

The Media and Operation *Urgent Fury* in Grenada

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Abstract: *The over-simplified image of a US press that assumes the role of a “fourth estate” seems to be part of a well-orchestrated image that the Americans want to give of themselves abroad. The power that the press would hold (power to watch, criticize, control and denounce) would be part of the US democratic system. It is perceived as an efficient counterweight against the rise of any of the other three powers. The so-called absolute freedom of the US media would be, as such, the proof that the country enjoys a healthy democracy. The reverse premise, professing that the media only serve their own economic and political interests and, therefore, those of the politico-economic elite, proves to be far less popular, and is mainly so in academic milieus as well as among a certain number of progressive critics. In my opinion, the thesis according to which the media play an important part in the decision making process cannot, therefore, be seen as controversial. The press has become very influential, something all the foreign policy makers have taken into account, as they have acquired the necessary skills to adapt their decisions to the media’s power of persuasion. Washington can never overlook the editorials and articles published in such influential newspapers as the New York Times, the Washington Post, or the Los Angeles Times. However, those very newspapers do also, in a way, depend on the US policy makers. Then, which side does really influence the other? True, the US media prove to be very powerful and influential nowadays, but does that really guarantee their independence? So, do the media keep a sharply critical eye on the foreign policy makers and inform the American public about their government’s activities abroad? Or, are they governmental public relations and propaganda tools that public officials -together with their corporate allies- use to manipulate public opinion?² I will try to provide an answer through my analysis of the American mainstream media’s coverage of operation *Urgent Fury* in Grenada.*

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After two years of open hostilities towards the Maurice Bishop regime, the Reagan Administration decided to send the Marines to the Caribbean island Grenada in October 1983. Considering the skepticism of post-Vietnam public opinion, the Reagan team counted on a large-scale public relations campaign that paralleled the military action. In effect, operation *Urgent Fury* was a two-front operation with a battle in Grenada and another one in Washington. As much as the US public was skeptical of military actions and of new Vietnams, the US government was distrustful of popular movements and of public opposition to its policy. Having learnt the lessons of the Vietnam episode, US officials decided to impose a complete blackout on the information reaching US citizens. The administration’s goal was not to totally suppress the news, but to delay detrimental information that might break the national consensus around Washington’s decisions. As Napoleon Bonaparte once said, “it is sufficient to delay the news until it no longer matters”.³ But, how did the post-Vietnam press behave in face of Washington’s desire to control the flow of news coming from Grenada? Did the news media ask the right questions? Did they challenge the administration’s arguments and question the inevitability of the invasion? These are the questions that I will try to respond to in this article.

With the ‘negative’ lessons of Vietnam in mind, the US policy makers decided to limit the press’ access to the island and, hence, to restrict as much as possible the amount of uncontrolled news. The White House made gargantuan efforts to provide information reflecting its version of events to the US press. Thus, access to sources outside the official channels was limited as much as possible. Accordingly, US reporters were not allowed direct access to Grenada until most of the fighting was over.⁴ When access was finally granted, the selected few allowed to go were flown there by the government, escorted to approved areas only, and allowed to stay for only a few hours.⁵ The severe censorship imposed by the US government during the first days of the

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² Wassim Daghrir, *The Media and Foreign Policy* (Saarbrücken, Germany: Scholars’ Press, 2015), pp. 7-16.

³ Cited in Mark Cook and Jeff Cohen, “How Television Sold the Panama Invasion”, *Extra*, January 1990, p. 8.

⁴ Peter Dunn and Bruce Watson, *American Intervention in Grenada* (Boulder: Westview, 1985).

⁵ William Farrell, “US Allows Reporters to Go to Grenada for Day”, *The New York Times*, October 28, 1983, p. 13.

invasion served the official line in two ways: First, it prevented the press from confirming or refuting the official statements -many of which later proved to be erroneous. Second, it deflected media scrutiny by making the censorship as big a story for the US media as the invasion.⁶ Many media outlets fell into this trap and devoted a lot of time to the censorship issue. Actually, half the precious minutes on the nightly TV news programs were devoted to the adventures of small groups of correspondents trying by air and water to break the blockage.⁷ So, instead of devoting their complete attention to the invasion, the media saw their efforts divided between their coverage of the operation and their denunciation of the censorship imposed on them.

Aside from the official censorship, "the media exercised self-censorship to protect the US government stance".⁸ In effect, the press failed to give detailed background coverage of the invasion: It ignored the accomplishments of the New Jewel Movement (NJM) and downplayed US actions to undermine and weaken the government of Maurice Bishop. Indeed, there was virtually no report of the termination of US aid to Grenada under the Reagan government. Nor was there significant coverage of the American campaign of military intimidation.⁹ The US pre-invasion hostilities, based on programs of economic pressure, diplomatic isolation, and military intimidation, were not cited as background material during the invasion. The media thus failed to relate the October 1983 events, with the revolt of the NJM's extremists and the assassination of Bishop, to the years of US pressure on the Grenadian revolution.

When the Marines landed in Grenada, most of the media rallied around the flag and started to parrot the administration's arguments. In fact, "the overall media thrust was to accept the US action as a kind of natural happening".¹⁰ The first question reporters asked President Reagan during the first press conference devoted to the Grenadian invasion was the following: "Is it true that two of our helicopters were shot down?" This kind of formula demonstrated that the media had accepted the legitimacy of the attack, focusing on how US troops were doing, and not on what they were doing.¹¹

Most of the political press accepted the administration's claim that the invasion was a rescue operation on behalf of American students living in the island. *Time* magazine, for example, headlined its cover story: "Rescue in Grenada".¹² The students who testified that they were never threatened by the Grenadians nor prevented from leaving the island were ignored by the press.¹³ The latter also failed to describe the US government's concern about the students' security as a secondary concern, paying no substantial attention to the fact that the Marines invaded the island without knowing the exact location of the campus -an element that could put the students' lives in real danger.

The second official objective of the invasion was 'the end of Cuban and Soviet involvement in the island'. Actually, the US press accorded prominent coverage to the official argument that Grenada was a Cuban military bastion. *Newsweek* reported that "Grenada's defenders were Cuban and extremely well-armed" and **ABC's** Evening News declared that "American military sources say they were staggered by the depth and strength of the Cuban military presence".¹⁴ While it was transmitting the administration's claims, the press was either unable or unwilling to challenge the White House's arguments as it deemphasized the fact that the Cubans, who were supposed to threaten US security, were unable to save their friend Maurice Bishop. The press also did not give any emphasis to the fact that the Cubans had distanced themselves from the Military Revolutionary Council and had issued an offer of cooperation with the US government. In fact, three days before the invasion, Havana sent a message to Washington suggesting that

[The US and Cuba] keep in touch...so as to contribute to a favorable solution of any difficulty that may arise or action that may be taken relating to the security of US or other nationals in Grenada, without violence or intervention in that country.¹⁵

⁶Ellen Ray and Bill Schaap, "US Crashes Caribbean Jewel", *CovertAction*, Summer 1989, p. 36.

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸Noam Chomsky, *Necessary Illusions* (London: Pluto Press, 1989), p. 177.

⁹In October 1981, for example, US military forces carried out an exercise code-named "Amber and the Amberdines" -obviously a reference to Grenada and the nearby Grenadines- which simulated the invasion and occupation of a small Caribbean island

¹⁰Michael Parenti, *InventingReality* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1993), p. 148.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²*Time*, November 7, 1983.

¹³*The New York Times* did mention these students a week later in the thirty-eighth paragraph of an article on Grenada.

¹⁴**ABC** Evening News, October 27, 1983, cited in Michael Parenti, *InventingReality*, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

¹⁵ Cited in Noam Chomsky, *Necessary Illusions*, *op.cit.*, p. 178.

The media failed to draw attention to Cuba's offer and missed, thus, an opportunity to challenge one of the administration's arguments for intervention.

When US journalists were allowed to visit the island, some sent back reports contradicting the administration's claims. Contrary to what the State Department claimed, there was "no evidence that a terrorist training base existed or that Cubans had planned to take over Grenada", the *New York Times* reported.¹⁶ Nevertheless, such corrective reports were not given the prominent exposure accorded to the government's original charges.

As for the third objective, 'to restore order and democracy', the media traditionally accepted such a noble argument and took at face-value the White House's democratic commitments. As far as operation Urgent Fury was concerned, many correspondents and commentators positively aligned themselves with the invasion, regarding it as a necessary "mission" to restore democracy.¹⁷

In a word, the White House's public relations campaign, as well as the media's docility towards the official version, made a tiny island, which was previously unknown to most Americans, of extreme vitality to the US national interest. Actually, the media were reluctant to raise serious doubts about Grenada's strategic value either for the Soviet Union or for the United States. In effect, the US media accepted the administration's view that tiny Grenada was of enormous military and strategic value to Cuba and the Soviet Union without providing clear explanations. The press did not even challenge the administration's arguments that Grenada's new airport was built for military purposes -even though several clear elements contradicted the administration's claims.¹⁸ To put it briefly, by accepting the official arguments concerning the extreme geo-strategic value of Grenada, the media could but assist the government in its efforts to justify, and to gain popular support for, its invasion of a sovereign country.

Needless to say, the media were not totally supportive of operation Urgent Fury. There were editorials in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Boston Globe* denouncing the invasion. One of the critical articles in the *New York Times* raised questions about the Reagan Administration's "deliberate distortions and knowingly false statements" in regard to the military action.¹⁹ Yet, whereas the coverage of Grenada was not completely pro-governmental, the supportive coverage was visibly dominant. The US government was portrayed as acting in the pursuit of clear defensible goals in Grenada. There was some criticism reported, but the overall tone reflected positively on the administration. Furthermore, very few mainstream voices tried to read between the lines and to escape from the established consensus by exposing the real motives behind Washington's decision to invade and occupy Grenada. In effect, only a few analyses or op-ed pieces explained clearly that, behind the declared objectives, Reagan sent the Marines to the tiny and weak Grenada in order to dismantle the NJM's socio-economic programs, install a pro-US government, send a warning to the neighboring countries, and get rid of the Vietnam syndrome.

To sum up, one might maintain that the US media did not wholly assume their constitutional role given that they failed to bring the government's policy under serious scrutiny. During the Grenada episode, the media were apparently not keen to ask the right questions, as they concentrated much more on the 'how' than on the 'what' and 'why'. In effect, the media did not provide complete background analyses of the invasion, did not bring the official objectives for intervention under severe scrutiny, and did not raise serious doubts about the necessity of such a large-scale action. This kind of coverage makes us raise some questions about the role of the press of a democratic political system in such military conflicts. Actually, can a free press prevent a democratic government from restricting information, influencing the mainstream coverage, and imposing its version of events in the case of such armed conflicts?...

CONCLUSION

Once we have assessed the US media's coverage of operation Urgent Fury, what are the conclusions that can be drawn as regards their objectivity and effective influence on events? Our analysis places us in a clear opposition to the view that holds that the US media were too aggressive and too biased against the government while covering Washington's hemispheric interventions. Actually, the prestige media generally remained faithful to the elites' definitions of political situations. Accordingly, the public was exposed mainly to what the elite chose to make public. There were certainly some excellent investigative articles that conflicted with the official line and caused much embarrassment to the policy makers. Nevertheless, such critical reports were not followed-up in a coherent manner. Moreover, while the press was critical of the policy details it was far from being critical of the official objectives. In this way, the media served as an arena for political discussion

¹⁶*The New York Times*, November 6, 1983, cited in Michael Parenti, *Inventing Reality*, op. cit., p. 149.

¹⁷ABC and CBSEvening News, October 26, 1983, cited in *Ibid*.

¹⁸ First, financial support for the new airport came from a variety of sources including Western Europe. Second, the prime contractor was a British firm. Third, the airport had none of the special technical facilities needed for military exploitation.

¹⁹*The New York Times*, November 6, 1983, cited in Michael Parenti, *Inventing Reality*, op. cit., p. 148.

reflecting the elites' consensus over ends and their lack of consensus over means. As for the alternative views that challenged Washington's essential premises, they were often excluded from the mainstream media's forum.

As a matter of fact, the media, while influential in molding the foreign policy attitudes of the American public, were to a large degree unable and, at times, unwilling to critically assess governmental policy. This holds especially true during foreign policy major crises when the government was able to impose restrictive measures on the freedom of the press. Most foreign policy crises, such as the U.S. intervention in Grenada, have seen the U.S. government employ numerous techniques designed to either manipulate or conceal information. Such government-imposed restrictions on the free flow of information serve to provide the government with the opportunity to present its policies in a positive light. On the other hand, the reliance on official sources protected journalists politically, relieving them of responsibility for the information they reported.²⁰

In a system with a real independent press, the body in charge of foreign policy represents just one of a multitude of potential sources of news and must therefore compete with the other sources for the attention of the news media. The other possible sources of news on foreign policy convert the spreading of information through news coverage into a political competition over the information that the public can use to form wise political opinions. Yet, today most Americans are confused with their country's foreign policy for the reason that the major media do not endow them with 'all the news fit to print', but mainly with the news that the power elite judges fit to print.

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²⁰ Wassim Daghrrir, *The Media and Foreign Policy, op.cit.*, pp. 427-432.