

DISASTROUS VICTORY

The Grenada War in Theory and Practice

A Proposal

by

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At the southern tip of the Lesser Antilles, the nine delectably named islands of the Grenadines float in a sea of swimming-pool aquamarine. Carriacou, Petit Martinique, Ronde, Caille, Saline, Frigate, Diamond, Large, and the big island of Grenada are cooled by trade winds and spared most of the hurricanes that roar through the Caribbean every summer. The British, who ruled them for two hundred and eleven years, called them the Spice Islands; nutmeg, cinnamon, cloves, ginger, and mace remain their principal yield. They sit astride no important sea lanes, possess no oil or strategic minerals, and -- as the nation of Grenada -- pack no punch at the United Nations. The big island is home to some ninety thousand descendents of French and British *creoles* and African slaves; the rest are largely uninhabited. A place of less intrinsic geopolitical importance would be difficult to imagine. Grenada is a backwater's backwater.

Yet a preposterously lopsided four-day war on Grenada in October 1983 redefined America's stance in the world. The invasion ended a decade-long post-Vietnam identity crisis and gave a new movement calling itself *neoconservative* a model for conceiving, waging, and -- most importantly -- justifying the projection of unilateral American power. In the sleepy Spice Islands, a generation of American policy-makers -- those who took us into long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan -- got their first heady taste of pre-emptive war and regime change. They would argue as well that the war in Grenada was the beginning of the end for the Soviet Union. Until then, no country in the Soviet bloc had ever suffered a battlefield defeat. Upon hearing the news of the American invasion while traveling by

train between Odessa and Moscow, Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev suffered the heart attack that would kill him two weeks later.

The story of the Grenada war is cinematically dramatic on two fronts: the jungly island where Marines, elite Rangers, and super-secret SEAL teams were nearly defeated by a rag-tag collection of Grenadan national guard and lightly armed Cuban construction workers; and the corridors of the White House where the war was conceived and afterwards successfully spun from near disaster to heroic victory.

It would be difficult to overstate the woebegone condition of the American military in 1983. Eight years after the fall of Saigon, the Army is having continually to lower its standards to attract enough warm bodies into its volunteer ranks; forty percent of its soldiers are high-school dropouts. Drug abuse is epidemic. The officer corps, decimated by five consecutive “force reductions,” is thoroughly demoralized; when General William Westmoreland appears before an auditorium full of officers at the Army War College, the assembled lieutenants and captains boo him off the stage. Each of the four services blames the others for America’s first battlefield defeat. Not only is cooperation non-existent, open inter-service hostility is intense.

To add insult to injury, the U.S. war machine has had to watch the military it has long considered its “little brother” – Israel’s – fight the kind of good old-fashioned tanks-and-airpower war the Pentagon has longed to fight after the confusing jungle messiness of Vietnam. That the Israelis whip four industrialized enemies in twenty days, just as American ground troops are dragging their tails out of Vietnam, is excruciating for the Pentagon. And then in 1982, the Pentagon’s country-cousin -- the British -- projects the

Crown's power far across the Atlantic to the Falkland Islands and, in a bracing sea-and-air battle that harks back to the clarity of Jutland and Midway, vanquish the Argentines in ten weeks.

And American warriors during those years? They are given two small combat missions and make a mess of both. In 1975, the Khmer Rouge government of Cambodia seized the U.S. merchant ship *Mayaguez*, and President Ford, stinging from the fall of Saigon just two weeks earlier, sends a hastily planned Marine rescue mission into Thai waters. Forty-one Marines are killed and fifty wounded before it's discovered that the Khmer Rouge have already released the crew unharmed. Thailand is so furious at the violent, needless incursion that it expels the U.S. military from its last base in Southeast Asia.

Then, in 1980, President Jimmy Carter orders the military to rescue the American hostages who have been held for two years in Teheran. Three of the eight helicopters malfunction, the radios fail to work right, and then a Marine helicopter and an Air Force plane collide in the Iranian desert, killing eight servicemen. In their haste to evacuate, the Marines make the rookie mistake of leaving behind documents that identify CIA agents in Teheran, as well as two serviceable helicopters that are pressed into the Iranian Navy. Many in the five-sided building believe the American century is well and truly over.

Grenada turns out to be, for President Ronald Reagan, the solution to an agonizing problem. He'd run Jimmy Carter out of the White House on a promise to restore America's stature in the world, and in 1983 he is still struggling to deliver. Reagan and the barely organized neoconservatives around him, such as Congressman Dick

Cheney, believe the United States has an exceptional right and responsibility – abdicated by the Vietnam-traumatized Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter -- to lead the world against a Soviet adversary that is, by all appearances, eternal. When the Soviet Union used Fidel Castro to support a new Marxist government in Nicaragua, Carter had looked to the United Nations and the Organization of American States to solve the problem -- not to America's own strength.

For all his tough talk, though, Reagan hasn't been able to do much better than Jimmy Carter. Congress is preventing him from fully assisting the Nicaraguan *Contras*, and when Israel launches a catastrophic war in Lebanon in 1982, Reagan is forced to provide troops for precisely the kind of multi-lateral peacekeeping mission he reviles.

This, then, is the world as it appears to the White House protagonists of *Disastrous Victory* as 1983 begins: Castro gaining the upper hand in Central America, the military defanged, and America's troops and prestige tangled up in an ambiguous, open-ended internationalist quagmire in Beirut.

Grenada had been a minor annoyance since 1979, when a self-described Marxist named Maurice Bishop staged a bloodless coup that overthrew the pro-Western post-colonial government. Bishop had begun a warm relationship with Fidel Castro, inviting him to build a ten-thousand-foot runway that Bishop said was to boost tourism. Jimmy Carter -- bedeviled by the Iranian hostage crisis, the second oil shock, and a deep recession -- was of no mind to do anything more substantive in Grenada than begin a policy of backhanded disdain.

Reagan chooses to interpret the Grenada runway as a future Soviet airbase, and Bishop's friendship with Castro as a hemispheric threat. In his first year as President, he stages a big naval exercise – "Ocean Venture 81" – that includes a mock invasion of a cluster of islands off Puerto Rico fictionally named the Amberdines. He convinces the International Monetary Fund to cut off loans to Bishop's government. And on March 23, 1983, he unveils a Strategic Defense Initiative to base anti-missile weapons in space -- citing as a reason the prospect of Soviet missiles in Grenada. Still, Washington's response to Grenada is all gesture and talk. Even as late as spring of 1983, the idea of using the military is unthinkable.

At precisely this moment, though, events began moving very fast to morph frustration in Lebanon into full-scale war in Grenada, and here is where the prologue ends and *Disastrous Victory* really begins. Events fall like dominoes: Three weeks after Reagan's "Star Wars" speech, a truck bomb blows up the U.S. Embassy in Beirut, killing seventeen Americans. A month after that, Maurice Bishop – alarmed at Reagan's increasingly bellicose rhetoric -- shows up uninvited in Washington, asking for an audience with the President. Reagan refuses to see him, and Bishop returns home empty-handed. In August, the Soviet Air Force shoots down Korean Air Lines flight 007 over Sakhalin Island, sending Washington into paroxysms of anti-Soviet rage. The next day, Reagan surprises the world by abandoning the role of neutral peacekeeper in Lebanon: the battleship *New Jersey*, with its sixteen-inch guns, begins a dramatically televised shelling of Druze positions.

On October 14, Grenada muscles its way onto a front burner. Deputy Prime Minister Bernard Coard declares Maurice Bishop a traitor to the revolution for his attempted *rapprochement* with Reagan and stages a coup. Bishop and his thirty ministers – including Bishop’s pregnant girlfriend – are lined up against a wall and shot. Overnight, Grenada turns from annoyingly leftist to hard-line Marxist -- violent, and unpredictable.

The dreadful specter of American hostages looms again. Some five hundred Americans attend medical school at St. George’s Medical College, and Reagan’s people can easily imagine suffering the kind of protracted crisis that they’d used to humiliate Jimmy Carter out of office. Although the Grenadan Army Chief of Staff says the Americans are free to leave the country, Reagan orders the Pentagon to prepare at once to evacuate them.

That’s Wednesday. The following Monday on the other side of the world, a truck bomber blows up the American barracks in Beirut, killing two hundred and sixty-three Marines -- the biggest single day of U.S. military deaths since Iwo Jima. Despite his best efforts to project American strength, the President suddenly looks as weak and vulnerable as Jimmy Carter. He desperately needs America to change the channel.

In one long night of feverish phone calls and meetings, Reagan’s National Security team expands the mission to evacuate the American students on Grenada into a full-blown war to unseat the Marxist government. They know they are crossing a line. For a generation, America has used its military only to protect Americans abroad or to defend allies in Seoul and Saigon; not since World War II has the military been tasked

with taking down a foreign government. The White House gives the Pentagon two days to plan the invasion of Grenada.

Sharing with the military a conviction that the press lost America the Vietnam war, the men of Reagan's National Security Council sets another precedent, ordering reporters excluded from the operation. None join the troops, and those who reach the island on their own are turned away or detained. Until the war is over, the American people know only what the government tells them. The military has never returned to giving reporters free access to a battlefield.

The invasion itself – code-named Operation Urgent Fury – turns into a thoroughgoing disaster. Bumbling at sea delays the launch, so the attacks take place in daylight instead of darkness. In the opening minutes, four Navy SEALs – the elite of the elite – drown after being dropped from a helicopter into the sea. A second team of SEALs fail to reach the beach because the outboard motors on their Zodiac boats conk out; they drift far out to sea before being rescued. A third is pressed into an impromptu half-baked mission to rescue the British governor-general, and get trapped in a barn several miles from the governor-general's house for two days. Bereft of food and water and low on ammunition, they fight off what feels to them like the entire Cuban army.

Meanwhile, a company of U.S. Rangers under the command of Captain John Abizaid, the “mad Arab” of West Point (later the commanding general for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq) is aboard a C-130, expecting to land at the Cuban-built Port Salines airfield. In mid-flight from North Carolina, though, word comes that the airfield is strewn with vehicles and debris. The Rangers, many of whom think they're on their

way to Beirut, struggle into their parachutes for an unrehearsed combat jump – the first battlefield drop of American paratroopers since the Korean War. The sky over Port Salines is full of red and green tracer bullets. Dodging and weaving, the planes drop the Rangers from a lower-than-regulation five hundred feet and into a firefight much more intense than expected. The Rangers' anti-tank rockets, left over from Vietnam, are duds; they bounce harmlessly off the Grenadans' Soviet-built armored cars. Several Rangers die.

Nobody has thought to issue maps to the Rangers or Marines, so they are reduced to ransacking hotel gift shops for tourist guidebooks. The Marines who arrive at St. George's Medical College can't find more than a handful of American students; most have been moved from the main campus to a modern annex with better lab space, and the jarheads have to fight their way across the island to them. A sortie of Navy Corsairs bombs a psychiatric hospital, killing several inmates and freeing others into the streets. Another strafes the medical school and nearly kills the American students. The Cubans shoot down two Black Hawks, and three others collide. The dead pile up.

Because the services so loathe each other, each uses a different radio frequency. A Navy jet strafes a platoon of American Rangers, killing one and wounding seventeen, because the Rangers can't wave them off. Infantrymen who need covering fire can see Navy ships bobbing on the surf and Air Force planes streaking overhead, but can't call them. Army medevac helicopters can't land on Navy ships because their pilots aren't trained for it, and Marine pilots – who know how – aren't permitted to collect the Army wounded. "I'm not flying Army soldiers on my Marine helicopters," a leatherneck officer

insists, to which Urgent Fury's deputy commander, Army Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf, replies "bullshit" and threatens to have the man arrested. Desperate to communicate with ships offshore, a Ranger searches the pockets of dead Grenadans for change and uses a gas-station pay-phone to call Fort Bragg. Shouting his way through the switchboard operator, he reaches a superior, who sets in motion the glacial process of calling in close air support.

The White House, meanwhile, is fielding the biggest diplomatic blunder of its fledgling term. Nobody has thought to notify British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher that the United States is invading a Commonwealth country (where the Queen, after all, is officially head of state.) Thatcher is livid, but when the U.N. overwhelmingly passes a resolution condemning the invasion, she is forced to stand by her ally.

The brute force of eighty-eight hundred American soldiers, sailors, and Marines eventually frees the American students and overthrows Coard, an outcome that was never in doubt. But nineteen Americans (plus twenty-five Cubans and as many as four hundred Grenadans) die. Were the Americans fighting a force stronger than the Grenadan National Guard, two companies of Cuban regulars, and six hundred lightly armed Cuban construction workers, Operation Urgent Fury might well end in another American military catastrophe.

As it is, the Beirut bombing disappears beneath an avalanche of triumphant press releases from the White House and Pentagon. Reagan's new day of American might is born. "Our days of weakness are over!" he tells the Congressional Medal of Honor

Society a few weeks after the invasion. “Our military forces are back on their feet, standing tall!”

Disastrous Victory is an emotional read that builds on the strengths I developed in writing *Nine Lives*. It is not a complete regimental or bureaucratic history of the war; the events of October 1983 will be seen entirely through the eyes of a small cast of White House policymakers, troops on the ground, Grenadans, and Cubans. By the time the shooting starts, readers will understand that, after living through the lowest ebb of American prestige since the Great Depression, the Americans were desperate for redemption and that the war delivered. In that sense, Grenada was far from trivial.

Each chapter of *Disastrous Victory* is told from inside the head and heart of one character. Though readers might disagree with, say, what Reagan’s people were doing, they’ll feel in their bones each character’s passions. The same goes for the soldiers, medical students, and Cuban and Grenadan characters, and the drama builds as decisions made in the calm of the White House situation room play out in the steamy chaos on the island. Just as readers of *The Perfect Storm* witnessed the 1991 hurricane from the points of view of the weather forecasters, the people of Gloucester, Coast Guard rescuers, and the men aboard the *Andrea Gail*, readers of *Disastrous Victory* see many of the events from various angles.

Among the protagonists in *Disastrous Victory* are:

- Oliver North. A Marine lieutenant colonel who earned a Silver Star, Bronze Star,

and two Purple Hearts as a platoon leader in Vietnam, North's job on Reagan's National Security Council staff is to prevent Fidel Castro and his Soviet backers from establishing a foothold in the western hemisphere. He is one of the principal planners of Operation Urgent Fury; it is what later gives him the moxie to attempt the Iran-Contra deal. North, deeply stung by the defeat in Vietnam -- the only war of his career -- is a zealot for restoring American military prestige and countering the Soviet Union everywhere. He has agreed to be interviewed; he says he turns down all such requests but so liked my coverage of the military in *The New Yorker* that he is enthusiastic about being one of my protagonists.

- Robert Kimmitt. A decorated paratrooper in Vietnam, Kimmitt is the National Security Council's lawyer. Next to the military planners, his job is the most important – building the political and legal justification for a new era of gunboat diplomacy. Kimmitt recruits the other island governments in the eastern Caribbean to support the invasion, figures a way to circumvent the War Powers Act, and interprets the right of the press to cover the war. He, too, has agreed to be interviewed.
- Langhorne Motley. A hard-line cold warrior alarmed by the march of Soviet aggression in the New World, Motley is Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs. A counter-intuitively bellicose diplomat, he works alongside the legendary CIA officer Dewey Clarridge to undermine the Bishop regime. When Coard replaces Bishop, Motley has a moment of doubt, realizing America had been better off with the devil it knew. Motley is also a State Department

- window on the diplomatic dust-up with Margaret Thatcher, and he, too, has agreed to be interviewed.
- Navy Lieutenant John Walsh. A SEAL leader who fought in Vietnam and stayed on afterwards, Walsh witnesses the congressionally mandated “force reductions” that hollow out the officer corps in the 1970s. He and his demoralized colleagues are left to build an elite force out of whoever happens to drag himself into a recruiting station to join the new, all-volunteer force. During the initial attack, Walsh leads SEALs on a forty-mile “over-the-horizon” reconnaissance mission to the beaches where the Marines were supposed to land; they radio back “Walking Track Shoes,” meaning the beach was too rocky and the Marines couldn’t come ashore. They are then pressed into the ill-fated mission to rescue the governor-general.
 - Army First Sergeant Manous Boles. A gung-ho kid from Thomasville, Georgia, Boles spends his teenage years praying that the Vietnam war will go on so he can fight in it. As an enlistee, he rises fast in the ranks and is one of the paratroopers dumped out of a plane over the Port Salines airfield. Pinned down without cover between the runways, Boles finally yells, “I’ve had enough of this shit!” and hot-wires a bulldozer to lead a makeshift armored assault on the Cubans.
 - Gail Reed is a radical American nurse from Chicago whose husband, Julian Torres Rizo, is Cuban Ambassador to Grenada. Reed and Torres are close friends of Bishop and spend the night he is murdered roaming the island, handing out anti-Coard handbills. The invasion is profoundly confusing for them. They hate Coard and are glad to see him overthrown, yet despise the Yankee aggressor even more.

- Mark Baretella is one of eight hundred American medical students at St. George's University Medical School. When Coard's hard-line regime bans privately owned ham radios, Baretella stashes his set among the cadavers in the school morgue, knowing that the superstitious Grenadan police won't go there. On the morning of the attack, Baretella lies on the floor of the morgue, shouting to a ham operator in New Jersey that American planes are strafing too close. He keeps broadcasting until Marines burst through the door.
- Col. Pedro Tortola Comas commands the hundred and fifty Cuban Army soldiers on Grenada, but the bulk of his "force" is six hundred Cuban construction workers, mostly middle-aged and barely trained to fire their AK-47s. Some fight like lions; most ditch their rifles and run when the Americans land.
- Bernard Coard is sentenced to death for murdering Maurice Bishop but is given clemency and is now locked in the same Grenadan prison into which he once threw his political enemies. In 1997, he publishes a long and eloquent apology to the Grenadan people, prompted by reading the cellblock graffiti of the people he'd jailed. He is scheduled to be released in 2010.

My cast of characters will be determined not only by who is willing to be interviewed but by who knows how to tell a detailed and candid story. Almost nine thousand American servicemen and women took part in the invasion, and they are easy to find because they discuss it endlessly on a variety of websites. Covering the military for *The New Yorker*, I learned how to elicit frank and vivid interviews from such vets. While writing *Smoke and Mirrors* and *Citizen Coors*, I learned that members of Reagan's

administration – from Michael Deaver and Ed Meese to the lowest staffer – are either intensely proud of their service and happy to discuss it, or, with the distance of years, regret their participation and are eager for a mea culpa. Either way, they love to tell stories. The Ronald Reagan Presidential Library has made available almost all the papers related to Grenada, and I've filed FOIA requests for the rest. The National Archives has recently finished cataloguing a trove of Grenadan documents captured by the Marines during the invasion. As for the Cubans, that country opens up a little more every day. Margaret and I speak fluent Spanish and Margaret has twice reported from Cuba. We believe we can find Cuban veterans willing to be interviewed.

An epilogue describes the legacy of the war in Grenada and its White House spin. The “stain” of Vietnam recedes further as Navy jets provoke a crisis in Libya's Gulf of Sidra and bomb Muammar Qaddafi, killing his six-year-old daughter. The drug war becomes a real war when President George H.W. Bush sends troops for the first time in history to Bolivia, Peru, and Colombia. More than thirty thousand U.S. personnel take part in Operation Just Cause – the invasion of Panama -- and from there it is a short step, in vision and confidence, to Operation Desert Storm and the second Iraq war. The Army opens its Center for Army Lessons Learned at Fort Leavenworth to analyze the many mistakes made on Grenada, which begins the intellectual rebuilding of the post-Vietnam military. “Jointness” – coordinated action among the services – becomes Pentagon doctrine, leading to the vastly integrated military we have today. Appalled by the command decisions made during the Grenada war, Congress completely reorganizes the military, taking the Joint Chiefs out of direct command of their services and making them

the President's military advisors, which elevates the power of the Secretary of Defense and his hand-picked theater commanders. America is indeed back, and the tragically botched piss-ant war on Grenada is what started it.

In 1993, while President Bill Clinton is coping with the political consequences of the Rangers' "Black Hawk Down" disaster in Mogadishu, he asks David Gergen (who also worked for Ronald Reagan), how it was that Reagan had been able to "remain unscathed after the tragedy of the Marine barracks in Beirut." Gergen replies, "Because two days later we were in Grenada, and everyone knew that Ronald Reagan would bomb the hell out of somewhere."

The Grenada war has been ignored by writers of literary non-fiction. Greenwood Press published a narrow volume called *Revolution and Rescue* in 1988, and Trans-Atlantic Publications published *Urgent Fury*, an account of battlefield action by Army Major David Atkins, in 1989. Otherwise, the subject has been left to military presses and writers of military-law journals.

We can deliver in spring 2012, in time for the twentieth anniversary of the invasion.