forwarded to all Commonwealth States by the Commonwealth Secretary General, Thatcher responded indignantly saying she was 'surprise[d] that the Commonwealth Secretary-General should have circulated such a message and believe[d] that we [the British Government] should ask why he considered it necessary to do so.'⁷⁵ More generally, the government did not share a good relationship with the Commonwealth.⁷⁶ As Britain's later opposition to economic sanctions against South Africa demonstrated, Thatcher's government simply did not care much for the Commonwealth or what they thought.⁷⁷

It has also been suggested that Britain opposed the invasion because it believed it broke international law. G. Williams quotes a passage from Thatcher's autobiography as proof of

⁷³ G. Howe, *Conflict of Loyalty* (London, 1994), p.335

⁷⁴ See: Thomas, p.78

⁷⁵ TNA: PREM/19/1048, 'Coles to Holmes', (27/04/1983)

⁷⁶ See D. Ingram, 'Thatcher and Ramphal: A Long and Turbulent Relationship,' *The Round Table*, 97, 398 (2008)

⁷⁷ S. Howe, p.244

how she was a 'stickler' for international law: 'my own instinct was...always to found military action on the right of self-defence, which ultimately no outside body has the authority to question.'⁷⁸ Yet the same quote might also be taken to mean that if the Americans thought their action justified, it should not be for Britain to judge otherwise. Indeed, briefing papers for Howe and British representatives at the UN, when it became apparent the US was partly justifying its action on the basis of rescuing its citizens in Grenada, made clear this was the line the UK government should take.⁷⁹ Howe would also privately say as much to Shultz, declaring that 'the judgement [to invade] depends on the facts, and the country most immediately concerned [the United States] might have the best evidence.'⁸⁰ For while the British government did not believe its citizens dispersed around Grenada to be in imminent danger as a result of the coup against the Grenadian Prime Minister, it did recognise that US students concentrated at the medical school 'were readily identifiable and were therefore at risk.'⁸¹

Historiography can agree, however, that the British government did believe an invasion might endanger the lives of the Governor-General and British citizens. Concerned that the Grenadian regime may either hold them hostage or kill them, this was expressed as early as Friday 21st in the Caribbean by British officials, and raised several times with US administration.⁸² Thatcher would also raise such concerns on Monday 24th in reply to Reagan's messages and on the phone with him.⁸³ Such was the concern about the Governor-General's safety, that throughout the crisis, Buckingham Palace was forwarded all messages relating to Grenada.⁸⁴ When the invasion then occurred, the British government asked the Washington embassy to 'urgently' request 'at the highest level' that the US protect all British lives there, and continued to raise the importance of the Governor-General and his safety.⁸⁵ It is therefore clear that those issues that directly and immediately touched British interests and responsibilities in Grenada were of concern.

⁷⁸ Williams, p.222

⁷⁹ TNA: PREM/19/1049, 'Briefing Notes' (28/10/1983);TNA: PREM/19/1048, 'FCO to New York', no.646 (25/10/1983)

⁸⁰ TNA: PREM/19/1048, 'Paris to FCO', no.963 (27/10/1983)

⁸¹ J. Young, 'Grenada', House of Lords, *Hansard* (25/10/1983)

⁸² Williams interview; TNA: PREM/19/1048, no.1759

⁸³ TNA: PREM/19/1048, 'Thatcher to Reagan' (25/10/1983); J. Coles, 'Grenada' (25/10/1983)

⁸⁴ Seen widely in TNA: PREM/19/1048 & PREM/19/1049

⁸⁵ TNA: PREM/19/1048, 'FCO to Washington', No.1768 (25/10/1983)

However, what has not widely been recognised is the government's deeper concerns about the broader long-term impact an invasion would have on international relations and British foreign policy. These are clearly demonstrated in government documents; none more so than in Thatcher's direct correspondence with Reagan, where she declared:

'This action will be seen as intervention by a western democratic country in the internal affairs of a small independent nation, however unattractive its regime. I ask you to consider this in the context of our wider East/West relations and of the fact that we will be having in the next few days to present to our parliament and people the sitting of cruise missiles in this country. I ask you to think most carefully about these points.'⁸⁶

This generalised passage clearly demonstrates what Howe would also tell Secretary Shultz several days later; that Britain's concerns about the invasion went much wider than those relating directly to Grenada.⁸⁷ These points, however, were never publically expressed; their absence being particularly conspicuous in Howe's address to Parliament on Wednesday 26th. Documents and other evidence now available, however, make possible an assessment that takes account of these wider, and at the time, sensitive foreign policy concerns.

The most immediate of the issues this passage and new evidence identify, and one that, as noted, historiography has only recently begun to emphasise, is the potential domestic impact on the then imminent US Cruise Missile deployment in Britain and elsewhere in Europe. Deeply unpopular, the decision to accept the US missiles from November 1983 was to be debated soon in Parliament. With the government defending its decision not to develop a dual key system for the missiles on account of previous agreements with the Americans, the invasion, and in particular the lack of US consultation, came at a hugely inopportune moment.⁸⁸ Thatcher clearly recognised this in her message to Reagan. Howe would also similarly express to Shultz on October 27th that the invasion and its public impact on the cruise missile issue 'was a particular cause for concern.' The difficulties the invasion created in this respect 'would not go away.'⁸⁹ Indeed, the invasion and its implications were seized

⁸⁶ TNA: PREM/19/1048, 'Thatcher to Reagan' (25/10/1983)

⁸⁷ TNA: PREM/19/1048, No.963

⁸⁸ Sharp, p.119

⁸⁹ TNA: PREM/19/1048, No.963

by opponents to missile deployment. Polls after the invasion suggested that over 70% of the public now thought the US would fire missiles without British permission. Over 80% now wanted dual key.⁹⁰ The British government had to have an early vote on the missiles to prevent such opposition jeopardising their presence.⁹¹ When the debate was held on October 31st, Grenada was raised no less than 46 times.⁹² Although the bill passed comfortably thanks to the Conservative Party's huge majority, the government was clearly right to express its concern to Washington about the impact of the invasion of Grenada on such a strategic issue.

The lack of consultation by the US also privately worried the government. According to John Edwards, Michael Heseltine, the Defence Secretary, and John Stanley, the Minister for the Armed Forces, believed this to be 'almost the most worrying aspect of the whole thing.'⁹³ For if the Americans could choose not to consult the UK government, what was to stop them doing so over firing the missiles. As such, at the first Cabinet meeting following the invasion, concern was widely expressed about the American's failure to take Britain into their confidence.⁹⁴ Geoffrey Howe would tell the FAC as much, saying it was made clear to American colleagues after the invasion that Britain expected consultation 'in comparable situations.'⁹⁵ Such was the government's private concern after the invasion, they actively sought to improve their 'proximity to US thinking' so that such a lack of communications could never happen again.⁹⁶

That Thatcher also asked Reagan to consider the intervention in the context of East-West relations was because she was concerned about whether it meant a departure from traditional American foreign policy, and a change in the Western Alliance's Cold War strategy. With increasing anti-Americanism spreading across Britain, due to its subversive approach to overseas interests (such as funding the Contras in Nicaragua), Thatcher had been briefed just days before the invasion by Alfred Sherman, a special adviser on foreign policy, that the government faced a very tricky balancing act between trying to maintain the 'special-

⁹⁰ TMSS: 132456, 'Prime Minister's Press Digest', (28/10/1983); Statistics quoted by D. Healy, 'INF Debate', *Hansard* (31/10/1983)

⁹¹ TMSS: 128198, 'Record of Kenneth Dam's visit to Chequers' (07/11/1983)

⁹² 'INF Debate', *Hansard* (31/10/1983)

⁹³ Edwards, *GWST*, p.21

⁹⁴ TNA: CAB/128/76/31, 'Cabinet Minutes' (27/10/1983)

⁹⁵ 'Grenada,' *FAC*, p.13

⁹⁶ 'Grenada,' *FAC*, p.21

relationship,' while winning over public opinion.⁹⁷ When the invasion came days later, it therefore not only threatened to make life more difficult for the government in respect to missile deployment, but also challenged its support for future American policy. Thatcher would thus say that her response to the invasion had been guided by trying to 'minimise the danger [it could cause] to the Western Alliance.'⁹⁸ It is also why she would say a week after the invasion that 'the fundamental question' about the whole affair 'was whether Grenada could be treated as a difficult, but isolated incident, as she would hope, or whether it marked a new departure in foreign affairs' that directly, rather than subversively, engaged in crisis areas.⁹⁹ Any such policy would make life very hard for the British government; a serious concern she would later express to Dam on November 7th when she posed the exact same question.¹⁰⁰

The government was further concerned about the damage the invasion would do to the moral high-ground the West believed it held over the East. Thatcher would tell the editors of *The Times* and *The Daily Mail* that the invasion threatened to undermine the most important distinction between the Soviet Union and NATO; that the former was an aggressive power, while the latter was purely defensive and encouraging of democracy through peaceful means.¹⁰¹ The same would also be said at Cabinet; that the invasion was 'difficult to reconcile with the contention that the US and the NATO threatened no one.'¹⁰² The government's fear was thus partly that the invasion would do little in the battle for hearts and minds, particularly in an increasingly anti-American Europe.

There was also concern that the invasion had the potential to impact other British interests. Thatcher in her message to Reagan would draw specific attention to the fact the intervention would be seen as meddling in the internal affairs of a 'small independent nation.' This should be understood as reference to how perception of the invasion might impact on the growing belief that small independent states could not guarantee their own security.¹⁰³ Howe would also tell Shultz that Britain was particularly concerned 'about the conclusions which small

⁹⁷ TMSS: 131098, 'Alfred Sherman Paper', (23/10/1983)

⁹⁸ TNA: PREM/19/1049, 'Thatcher to Rifkind', (04/11/1983)

⁹⁹ TNA: PREM/19/1049, 'Barclay to Ingham' (31/10/1983)

¹⁰⁰ TMSS: 128198, 'Record of Kenneth Dam's visit to Chequers' (07/11/1983)

¹⁰¹ TNA: PREM/19/1049, 'Barclay to Ingham' (31/10/1983); TMSS: 105212, 'Interview with David English' (04/10/1983)

¹⁰² TNA: CAB/128/76/31, 'Cabinet Minutes' (27/10/1983)

¹⁰³ 'While Britain Slept', *The Times* (06/04/1984)

countries around the world would draw about intervention by super powers.’¹⁰⁴ Small state stability was of particular concern to Britain as it had been accused of withdrawing too rapidly and not doing enough to prepare many of them for independence when decolonising.¹⁰⁵ The unstable condition in which Grenada had been left had been particularly highlighted in a 1982 FAC report.¹⁰⁶ With the invasion coming less than a month before a Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, which almost entirely focused on this issue, the UK had to commission a report into the matter alongside a larger Commonwealth study.¹⁰⁷ The invasion of Grenada not only forced Britain to concede privately that ‘it was increasingly clear that small islands could not protect themselves’ and may require support, but also to accept ‘insufficient attention had been paid [by British governments] to the security problems of small states.’¹⁰⁸

Moreover, the US invasion ran counter to Britain’s broader policy objectives of withdrawal from the Caribbean and Central American region. Completely ignored by historical analysis to date, is evidence that Britain was deeply concerned that an invasion would impact on this policy. John Edwards would tell Jessop in a post invasion background briefing that the government’s position was guided ‘first and foremost’ by ‘a fear’ that British support for intervention ‘would make a pull-out from Belize more difficult and would run counter to broad UK policy to withdraw from the region.’¹⁰⁹ Indeed, while publically denying that the UK would remove Britain’s military presence from Belize, this was widely seen by London as the next step and believed likely within the next few months.¹¹⁰ But as Edwards noted, if Britain supported the invasion, it ‘would generate a feeling that Britain was prepared to involve itself in wars not of its making in the Caribbean, and that this, by extension, would imply that Britain could be drawn into a war in Belize after it had withdrawn.’¹¹¹ With Number 10’s policy advisers also warning that American foreign policy now saw the Caribbean, Central and South America through the prism of the East/West conflict, Britain could not be seen to support the intervention if it was to maintain a position of retreat and not

¹⁰⁴ TNA: PREM/19/1048, ‘Paris to FCO’, no.963 (27/10/1983)

¹⁰⁵ ‘Minutes of Evidence’, *FAC* (23/11/1981)

¹⁰⁶ ‘Caribbean and Central America’, *FAC* (21/10/1982), p.xxxvi-iii

¹⁰⁷ ‘The Economic and Political Security of Small States’, *FAC* (04/07/1984)

¹⁰⁸ TNA: PREM/19/1049, ‘Barclay to Ingham’ (31/10/1983); A. Payne, ‘Britain and the Caribbean’, in P. Sutton (ed.), *Europe and the Caribbean* (London, 1991), p.23

¹⁰⁹ JMSS: ‘Conversation with John Edwards’, (11/1983)

¹¹⁰ TMSS: 128198, ‘Record of Kenneth Dam’s visit to Chequers’ (07/11/1983)

¹¹¹ JMSS: ‘Conversation with John Edwards’, (11/1983)

be sucked into a new conflict zone.¹¹² While it was therefore understood privately that the intervention may draw the Caribbean into the US sphere of influence and out of British hegemony, Britain could not afford to publically favour intervention because it would be likely misunderstood as desire to remain involved in the region.¹¹³

The British government's negative assessment once it knew about the invasion was therefore a decision made largely in response to broader foreign policy concerns that should be understood in the context of the Cold War and its threatened impact on Britain's strategic interests. While there were short term fears that the invasion might endanger the lives of British citizens and the Governor-General, little attention was given to the Commonwealth or international law, and were only offered afterwards as excuses to explain Britain's negative reaction. However, when late in the day its opposition went unheeded, the government was then confronted with a whole new concern; how to minimise its public and private political impact.

¹¹² TMSS: 131098, 'Alfred Sherman Paper', (23/10/1983)

¹¹³ TNA: PREM/19/1048, 'Parsons to Thatcher', (26/10/1983)

Chapter Three

Historical assessment agrees that the invasion was a highly embarrassing incident for the British government.¹¹⁴ Yet, while it was known that Britain opposed the invasion, its public response was muted, arguing that there were different points of view and the US had simply pursued a different line to Britain.¹¹⁵ It wasn't until Sunday 30th October that Thatcher finally made a public, veiled criticism of the invasion. In an interview on BBC World Service, she declared that the West should not use force to walk into independent countries, however disagreeable the regime.¹¹⁶ Even then she would not openly condemn the US action.

At the time, the UK government's response was declared 'confused,' and widely criticised by opponents.¹¹⁷ More recently, however, G. Williams has declared that Britain's failure to condemn the invasion and US involvement is better seen as a demonstration of loyalty and pragmatism. Quoting Neil Winn, he suggests that to criticise the US would have 'meant undermining the US [and]... serve[d] no other practical purpose than satisfying the anti-American sections of Western European public opinion.'¹¹⁸ It is now clear from government papers that this was indeed the British government's thinking and its response was coordinated to protect its broader interests.

Public presentation was the first concern of the British government once it became clear that the US was not going to listen to its advice.¹¹⁹ With Washington telling London that 'in international fora they would be hoping for support from their allies,' it was clear that the UK government response could not be openly critical.¹²⁰ The Ambassador in Washington, Oliver Wright, warned that while 'the U.S. Administration...will not take it amiss if we say, which is true, that your judgement of what course of action to take differed from theirs,' in contrast 'they will not understand it if we publically criticise their actions while their troops are still engaged.'¹²¹ Howe's statement to Parliament on October 26th, that 'it is no more for me to

¹¹⁴ See for example: Payne, p.407; Sharp, p.230

¹¹⁵ Howe, 'Grenada Emergency Debate', *Hansard* (26/10/1983)

¹¹⁶ 'M. Thatcher Interview with BBC World Service' (30/10/1983), available at [\[http://bufvc.ac.uk/tvandradio/lbc/index.php/segment/0201800321001\]](http://bufvc.ac.uk/tvandradio/lbc/index.php/segment/0201800321001) (18/04/2014)

¹¹⁷ 'Memorandum', *West India Committee (WIC)* (02/1984), cited in 'Grenada', *FAC*, p.4; Payne, p.408

¹¹⁸ N. Winn, *European Crisis Management in the 1980s* (Aldershot, 1996), p.161, cited in Williams, p.229

¹¹⁹ TNA: PREM/19/1048, J. Coles, 'Grenada' (25/10/1983)

¹²⁰ TNA: PREM/19/1048, 'Washington to FCO', no.3118 (25/10/1983)

¹²¹ TNA: PREM/19/1048, 'Washington to FCO', no.3134 (26/10/1983)

condemn the United States [for having a different view] than it is for them to condemn us,' should therefore be understood in this context.¹²²

For it was recognised following the invasion that there were much broader British interests to protect. Sherman would make this fact clear to Thatcher. In an October 26th addendum on Grenada, added to his October 23rd policy document on Latin America, he commented: 'to see Grenada in terms of the wellbeing of 200 British citizens there, is to voluntarily abdicate the status of world power and withdraw into ridiculous parochialism.'¹²³ Britain's foreign policy fundamentally relied on the United States. To criticise the US administration would therefore threaten Anglo-US relations and damage Britain's own interests. As Thatcher told her Cabinet after the invasion, despite what happened, 'Britain's friendship with the US must on no account be jeopardised.'¹²⁴

The government's public refusal to recognise that the invasion had implications for cruise missile control is a clear example of this. Thatcher saw them as fundamental to Britain's security.¹²⁵ When the Grenada invasion took place, Thatcher would therefore tell the editor of *The Daily Mail* that the government still 'recognise[d] the large issues at stake,' and that irrespective of the implications of the invasion, 'we have to get Cruise missiles sited.'¹²⁶ The government as a result would maintain, in the face of public concern, that there was no parallel between the invasion and the missile deployment because there were strict rules dictating how the latter could be fired.¹²⁷

Briefing papers for Howe show how the government set out to defend the US in relation to the legal concerns raised by other countries and suggestions that the invasion bore a similarity to that by the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Declaring that in law the US was 'entitled to act to protect lives of citizens' and that legally it was 'for [the] US to make [its] own case,' the government rejected any concerns about the legality of the invasion. On the parallels with Afghanistan, Howe was advised to say the issues were 'completely different,' and the intervention was 'to protect foreign citizens and restore constitutional government.' It was

¹²² Howe, 'Grenada Emergency Debate', *Hansard* (26/10/1983)

¹²³ TMSS: 131098, 'Alfred Sherman Paper' (23/10/1983)

¹²⁴ TNA: CAB/128/76/31, 'Cabinet Minutes' (27/10/1983)

¹²⁵ See: 'Mrs Thatcher Seeks Wider NATO Sphere of Influence', *The Times* (09/02/1981)

¹²⁶ TMSS: 105212, 'Interview with David English' (04/10/1983)

¹²⁷ See for example: TMSS: 105460, 'Speech to Finchley Conservative Women' (03/11/1983)

also stressed in his briefing that the government's line was 'to avoid a public row with US ally.'¹²⁸ It was a line also taken by other ministers in Parliament and in interviews. The British government thus very clearly set about defending the US action and avoiding it impacting on British interests despite their reservations and public opposition. Indeed, Thatcher would say privately 'once the invasion occurred, my concern was to do everything possible to avoid hindering the operation and to minimise the danger [it could cause]. Thus we refused to condemn the invasion here at home.'¹²⁹

The public defence of the invasion should also be understood in the context of the government believing it would help facilitate Britain's withdrawal from the Caribbean. The invasion, John Edwards would say the following month, signified a clear willingness on the part of the US to embrace the area in their sphere of influence. It 'effectively relieved the UK of a role [in the Caribbean] and has by its actions allowed the UK to speed up its total withdrawal from the region'¹³⁰ Indeed, Thatcher was advised the day after the invasion by her foreign policy special adviser, Anthony Parsons, to seize this opportunity to quicken withdrawal from Belize.¹³¹ To condemn the invasion might therefore have suggested Britain retained a strong interest in the region as much as if they had supported it to begin with. That 1983 was remembered several months later by the Barbados Prime Minister, as 'a watershed year in which the influence of the United States [in the Caribbean] came observably to replace that of Great Britain,' suggests the invasion was indeed a turning point.¹³²

However, while it was recognised that the government should not publically condemn the US invasion, it was also understood in Cabinet that they could not support it, having expressed clear reservations.¹³³ By the end of the week of October 25th, when the operation had succeeded and anti-American sentiment began to become less visceral, the government's response became harder. When Thatcher made her remarks on the BBC World Service, it was no coincidence that Howe made similar comments the same day on television.¹³⁴

¹²⁸ TNA: PREM/19/1049, 'Briefing Notes' (28/10/1983)

¹²⁹ TNA: PREM/19/1049, 'Thatcher to Rifkind' (04/11/1983)

¹³⁰ JMSS: 'Conversation with John Edwards' (11/1983)

¹³¹ TNA: PREM/19/1048, 'Parsons to Thatcher' (26/10/1983)

¹³² Quoted in 'Memorandum', *WIC*

¹³³ TNA: CAB/128/76/31, 'Cabinet Minutes' (27/10/1983)

¹³⁴ Extracts from 'Weekend World' (30/10/1983), cited in TNA: PREM/19/1049, 'FCO to Kingston', No.222 (30/10/1983)

Britain felt it needed to make clear that the lack of information from the US in the build up to the invasion was not acceptable. Parsons would recommend as much, saying that while Britain should not criticise the US, ‘we should do some plain speaking about the need for full consultation.’¹³⁵ Howe would tell Parliament as early as the day after the invasion that ‘the extent of consultation was regrettably less than we would have wished.’¹³⁶ His briefing papers for public appearances also clearly outlined that while he should defend the American action, he could very clearly express that their consultation ‘was inadequate.’¹³⁷ Such words made clear to the US that this could not happen again and helped abate public opinion calling for such a statement.

The British government thus pursued a policy of neither directly condemning the action, nor supporting it. The government’s decision to abstain from the UN vote condemning the US and Caribbean action is the clearest example of this. As the British representative to the UN declared, Britain would not vote against the motion for it ‘is very plain that my government did not support those operations,’ but equally would not support the motion, for it did ‘not take adequate account of the concerns which have motivated the action.’¹³⁸ For its part, the US would thank the government for not condemning the action at the UN, which other European allies did, and indicated its ‘admiration for the firm line the government has been taking on INF [missile] deployment.’¹³⁹ In fact the Americans would not only apologise for the lack of consultation, but recognised ‘the degree and pattern of consultation on this occasion fell short of what was desirable;’ exactly as the British wanted.¹⁴⁰ Such a constructive outcome would not have occurred had the British government publically condemned their action.

Thus while Thatcher’s government was criticised in Parliament at the time as ‘not know[ing] what to do about it [the invasion],’ once they had knowledge of the invasion they formulated a clear response.¹⁴¹ As Edwards said, Britain took an active approach ‘to play down the crisis and Britain’s role in it, particularly in Parliament and the media to attempt to heal the rift with

¹³⁵ TNA: PREM/19/1048, ‘Parsons to Thatcher’ (26/10/1983)

¹³⁶ Howe, ‘Grenada Emergency Debate’, *Hansard* (26/10/1983)

¹³⁷ TNA: PREM/19/1049, ‘Briefing Notes’ (28/10/1983)

¹³⁸ TNA: PREM/19/1049, ‘New York to FCO’, no.1180 (28/10/1983)

¹³⁹ TNA: PREM/19/1048, ‘Washington to FCO’, no.3169 (27/10/1983); TNA: PREM/19/1049, ‘Washington to FCO’, no.3383 (09/11/1983)

¹⁴⁰ PREM/19/1049, ‘Ricketts to Coles’ (01/11/1983); ‘Grenada’, *FAC*, p.21

¹⁴¹ J. Corbyn, ‘Grenada Emergency Debate’, *Hansard* (26/10/1983)

the US.’¹⁴² Britain also sought to help Washington in Grenada; their briefing on the role and responsibilities of the Governor-General demonstrating how the government, while pursuing an indistinct line publically, continued to recognise US priorities privately.¹⁴³ For while Howe would later reflect that the government privately disagreed with the intervention ‘equally strongly’ as every other political leader, they understood it was in Britain’s broader interests to not voice their true opinion like those other leaders.¹⁴⁴ This necessarily attracted criticism and helped entrench the incident as one that was embarrassing for the Thatcher government, but with hindsight it is clear that ‘statesmanlike ambiguity’ limited the potential impact of the invasion for British foreign policy.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² JMSS: ‘Conversation with John Edwards’ (11/1983)

¹⁴³ TNA: PREM/19/1049, ‘Washington to FCO’, no.3161 (27/10/1983)

¹⁴⁴ G. Howe, p.335

¹⁴⁵ G. Howe, p.331

Conclusion

Several months after the invasion, *The Times* would write an editorial piece about how the British government had responded to the incident. It declared; ‘The Grenada episode showed a British failure of intelligence, a failure of judgement and a failure of nerve.’¹⁴⁶ In a single sentence, *The Times* encapsulated everything that has been misunderstood about the British government’s response, then and since.

For it can now be said with certainty that the British government did receive detailed information regarding a potential US invasion of Grenada. While this mostly did not come from Washington, a stream of reporting from Caribbean posts indicated the likelihood of US involvement and that active military preparations were in hand. It therefore cannot be said that the British government was ignorant about what was about to happen. Rather, ministerial shock at the invasion and passivity in the days before the event was founded on a Cold War belief in the primacy of American information and a mistrust of evidence from the Caribbean. In this respect, the government made an error of judgement.

That the UK did not support the intervention, however, was a calculated assessment: the invasion would negatively impact on a variety of British strategic interests. While it had in the short term the potential to threaten the lives of British citizens and the Governor-General in Grenada, it also impacted on longer term broad based British foreign policy and defence interests in the context of the Cold War and particularly in the Caribbean Basin. Although not emphasised to date, the government had a real apprehension that the invasion would impact negatively on the deployment of cruise missiles in Britain and the positive moral high ground in the Cold War held by the Western world. More broadly they were also concerned that it signified a new US foreign strategy of intervention that would be hard to support domestically. The impact the invasion would have on its policies towards the Caribbean also gave Britain cause for concern, for it potentially drew attention to the inadequate nature of its decolonisation process and more importantly, jeopardised continuing British attempts to withdraw militarily from Belize and finally extricate Britain from the region. Suggestions that the government’s negative assessment was driven by both concerns about how the Commonwealth would react to an invasion, and that it was contrary to international law, are

¹⁴⁶ ‘While Britain Slept’, *The Times* (6th April, 1984)

incorrect. They were simply excuses to explain the government's negative assessment of the invasion while its real concerns remained undisclosed.

That no public condemnation was made by the UK government, despite it being clear they opposed the invasion, was the result of a judgement call that recognised British interests lay in maintaining a strong, supportive relationship with the US and not criticising them. Such a decision was not, as *The Times* suggested, 'a failure of nerve,' but if anything, a real test of character, for the American intervention faced huge public criticism. That they were also able to eventually make their displeasure heard and move forward constructively with the US, suggests the British successfully defended their bigger interests.

Reassessing the invasion of Grenada from a British perspective therefore clearly demonstrates where Britain's broader foreign policy interests lay in the early 1980s; how an independent, isolated incident interacted with set national policy objectives; and the lengths the government were willing to go to protect them. While there is no room here to assess how the invasion impacted in the long term on these interests, such research and analysis could prove valuable to both our understanding of the 'special relationship' during the 1980s and Britain's withdrawal from the Caribbean Basin.

Ultimately, Thatcher put it best herself when she told Dam, 'to say that all this had put us in difficulty was to put it very mildly.'¹⁴⁷ The physical invasion of Grenada had little to do with the UK, but presented the government with a difficult political and strategic challenge. That it is only now remembered as an embarrassing incident for the government and nothing more suggests that it was handled rather well.

¹⁴⁷ TMSS: 128198, 'Record of Kenneth Dam's visit to Chequers' (07/11/1983)

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