

U.S. Political Involvement in the British West Indies 1939-1985, Guyana

Introduction:

The United States became actively involved in the political affairs of three main Caribbean countries during this period.

They are:

Jamaica

Guyana

Grenada

Why did she become involved in these three countries ?

- 1.** The United States considered the Caribbean to be her sphere of influence. She would only tolerate democracy NEVER Communism.
- 2.** She was suspicious of the close relationship that the prime Ministers of these three countries seemed to share with the rebel leader Fidel Castro.
- 3.** She did not want to give them any encouragement. She felt that she had to aggressively crush this sort of relationship before it spread to the other territories.
- 4.** As noted above in the economic involvement, she had invested in several areas of the economy of these countries. She needed to protect American life, liberty and property in these countries.

Guyana

In 1953 Constitutional Reforms are introduced to British Guiana. There is a Ministerial government with an elected Assembly under Universal Adult Suffrage. The People's Political Party wins the election with very little opposition. Its chairman, Cheddi Jagan became the Premier of British Guiana six years before Fidel Castro wrenched Cuba from the control of America.



Cheddi Jagan

Russia or the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) became Communist (1917). She was basically isolated after World War 2. The democratic nations did not want a relationship with her. America was afraid that she would infiltrate the Caribbean in search of markets and allies.

The government of the United States soon became unsatisfied with his regime. They claimed that Jagan had developed close ties with the Soviet Union. The Americans persuaded Britain, the Mother Country to reject the Constitution of 1953. British military invasion followed.

The PPP was removed from power and a temporary government created in the interim. The PPP had been shared by Jagan an Indian and Forbes Burnham a Negro. Burnham had racial issues with Jagan and the two parted company. The U.S. influenced invasion led to a division. In 1955 Burnham forms his own party, the People's National Congress (PNC). The split became official.



Forbes Burnham

The PPP won the next two elections in 1957 and 1961 respectively but each time the PNC gained new grounds as their support got larger. The U.S. became even more concerned with the 1961 victory by Jagan and the PPP. Firstly, Cuba had already become communist. Secondly, Jagan declared that he embraced socialism. She could not afford the two of them in her backyard threatening her very existence!

Two years of racial violence followed. (1961-1963) In the midst of the riots, Jagan announced proposed tax increases. Talk about bad timing! It is alleged that the U.S. backed Burnham to stir up racial conflict between the Indians and the Negroes hoping that in the end fresh elections would be called and Burnham would win since the blacks had a slight majority. Further allegations were made that the U.S. sent CIA agents to British Guiana. These agents were responsible for the overnight appearance of posters, newsletter and fliers all over the country. The American Yellow Press once more used propaganda to help get rid of its opposition.

In 1963 there was a 78 day strike. Ten persons were killed, many more were seriously wounded. Jagan and three of his colleagues were suspended from the Assembly. By the following year, 1964 there was another strike. This lasted from February to July. 176 persons were killed. This was definitely 'chronic wrong doing' in U.S. backyard. She could not tolerate the political instability any longer. Once again she encouraged Britain to take strong action. Once again, a state of emergency was declared and British troops landed in the country to maintain law and order. In all of this, support for the PNC grew while support for Jagan and the PPP decreased.

On December 7, 1964, under the watchful supervision of British officials, elections were held. It was close. PPP 24, PNC 22 and Peter D'Aguilar's new party the United Force (UF formed in 1961) won 7 seats. Burnham smartly forms a quick coalition with the UF. Burnham and the PNC were now in the majority. The governor asked Burnham to form his new government.

In May 1966, Burnham declares British Guiana's independence and changed its name to Guyana. Burnham later changed his political philosophy and also adopted social reforms. In the 1970's he began trading with Cuba. Guyanese rice was sold to Cuba in exchange for cars and lumber. Cuba helped to train Guyanese pilots. The two countries shared ideas on sugar industry and technology. It is during this time too that Burnham began to nationalize foreign enterprises. Guyana provided landing rights to Cuban military aircrafts ferrying troops to Angola in that country's struggle for liberation. It is no wonder then that on one of his state visit to Cuba President Burnham was presented with the Jose Marti National Award.

Reactions

The United States

1. She refused Guyana aid and support
2. She declared that the country was not safe for travel. A number of Guyanese were refused visas to visit America with the excuse that they were communist spies.
3. Trade restrictions and embargo were imposed on the country
4. In October of 1976, the United States bombed a Cuban airline killing its crew and passengers which included 11 Guyanese. This was seen as part of the penalty for Guyana's close connection with the 'enemy'.

The Guyanese

A large number of Guyanese fled the country. Some of them went to neighboring territories such as Jamaica and Trinidad. This includes a number of professionals such as teachers and doctors. The country suffered a serious brain drain as a result.

A small minority benefited from Burnham's alliance with Castro and Cuba. Guyanese students were offered scholarships to Cuba and other communist countries such as Russia and China.

Guyana's neighbors

1. Venezuela was an ally of the U.S. in the 1960's and 1970's. She feared that with communism so close to her it might spread across the boundary lines and infiltrate her people. In 1962, she presented a plea to the United Nations with regards to boundary dispute with Guyana. It is alleged that she provoked incidents of rebellion in the Rupununi region of Guyana in 1966.
2. In 1958, Jagan declined to enter the Federation. A number of West Indian leaders were angry about this. They felt that the Federation would have had a better chance of succeeding if the two largest colonies (in terms of size) British Guiana and British Honduras had joined.