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The End of the Vietnam Syndrome? Ronald Reagan and the U.S. Invasion of Grenada

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The End of the Vietnam Syndrome?

RONALD REAGAN AND THE U.S. INVASION OF GRENADA



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¹ US soldiers stand guard over Grenadian prisoners in St George's, Grenada, 1983. Photograph: AP

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Introduction

For a generation of Americans, the Vietnam War represents a dramatic experience, a trauma, and a truly historical watershed. By the time the American troops withdrew from Vietnam in 1973, the war had become the US's longest one. During the twenty-year struggle between Washington and the Communist North-Vietnam, some 47,000 American soldiers were killed and roughly 304,000 Americans were wounded.² Thousands of teenagers were drafted and sent to fight in Vietnam. At its peak in 1968, America's commitment in Vietnam topped half a million military personnel. The war effort and sacrifice came to affect the whole of American society.

The way in which the war ended was a substantial humiliation for the United States. While stepping on the moon and seen as one of the most advanced nations in the world, the United States was forced out from what at that time was considered an underdeveloped nation. When the war ended, America had to come to terms with the fact that all – the money spent, the lives lost, and the reputation compromised – had been in vain.³

The Vietnam War left a huge scar on the United States. It not only impacted the reputation of the American military, but the war also had major consequences for American politics, and most notably, American foreign policy. American politicians tried not only to understand as to why they lost the war, but also how to prevent a new foreign intervention that could escalate into what some politicians feared as another Vietnam. As a result, under the Ford and Carter presidencies, U.S foreign policy became more cautious. Interventions were only seen as a last resort and were only considered an option if it was in the direct interest of the United States.⁴ The idea of public support for a potential foreign intervention also became more powerful after the Vietnam War, as the war in Vietnam was so unpopular back in the United States.⁵

The phenomenon of US foreign policy becoming more cautious after the Vietnam war is nowadays known as the Vietnam Syndrome. One of the aspects of this syndrome was that there was now more emphasis on public support for a new war or foreign intervention. This

² Paul Dowswell, *The Cold War: The Vietnam War* (London: Hodder Wayland, 2002), 4.

³ Ibid, 4-5.

⁴ Mark Atwood Lawrence, *Rhetoric and Restraint: Ronald Reagan and the Vietnam Syndrome*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021), 177.

⁵ Ibid.

became especially important during the Ford and Carter administrations.⁶ Ronald Reagan, who had claimed the war in Vietnam could have been won, wanted to overcome the Vietnam Syndrome by reasserting the United States as a global power and send out the message that the Ford and Carter administrations had learned the wrong lessons from the Vietnam War.⁷ Under the Ford and Carter administrations, many Americans viewed their role in the world as more of a defensive role against communism and Reagan blamed them for weakening the United States on the global stage.⁸

Even if Reagan wanted to get rid of the Vietnam Syndrome, his cabinet officials were split on the correct lessons that should be learned from the Vietnam War. Reagan his Secretary of State, Alexander Haig, claimed that the Vietnam War had shown the United States that decisive foreign policy was needed, while the Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger, claimed that the correct lesson of the Vietnam War was that a more cautious foreign policy should be pursued, with an emphasis on public support. Weinberger argued that a new American overseas intervention should only take place if it was in the interests of the United States.⁹

Reagan did not start mentioning the fact of what he viewed as kicking the Vietnam Syndrome, when he became president. During his presidential campaign and even before that, Reagan already feared the fact that the United States was becoming inferior compared to the Soviet Union thanks to the fact that under the presidencies of Ford and Carter, the United States became more cautious in implementing their foreign policy.¹⁰ When Reagan was elected president, his drive for a change in foreign policy could now finally be implemented. One of the first area's where Reagan could implement his new foreign policy was Central America, where in march 1981 Reagan and his administration approved an increase in military assistance towards the nation of El Salvador.¹¹ At the same time, Reagan and his

⁶ Alexander Priest, "From Saigon to Baghdad: The Vietnam Syndrome, the Iraq War and American Foreign Policy", *Intelligence and National Security* Vol 24:1, 2009, 142, 145.

⁷ Ibid, 158.

⁸ Russel Crandall, *Gunboat Diplomacy: U.S. Interventions in the Dominican Republic, Grenada and Panama*. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 105.

⁹Jonathan Hunt, Simon Miles and William Inboden, *The Reagan Moment: America and the World in the 1980s*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021), 173.

¹⁰ Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar Movement: U.S. Foreign Policy and the rise of the post- Cold War order*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), 71-72.

¹¹ Geoff Simons, *Vietnam Syndrome: Impact on US Foreign Policy*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 16.

officials also approved a plan by the CIA to increase and approve covert actions taken against Nicaragua and other Central American nations.¹² However, up to 1983, Reagan his policy had never resulted in a full scale invasion of any of the Central American nations.

This changed when in late October of 1983, the United States decided to invade the Caribbean island nation of Grenada.¹³ Reagan saw the invasion of Grenada as the perfect way to get rid of the Vietnam Syndrome, as the island was quite small in size and could be overrun by American forces in just a few days. Reagan hoped that a quick and decisive victory would make the American citizen regain faith in the United States as a strong foreign power.¹⁴ Even Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger, who pleaded for a more cautious approach towards foreign policy, supported Reagan his plans for the invasion of Grenada.¹⁵

In order to pull off this invasion, Reagan wanted it to remain a secret, so the American public had no time to react and, according to Reagan, had no time to fear for another Vietnam, as the operation would be over before the public and media could get involved.¹⁶ On the importance of secrecy and the role that the Vietnam Syndrome played in U.S Foreign Policy, The White House Chief of Staff James Baker, said the following: “It was the first military action since Vietnam. We got a lot of flak—I did, particularly—for not telling the press in advance, or not telling our Press Secretary. But you have to remember, we were operating with the Vietnam syndrome in full force. And we weren’t about to take any risks of casualties to Americans through a leak.”¹⁷ Reagan himself was also skeptical on notifying the American media, and congress, as he claimed that they would be: “Trying to give this the Vietnam treatment.”¹⁸ Reagan his fear for the Vietnam Syndrome can also be seen in the book by Christian Appy, where Reagan states that he was afraid most of the congressmen would be against the invasion because they feared another Vietnam.¹⁹

¹² Simons, *Vietnam Syndrome*, 17.

¹³ Crandall, *Gunboat Diplomacy*, 105.

¹⁴ Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime*. (New York: Simon & Schuster Company, 1991), 339.

¹⁵ Casper Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace, Seven Critical Years in the Pentagon*. (New York: Warner Communications Company, 1990).

¹⁶ Christian Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and our National Identity*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 290-291.

¹⁷ James A. Baker, III Oral History. From: *University of Virginia: Millers Center, Presidential Oral Histories: Ronald Reagan Presidency* (Accessed October 9, 2023).

¹⁸ Reagan Diaries, Sunday, October 30, 1983, 192.

¹⁹ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 290-291.

Many Americans were still skeptical of the potentials a foreign intervention could achieve, but in spite of this the polls showed public support for the invasion. Despite the fact that Reagan wanted to get rid of the Vietnam Syndrome, some historians still claim that Reagan was still affected by the phenomenon. Many of his interventions would turn out to be only minor interventions, and as Mark Lawrance states: “Reagan claimed to get rid of the Vietnam Syndrome, but quietly respected it’s outcomes.”²⁰ Some view the U.S invasion of Grenada as an operation that could never fail and that the primary objective of the invasion was to make American people rally around their flag in a time when most Americans were in doubt on their role in the world.²¹

On the Vietnam Syndrome, there is an extensive amount of literature available. There has been extensive research as to the consequences of the Vietnam War on US foreign policy. Not only this effect on US foreign policy has been deeply studied, but there is also a large amount of research done into Ronald Reagan and his views on foreign policy.

The U.S invasion of Grenada is a less researched subject and is thus relevant to further exploration, as it is an important moment for U.S foreign policy during the Reagan Era. Here we can find a significant gap in the historiography. Reagan had always claimed wanting to be free of the Vietnam Syndrome, and he saw the U.S invasion of Grenada as the perfect opportunity for the American people to regain faith in their nation, as the invasion was an almost guaranteed success. So, the question for this research will be: What was the significance of the Vietnam Syndrome for Ronald Reagan’s administration during the American invasion of Grenada?

In order to answer this research question, this thesis will be divided into several chapters. Before we start further exploring the U.S invasion of Grenada, there will be some time for a literature review. In this chapter, the current historiography on not only the U.S invasion of Grenada, but also on U.S foreign policy under the Reagan administration will be discussed.

Then in the first chapter there will be an analysis of how the foreign policy of the Carter and Ford administrations differed from the foreign policy Reagan had implemented. In this chapter I will argue that under the Reagan administration, American foreign policy became more aggressive in an attempt to once again strengthen the role of the United States on the global stage, like it was before the end of the Vietnam War.

²⁰ Hunt, *The Reagan Moment*, 183.

²¹ Crandall, *Gunboat Diplomacy*, 161.

Before reaching the conclusion for this thesis, there will be a second chapter that focusses on the U.S invasion of Grenada, where I will argue that Reagan his motivations for the invasion were driven by trying to get rid of the Vietnam Syndrome by obtaining an easy victory, but that Reagan was still limited in his plans because of the Vietnam Syndrome. In order to answer the research question of this thesis, both primary and secondary sources will be used. All of the sources used above will be listed in the bibliography and the bibliography will usually still expand during the writing of the thesis.

The primary sources that will be used for this thesis vary between written accounts and speeches. For the oral history part of the primary sources, there are the speeches made by Reagan and his officials that have been documented. The Miller Center has a collection of oral histories on the Reagan administration. This database contains interviews with the Secretary of Defense, Casper Weinberger, or Reagan's Chief of Staff, James A. Baker, all of whom share their own perspectives on the U.S invasion of Grenada and on U.S foreign policy under Ronald Reagan.

For the speeches made by Reagan and other conversations Reagan had with journalists or cabinet officials, there is the Public Papers of the Presidency, which has documented speeches from both his presidential terms. For this thesis, his first term is the most important, as this thesis focuses on the period of 1980-1983 when it comes to the Reagan administration. Through his official speeches, we can get a clear view on Reagan his stance on foreign policy and his justifications for the US invasion of Grenada.

For Reagan's foreign policy, there is the archive of the Foreign Relations of the United States. Some of the documents are still being published online or are under declassification review, but the Volume I: Foundations of Foreign Policy, 1981-1988 is fully published online. This volume is of use for this thesis as it is the official foreign policy that was documented and published to the public of the Reagan administration. The same kind of document is also available for the Carter and Ford administrations.

Then there are the autobiographies written by either journalists or Ronald Reagan himself. From the latter, the Reagan Diaries are an important source, as it contains the most notable meetings Reagan had, also on the invasion of Grenada. Then there is the autobiography of Casper Weinberger, who pleaded for a more cautious approach for US foreign policy.

Finally, prominent journalist Lou Cannon, who was the White House Correspondent for the Washington Post during the Reagan administration and wrote a book on the Reagan presidency, will be used as a primary source. These autobiographies are relevant to this thesis

as they offer an insight into the meetings of for example the National Security Council and show us what the opinions and discussion points were of the officials that were present. Newspapers like the Washington Post and the New York Times will also be used in order to show the public response to the invasion of Grenada.

There will be some limitations for this thesis. To start with, this thesis is reliant on archival sources that have been published online, meaning that there are sources out there and available in the United States, which have not yet been made available online. As a trip to the United States is unfeasible for this thesis, there are some sources that will have to be left out. Since the invasion of the island of Grenada happened in 1983, so forty years ago when this thesis was written, there are still some sources that are seen as classified and have not yet been made available to the public.

The Vietnam War had consequences for the way US foreign policy was conducted for the years to come. Some claim that despite the efforts made by Reagan, the Vietnam Syndrome was not buried until the first Gulf War, and even now some scholars argue that the Vietnam Syndrome still haunts US foreign policy to this day. Reagan tried to get rid of the Vietnam Syndrome, and one way to do so was his invasion of Grenada, hoping that a swift victory would end the Vietnam Syndrome and once again show American strength. The less studied case of the US invasion of Grenada, and the fact that scholars are in doubt whether the United States has fully recovered from the Vietnam Syndrome, makes this thesis relevant for today's debates.

Literature Review

Over the years, there has been a lot of research done by historians on US foreign policy, especially on American foreign policy during the Cold War. In this chapter, there will be a focus on this broad arrange of literature that is available to us and the debates among historians on the subject of US foreign policy during the Cold War. For this chapter, there will be a review on some of the most notable literature that will be used for this thesis, as discussing all the literature that will be used will be too long. The first part of this chapter will focus on the literature that studies the Reagan administration and Reagan his foreign policy. The second part of this chapter will be a review on the most important literature that focusses on US-Grenada relations.

I would argue that there is a clear debate in the historiography on Ronald Reagan and how effective his foreign policy actually was. In his book, *Making the unipolar moment. U.S. foreign policy and the rise of the post- Cold War order*, historian Hal Brands focusses on how US foreign policy had recovered itself from the period of the 1970s. Brands claims that US foreign policy during the 1970s was suffering from a malaise, as the United States started to lose her influence on the global stage.²² However Brands argues that in the 1990s, US foreign policy was back to its strength and the Reagan administration, according to Brands, played an important role in this transition. As Brands points out, Reagan claimed that respect and confidence in the United States was at an all-time low.²³ This claim is further strengthened when we take a closer look at other works done in the field.

Helga Haftendorn. In *The Reagan Administration: A Reconstruction of American Strength?* Haftendorn, just like Brands, claimed that the United States foreign policy suffered from a period of lesser involvement and a period where the United States was losing her international position during the 1970s.²⁴ Haftendorn claimed that the United States under the presidency of Ronald Reagan had three main objectives to break away from the foreign policy that was being implemented during the 1970s.²⁵

²² Brands, *Making the unipolar movement*, 1-3.

²³ Ibid, 337.

²⁴ Helga Haftendorn, *The Reagan Administration: A reconstruction of American Strength?* (Boston: De Gruyter, 1988).

²⁵ Ibid, 3.

According to Haftendorn, the three main objectives were to strengthen US alliances, contain the Soviet Union and to make sure that nations respected the United States once again.²⁶

However where Brands had argued that the Reagan Administration had succeeded in creating a new successful foreign policy that would lead to the United States being the dominant leader on the global stage, Haftendorn counters that by arguing that the Reagan Administration did not inaugurate a new phase of American world leadership.²⁷ It did recover the domestic faith in the United States, but on the foreign policy side, the Reagan Administration had to respect the fact that the United States could not become the global leader it wanted to be.²⁸

Brands concludes that at the beginning of 1980, the United States appeared to be in reverse. It was losing its status as world power to the Soviet Union and the United States had become more cautious in their foreign policy. For Brands, the positions of the United States and Soviet Union had changed dramatically after Ronald Reagan had left the office of president. This all thanks to the fact that Reagan and his officials were more aggressive in their foreign policy, taking opportunity in trying to strengthen American foreign policy once more.²⁹

Thus, where Brands argues that the contribution of the Reagan administration towards foreign policy, was vital to the American resurgence on the global stage, as Reagan and his ministers had developed new strategies on foreign policy that helped the United States regain her powers on the international stage.³⁰ Haftendorn argued the exact opposite to Brands, that the work done by Reagan and his Administration did not result in a new phase of American leadership.³¹ Trevor McCrisken in his work comes to a similar conclusion.

The past two books discussed above, have a focus on the Reagan administration and how Reagan and his officials tried to change US foreign policy. But in order for us to understand the political situation Reagan and his administration inherited, we also need to take a close look at the historiography of American foreign policy previous to the Reagan administration. In *American Exceptionalism and the Legacy of Vietnam: US Foreign Policy Since 1974*, McCrisken goes through the US presidencies, from Ford all the way to the

²⁶ Haftendorn, *The Reagan Administration*.

²⁷ Ibid, 29.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Brands, *Making the unipolar moment*, 117.

³⁰ Ibid, 342.

³¹ Haftendorn, *The Reagan Administration*, 29.

Clinton presidency.³² McCrisken argues that the Vietnam War showed that the United States was not invincible and that under the Ford and Carter administrations, US foreign policy changed. Both tried to heal the nations wounds, left behind by the Vietnam War and became more cautious in implementing US strength abroad.³³

Just like the Haftendorn and Brands research, McCrisken acknowledges the fact that Reagan tried to change US foreign policy and tried to make the world respect and believe in the United States as a superpower once again. However just like Haftendorn does, McCrisken concludes that Reagan his vision of the United States becoming a dominant world player once again, was largely an illusion, as McCrisken argues that Reagan was still reluctant to use the American military to implement in foreign nations, only doing so twice, despite his tough stance rhetorically.³⁴

We can clearly see a debate within the historiography that the Reagan administration was definitely a political move in a different direction compared to the previous presidential administrations, but the effectiveness of Reagan his foreign policy is debated. A key aspect of this thesis and why American foreign policy changed so much between the Ford, Carter and Reagan administrations has to do with the Vietnam Syndrome.

Richard Melanson. In his book: *American foreign policy since the Vietnam War: the search for consensus from Richard Nixon to George W. Bush*, Melanson looks to describe foreign policy from the presidency of Richard Nixon until the presidency of George W. Bush and Melanson tries to research the strategies all these presidents employed to sell their foreign policy to what he sees as a skeptical congress.³⁵ In his conclusion, Melanson argues that under the Reagan administration, there was an emphasis on strengthening the US military after what Reagan saw as years of neglect.³⁶

Melanson concludes that although Reagan his foreign policy was aimed at restoring the faith in the United States after years of neglect, the public was still not sure on whether to support this view or not. The public was afraid of a nuclear war or another Vietnam, and thus

³² Trevor McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism and the Legacy of Vietnam: US Foreign Policy Since 1974*. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003).

³³ Ibid, 185.

³⁴ Ibid, 186.

³⁵ Richard Melanson, *American Foreign Policy since the Vietnam War: The Search for Consensus from Richard Nixon to George W. Bush*. (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2005), 8.

³⁶ Ibid, 334.

Melanson concludes that these public pressures meant that Ronald Reagan and his administration were more limited in their foreign policy than they would have liked.³⁷

Melanson's arguments are also confirmed by Geoff Simons in his *Vietnam Syndrome: Impact on US Foreign Policy*. Simons takes a look at how the Vietnam Syndrome impacted the foreign policy of the United States. Simons starts off with firstly describing the term Vietnam Syndrome and what he means by that. After looking at the situation in the United States during the Vietnam War, Simons focusses on the impact the war had on US foreign policy. Simons concludes that the Vietnam War had both psychiatric impact and practical consequences for the United States.

Simons claims that it had the most impact on the use of military or non-military options and that every new military involvement, from Grenada to Iraq was influenced by the Vietnam War and that the impact of the war remained visible for at least twenty years after Saigon was captured in 1975.³⁸ Simons also argues that Reagan was the first president to try and what he calls kick the Vietnam Syndrome and that the US invasion of Grenada was an opportunity for Reagan to have the people regain faith in the US military.³⁹

Whether Reagan was indeed successful in his new foreign policy and elevating the United States to a global superpower once more is clearly debated by Haftendorn, Brands and McCrisken. Another historian, Mark Atwood Lawrence also doubts the effectiveness of Reagan's foreign policy. It was clear that Reagan wanted to rid the nation of the symptoms of the Vietnam Syndrome and if we are to believe Brands, Reagan actually achieved this. But according to Lawrence, in his chapter *Rhetoric and Restraint Ronald Reagan and the Vietnam Syndrome*, Reagan instead of getting rid of the Vietnam Syndrome, actually respected its symptoms and actually quietly respected the new post-Vietnam political order.⁴⁰

There is a lot of literature that focusses on US foreign policy during the Cold War. Some of the literature discussed above shows us that there is a debate among historians on the effectiveness of the foreign policy implemented by Reagan. What is clear is that Reagan's foreign policy was a break from previous administrations, where foreign policy was more cautious. This thesis does not only look at US foreign policy, but the last part of this thesis focusses on the US relations towards the Caribbean Island of Grenada. There is a significant decrease in literature on the US-Grenada relations compared to the literature on US foreign

³⁷ Melanson, *American Foreign Policy since the Vietnam War*, 349.

³⁸ Simons, *Vietnam Syndrome*, 267.

³⁹ Ibid, 18.

⁴⁰ Hunt, *The Reagan Moment*, 183,

policy. However, within the standing historiography on the US invasion of Grenada, there are several different perspectives that have been used to study the invasion.

One of the older books on US-Grenada relations is by Mark Adkin. *Urgent Fury: The Battle for Grenada*, published in 1989, gives an overview of the US invasion of Grenada, codenamed Urgent Fury, and the actors that were in play.⁴¹ Where the other books will have more of a focus on the decision making from the United States point of view, this book mostly focusses on the situation from the perspective of Grenada and the buildup to the invasion. It is written more from a military perspective, whereas the other books are written more from a political perspective.⁴² One of the interesting conclusions made by Adkin, is that the US invasion of Grenada did not result in a victory. Despite overwhelming superiority, the United States military, according to Adkin, was suffering from the same faults as they had experienced during the Vietnam War, as good intelligence was missing.⁴³

Overtime, the focus of the study of the American invasion of Grenada shifted from a traditional military perspective, towards a focus on decision making and the role of the American president in the conflict. Garry Williams his book *US-Grenada Relations: Revolution and Intervention in the Backyard*, published in 2007, is one of those books that focus more on American politics. It also explains the long history behind the American invasion compared to Adkin his work that focus solely on the American invasion and the strategy behind the invasion. After touching on the US-Grenada relations throughout history, Williams his main focus is on the Carter and Reagan administrations and their policies towards the nation of Grenada. Williams argues that there were three main causes that the US-Grenada relations over the years soured and would eventually lead to the US invasion of the island.

The safety of US citizens in Grenada, the restoration of a democratic government and preventing the spread of influence from Cuba were the main reasons for an eventual US invasion.⁴⁴ In order to explain the relations between the US and Grenada, Williams uses interviews with people that were involved, like officials of the US state department or the US ambassador to Grenada.⁴⁵ Williams finally concludes that under the Reagan administration,

⁴¹ Mark Adkin, *Operation, Urgent Fury: The Battle for Grenada*. (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1989).

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid, 340.

⁴⁴ Gary Williams, *US-Grenada Relations: Revolution and Intervention in the Backyard*. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 3-4.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 191.

for a long period of time, the United States tried to isolate Grenada both politically and economically and that compared to the US-Grenada relations under the presidency of Jimmy Carter, the relations between the two nations under Ronald Reagan worsened.⁴⁶

Robert Beck his work *The Grenada Invasion: Politics, Law, and Foreign Policy Decision making*, published in 1993 is quite similar to Williams his work. Beck his book focusses fully on the decisions that were made behind the scenes from everyone involved.⁴⁷ For example, Beck looks at meetings between Ronald Reagan and his crisis management team on the situation in Grenada, or meetings between Reagan and his National Security Council who regularly updated Reagan on the situation.⁴⁸ He also concludes that under the Reagan administration, the relations with Grenada were worsening as Beck shows us by using statements made by then Secretary of State Alexander Haig, who directed the bureau of Latin-American affairs not to give a single coin of economic support towards Grenada.⁴⁹

Thus, there was clearly already a concept in the historiography of the invasion of Grenada that the United States was to blame for the escalating conflict. But what all books conclude is that the invasion was a success for the United States. This is somewhat challenged by the latest research done into this topic. Philip Kukielski in *The U.S. invasion of Grenada: Legacy of a flawed victory*, published in 2019, comes to a different conclusion. Just like Adkin his work combines both the political aspects from Williams and others and the military side of the conflict similar to Adkin his work.

As one could have guessed by the title, Kukielski argues that the US invasion of Grenada was not a major victory as it was portrayed by the Reagan administration, just like Mark Adkin argued in his book.⁵⁰ Kukielski does conclude that under the Reagan administration the relationship with Grenada indeed worsened, but that the relations between the two nations was already on edge before Reagan became president and that under the presidency of Jimmy Carter, the relation between the US and Grenada was already starting to deter.⁵¹ Kukielski his

⁴⁶ Williams, *US-Grenada Relations*, 76.

⁴⁷ Robert Beck, *The Grenada Invasion: Politics, Law, and Foreign Policy Decision making*. (Boulder, CO: West-View Press, 1993).

⁴⁸ Ibid, 106-107.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 26.

⁵⁰ Philip Kukielski, *The U.S. Invasion of Grenada: Legacy of a flawed victory*. (North Carolina: McFarland & Company Inc. 2019).

⁵¹ Ibid, 160.

work being a more recent study, Kukielski has better access to a wider variety of sources that when Adkin published his book, were still classified.

We clearly see that over time, the American victory of the small Caribbean Island of Grenada went from being seen as a success to more of a flawed victory. Already in 1989, there were links made with the Vietnam War by Adkin. Where Adkin had a strong military and political focus, and written just shortly after the invasion, there has been a shift in the historiography from seeing the invasion as a military success to seeing the invasion as a flawed victory.

All the literature that has been discussed in this chapter is of significance for this thesis. There is however a longer list of literature on both the history of US foreign policy after the Vietnam War and more literature on the US-Grenada relations, which will be used for this thesis. Now that the most important literature for this thesis has been briefly discussed, it is time to continue to the first chapter, where there will be a close study on US foreign policy after the Vietnam War, up until Ronald Reagan became president.

No More Vietnams

After years of fighting in Vietnam, a new period in American foreign policy dawned. The impact of the war in Vietnam and the resulting Vietnam Syndrome was going to determine American foreign policy for the years to come. Under the presidential administrations of Ford, Carter and Reagan, US foreign policy goals and strategies shifted continuously. In this chapter, we need to ask ourselves the question how did the Vietnam War and the resulting Vietnam Syndrome impact the Ford, Carter and Reagan administrations? I will argue that under the Ford and Carter presidencies, American foreign policy goals changed dramatically as a consequence of the Vietnam War.

This chapter will be divided into three different parts, according to the three presidential administrations I will discuss. In the first part, I will argue that President Ford was the first one to try and heal the nation from the wounds left behind by the Vietnam War and that his foreign policy was the first step into a new direction. In the second part of this chapter, I will argue that under Jimmy Carter, US foreign policy changed dramatically, and the emphasis switched from containment policy towards human rights at the center of foreign policy. Finally, I will argue that Ronald Reagan tried to reverse the foreign policy course set by Jimmy Carter and that Reagan wanted to strengthen the United States on the global stage once again after years of neglect.

But first we must start with defining the Vietnam Syndrome once more. Michael Klare, in a study done in 1981, gave us the simple explanation that the Vietnam Syndrome was the American public's dissent against new interventions in third world nations, interventions that a few years prior had led to the Vietnam War.⁵² This is also a good moment to discuss the work done by historian Viet Thanh Nguyen. Nguyen argues that all wars are fought twice, first on the battlefield and the second one in our minds. With this second battle, Nguyen means the battle over how we must remember certain events and how we deal with them.⁵³ It is this second battle, the battle for memory, that will play a crucial role in this thesis, as the scars left behind by the Vietnam War would influence American foreign policy for the coming presidential administrations.

⁵² Michael Klare, *Beyond the "Vietnam Syndrome": U.S. Interventionism in the 1980s* (Washington DC: Institute for Policy Studies, 1981), 1.

⁵³ Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing ever dies: Vietnam and the memory of war* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

The first American president that tried to heal the wounds left behind by the Vietnam War was Gerald Ford, president from 1974 to 1977.⁵⁴ When Ford entered the office of president, the United States was reeling from the resignation of Nixon as a result of the Watergate scandal and a high inflation as a result of the Vietnam War. This, as a result, had caused the American public to lose faith in American politics and especially American foreign policy.⁵⁵ Ford had the difficult challenge to convince the American public that the long nightmare in Vietnam was now over and that the United States could move on from the trauma's left behind by the war.⁵⁶ But what were the correct lessons to be learned in order to move on? Ford, Carter and Reagan all had different perspectives on the correct lessons to be learned.

At the start of his presidential term, the American public was quite optimistic for Ford and his administration. The American public had good hope that Ford would indeed heal the nation from the trauma's left behind by the Vietnam War. This optimism was mainly due to Ford his previous experience in International Affairs. For many his experience in International Affairs presented an opportunity on the area of foreign policy, as Ford his experience on this area meant that he could present himself as a strong leader and make it clear to the American people what direction the country would take.⁵⁷

Early on in his presidency, Ford faced his first major foreign policy crisis. Ford had to deal with the images and messages coming out of South Vietnam, where communist forces were regaining control over South Vietnam.⁵⁸ After years of fighting in Vietnam to protect South Vietnam, the capital Saigon fell just under two years since the last American forces withdrew from Vietnam. These images and messages no doubt resulted in mixed feelings among the American public, who had seen their country sacrifice a huge number of resources for years to protect a regime that had now fallen. A week before the fall of Saigon, Ford held a speech at Tulane University, where he tried to close the history of the Vietnam War. During his speech, being well aware of the destabilizing situation in South Vietnam, Ford was asked about a new potential American intervention in Vietnam.

Now going back to Vietnam in yet another intervention and possibly another prolonged conflict could have been an opportunity to get rid of some of the trauma of the Vietnam war,

⁵⁴ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 223.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Andrew Priest & Andrew Johnstone, *US Presidential Elections and Foreign Policy: Candidates, Campaigns and Global Politics from FDR to Bill Clinton* (Kentucky: Kentucky University Press, 2017), 231.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 231-232.

⁵⁸ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 223.

but only if this resulted in an American victory. Ford would acknowledge that a new intervention would mean the chance for America to “Regain a sense of pride that existed before Vietnam”. However, for Ford, a new intervention or the regaining of American pride “cannot be achieved by refighting a war that is finished as far as America is concerned.”⁵⁹ So for Ford, a new intervention could have been an option to heal the wounds left by the Vietnam War as it would be a way for the United States to regain some sense of pride. But it was clear to Ford that a new intervention would not be a realistic option at this moment in time.

Although Ford opted not to intervene in Vietnam again, this did not mean that Ford and his administration were not interested in any new developments coming out of South Vietnam. In fact as late as 1975, the year Saigon fell and two years since the last American forces withdrew from Vietnam, Ford and his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, who was also Ford his Secretary of State, claimed that the situation in Vietnam was still in the interests of the United States and that the fall of Saigon would represent a fundamental threat to American security.⁶⁰ Whether more decisive action, like financial or military aid, would have saved Saigon is highly doubtful, but what is clear is that these options were simply only mentioned but would eventually never be used. Here we can see a clear change in US foreign policy. Despite the danger of a communist take-over of Vietnam, it was clear that Ford would not intervene again in Vietnam.⁶¹

One of the main reasons that Ford did not decide to intervene in Vietnam, was that the opinion among the American public on new interventions, had changed. During the Vietnam War, there were mass protests against the war and this attitude against a foreign intervention remained after the last American forces withdrew from Vietnam in 1973. Where Americans in the past were more supportive of foreign interventions, especially to prevent the Soviet Union from gaining more influence, most Americans were now against a new foreign intervention.

This was something that soon after the fall of Saigon, prominent members of the Ford administration realized as well. We can clearly see this in a memorandum from the Director of the Joint Staff, Harry D. Train, to the Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staffs, George S. Brown, sent on the 24th of June 1975, two months after the fall of Saigon. Brown stated that: “The American public is not as willing as earlier assumed to support extended military operations

⁵⁹ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 223-224.

⁶⁰ Simons, *Vietnam Syndrome*, 4.

⁶¹ Joseph Nye, *Do Morals Matter?: presidents and foreign policy from FDR to Trump* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 100.

in support of limited interests abroad. The objective of future limited military operations abroad will need to be both clearly understandable to the public and of sufficient national interest to warrant the use of force.”⁶² This memorandum reinforces the idea that after the Vietnam War, US foreign policy and especially foreign interventions should only take place if there was enough support from the public and only if it was in the interests of the United States.⁶³

Another intervention in Vietnam would have been immensely unpopular among the American public. But the change in foreign policy was not just visible with the destabilizing in Vietnam. Another case that showed a change in US foreign policy as well, was the stance the Ford administration had towards the situation in Angola, where a civil war was raging since 1975. It was clear to Washington that a threat of the spread of Communism was real in Angola, as a US backed intervention earlier had been defeated by both Soviet and Cuban aid and forces.⁶⁴

Ever since this defeat, Washington did not go beyond financial support, as the fear of being dragged into a new Vietnam was present within US congress.⁶⁵ The fear to go beyond financial or material support, so to the commitment of US forces, is also seen in a private conversation between Ford and his French colleague Valéry Giscard D’Estaing. In this letter Ford mentions: “With regard to our aid, we feel the problem is now less one of material than an aggressive offensive effort”⁶⁶ and later Ford mentions that “The United States seeks neither to dominate an independent Angola nor to confront the Soviet Union in there.”⁶⁷

This stance by the White House would have been thought impossible before the Vietnam War. Whereas under earlier Presidents, the fact that the Soviet Union was trying to increase its influence in Africa would not go unanswered and a more aggressive foreign policy would have been pursued, now there was a clear stance of maintaining peace with the

⁶² *Memorandum From the Director of the Joint Staff (Train) to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Brown)*, June 24th 1975. From: Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume X, Vietnam, January 1973-July 1975 (Accessed November 15, 2023).

⁶³ Priest, *Intelligence and National Security*, 145.

⁶⁴ Eddie Michel, “Racial Justice and the Cold War: Gerald R. Ford, Rhodesia and the Geneva Conference of 1976.” *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies* Vol 20:4, 2019, 473.

⁶⁵ Inge Tvedten, “US Policy towards Angola since 1975.” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* Vol 30:1, 1992, 35.

⁶⁶ *Message from President Ford to French President Giscard D’Estaing*, November 25, 1975. From: Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume XXVIII, Southern Africa (Accessed November 16, 2023).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

Soviet Union and improving relations between the two nations. In this case, Ford actually continued the improvement of relationships between the United States and Soviet Union, relations that were already improving during the Nixon administration, a period we now know as the Détente. Ford increased this further, but this stance would soon become unpopular, as Ford was criticized by politicians like Reagan for accepting Soviet domination of Eastern Europe and weakening the position of the United States on the global stage.⁶⁸

Ford did actually use military force during his presidency. Ford deployed the Marines to rescue an American vassal that had been taken hostage by the Khmer Rouge forces just off the shores of Cambodia. The whole operation would turn into a huge failure. It could have been a huge success for Ford to show that the American military after its defeat in Vietnam was still standing strong. However, the huge loss of life during the operation only resulted in the confirmation for many that the American military was just an image of its former self since it had left Vietnam.⁶⁹

Clearly under the Ford administration, the first few changes in American foreign policy were made. It was clear that Ford was not keen on new foreign interventions out of fear of being dragged into another Vietnam style war and the fact that the American public was very much against a new intervention also influenced Ford his foreign policy. From an outside perspective however, it would look like foreign policy under Ford did not really differ from the previous administrations. This view was widely held by the American public and was perhaps even further re-enforced by Ford his decision not only to pardon previous president Richard Nixon, but also by keeping many of the secretaries that worked for the Nixon administration. Secretaries like Henry Kissinger remained in their positions under the Ford administration, making many Americans believe that nothing had really changed in the White House, despite Ford his hands off policy towards the situation in South-Vietnam or Africa.⁷⁰

Perhaps the biggest change in US foreign policy was under the presidency of Jimmy Carter. His election to the office of president in 1976 meant a complete re-examination of US foreign policy. Unlike the previous president, Carter had almost no previous experience in the area of foreign policy or International Affairs. Nevertheless, Carter would try to completely

⁶⁸ Nye, *Do Morals Matter*, 100-101.

⁶⁹ Yanek Mieczkowski, *Gerald Ford and the Challenges of the 1970s* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2005), 296.

⁷⁰ Priest, *US Presidential Elections and Foreign Policy*, 232.

reform US foreign policy during his presidency.⁷¹ Carter pointed out the dangers that American foreign interventions in areas that were of no interest for the United States, with the Vietnam War as the biggest example, could have.

The Vietnam War was a war that according to Carter and many others, was started with trying to contain the influence of the Soviet Union, when the ideology of containment dominated American foreign policy and a policy that would eventually saw the United States get involved in Vietnam.⁷² Carter and others within his administration realized that using containment as foreign policy was no longer the reality. Carter realized that during this era, the world could no longer be viewed in a western capitalist bloc and an eastern communist bloc. As a result, Carter decided that US foreign policy should change, from focusing on containment policies against communism, to a new foreign policy with Human Rights at its center.

During his inauguration, Carter thanked Ford and his administration for their attempts to heal the nation from the wounds left behind by the Vietnam War, but that not enough had been done up to this point. Carter pointed towards the pardoning of Nixon and Kissinger who remained involved in foreign policy as the main causes.⁷³ As was clear under the Ford administration, there were many global conflicts that American foreign policy had to respond to. The Soviet Union was increasing its influence in Africa and other Third World nations and by the end of the 1970s, an Islamic Revolution overthrew the western supported Shah of Iran and not long after the Soviet Union would invade Afghanistan.⁷⁴

In a speech at the University of Notre Dame on May 22nd, 1977, Carter, just like his predecessor, mentioned the impact the Vietnam War had on American politics. Carter stated that: “The Vietnamese war produced a profound moral crisis, sapping worldwide faith in our own policy, a crisis of confidence made even more grave by the covert pessimism of some of our leaders.”⁷⁵ Carter was thus determined to do foreign policy different. Where during the Vietnam War, foreign policy was more of a secret to the American public, US foreign policy

⁷¹ Aaron Donaghy, *The second Cold War: Carter, Reagan, and the Politics of Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 24.

⁷² Patrick Hagopian, *The Vietnam War in American Memory: Veterans, Memorials and the Politics of Healing* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 33-34.

⁷³ McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism*, 56.

⁷⁴ Nye, *Do Morals Matter*, 106.

⁷⁵ Jimmy Carter Address at Commencement Exercises at the University of Notre Dame, May 22, 1977. From: The American Presidency Project (Accessed November 17, 2023).

for Carter should be more open and most importantly, in cooperation with both Congress and the American public.⁷⁶ Above all, Carter found it most important to implement more moral values into American foreign policy, and thus the focus of Carter and his administration shifted more towards Human Rights.⁷⁷

Despite his inexperience on foreign policy, Carter his shift towards Human Rights as the main focus of US foreign policy, was widely supported by his officials. Carter was determined to spread American Civil Rights overseas. His National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzeziński also persuaded Carter to use Human Rights as a foreign policy strategy. Brzeziński hoped that by focusing on Human Rights, this would weaken the Soviet Union and cause internal divisions that could eventually lead to the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁷⁸

For many, Carter his foreign policy is viewed as a success, with the successful Camp David Accords as an example. However, according to some American politicians and experts on US foreign policy, there were a lot of points of critique to be had on Carter his foreign policy, as Carter his focus on Human Rights as foreign policy also made the country look weak. Robert Kaplan argues that if it was not thanks to the foreign policy decisions made by presidents Nixon and Ford, the United States may not have survived the damage caused by Carter his foreign policy.⁷⁹ To prove this, Kaplan points towards the increasing influence of the Soviet Union in Africa. Kaplan looks especially at the fact that the Carter administration refused to increase arms deliveries to Ethiopia, making it easier for the Soviet Union to increase their influence in this region.⁸⁰

Kaplan was not the only one to critique Carter his foreign policy. Conservative Republicans attacked Carter for his passiveness in foreign policy and pointed towards Carter not taking action in Iran where the Shah had been overthrown by an Islamic Revolution. The same was the case for Nicaragua where left-wing revolutionaries swept away the Somoza regime. Conservative Republicans blamed Carter his Human Rights stance on foreign policy for this passive attitude and concluded that even though both regimes were repressive against their own people, they were important allies to the United States.⁸¹ Jeane Kirkpatrick stated

⁷⁶ McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism*, 56.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 34.

⁷⁹ Robert Kaplan, "The Statesman: In Defense of Henry Kissinger," *The Atlantic* (May 2013), 78.

⁸⁰ Nye, *Do Morals Matter*, 106.

⁸¹ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 232.

this an article in 1979: “The Shah and Somoza were not only anti-Communist, they were positively friendly to the U.S.”⁸²

Kirkpatrick championed the idea of a more muscular approach to foreign policy, claiming that national security was more important than moral standards, as was the case under Carter.⁸³ Kirkpatrick criticized Carter by claiming that authoritarian regimes would sometimes turn into liberal democracies and should thus still be supported, even if they violate human rights. Communism was not an authoritarian regime for Kirkpatrick but a totalitarian state, and despite all the efforts made by Carter, unable to reform towards a liberal democracy.⁸⁴

Clearly Carter his focus on human rights as the main focus of US foreign policy was causing critique among many Republicans and Conservatives in Congress. The two areas of critique were Carter his foreign policy towards Latin America and Iran. During his first year as president, Nicaragua was plunged into a civil war. Carter was torn between supporting the current government, which was preventing a rise of communism in Nicaragua, or to withdraw military and financial aid to the same regime because of the numerous Human Rights violations committed by the current regime.⁸⁵

Here we can see the new change in American foreign policy. The fact that Carter was in doubt whether to support an American ally because of human right violations, made the United States passive to the situation unfolding. Carter his advisors realized the difficult situation and would opt that the United States would play a mediating role between the fighting factions in Nicaragua, as can be seen in a memo from Brzezinski to Carter: “That you approve modifying instructions to ask Latin American countries to join us in mediation in Nicaragua.”⁸⁶ By trying to find middle ground between the Somoza government and the Sandinistas, Carter incurred the criticism of both factions and from the left and right of the

⁸² Appy, *American Reckoning*, 232.

⁸³ Ibid, 49.

⁸⁴ Colin Dueck, *Hard line: the republican party and U.S. foreign policy since world war II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 198.

⁸⁵ Gaddis Smith, *Morality, Reason and Power: American Diplomacy in the Carter Years* (New York, 1986), 118-119.

⁸⁶ *Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski) to President Carter, September 19, 1978*. From: Foreign Relations of the United States 1977-1980; Volume XV; Central America, 1977-1980 (Accessed November 19, 2023).

political spectrum in Washington. They blamed Carter for the eventual loss of a valuable American ally in the region.⁸⁷

The situation in Iran was deteriorating as well. The Shah, supported by the United States was becoming increasingly unpopular. The Carter administration was too slow to realize that the situation was deteriorating at a rapid pace.⁸⁸ According to Gaddis Smith, Carter had inherited a volatile situation in Iran and could probably not have reversed it, but his administrations did make the worst of it.⁸⁹ Use of the American military to save the Shah was not an option in the first few months.

The situation for Carter became even worse when fifty-two Americans were held hostage in the US embassy in Teheran in 1980. The same year, Carter was up for re-election, running against Ronald Reagan trying to extend his presidency for another four years. Carter eventually decided against campaigning until the hostage situation was resolved. Several attempts were made by the Carter administration to open talks with the new Revolutionary Iranian government.⁹⁰ But as the months passed, Carter decided to use military force to free the hostages. The operation resulted in a major failure, and it was another humiliation for the American military. It showed the decline of the US forces that had been ongoing ever since the withdrawal from Vietnam.⁹¹

Carter his policy to find a middle ground between the United States and the Soviet Union was dealt a blow when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979. Where Carter in the past focused more on trying to find a compromise between both sides for a Soviet withdrawal out of Afghanistan, Carter his new stance in this conflict left little room for any compromise.⁹² In Carter his State of the Union held on January 23, 1980, Carter his new views towards the situation in Afghanistan can be seen: “An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of

⁸⁷ Smith, *Morality, Reason and Power*, 122.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 187.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 188.

⁹⁰ David Houghton, *US Foreign Policy and the Iran Hostage Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 5.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Donaghy, *The second Cold War*, 78.

the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.”⁹³

The Carter administration their new stance on foreign policy as a response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, is by some experts described as a turn to the right, as finding a middle ground with the Soviet Union was abandoned and the period of Détente was considered to be over. In a televised speech to the nation on January 4th, 1980, Carter spoke to the nation on the situation in Afghanistan. In this speech, we can see the abandonment of the idea of finding a middle ground with the Soviet Union. To start with Carter announced to: “halt or to reduce the exports to the Soviet Union in three areas that are particularly important to them.”⁹⁴ These three areas would eventually be the export of technology and grain to the Soviet Union and restricting their fishing rights in American waters.⁹⁵

Despite the critique Carter voiced over the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, a military intervention was once again not an option for the United States. Brzezinski urged to go beyond just medical and financial aid to the Mujahadeen who were fighting the Soviets, and wanted a more active role in the conflict but this was never to be.⁹⁶ Carter did promise that: “Along with other countries, we will provide military equipment, food, and other assistance to help Pakistan defend its independence and its national security against the increased threat it now faces from the north.”⁹⁷ By supporting neighboring nations with weapons, the US would not be directly involved in the conflict against the Soviets. The deteriorating situation in Iran with the hostage crisis, would continue during his presidential re-election campaign, an election that Carter would eventually lose to Ronald Reagan.

Reagan his views on foreign policy differed from the Ford and Carter administrations. Reagan won the presidential elections of 1980, against Jimmy Carter. But Reagan his critique for the current state of US foreign policy was already made clear in the previous presidential elections, where Reagan tried his luck against Ford in the primaries for the Republican

⁹³ *Jimmy Carter State of the Union Address 1980. January 23, 1980.* From: Jimmy Carter Presidential Library & Museum (Accessed November 20, 2023).

⁹⁴ *Jimmy Carter Speech on Afghanistan, January 4, 1980.* From: Millers Center: Presidential Speeches: Jimmy Carter Presidency (Accessed November 20, 2023).

⁹⁵ Donaghy, *The second Cold War*, 95.

⁹⁶ *Summary of Conclusions of Special Coordination Committee Meeting, January 2, 1980.* From: Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980, Volume VI, Soviet Union (Accessed November 21, 2023).

⁹⁷ *Jimmy Carter Speech on Afghanistan, January 4, 1980.*

nominee.⁹⁸ During the primaries for the Republican presidential candidate, Reagan had voiced his critique against the Ford administration's foreign policy and focused his critique especially on Henry Kissinger. For Reagan, the Détente policies of the Ford administration had significantly weakened the position of the United States on the global stage. Reagan especially focused on the policies of the Ford administration towards the Panama Canal and the situation in Southern Africa where the Soviets were expanding their influence.⁹⁹

Reagan would eventually not run against Jimmy Carter in the 1976 presidential elections. Despite his loss in 1976, Reagan would try to go for president once more during the 1980 presidential elections. Reagan was now the most prominent Republican nominee to run against Carter. Just like with Ford during the 1976 presidential elections, Reagan once again voiced his criticism on the state of US foreign policy, this time against Carter in the 1980 presidential elections. Foreign policy was the most important theme during the presidential debates. In fact, according to some experts, foreign policy was more important during the elections than domestic policy was, especially the high inflation in the United States was viewed as less important than foreign policy was during the debates between Carter and Reagan.¹⁰⁰

It was no secret that Reagan wanted to try and restore faith in the United States and regain American strength on the global stage, as was made clear in the introduction. During the Ford and Carter administrations, we have seen a period of Détente and an improvement of relationships between the United States and Soviet Union as a result of this policy. With the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan one can claim that the Détente was already on the decline, but with Ronald Reagan as president, the improvement of relationships between both nations was sure to be ended.¹⁰¹

Reagan expressed his dissent of the current state of American foreign policy not just in the election campaigns against Ford or Carter. In 1978, Reagan in a speech mentioned his dissent of the current state of global affairs with the Soviet Union. Reagan feared that if the nation continued on this course, "the United States will be assigned a role of permanent military inferiority vis-à-vis the Soviet Union."¹⁰² Reagan, just like most Conservative and Republicans in congress, saw the policy of Détente as a strategic failure. They claimed that it

⁹⁸ Priest, *US Presidential Elections and Foreign Policy*, 234.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 235.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 252-253.

¹⁰¹ Nye, *Do Morals Matter*, 118.

¹⁰² Brands, *Making the Unipolar Movement*, 71.

allowed the Soviet Union to spread their influence unchecked. Most important, they argued that the Détente had caused the United States to decrease their spending on the defense budget, while doing nothing about the fact that the Soviet Union was only increasing its spending on defense.¹⁰³

During the presidential campaign of 1980, Reagan gave his views and criticism on the Carter administration and their use of foreign policy in an interview in 1980: “What this Administration has done to the domestic economy is infinitesimal compared to what has been done on the international scene to this country.”¹⁰⁴ Reagan clearly criticized the Carter administration for the fact that on the global stage, the United States was getting weaker and that this was nothing compared to the high inflation on the domestic side.

Reagan pleaded for a much tougher stance towards the Soviet Union. He wanted to reverse the Détente and he did not approve of the current status quo between the two nations. His rhetorical offensive against the Soviet Union, as well as an increase in military spending, with the goal to result in an increased US military, was meant to put pressure on the Soviet Union, hoping that it would collapse.¹⁰⁵

Whereas under Carter and his administration Human Rights were the main priority, this changed when Reagan became president. Human Rights still played a role in US foreign policy under Reagan, but there was to be a more proactive focus on strengthening the role of the United States on the global stage. The shift in US foreign policy, to be more proactive on the global stage, is also seen in a memorandum from Secretary of State Haig to Reagan. In this memorandum of January 11, 1982, Haig discusses the current state of American foreign policy: “We placed foreign policy on a new footing, one based less in negotiation *per se* than on an approach comprising a U.S. effort to rebuild its economic and military strength.”¹⁰⁶

Here we see the importance of Reagan his new vision of US foreign policy, to strengthen the American economy and the American military once again after years where a more passive stance was the norm in US foreign policy. The new stance of the United States towards the Soviet Union, is also mentioned in the same memorandum: “Moreover, we have put Moscow on notice that Soviet and Soviet-proxy behavior which challenged the world

¹⁰³ Brands, *Making the Unipolar Movement*, 72.

¹⁰⁴ Priest, *US Presidential Elections and Foreign Policy*, 252.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ *Memorandum From the Secretary of State Haig to President Reagan, January 11, 1982*. From: Foreign Relations of the United States, 1981-1988, Volume I, Foundations of Foreign policy (Accessed November 23, 2023).

order would not go without response.”¹⁰⁷ This part of the memorandum shows that where under the previous administrations, the United States was more lenient towards the Soviet Union, this changed once Reagan came to power, making sure that the expansion of Soviet influence would not go unanswered, definitely signaling the end of the period of Détente.

A good example of Reagan his change in foreign policy can be found in Central and South America. We have seen that under the Carter administration, there was an emphasis on balancing human rights with supporting regimes that were allies to the United States. It was in El Salvador where Reagan his ideology and his stance against the spread of communism was first used. In El Salvador, when Reagan took office, the current pro-West regime was under threat from guerilla insurgencies.¹⁰⁸ As a response, Reagan supported the current regime in El Salvador with more than two billion dollars in aid, consisting of mostly military and medical aid.¹⁰⁹ This was also a significant increase of the aid Carter and his administration gave to El Salvador, which was only twenty-five million dollars in aid.¹¹⁰

On the situation in El Salvador, according to Haig: “We should also continue to increase the pressures on Cuba and provide whatever economic and military assistance is needed to keep El Salvador and its neighbors afloat.”¹¹¹ Besides the Soviet-Union, Cuba was also seen as a close threat to the United States and their interests. Reagan feared the spread of Cuban influence in Central and South America, thus his focus was set on maintaining current regimes and allies in Central and South America in power by supporting them with large sums of economic and military aid.

Reagan realized that the American public was still reeling from the Vietnam War and not happy to support a new foreign intervention. Reagan however, still wanted to strengthen the United States position towards the Soviet Union. For Reagan, the Soviet Union had become too strong in his opinion and had to be brought to a hold. This meant that Reagan and

¹⁰⁷ *Memorandum From the Secretary of State Haig to President Reagan, January 11, 1982.* From: Foreign Relations of the United States, 1981-1988, Volume I, Foundations of Foreign policy (Accessed November 23, 2023).

¹⁰⁸ Brands, *Making the Unipolar Movement*, 79.

¹⁰⁹ Simons, *The Vietnam Syndrome*, 328.

¹¹⁰ Alexander Haig, *Caveat: Realism, Reagan, and Foreign Policy* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1984), 128.

¹¹¹ *Memorandum From the Secretary of State Haig to President Reagan, January 11, 1982.* From: Foreign Relations of the United States, 1981-1988, Volume I, Foundations of Foreign policy (Accessed November 23, 2023).

his administration had to look towards other means to implement his view of foreign policy.¹¹² As a solution, under Reagan but also previous administrations, there was an emphasis on Low Intensity Warfare, or LIW for short. It was meant as a solution for US foreign policy to fight wars without declaring them.¹¹³

Under the Reagan administration, this method of using LIW to push wars in overseas nations in favor of the United States, and not the Soviet Union, was implemented more than under other administrations. This concept of LIW, and supporting anti-communist regimes in mostly third world nations, would according to some be named the Reagan Doctrine. Under his administration, Reagan supported regimes in El Salvador, Afghanistan, Angola and many more Third World nations, as a way to prevent the spread of communism.¹¹⁴

This was not entirely true, as under the Carter administration, US spending on defense was increased after years of savings, but now that Reagan was president, the defense budget would increase by large amounts, with the support of congress.¹¹⁵ The abandonment of Human Rights under the Reagan administration, meant that Reagan started to strengthen or reshape alliances. Under Carter, some allies who were violating Human Rights became estranged with the Carter administration. Allies like Argentina, Chile or even South Korea were criticized by Carter for their violations of Human Rights. Now that Human Rights were less important, these alliances were once again strengthened by Reagan.¹¹⁶

Despite the fact that Reagan wanted to roll back the Détente from the previous administrations and create a tougher stance towards the Soviet Union, the reality was sometimes quite different. Reagan his ideas to try and strengthen American foreign policy were sometimes even quite unrealistic.¹¹⁷ In interviews done by officials of the Reagan administration, this theme comes back multiple times. According to some, Reagan did not have a clear foreign policy strategy towards the Soviet Union.¹¹⁸ Richard Allen, Assistant for National Security Affairs did believe that Reagan had an effective strategy towards the Soviet

¹¹² Simons, *The Vietnam Syndrome*, 288.

¹¹³ Micheal Klare and Peter Kornbluh, *Low Intensity Warfare: How the USA Fights Wars without Declaring Them* (London: Methuen, 1989), vii.

¹¹⁴ Simons, *The Vietnam Syndrome*, 288.

¹¹⁵ Brands, *Making the Unipolar Movement*, 74-75.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 79.

¹¹⁷ Nye, *Do Morals Matter*, 118.

¹¹⁸ Hunt, *The Reagan Moment*, 34.

Union.¹¹⁹ However when asked a question on Reagan his strategy of expanding the US military to break down the Soviet Union and that it was an effective strategy according to some, Secretary of State, George Schultz said: ‘I’ve heard a lot of people say that, but I never really bought that.’¹²⁰

People within his administration were not convinced Reagan his new stance on foreign policy was going to succeed. Even though Reagan wanted to rid the nation of what he viewed as the Vietnam Syndrome, he quietly respected it in his first few years. He supported the Mujahadeen in Afghanistan in their fight against the Soviet Union but only with weapons, not with troops on the ground. When presented an opportunity to block or perhaps even attack Cuba, a nation that Reagan saw as a threat because of their communist ties, Reagan declined. He feared that such a strategy would result in a new Vietnam War and opted for other solutions to roll back the influence of the Soviet Union.¹²¹

Even though Reagan voiced his criticism on using human rights as a way to implement foreign policy, he soon realized that human rights in foreign policy would not disappear. What Reagan did change, was the way on how human rights were used in foreign policy. Whereas under Carter human rights were used as a way to be more passive in their support to foreign regimes, Reagan used human rights to justify a more aggressive foreign policy by claiming the United States was getting involved in these overseas conflicts was because it viewed to be essential for the protection of human rights.¹²²

Despite Reagan his strong emphasis on a more aggressive foreign policy and intervening in Third World nations to prevent the strengthening of the Soviet sphere of influence, it never went beyond sending weapons to allied regimes. The Reagan Doctrine did not mean the use of military troops overseas. This would soon change, because in 1983, Reagan decided to proceed with the military plans for an invasion of the island nation of Grenada, the first full US invasion since the end of the Vietnam War.

After the Vietnam War, three presidents: Ford, Carter and Reagan tried to what they called heal the nation from the wounds left by the Vietnam War. All three administrations had their own view on how to heal the nation and how this should be done in foreign policy.

¹¹⁹ Hunt, *The Reagan Moment*, 34.

¹²⁰ *Interview with George Schultz, December 18, 2002*. From: Millers Center of Public Affairs: Presidential Oral History Projects: Ronald Reagan Oral History Project (Accessed November 22, 2023).

¹²¹ Brands, *Making the Unipolar Movement*, 80.

¹²² William Michael Schmidli, *Freedom on the Offensive: Human Rights, Democracy Promotion, and US Interventionism in the Late Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022), 70.

Under the Ford and Carter administrations, US foreign policy became more cautious, meaning less aggressive foreign involvement by America. During both presidencies, the relationship with the Soviet Union was improving in a period known as Détente.

However, both administrations had to deal with critiques from Republicans and Conservatives. The fact that both administrations had a more cautious approach to US foreign policy, meant that the Soviet Union could increase their influence in the world, especially in Third World nations. When Reagan took office, he viewed that thanks to Carter and Ford, the United States was left weak compared to the Soviet Union, thus Reagan pleaded for once again a more aggressive foreign policy towards the Soviet Union and communism as a way to restore faith and pride in America and American exceptionalism. Reagan increased the defense budget and would intervene more to help regimes allied to the United States in their fight against communism, today known as the Reagan Doctrine. This doctrine would eventually lead to the first major US intervention since the Vietnam War.

Reagan made it clear during the 1980 presidential election campaign, that there would be an increase in spending on defense once more. Part of Reagan his strategy was that, by increasing the American spending on defense, it would force the Soviets to increase their defense budget as well. Reagan hoped that because of the Soviet Union's fragile economy, forcing them to increase their defense budget would increase the pressure on an already unstable Soviet economy.¹²³

¹²³ Schmidli, *Freedom on the Offensive*, 40.

The End of the Vietnam Syndrome?

For many historians, the Vietnam Syndrome got buried in the deserts of the Middle East with Operation Desert Storm in 1990. What is mostly forgotten is that this was not the first major military intervention by the United States since the Vietnam War. In October of 1983 the American military invaded the Caribbean Island nation of Grenada and conquered it in just three days. For President Reagan, who wanted to rid the nation of the Vietnam Syndrome, this invasion could be viewed as a huge victory over the Vietnam Syndrome. It showed that the United States military was once again a force to be reckoned with. But despite the huge military success of the operation, for many historians the invasion of Grenada did not signal the end of the Vietnam Syndrome. Thus, despite all of his efforts, Reagan his invasion of Grenada did not end the Syndrome.

In this chapter we will take a closer look at Reagan his policy towards Grenada and why he eventually decided to invade the island nation. I will try to answer how the American invasion of Grenada did not result in the ending of the Vietnam Syndrome. I will argue that despite the successful military intervention in Grenada, Reagan was not able to rid the nation of the Vietnam Syndrome and that even for the next president, Bush, the Vietnam Syndrome was still present in American society.

To understand the American invasion of Grenada, we need to briefly look back at President Carter and his policy, as the situation in Grenada was already starting to escalate. During Carter his last year as president, there was a regime change in Grenada. On March 13, 1979, the government of Grenada was overthrown by a leftist movement who turned towards Castro and Cuba for aid.¹²⁴ When the current president was out of the country, the leftist movement under the lead of Maurice Bishop took control.

The American ambassador to the region in 1979 was Frank Ortiz. According to Gaddis Smith, Ortiz was known for his anti-communist rhetoric. A leftist take-over, possibly aided by Communist Cuba and maybe even the Soviet Union, thus created a sense of fear for Ortiz, especially since the revolution took place so close to the American mainland. Ortiz visited the island and met with the new president, Maurice Bishop. In a meeting between the two, Ortiz pushed Bishop to denounce any ties between him and Cuba or risk losing all

¹²⁴ Smith, *Morality, Reason, and Power*, 125.

American economic and military support: “our relationship will be complicated if it developed close ties with Cuba.”¹²⁵

The result of the meeting with Ortiz was seen as a threat to Bishop, who would soon indeed strengthen ties with Cuba and allow Cuban military officials to enter Grenada instead of denouncing these ties. The response from the Carter administration at first was one of caution and doubt whether to support the new regime. But just a month later, the potential relationships with the new regime were shoved away as the presence of Soviet and Cuban advisors was noticed by American officials.¹²⁶

The response by the National Security Council was to try and diplomatically isolate Grenada. The Security Council contemplated the idea of an immediate blockade by the American Navy. We can argue that this is the point that would later result in the American invasion of Grenada, as according to Gaddis Smith, American aggression towards the new Bishop regime in Grenada, pushed Bishop into strengthening his ties with Cuba and the Soviet Union.¹²⁷ Carter his Latin America experts urged him to make a concentrated effort to not “lose Grenada to the communist camp.”¹²⁸

Cuban aid to Grenada was first noticed by American officials in April 1979. In a memo on April 14, 1979, White House aide Robert Pastor wrote: “The Cubans are now directly involved in trying to help “consolidate” Bishop’s revolution. 8 Cubans arrived covertly last week. A large shipment of arms was flown from Cuba to Guyana where it was transshipped to Grenada.”¹²⁹ Later on in the memorandum, Pastor mentions that even more Cuban forces are on their way to Grenada: “A Cuban merchant ship (*Vietnam Heroico*) with 200 cadets on board is apparently on its way to Grenada.”¹³⁰ Pastor urged the Carter administration to rethink its policy towards Grenada, trying to isolate the nation even further and deter Grenada from strengthening their relations with Cuba.¹³¹ But this would only result

¹²⁵ Smith, *Morality, Reason and Power*, 126.

¹²⁶ Crandall, *Gunboat Diplomacy*, 128.

¹²⁷ Smith, *Morality, reason, and power*, 125.

¹²⁸ Crandall, *Gunboat Diplomacy*, 128.

¹²⁹ *Memorandum From Robert Pastor of the National Security Council Staff to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski) and the President’s Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Aaron), April 14, 1979.* From: Foreign Relations, 1977-1980, Volume XXIII, Mexico, Cuba, and the Caribbean (Accessed April 4, 2024).

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Crandall, *Gunboat Diplomacy*, 129.

in Bishop wanting more Cuban aid. Despite trying to isolate Grenada, it was once more clear that a military intervention was not an option for Carter.

Thus, the situation Reagan inherited when he was elected president was already destabilizing. We know that the Reagan administration was very much concerned with the fact that the United States was on the defensive against the Soviet Union. The island of Grenada played a huge part in Reagan his view of rolling back the expansion of communism.¹³² When Ronald Reagan took the office of president, the relationship between the two nations got even worse. Reagan his determined stance to prevent the further expansion of Communism, made the island of Grenada central in his view. To the critics of Reagan his hard stance against Grenada, Reagan said the following: “People who make these arguments haven’t taken a good look at a map lately or followed the extraordinary build-up of Soviet and Cuban military power in the region.”¹³³

The isolation of Grenada would continue under Reagan his administration. Secretary of State, Alexander Haig directed the bureau of Inter-American affairs not to give a single penny to Grenada.¹³⁴ American policy makers worked hard to try and isolate Grenada from international relations with other nations as well. Bishop himself tried to meet with Reagan several times to try and ease the tensions between the two nations but to no avail.¹³⁵ In a televised speech, Reagan addressed the nation on the situation in Grenada and gave his opinion on the matter. On March 23, 1983, Reagan informed the American public on the importance of Grenada: “The Caribbean is a very important passageway for our international commerce and military lines of communication.”¹³⁶ Reagan clearly fears that a communist force in Grenada could harm America’s economy and trade with her allies. In the same speech, Reagan also mentions the military built up in Grenada: “On the small island of Grenada, the Cubans, with Soviet financing and backing are in the process of building an airfield.Grenada doesn’t even have an air force. Who is it intended for?”¹³⁷

Reagan does not answer this question in his speech but his intend is clear. Reagan tries to show that the Cubans, along with Soviet aid, are taking advantage of the opportunity that

¹³² Crandall, *Gunboat Diplomacy*, 106.

¹³³ Kukielski, *The U.S. Invasion of Grenada*, 168-169.

¹³⁴ Crandall, *Gunboat Diplomacy*, 130.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ *Ronald Reagan Adress to the Nation on Defense and National Security, March 23, 1983*. From: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum (Accessed April 4, 2024).

¹³⁷ Ibid.

has presented itself in Grenada to try and check American power in the region. Reagan was clearly worried about the building of this new airfield, and during his speech to the American public, Reagan continued to show satellite pictures of the construction works and Reagan requested to be updated on the state of the airfield almost daily according to some of his closest advisors.¹³⁸

Reagan even linked the Cuban and Soviet build-up to the American efforts in Central America, where the United States were trying to curb Soviet influence in places like El Salvador or Nicaragua: “The Soviet-Cuban militarization of Grenada, in short, can only be seen as power projection into the region. And it is in this important economic and strategic area that we're trying to help the Governments of El Salvador, Costa Rica, Honduras, and others in their struggles for democracy against guerrillas supported through Cuba and Nicaragua.”¹³⁹

The CIA, under orders from Reagan, tried to further look into the relations between Grenada and Cuba and concluded that the aid from Cuba to Grenada was estimated to be around 66 million dollars. Despite the hawks in Reagan his administration and their fear of a potential new communist force in their backyard, there was some criticism to Reagan his strong denunciation of Bishop and his regime. The critics argued that the building of the airfield that was mentioned in Reagan his speech, was not for a potential air force or potential Cuban and Soviet aircraft, but it was key to Grenada’s economic well-being. Some critics even pointed towards the fact that some American medical students present in the area even used the new airfield as a jogging track.¹⁴⁰

On April 21, 1983, a secret CIA report offered a strategic assessment on the building of the airfield: “The ongoing airfield construction project will improve the island’s capability to support Soviet forces and can be used to sustain Cuban interventionism in the hemisphere and Africa.”¹⁴¹ These reports further increased the fear within the Reagan administration that Grenada could play a crucial role in the expansion of the Cuban and Soviet sphere of influence.¹⁴²

¹³⁸ Crandall, *Gunboat Diplomacy*, 132.

¹³⁹ Ronald Reagan Address to the Nation on Defense and National Security.

¹⁴⁰ Crandall, *Gunboat Diplomacy*, 131.

¹⁴¹ CIA, Directorate of Intelligence. “Soviet Geopolitical and Military Interests in Grenada and Suriname,” secret memorandum, April 21, 1983, unclassified, in CIA FOIA Reading Room.

¹⁴² Kukielski, *The U.S. Invasion of Grenada*, 170.

A new CIA report written shortly after the conclusion of the invasion of Grenada, found that the Soviet Union, Cuba and even North Korea had committed themselves to establish a communist regime in Grenada and to use the nation as a foothold to launch further communist revolutions across the Caribbean. The CIA report also mentions that: “The Soviet Union and North Korea signed agreements with Grenada committing themselves to the delivery of some \$37.8 million worth of military equipment.”¹⁴³

The fear of the Reagan administration was not per se against the fact that the island of Grenada was building a new airfield, but that this was funded by the Cubans and that it would serve as a staging ground for Cuban and Soviet forces to spread their influence into Latin America. This is perhaps best expressed by Ludlow Fowler, then the American chargé d’affaires in Barbados. When asked on the situation around the airfield in Grenada, Fowler responded: “It isn’t the airport per se that bothers us. Lots of islands around here have airfields. It is that the airport in Grenada was primarily financed and built by Cubans, who tend not to do these things out of a sense of Christian charity.”¹⁴⁴

What we can see in the case of Grenada, is the return of the concept of the Domino theory back into American foreign policy. This concept had been abandoned by Ford and Carter when they tried to improve relations with the Soviet Union, but I would argue that under Reagan the Domino theory made a return. The concept of the domino theory usually applies to the spread of influence of the Soviet Union and one of the reasons the United States intervened in Vietnam out of fear that other Asian nations would follow a similar path towards communism. This is exactly the fear Reagan had, that after Grenada, more nations in the region would transition towards communism.

In 1982 Reagan warned that: “If we do not act promptly and decisively in defense of freedom, new Cubans will arise from the ruins of today’s conflicts.”¹⁴⁵ Ever since the Cuban Revolution, America prioritized the prevention of new nations in the region to switch towards communism. Grenada was thus viewed as a New Cuba, a new domino that would fall towards communism and could export their communist revolution throughout the region, thus threatening American security in the region and requiring the United States to take action to prevent further dominos from falling.¹⁴⁶ The poor standards of living in the already vulnerable

¹⁴³ CIA Preliminary assessment of Cuban and Soviet Involvement in Grenada, 30 October, 1983.

¹⁴⁴ Adkin, *Urgent Fury*, 111.

¹⁴⁵ Ronald Reagan, remarks on the Caribbean basin initiative, 1982.

¹⁴⁶ Williams, *US-Grenada Relations*, 65.

eastern Caribbean, meant that a communist revolution was perceived as a real threat by Reagan and his administrations. Slowly the idea of an American invasion of Grenada to prevent other nations in the area from switching towards communism, was becoming a real possibility.¹⁴⁷

Reagan and his officials remained alarmed by the situation in Grenada. The situation changed even more, when Bishop was assassinated on October 19, 1983. The United States would start their invasion of Grenada just a few days later. Up to the point of October 19, there was no indication that America would plunge itself into a new conflict. Indeed, the Reagan administration feared a new communist nation in their own backyard, but they realized this was a distant threat and that Grenada would not be the major communist force in the region that they feared so much. The United States had indeed been issuing military exercises to practice for a naval invasion, but up till October 19, the nation of Grenada was simply too small and there was no compelling reason to start an invasion of the island. Nobody on October 19 would foresee that just a few days later, American forces would launch a full-scale invasion of Grenada.¹⁴⁸

The American Navy had already sent out a task force at this time. However, the Marines that were part of this task force, were never destined for Grenada. If you asked every officer on board this task force what their destination would be, all would have said Lebanon. Just a few days earlier, an American Marine base in Lebanon was the victim of a terror attack. Then, on the 20th of October 1983, three days into their journey to Lebanon, the Commander of the task force, Carl R. Earle, got some unexpected orders from Washington. The Pentagon had now ordered the task force to change its course and head for Puerto Rico and await further orders. The new destination for the task force would be Grenada.¹⁴⁹ But just a few days ago, Reagan and his administration were not even close to starting an invasion of Grenada. As we have seen in the previous paragraph, the island nation was simply no threat to interests of the Americans.

What had changed for Reagan and his administration, was that it was now believed that American lives were actually in danger. On October 25th, 1983, Reagan said that this was a reason for the United States to intervene: “American lives are at stake. We’ve been following the situation as closely as possible. Between 800 and a thousand Americans,

¹⁴⁷ Williams, *US-Grenada Relations*, 65.

¹⁴⁸ Crandall, *Gunboat Diplomacy*, 134-135.

¹⁴⁹ Kukielski, *The U.S. Invasion of Grenada*, 9-11.

including many medical students and senior citizens, make up the largest single group of foreign residents in Grenada.”¹⁵⁰ Whether or not the situation of the American medical students was indeed as dire that the United States needed to intervene is up for debate. According to critics of the American invasion, the medical students were never in any danger, but it was used as a legitimization by the Reagan administration to invade Grenada and establish a democratic ally favored to the United States.

Reagan and his administration knew the importance of secrecy and had to act quickly if they wanted to pull off this invasion. In times of war, the president is the commander in chief and ultimately responsible. However, an invasion of another nation usually went through congress. Reagan, realizing the importance of secrecy and a swiftness for the upcoming invasion, bypassed congress by using a law that was signed in 1973. The War Powers Resolution allowed the President of the United States in times of crisis, to take military action without congressional approval for up to ninety days.¹⁵¹

Reagan signed the go ahead for the operation on Sunday, October 23 and the invasion would launch just a few days later. In those few days, Reagan had the opportunity to call off the invasion, but he never opted to do so nor did he interfere with any of the further planning of the invasion.¹⁵² But the President, under the War Powers Resolution, was required to justify his actions before congress as soon as possible. In the case of Grenada, Reagan justified his actions shortly after the American invasion had begun.

In a letter to the Senate, Reagan mentioned the objectives and reasons behind his decision to invade Grenada. On October 26, 1983, the US Senate received the following message from the President: “Although it is not possible at this time to predict the duration of the temporary presence of United States Armed Forces in Grenada, our objectives in providing this support are clear. They are to join the OECS collective security forces in assisting the restoration of conditions of law and order and of governmental institutions to the island of Grenada, and to facilitate the protection and evacuation of United States citizens. Our forces will remain only so long as their presence is required.”¹⁵³

In a televised speech to the nation on October 27, 1983, Reagan for the first time addressed and informed the nation on the American invasion of Grenada. Reagan claimed

¹⁵⁰ Remarks of the President and Prime Minister Eugenia Charles of Dominica Announcing the Deployment of United States Forces in Grenada October 25, 1983. From: Public Papers of the Presidency book 2, 1505-1506.

¹⁵¹ Adkin, *Urgent Fury*, 106.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ *Congressional Record*, October 26, 1983. From: Congress.gov (Accessed April 15, 2024).

that: “We had to assume that several hundred Cubans working on the airport could be military reserves. Well, as it turned out, the number was much larger, and they were a military force. We have discovered a complete base with weapons and communications equipment, which makes it clear a Cuban occupation of the island had been planned.”¹⁵⁴ Later on in his speech, Reagan claimed to have saved the nation from a major communist threat: “Grenada, we were told, was a friendly island paradise for tourism. Well, it wasn't. It was a Soviet-Cuban colony, being readied as a major military bastion to export terror and undermine democracy. We got there just in time.”

The reason to keep the invasion a secret was very important for Reagan. Ever since the Vietnam War, the American public was firmly against foreign interventions, as was made clear in the first chapter. For Reagan to actually defeat what he viewed as the Vietnam Syndrome, the invasion had to be done in secret, otherwise American public opinion would turn against the invasion. This reason for secrecy, is mentioned by Reagan in his own memoirs. Reagan mentions that: “Frankly there was another reason I wanted secrecy. It was what I call the ‘post–Vietnam syndrome,’ the resistance of so many in Congress to the use of military force abroad for any reason.”¹⁵⁵

As we have seen in the previous chapter, after the Vietnam War, presidents Ford and Carter wanted more transparency and more influence of public opinion in the foreign policy department. Reagan always wanted to rid the nation of this what we know as the Vietnam Syndrome. According to many veterans of the Vietnam War and Hawks like Reagan and his administration, part of the reason the war in Vietnam was lost, was because of the role of the media. The invasion of Grenada would be followed by a second invasion of American and British journalists. As Philip Kukielski described, “The first invasion was opposed by Grenadian troops and the Cubans. The second incursion, was opposed, at least initially, by the American military.”¹⁵⁶

The Pentagon had made the plans for the invasion, but never incorporated any plans for a press corps joining the American Marines during the invasion. In fact, the Pentagon tried their hardest to prevent any American journalist arriving on Grenadian soil while fighting was still ongoing.¹⁵⁷ Perhaps one of the reasons for not informing any of the major news outlets in

¹⁵⁴ Ronald Reagan Address to the Nation on Events in Lebanon and Grenada, October 27, 1983. From: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum (Accessed April 10, 2024).

¹⁵⁵ Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 451.

¹⁵⁶ Kukielski, *The U.S. Invasion of Grenada*, 134.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

the United States, was that the Pentagon feared that the plans for the invasion would be leaked, thus alerting the Soviet Union and Cuba that an American invasion was imminent.¹⁵⁸ Reagan in his memoirs mentioned that he did not even want to update the members of congress on the matter. In his memoirs, Reagan wrote that: “I suspected that, if we told the leaders of Congress about the operation, even under terms of strictest confidentiality, there would be some who would leak it to the press.... We didn’t ask anybody, we just did it.”¹⁵⁹

When asked about the lack of news reporters that were allowed to follow the American troops during their invasion, some have argued that this was because of the impact journalists had in Vietnam. As was the case with the American admiral leading the operation. Casper Weinberger, Secretary of Defense at the time of the invasion, gives another reason for the lack of journalists. According to Weinberger in an interview with the Millers Center of Public Affairs it was due to logistical issues: “No, it wasn’t to keep the press out. It was a matter of very, very limited logistics. In the initial landings—the initial parachute drops and all—there wasn’t really any room for anybody else.”¹⁶⁰ Most likely the reason for not allowing any reporters, was still a legacy from the Vietnam War. If you ask American commanders or Veterans from the war, some would blame the American media for their defeat, deliberately swaying public opinion against the war.

An article by the Washington Post also shows us the fear of the Vietnam Syndrome within the American military. We have already established that fear of the media and critical questions from the media were according to some soldiers and to President Reagan the reasons the war in Vietnam had been lost, hence the emphasis on secrecy for this invasion. The article from the Washington Post shows us how the fear of the American commanders to allow the press to enter Grenada. On October 31st, 1983, the Washington Post wrote: “The U.S. military commander of the Grenada Task Force is fighting two battles: one with the resistance on the island and another with reporters trying to cover the invasion.”¹⁶¹

The commander of the fleet in charge of the operation, Joseph Metcalf was inclined not to allow any reporters on his own ship or on any other American naval ship. This was probably, just like with officials in the Reagan administration, a trauma from the Vietnam

¹⁵⁸ Kukielski, *The U.S. Invasion of Grenada*, 134.

¹⁵⁹ Reagan, *An American Life*, 451.

¹⁶⁰ Casper Weinberger oral history. From: University of Virginia: Millers Center (Accessed April 14, 2024).

¹⁶¹ Kernan Turner, “Admiral Fights 2 Battles: With Grenada and with the Press,” *Washington Post*, October 31, 1983. <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/admiral-fights-2-battles-with-grenada-press/docview/147579302/se-2?accountid=12045>

War. Metcalf his personal feelings about the press after his experiences in Vietnam didn't help in Metcalf his attitude towards reporters. In his own memoir, Metcalf wrote that: "I had little confidence in the press to report events accurately or to make balanced interpretations of what had occurred."¹⁶²

This shows the that the American military was actively trying to prevent the American press from gaining access to the island. In fact, if we are to believe Washington Post reporter Kernan Turner, the commander of the invasion, Admiral Metcalf, had put out a strong order to prevent reporters from reaching Grenada: "Vice Adm. Joseph Metcalf III says that he has ordered naval patrol boats to shoot at unauthorized small craft attempting to land reporters and photographers on Grenada."¹⁶³

Reagan his fear of the media was noted in his diary on Sunday October 30, 1983. While watching some late-night news shows, Reagan noted the following: "Watched the Sunday talk shows-subject Lebanon & Grenada. The press is trying to give this the Vietnam treatment but I don't think the people will buy it."¹⁶⁴ What Reagan meant with the Vietnam treatment, is actually part of the Vietnam Syndrome, the fact that politicians like Reagan but also high ranked generals believed that the media were responsible for the loss of the American military in Vietnam. For Reagan, the media was responsible in turning public opinion against the Vietnam War and the media now tried to do the same with the American invasion of Grenada. For Reagan, the main reason the media were upset was not because they did not support the invasion but because: "They are still whining we didn't take them on a guided tour the 1st day we were on Grenada."¹⁶⁵

Reagan also did not mention any part of the invasion plans to congress, as we have seen earlier on, by using the War Powers Act. Reagan said the following on why he decided not to inform Congress: "I suspected that, if we told the leaders of Congress about the operation, even under the strictest confidentiality, there would be some who would leak it to the press together with the predictions that Grenada would become 'another Vietnam.'¹⁶⁶ Secrecy was thus key to combat the Vietnam Syndrome.

¹⁶² Charles D. Metcalf, "Mother of the Mother," 56–57.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ronald Reagan, *the Reagan Diaries*, October 30, 1983, 192

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 191.

¹⁶⁶ Hunt, *The Reagan Moment*, 181.

Despite the fact that the media was not allowed to enter the island, Operation Urgent Fury, the name given to the invasion, was a huge military success. The island of Grenada proved to be a pushover. In fact, had it not been for outdated intelligence and outdated maps, the American forces might have taken the island within just a day instead of the three days it took them. Only nineteen American soldiers died, most by friendly fire related incidents. So, on paper, the invasion of Grenada was a huge success. But for Reagan, the invasion would soon turn from victory to defeat, as the victory in Grenada would turn out not to be a victory over the Vietnam Syndrome Reagan so desired. Thus, in order to determine why it did not succeed in curing the Vietnam Syndrome, we need to look closely at the response towards the invasion, especially within the American media.

According to Reagan, the American invasion of Grenada had enjoyed broad support: “We’ve had broad and bipartisan support for our actions in Grenada. Yes, there were some critics, but I’d like to suggest that those critics take a moment to listen to interviews with Grenadians rejoicing at their new freedom, or to meditate on the photo of an American medical student rescued by U.S. Rangers.”¹⁶⁷

The reaction to the invasion in America was actually more mixed than Reagan lets us to believe. Pictures of the medical students arriving back on American soil and kissing the ground, being elated to be back, really did good for Reagan and his administration. These pictures, along with Reagan his speech on the situation in Grenada and Lebanon on October 23rd, really did his approving ratings good. According to some, Reagan was viewed as the protector of American citizens abroad.¹⁶⁸ Where public opinion seemed in favor of Reagan his action, this soon changed.

A New York Post article on the 28th of October 1983, also showed that opposition among the American public was also starting to gather. The article claimed that: “fourteen demonstrators opposed to the United States invasion of Grenada stages a sitdown protest inside the United Nations and were arrested on trespassing charges.”¹⁶⁹ This protest is not comparable to the huge numbers of protests during the Vietnam War, but it does show that there was some opposition to Reagan his invasion of Grenada and that perhaps the quick victory was not necessarily a victory over the Vietnam Syndrome.

¹⁶⁷ *Remarks at the Reagan-Bush Campaign Reunion November 3, 1983.* From: Public Papers of the Presidency book 2, 1539.

¹⁶⁸ Treharne, *Reagan and Thatcher’s Special Relationship*, 119.

¹⁶⁹ James Lemoyne, “Protesters seized at mission to UN,” *New York Times*, October 28, 1983, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/protesters-seized-at-mission-u-n/docview/122288823/se-2>

Public opinion against the invasion would only grow further. According to the Washington Post: “The American invasion of Grenada has left many citizens numbed and angered by the violence.”¹⁷⁰ The Washington Post also draws similarities with the antiwar movement during the Vietnam War. According to the newspaper: “It has also sparked the inevitable comparisons to Vietnam and prompted antiwar groups to redouble their efforts to promote a Nov. 12 march here to protest the Reagan administration’s growing involvement in Latin America.”¹⁷¹ It is clearly visible that the American invasion of Grenada did not result into the full support from the American public, leaving the Reagan administration in doubt whether their more aggressive foreign policy could actually still be pursued for the years to come.

The American media, which was deliberately being kept in the dark during the invasion, had a more negative response to the invasion. The Washington Post called the invasion outrageous and antithetical to open society. The New York Times was just as critical. Pictures of the American medical students arriving back on American soil and kissing the ground, did Reagan some good, but public opinion remained divided.¹⁷²

Further criticism from the media focused on Central America as well. Reagan had promised that not to intervene in any of the Central American nations, but according to the Washington Post, those promises were now undermined with the American invasion of Grenada. In their edition on October 31st, 1983, the Washington Post wrote: “In undertaking the Grenadian invasion, did we take into account the impact of our actions on those in the hemisphere who had finally come to accept our assurance that the United States is truly committed to nonintervention?”¹⁷³

Secrecy was very important for Reagan to keep the media out from criticism or questioning the invasion. But secrecy was also very important to keep the public opinion from turning against the invasion. We have concluded in the previous chapter that under presidents Ford and Carter, there was a stronger emphasis on public opinion in the case of foreign interventions. But Reagan his secrecy was clearly a tactic to try and keep public opinion out. For the New York Times, secrecy was important because: “Mr. Reagan was afraid that the

¹⁷⁰ Peter Perl, “Old Faces: New Groups to Protest U.S. Actions,” *The Washington Post*, October 28, 1983, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/old-faces-new-groups-protest-u-s-actions/docview/147554866/se-2>.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Treharne, Reagan and Thatcher’s Special Relationship, 119.

¹⁷³ Sol Linowitz, “Grenada: Critical Questions,” *Washington Post*, October 31, 1983, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/grenada-critical-questions/docview/147582961/se-2>.

facts on the ground would not support the reasons he gave for the invasion. He was afraid that public support, as shown in opinion polls, would wither if people learned too much too soon.”¹⁷⁴

In his memoirs, Reagan justified his invasion of Grenada by pointing towards the Cuban threat and the fact that Cuban weapons were found on the island. Reagan noted on October 27, 1983, in his diary that: “Everything is going well in Grenada. We’re mopping up. We discovered a Cuban base, barracks, H.Q., Warehouse full of weapons. They were really going to move in and take over.”¹⁷⁵ Reagan insisted that the island was becoming a: “Soviet-Cuban colony being readied as a major military bastion to export terror and undermine democracy.”¹⁷⁶

The justification for Reagan to launch the invasion, to rescue the American medical students in Grenada and to prevent Cuba from taking complete control of Grenada, proved not to be entirely true. It is unknown if these students were even under threat as some students were probably using the newly built airstrip, that Reagan feared so much, as a running track. According to Canadian officials, the American medical students were under more danger from American fire than they were from the regime in Grenada.¹⁷⁷ Reagan his strong emphasis on secrecy however, proved to be a major point of criticism that would turn the American people against the invasion.

By declaring war in secrecy and starting the operation without the consultation of congress or the presence of the media during the invasion, Reagan tried to undermine one of the aspects of the Vietnam Syndrome: public opinion. For Carter, public opinion was the major determinant in whether or not the United States should intervene abroad. For Reagan this would only cause more and more debate. By taking the decision in secret, Reagan prevented public debate on the invasion and thus prevented the public from arguing that this was going to turn into another Vietnam. The war was simply to be fought, quickly won and only then to be justified, thus preventing anyone from opposing the invasion.¹⁷⁸ The very first journalists would only be allowed to arrive once the island was fully taken.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁴ Anthony Lewis, “What was he hiding?” *New York Times*, October 31, 1983,

<https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/what-was-he-hiding/docview/122246011/se-2>.

¹⁷⁵ Ronald Reagan, *the Reagan Diaries*, October 27, 1983, 191.

¹⁷⁶ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 290.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, 291.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

Reagan his emphasis on secrecy is also mentioned in his memoirs. Reagan, on Monday October 24, 1983, just a few days before the invasion was delighted that there was: “So far not even a tiny leak about the Grenada move.”¹⁸⁰ However when the invasion was clear for all to see, many opposition members in congress did not believe that there was actually any reason to invade Grenada. They never thought the American citizens there were in any danger and that there was no real evidence that the Cubans and the Soviet Union were using Grenada to strategically spread their influence in the region.¹⁸¹

Another argument made by some members of congress, was that by this military intervention, the United States was no different from the Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. For some congressmen, the invasion of Grenada by the United States was no different.¹⁸² The American congress also focused on the use of the War Powers Act by Reagan. Both the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Thomas O’Neill and the Democratic chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Clement Zablocki, claimed that the War Powers Act was not properly used in this case. O’Neill was also very vocal on the American invasion itself, calling it Gunboat Diplomacy, meaning that the United States forced its way into a certain nation or economy.¹⁸³ Other senators, like Democrat Ted Weiss, went as far as calling for the impeachment of Reagan because his decision to invade Grenada was violating international law. But his attempt to impeachment was eventually not successful.¹⁸⁴

Within the Democratic party, there was even more opposition to Reagan his invasion of Grenada. The Democratic party viewed Reagan his decision to invade Grenada as a part of something bigger. The Democratic party continued to criticize Reagan his overly aggressive foreign policy stance and claimed that the invasion of Grenada was Reagan his burning desire to rid the nation of the Vietnam Syndrome. The Democrats argued that that Reagan his invasion fitted into Reagan his aggressive foreign policy that would see the United States getting involved in more foreign conflicts. Democratic senator from California, Alan Cranston, found the President: “trigger happy and somewhat reckless.”¹⁸⁵

Despite the heroic images of American soldiers rescuing the American medical students, that really helped public support for Reagan his invasion of Grenada at first, support

¹⁸⁰ Ronald Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries*, October 24, 1983, 190.

¹⁸¹ Treharne, *Reagan and Thatcher’s Special Relationship*, 119-120.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Treharne, *Reagan and Thatcher’s Special Relationship*, 120.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Hunt, *The Reagan Moment*, 180.

started to fade. Soon the American public was more concerned with the course Reagan was taking American foreign policy. Even though the public supported Reagan his invasion, they were still weary of the United States getting embroiled in another Vietnam War. Polls showed that 49% of the American public thought Reagan used military force too quickly. In the same poll, 49% also claimed that they felt uneasy with Reagan his foreign policy. Thus, despite Reagan his quick victory and show of American strength in Grenada, the American public was still weary of ending up embroiled in another long guerilla style conflict.¹⁸⁶

Reagan did not rid the nation of the Vietnam Syndrome with the successful military operation in Grenada. The fact that the Vietnam Syndrome was still alive, can also be seen under the next American president. When George H.W. Bush launched operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm against Iraq, the press corps was, just like with Grenada, kept away from the battlefield. The media had to deal with far more rules of censorship than the American media had to deal with during the Second World War and their access to the battlefield was severely limited.¹⁸⁷ Fear of public opinion turning against the intervention was also still very much present. The American military decided that reports on casualty numbers were severely limited out of fear that this would anger the American public. Reporter James McCartney observed that it was: “Okay to die for your country. The Pentagon just doesn’t want anyone to know about it.”¹⁸⁸

We have seen that the relations between Grenada and the United States were under much stress since the coup made by Bishop. The complete isolation of the island, out of fear for a communist regime right in America’s backyard, would actually force Bishop and Grenada to look towards the Soviet Union and Cuba for aid. Despite the fact that the American invasion of Grenada was a success in military terms, it was not a victory for Reagan and his administration. Reagan had hoped that a quick victory over the small island nation of Grenada would rid the nation of the Vietnam Syndrome and show American strength, but this was not to be. Popularity ratings for Reagan his handling on foreign policy dropped significantly after the invasion. Thus, despite Reagan his victory against the small island of Grenada, the Vietnam Syndrome was there to stay.

¹⁸⁶ Hunt, *The Reagan Moment*, 180.

¹⁸⁷ George Herring, “Refighting the last war: the Persian Gulf and the “Vietnam Syndrome” *New Zealand International Review* 16 No.5, 1991, 17

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 17

Conclusion

This thesis has explored the long period of American foreign policy after the Vietnam War till the Reagan administration. We have explored the long struggle each president had with the results of the Vietnam War and what Reagan called the Vietnam Syndrome. We have explored how Reagan wanted to rid the nation of this syndrome but was Reagan really that successful in doing so, or was there still a part of the Vietnam Syndrome left? And what was the significance of the Vietnam Syndrome for Ronald Reagan's foreign policy towards Grenada?

In the first chapter we have examined how the presidential administrations of Ford, Carter and Reagan tried to deal with the scars left behind by the Vietnam War. I would argue that under Ford, the first few steps in changing American foreign policy were made. By not intervening once again in Vietnam after the fall of Saigon, even though according to Ford this would have been the opportunity to regain a sense of pride, was a clear break with the past. The same can be said for Africa, where the Soviet Union was expanding its influence, unchecked by the Ford administration.

Under Jimmy Carter, American foreign policy would change even more. Gone were the days in American foreign policy of trying to contain the influence of the Soviet Union and a stronger emphasis came to be on Human Rights. This meant that in some cases, American allies were abandoned or simply not supported anymore because of their Human Rights violations. This paved the way for the Soviet Union to try and spread their influence, as the United States was not as keen on preventing them to do so.

Reagan clearly opposed this new style of American foreign policy. He thought it made the United States look weak on the global stage and more importantly, it made the United States look weak against the Soviet Union. Years of budget cuts on the American military, and the policy of Human Rights had made the United States and its military look weak. Thus, the opportunity to invade a small Caribbean Island would have been the perfect opportunity for Reagan and his administration to show to the world and especially the Soviet Union that the United States was back and strengthening again. The possibility of Cuban troops on the island, and the construction of a brand-new airfield would be the perfect legitimization Reagan needed for an invasion. However, up until October of 1983, there was no reason for an invasion of Grenada. The threat the island posed to American interests was simply not big enough.

The moment for Reagan to launch an invasion, came when news broke that a large group of American students were possibly in danger. For Reagan, Grenada was the perfect example to show American strength once more and gain an easy victory over the small number of forces present in the area. The invasion was set up in just a few days' time and overall, it was a massive success. The Grenadian government was disposed and replaced with one more friendly towards the United States and more importantly the Cuban and Soviet influence in the area was halted.

Yet despite the success of the operation, there was no end to the Vietnam Syndrome. In fact, Reagan was heavily influenced by the Vietnam Syndrome when his administration was planning the invasion of Grenada. The fact that the operation was to be a secret, stemmed from the fears of the Vietnam Syndrome. Under president Carter, there was an emphasis on transparency of information when it came to American foreign policy. Reagan feared that if he informed congress or the media on the upcoming invasion, it would never take place. Reagan feared that by informing the media, they would oppose the invasion, possibly inform the Grenadian government and then the media would turn public opinion against the invasion.

Public opinion, another important aspect of the Vietnam Syndrome, that an American intervention abroad should have broad public opinion, was fully in favor of the American invasion. However, after the invasion was over and despite the invasion ending in a success, it was still a loss for Reagan and his administration. Public support for Reagan his aggressive foreign policy dropped in several polls held shortly after the invasion. The American public was still in too much fear that an aggressive foreign policy by Reagan would lead the United States to be entangled into a new long war far from home.

Despite Reagan his best efforts to rid the nation of the Vietnam Syndrome, he was eventually not successful. We can even doubt that with the first Gulf War, where George H.W. Bush had a much smaller force at his disposal than he would have liked, the Vietnam Syndrome was still in full effect. The media was also deliberately left out of the operation, still afraid that they could sway public opinion. Now with the American withdrawal from Afghanistan and the quick reconquest by Taliban forces of Afghanistan, it would be an interesting new area of research to look into the consequences of this. We have seen in Vietnam that the war led to the Vietnam Syndrome and the cautioning of American foreign policy, so can we now expect an Afghanistan Syndrome in the years to come? It would be an interesting area to research and to closely study how American foreign policy will develop over the coming years.

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