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British Guiana: Decolonisation, Cold War and the Struggle for Self-Rule, 1961-1963



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Cover image: Cheddi Jagan in Georgetown on 23 August 1961 after winning the national election. http://www.jagan.org/Biography/CJ%20Bio/cj_biography6.html

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Introduction

The Cold War and the decolonisation of European empires were two of the most significant consequences of the twentieth century. In the two decades that followed the end of World War II, with a new international climate hostile to the practice of imperialism, a vast majority of the previously colonised world had either achieved independence, or was expecting to very shortly. In response to this new international climate, people within formerly colonised territories began to assert what they understood as their right to self-determination, claiming that powerful nations should no longer interfere in their domestic affairs. As the United States and the Soviet Union became engaged in a conflict for both ideological and physical control over these newly independent areas, however, nationalist leaders soon discovered that powerful nations would continue to intervene in their affairs to protect their own interests despite the cessation of formal empires. Thus, conflict was to be expected as former colonisers, nationalist leaders in developing countries and the two new superpowers, the Soviet Union and the United States, were competing with one another for supremacy in newly independent regions.

By using the process of independence in British Guiana (now Guyana) from 1961 to 1963 as a microcosm, this study will explore the relationship between post-1945 decolonisation and the Cold War. More precisely, this study will attempt to contextualise the decision made by the Anglo-American alliance to subvert Dr. Cheddi Jagan and his People's Progressive Party (PPP) and instead support a regime led by Forbes Burnham. Although Jagan was officially subverted on 7 December 1964, this study is concerned primarily with the reasons behind this decision. Therefore, this work will focus on the period between January 1961 and November 1963, otherwise recognised as John F. Kennedy's presidential

term, as it was during these thirty-four months that the Anglo-American alliance decided that Jagan would not lead his country to independence.

This study will argue that the Anglo-American intervention in Guianese politics can be explained as a consequence of two predominant factors: first, the need to ensure stability during the Cold War and decolonisation period; second, as a consequence of the American determination to ensure that pro-Western governments were in power in the Caribbean following the Cuban Revolution. In the process, this study will also examine the impact that Guianese nationalist leaders had on American policy towards the colony. Additionally, this study will explore the impact that the need to preserve the Anglo-American ‘special relationship’ had on the decision-making process in Great Britain and, although to a lesser extent, in the United States. Considering these interlinking components, the decolonisation of British Guiana provides an exceptional opportunity to examine the complex ways in which nationalist leaders in the developing world and policymakers in Great Britain and the United States struggled both with and against each another as they sought to restructure the post-colonial world during the Cold War.

Scholarship on the decolonisation of British Guiana is extremely lacking, especially when compared to areas in the same region. Where secondary literature does exist, it focuses almost solely on the impact that the Cold War had on the Anglo-American decision to subvert Jagan and his popularly elected government. In *The West On Trial*, for example, Cheddi Jagan himself interprets events exclusively as “part of the Cold War struggle in which British Guiana became a victim of overzealous anti-Communists in the United States.”¹ Similarly, Richard Barnett’s *Intervention and Revolution* is also an early criticism of the

¹ Cheddi Jagan, *The West On Trial: My Fight for Guyana’s Freedom* (London, 1966), p. 76.

proclivity of policymakers in Washington to “view the world through a narrow Cold War lens.” Describing Jagan as a “romantic Stalinist,” Barnet concludes that he was “unjustly removed from his position by a Kennedy administration obsessed with avoiding a Cuban-like revolution in British Guiana.”²

In his recent *U.S. Intervention in British Guiana*, Stephen Rabe focuses particularly on the impact that the Cold War had on policymaking in the United States, arguing that “Washington’s fear of confronting a communist government in the hemisphere after the Cuban Revolution” resulted in “an inflexible and irrational policy of covert subversion toward a moderate PPP government.”³ Offering an explanation for the role that Great Britain played in the subversion of Jagan, Rabe concludes that “the British bowed to American pressure and assisted in destroying democracy in their colony to achieve American Cold War aims.”⁴ Historians have since agreed with Rabe and thus the general consensus within the existing historiography regarding Britain’s role is that British policymakers allowed the “Kennedy administration’s strict Cold War policy to drive events in British Guiana.”⁵ Thus, even Britain’s involvement in Jagan’s subversion is explained within the context of American Cold War objectives.

This work does not seek to refute any of these conclusions directly; rather, this study attempts to add to the existing scholarship by demonstrating that the Anglo-American decision to subvert Jagan was based on a more complex range of factors than is currently acknowledged. This will be achieved firstly by demonstrating that Britain’s involvement

² Richard Barnet, *Intervention and Revolution: The United States in the Third World* (New York, 1968), p. 106.

³ Stephen G. Rabe, *U.S. Intervention in British Guiana: A Cold War Story* (Chapel Hill, 2005), pp. 70-5.

⁴ Ibid, p. 172.

⁵ Gordon Oliver Daniels, “A Great Injustice to Cheddi Jagan: The Kennedy Administration and British Guiana, 1961-63” (Ph.D. Diss., University of Mississippi, 2000), pp. 124-125.

cannot solely be explained as acceding to American demands; instead, this study will demonstrate that British officials had their own reasons for wanting Jagan to be replaced by Burnham. This work will also add to the existing historiography by demonstrating that the actions of Guianese politicians, especially Jagan and Burnham, shaped and influenced the Anglo-American course of action in British Guiana; in this sense, this work supports the conclusion reached by Jason Parker and Odd Arne Westad, both of whom argue that the “interrelated dynamics of the Cold War and global decolonisation impacted and were impacted by developing areas in the world.”⁶ Overall then, this work is crucial as it presents a far more nuanced explanation for the reasons behind the Anglo-American intervention in Guianese politics than is offered within the existing historiography.

Other than the historiography mentioned, this work has made use of a number of important archival resources. Volume XII of the *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)* series, which contains sixty documents concerning United States policy in British Guiana between 1961 and 1963, has been especially useful. In particular, memorandums from the United States Consulate in British Guiana to the Department of State in Washington have been valuable in understanding American opinions of Jagan and Burnham and the ways in which these opinions changed between 1961 and 1963. Memorandums from administrative officials in the United States to the British Foreign Office have been equally beneficial in examining how British and American leaders worked together to construct a Cold War strategy for the decolonisation of British Guiana. Recordings and transcripts of President John F. Kennedy’s meetings and telephone conversations, all sourced within the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, have also been used to provide an additional insight into the

⁶ Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 3; Jason Parker, *Brother’s Keeper: The United States, Race, and Empire in the British Caribbean, 1937-1962* (Oxford, 2008), p. 173.

American attitude regarding the situation in British Guiana from the highest level in Washington.

The documents published within the *FRUS* series on British Guiana have not been solely relied on for the purpose of this study, however, because a considerable number of documents either remain classified or were destroyed by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), as revealed by Nick Cullather in 1997.⁷ Consulting British documents in conjunction with the documents within the *FRUS* series has thus yielded a more complete representation of the Anglo-American interference in British Guiana. Considering that several historians of United States foreign policy have also been criticised for depending exclusively on United States sources when analysing international history, using British sources has also helped to evade “what is disparagingly dubbed the ‘view from Washington’ syndrome.”⁸

The British sources that have been used are housed at The National Archives and are based mostly on Parliamentary records, Cabinet Minute Papers and records of the Colonial Office and the Foreign Office. These sources have been useful in revealing the varying agendas of the numerous components of the British government and the way in which collective decisions regarding British Guiana were made between these different institutional components. The letters and memorandums between different government posts have been beneficial in revealing the evolving British assessment of Jagan and Burnham and the reasons behind their decision to eventually support the intervention in Guianese politics. The importance of preserving the Anglo-American ‘special relationship’ and the impact this had

⁷ Stephen G. Rabe, ‘John F. Kennedy and Latin America: The ‘Thorough, Accurate, and Reliable Record’ (Almost),’ *Diplomatic History* 23 (1999), pp. 542-43.

⁸ Ibid.

on the British decision-making process has also been considered at length through examining various transcripts of recorded conversations between high-ranking British officials.

There is a consensus within the existing historiography that the United States and Great Britain, although both concerned with British Guiana, had different objectives in the colony. The first chapter of this study will demonstrate that in reality this was not the case. By 1961, the primary objective of both Great Britain and the United States in British Guiana was ensuring that a stable government, which was capable of maintaining peace in the colony once British administrators and troops had left, was in power before the country was granted independence.

The second chapter of this study will examine the ways in which Guianese leaders shaped and influenced American policy in the colony. This will be achieved by exploring the reasons behind the breakdown of the relationship between the United States and Jagan from Washington's perspective between 1961 and 1962. This chapter will also seek to determine why Forbes Burnham became the preferred option to lead Guiana to independence in the opinion of American policymakers. This chapter is not an attempt to suggest that American interference in the domestic affairs of developing nations is or was justified; given that this chapter is concerned with how the actions of Guianese politicians were interpreted in the United States, rather than the actions themselves and what they meant, judgement is inherently withheld. Rather, this chapter is an attempt to demonstrate that although the United States "drove Western Cold War policy," American officials could not ignore leaders and events in the developing world.⁹

⁹ Parker, *Brother's Keeper*, p. 175.

The third chapter of this study will determine the reasons behind the British decision to eventually support the American-directed intervention in Guianese politics. Historians tend to argue that the United States pressured the British Government into destroying democracy in their colony; this interpretation is far too simplistic, however. As this chapter will demonstrate, American pressure worked in harmony with Britain's own interests to encourage British officials to subvert Jagan and support a regime led by Burnham.

The fourth chapter of this study will analyse the exchanges between officials in the United States and Great Britain between 1961 and 1963 to demonstrate that both nations largely advanced their own interests in the colony while remaining cognisant of their partner's interests. Given the degree of cooperation involved in developing a Cold War strategy for the decolonisation of British Guiana, this chapter will conclude that the decision to subvert Jagan and his government can largely be interpreted as a successful negotiation between Great Britain and the United States and between the necessities of decolonisation and the Cold War.

Overall, this dissertation examines the intricate decolonisation process in British Guiana within the context of the power struggle that emerged between Guianese nationalist leaders and policymakers in Great Britain and the United States. The process by which British Guiana became an independent country is an exceptional example of how British and American policymakers overcame their differences in an effort to develop a coordinated strategy. In this sense, it is also an exceptional example of how the Cold War and post-1945 decolonisation affected one another. Perhaps most importantly, however, British Guiana provides us with an opportunity to recognise the important role that nationalist leaders played

in shaping and influencing the foreign policy decisions of the great powers during the Cold War.

Chapter One: Anglo-American Objectives in British Guiana

British and American foreign policy objectives after the Second World War were shaped respectively by the necessities of decolonisation and the Cold War. These two phenomena were both aspects of the post-1945 global power shift away from European nation states and were thus inherently related. They were also inherently related in the sense that the instability and uncertainty caused by decolonisation were conditions under which the Cold War was fought, while the Cold War shaped the nationalist struggles that surfaced during the decolonisation process. Given this relationship, it is not surprising that by the early 1960s the main battlefronts of the Cold War had shifted to the colonial world; this was very much the case in British Guiana as American officials were concerned with the colony as an aspect of their Cold War geostrategy by 1961, the exact moment that British officials were preparing to grant the country independence. There is a consensus within the existing historiography that Great Britain and the United States, although both concerned with British Guiana, had different objectives in the colony.¹⁰ The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate that in reality this was not the case. Given that the process of decolonisation and the Cold War both begat instability, by 1961 the primary objective of British and American officials in British Guiana was ensuring stability in the colony. In this sense, British Guiana provides an exceptional insight into the relationship between the Cold War and post-1945 decolonisation.

Officials in Washington interpreted instability simply as an opportunity that communists could exploit to gain power. Toward the end of the Dwight D. Eisenhower administration, a series of crises rocked inter-American relations and convinced American

¹⁰ See Stephen G. Rabe, *U.S. Intervention in British Guiana: A Cold War Story* (Chapel Hill, 2005); Gordon Oliver Daniels, "A Great Injustice to Cheddi Jagan: The Kennedy Administration and British Guiana, 1961-63" (Ph.D. Diss., University of Mississippi, 2000).

officials that Latin America had become a critical “Cold War battleground.”¹¹ Consequently, upon taking office, the Kennedy administration promised to pursue a harder line in countering the rise of communism in the region. As this chapter will demonstrate, it was particularly important to avoid circumstances conducive to a communist government takeover in British Guiana because of the country’s significance to American Cold War geostrategy. British officials were just as eager to avoid instability in British Guiana, fearing a damaged reputation in the international community if withdrawing from their colony led directly to instability and conflict. Although less restrained by Cold War imperatives than their trans-Atlantic partner, British officials also feared that instability might lead to a communist government takeover in Guyana which in turn might encourage other countries nearby, in which Britain’s economic ties were significantly more important, to follow suit.¹² Thus, as this chapter will demonstrate, it was crucial for the United States and Great Britain, within the context of their larger Cold War and decolonisation objectives, to ensure stability in British Guiana prior to it being granted independence.

A series of upheavals rocked the inter-American community in the late 1950s and contributed significantly to how the United States viewed the region and their relationship to it. There had always been considerable opposition to United States policies within Latin America and the Caribbean, though this opposition manifested itself particularly during Vice President Richard Nixon’s tour of the continent in 1958. The vice president received an extremely poor reception, the worst of which occurred in Venezuela where Nixon’s car was attacked and nearly overturned by a mob. The Department of State concluded that the

¹¹ Memorandum from the Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs (Rubottom) to the Secretary of State, 24 April 1959, *Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereinafter FRUS), 1958-1960, *American Republics, Volume V*, Document 118.

¹² The National Archives, Kew, Richmond, Surrey (hereinafter TNA), Colonial Office (hereinafter CO) 1031/4866, Records of the West Indian Department, British Guiana: Anglo/US Exchange on Status and Prospects of Political Developments, 13-14 December 1961.

response Nixon received was “due to [the] increased influence of the Soviet Union and China” in the region, suspecting that the Soviet Union in particular had been “providing regional communist parties with material and moral support.”¹³ That the most severe opposition Nixon experienced occurred in Venezuela, British Guiana’s neighbour, did not go unnoticed in Washington. The United States Information Agency claimed that Venezuela harboured “the most vociferous and fastest-growing legal communist party in the Western Hemisphere,” which apparently explained Nixon’s particularly poor reception there. Officials thus advised that extra attention be paid to countries that were in close proximity to Venezuela, such as British Guiana.¹⁴ As early as 1958 therefore, the presence of an active communist threat in Venezuela reinforced the significance of British Guiana to American Cold War geostrategy.

In 1959, in perhaps the most important of changes, Fulgencio Batista, the pro-American dictator of Cuba, was overthrown by Fidel Castro, who then turned the Cuban Revolution into an intensely anti-American movement.¹⁵ Following Nixon’s tour of the continent and Castro’s triumph in Cuba, the Dwight D. Eisenhower administration concluded that Latin America had become a critical “Cold War battleground.”¹⁶ When John F. Kennedy assumed office in January 1961, fears about the situation in Latin America and the Caribbean continued to dominate discussions in the White House. With the progression of the Cuban Revolution toward communism and Castro’s subsequent alliance with the Soviet Union, Kennedy administration officials vowed that they would “not be taken in by a communist

¹³ Memorandum of a Telephone Conversation between Rubottom and Sanders, 13 May 1958, *FRUS 1958-1960*, 5:49.

¹⁴ Memorandum from United States Information Agency to Department of State, 31 December 1958, *FRUS 1958-1960*, 5:54.

¹⁵ Stephen G. Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World: John F. Kennedy Confronts Communist Revolution in Latin America* (North Carolina, 1999), p. 27.

¹⁶ Memorandum from the Secretary of State to the President, 7 January 1959, *FRUS, 1958-1960*, 5:217.

who posed as a reformer,” as the Eisenhower administration had been with Castro. The Department of State thus decided that the most appropriate course of action would be tougher opposition to any movements in the region that seemed even slightly anti-American.¹⁷ Ultimately, the Cuban Revolution served to narrow Washington’s opinion of what constituted an appropriate nationalist movement and made administration officials more suspicious of any foreign policies in the region that claimed to be neutral or nonaligned in the Cold War. Although President Kennedy publically claimed on several occasions that “the United States respected neutralism,” in private the president continuously stressed the importance of wooing neutral countries on the continent into the American “Cold War camp.”¹⁸

The harder line that the Kennedy administration promised to take in an effort to counter the rise of communism in Latin America and the Caribbean would manifest itself particularly in British Guiana because of the colony’s significance to United States Cold War geostrategy. Perhaps the most important aspect of Washington’s preoccupation with the colony was its ideological significance. Administration officials were convinced that if they “lost” another nation to communism in the Western Hemisphere, it would severely damage the reputation of the United States in the opinion of other South American and Latin American nations.¹⁹ Potentially more devastating than a damaged reputation in the international community, however, would be the domestic political ramifications that awaited the Kennedy administration if a communist government was established in British Guiana. Just as President Truman and President Eisenhower had struggled against charges of “losing” China and Cuba to communism, administration officials feared the consequences at home if

¹⁷ Rusk to embassy of United Kingdom, 11 August 1961, *FRUS, 1961-1963, American Republics, Volume XII*, Document 519; Circular Telegram from the Department of State to Certain Diplomatic Posts in the American Republics, 10 May 1961, *FRUS, 1961-1963*, 12:75.

¹⁸ Memorandum from Attorney General Kennedy to President Kennedy, 11 September 1961, *FRUS, 1961-1963*, 12:82.

¹⁹ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston, 1965), p. 743.

another communist nation was established, especially so close to the United States. As the Deputy Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Richard Helms reflected in July 1964: “Such a situation would have been politically intolerable to the administration,” especially since Kennedy had promised to “act tougher and do more” to counter the rise of communism in the Western Hemisphere.²⁰

Contributing to British Guiana’s significance to American Cold War geostrategy was the colony’s proximity to countries in which the United States had significant interests. Not only did British Guiana share a border with Venezuela, the primary destination for United States capital in the region, but it also shared a border with Brazil, perhaps the most powerful country on the South American continent. Administration officials thus feared that if a communist government were to establish power in British Guiana after it was granted independence, Venezuela and Brazil might follow suit. This fear was heightened by the fact that the borders which British Guiana shared with Brazil and Venezuela were frequently areas of “instability and subversive activity.”²¹ British Guiana’s proximity to important nations therefore meant that the colony held a crucial location for hemispheric defence over the Cold War period.

Finally, the Atkinson Airfield in British Guiana, which the United States had constructed in 1942 as part of a deal with Great Britain, made avoiding a communist government takeover in the colony even more crucial.²² Administration officials saw this airfield as an important aspect of their “hemispheric military hegemony” and thus did not

²⁰ Memorandum from the Deputy Director for Plans of the Central Intelligence Agency (Helms) to the President’s Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy), 17 July 1964, *FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXXII, Dominican Republic; Cuba; Haiti; Guyana*, Document 385.

²¹ National Intelligence Estimate: The Outlook for Brazil, 8 August 1961, *FRUS, 1961-1963*, 12:212.

²² Rabe, *U.S. Intervention in British Guiana*, p. 22.

want to lose it because a communist government established power in British Guiana. In a discussion between officials in the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defence, William Lang explained to Gerald Goldstein: "...the Air Force is concerned with the need to retain available military 'toe-holds' on the South American continent for possible use in contingency operations in the area." He went on, "...while there is no present need for the facilities in B.G [British Guiana]....a future requirement for their use may arise either in connection with developments in our missile and space programs or with respect to contingency operations in Latin America."²³

While the Kennedy administration saw British Guiana as an important aspect of their regional Cold War strategy, British Guiana had become little more than a politically obstinate and economically draining burden for Great Britain by the early 1960s. As Commonwealth Secretary Duncan Sandys claimed in 1961: "the sooner we get these people out of our hair the better." Historians have interpreted such comments as evidence that the primary objective of Great Britain by 1961 was to grant the colony independence at the earliest possible date.²⁴ Although it is certainly true that British officials were eager to withdraw from British Guiana as soon as possible, this interpretation overlooks the importance that British officials placed on ensuring that a government "capable of maintaining stability" was in power in the colony before it was granted independence.²⁵

²³ Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defence William Lang to Gerald Goldstein, 14 August 1961, B.G.-U.S. Govt.-General 20, RG 59, General Records of the Department of State, National Archives II, College Park, MD cited in Joshua David Esposito, "The Anglo-American Intervention and Guianese Nationalist Politics," (Ph.D. Diss., West Virginia University, 2010), p. 81.

²⁴ Cary Fraser, "The New Frontier of Empire in the Caribbean: The Transfer of Power in British Guiana, 1961-4," *International History Review* 3 (2000), p. 597.

²⁵ TNA, CO 1031/4866, Records of the West Indian Department, British Guiana: Anglo/US Exchange on Status and Prospects of Political Developments, 13-14 December 1961.

Indeed, following the catastrophic and devastating European withdrawals from Africa after the Second World War, the international community had become increasingly concerned about the humanitarian consequences of decolonisation.²⁶ In an effort to preserve a degree of national pride, therefore, British officials were determined to disassemble their empire in “a dignified manner,” thereby achieving “a stable conclusion” to their “colonial legacy,” even in a relatively insignificant territory like British Guiana. British officials understood first hand that granting independence to a colony prematurely could result in violence as memories of the ethnic warfare that followed the partition of India, which had left millions dead, still weighed heavily on the conscience of British administrators. Thus, Great Britain would only entertain withdrawing from British Guiana when the country was able to maintain “a stable self-government.”²⁷

As it did with the United States, British Guiana’s proximity to Venezuela presented an additional problem for Great Britain. The border between Venezuela and British Guiana, known as the Essequibo region, had been hotly disputed since the nineteenth century and although this dispute had been resolved with the help of the United States in 1895, Venezuela had never fully accepted the settlement. Believing that “the small Guianese security force would be insufficient to protect its sovereignty if Venezuela pressed its claim to Guianese territory,” British officials predicted that the dormant dispute would explode once the colony was granted independence. Thus, the British would not be able to withdraw from British Guiana “in a dignified manner” if that withdrawal meant conflict with its neighbour.²⁸

²⁶ Ronald Hyam, *Britain’s Declining Empire: The Road to Decolonization, 1918-1968* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 172-79.

²⁷ TNA, CO 1031/4866, Records of the West Indian Department, Note from John Hennings of British Embassy, Washington D.C. to Ambler Thomas of Colonial Office, 15 February 1963.

²⁸ TNA, Foreign Office (hereinafter FO) 371/179146, General Records of the American Department, Note from Sir Patrick Dean to Jack Rennie, 2 August 1965.

Like the United States, British officials also feared that instability might lead to a communist government takeover in British Guiana. British administrators feared that if this were to happen in British Guiana, it might “set a precedent for [other] decolonising areas” where Britain’s economic ties were significantly more valuable, such as Singapore. In addition, Britain had significant interests in the Caribbean bauxite industry and feared that if a communist government established power in British Guiana and then nationalised the bauxite industry, the rest of the region might follow suit.²⁹ The lengths to which the British Government would go to avoid a communist government takeover in British Guiana was made evident in 1953 when British Guiana had first been granted self-government. Fearing that the colony was moving in a communist direction, the British Government suspended the Guianese constitution and returned to direct control in less than six months.³⁰

This chapter has demonstrated that the primary objective of both the United States and Great Britain in British Guiana by 1961, within the context of their larger decolonisation and Cold War objectives, was ensuring that the colony was stable before it was granted independence. The United States feared that instability would lead to a communist government establishing power, an event that would have major implications for the United States considering the colony’s significance to American Cold War geostrategy. On the other hand, British officials were concerned that instability in an independent Guyana would damage their reputation in the international community and threaten their control of the decolonisation process in their other colonies. Therefore, despite there being a consensus within the existing historiography that Great Britain and the United States had different interests in the colony, the reality was quite different.

²⁹ TNA, CO 1031/4866, Records of the West Indian Department, British Guiana: Anglo/US Exchange on Status and Prospects of Political Developments, 13-14 December 1961.

³⁰ TNA, CO 1031/4405, Records of the West Indian Department, Note by Alec Douglas-Home, 19 November 1963.

Chapter Two: Guianese Politicians as Actors in the Cold War, 1961-1962

Thus far this study has demonstrated that the primary objective of both the United States and Great Britain in British Guiana by 1961 was ensuring stability in the colony before it was granted independence. The intention of this chapter is to assess the impact that Guianese nationalist leaders had on American policy toward the colony. This will largely be achieved by examining how the foreign policy decisions of Cheddi Jagan and Forbes Burnham were interpreted by American officials and in turn how these actions contributed to the decision-making process in Washington. The existing historiography on the decolonisation of British Guiana focuses solely on the relationship between “domestic reform movements and foreign intervention,” with historians concluding that the People’s Progressive Party (PPP) became a “victim of American communist paranoia” because of the “mild social reforms” it pursued.³¹ The critical role played by British Guiana’s leaders in influencing American foreign policy has thus largely been overlooked. This chapter is therefore a crucial contribution to the existing historiography, especially since historians now argue that “in order to obtain a more accurate view of how the Cold War unfolded, it is necessary to examine the agency of political actors who were not leaders of the great powers.”³²

Although officials in Washington had grown increasingly suspicious of Jagan’s ideological position and foreign policy intentions in the last few years of the Dwight D. Eisenhower administration, when the PPP won the election in British Guiana in June 1961, the Kennedy administration decided to provide Jagan with an opportunity to prove that he

³¹ Richard Barnet, *Intervention and Revolution: The United States in the Third World* (New York, 1968), p. 79; Stephen G. Rabe, *U.S. Intervention in British Guiana: A Cold War Story* (Chapel Hill, 2005), p. 13.

³² Jason Parker, *Brother’s Keeper: The United States, Race, and Empire in the British Caribbean, 1937-1962* (Oxford, 2008), p. 279.

was not a communist before making any hasty decisions regarding the situation. By mid-1962, however, Kennedy administration officials had become adamant that Jagan would not lead his country to independence. This chapter thus seeks to examine the breakdown of this relationship from Washington's perspective and the reasons why Forbes Burnham became the preferred option to lead Guiana to independence. This chapter is not an attempt to determine whether American intervention in British Guiana was justified; given that this chapter is simply concerned with how the actions of Guianese leaders were interpreted in the United States and why, in the opinion of administration officials, this meant that Jagan was not a suitable candidate to lead his country to independence, judgement is inherently withheld. Rather, the aim of this chapter is to acknowledge the role that leaders in the developing world played in shaping and influencing superpower policy during the Cold War.³³

In a speech in Trinidad in April 1960, Jagan claimed that Fidel Castro was “beloved by everyone” and suggested that British Guiana and “the rest of the Caribbean” should “come to the aid of the Cuban cause” if the “imperialists” were to ever intervene in the country.³⁴ Eisenhower administration officials interpreted these comments as evidence that “the success of the Cuban Revolution” in January 1959 had “reinvigorated [Jagan's] belief in Marxism” and encouraged him to pursue an “increasingly more aggressive” foreign policy. Melby Everett, the United States Consul in Georgetown, wrote to the Department of State following Jagan's speech in order to summarise his fears about “the communist situation in British Guiana.” Melby explained that it was becoming obvious that the Cuban Revolution, and more importantly its success, had proved to Jagan that “an independent course was possible” as

³³ Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 3-7; Parker, *Brother's Keeper*, p. 279.

³⁴ Woods to Department of State, 11 May 1960, *Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereinafter FRUS), 1958-1960, *American Republics, Volume V*, Document 342.

long as he secured support from Cuba and the Soviet Union. Melby voiced several additional concerns such as “the importation of communist literature,” “communist contacts,” and “Soviet Bloc trade, aid and scholarships.” Melby explained that he believed such evidence simply confirmed Washington’s fear that Jagan would seek to establish ties with communist nations post-independence. Fears and suspicions in Washington only grew further when a Guianese newspaper reported in early October 1960 that Jagan had told businessmen in the colony that he would not ensure free elections in the country after it was granted independence.³⁵

In May 1961, Jagan sought to explain the relationship that he hoped British Guiana would have with the United States after the county was granted independence. The Guianese Prime Minister claimed that he would like “to continue a friendship” as long as “there were no strings attached” and that the United States “accepted his principles of economic planning.”³⁶ This statement was certainly not as provocative to officials in Washington as, for example, his vocal support for Castro and the Cuban Revolution. However, as discussed previously, Washington’s inability to control the Cuban Revolution had made American officials adamant to avoid any further revolutions in the Western Hemisphere. Moreover, Cuba’s progression toward communism and Castro’s subsequent alliance with the Soviet Union served only to make American officials less willing to accept foreign policies that claimed to be independent in the Western Hemisphere. In particular though, the United States would not be satisfied with neutralism in British Guiana considering its close proximity to the United States, and the country’s significance to American Cold War geostrategy, as also discussed previously.

³⁵ Melby to Department of State, 6 July 1960, *FRUS, 1958-1960*, 5:347.

³⁶ Melby to Department of State, 3 July 1961, *FRUS, 1961-1963, American Republics, Volume XII*, Document 243.

Despite reservations about Jagan during the Eisenhower administration, the Kennedy administration agreed to reassess its policy toward the colony at the behest of British officials following the PPP's electoral victory in early August 1961. After almost a month of deliberation in the Oval Office, Kennedy proposed an approach he described as "an across-the-board, whole-hearted attempt to work with Jagan."³⁷ The exact nature of this policy is rather vague given the number of documents on the subject that remain confidential; according to presidential aide Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., however, the attempt to remove Jagan would be postponed until administration officials were provided with what they considered to be sufficient evidence that Jagan was actually a communist.³⁸ Jagan and his party were therefore provided with an opportunity to prove that they were willing to conduct their foreign policy within a framework approved by the United States.

Before continuing, it is important to firstly address a crucial limitation to the argument set forth within this chapter. There is a consensus within the existing historiography that Kennedy's proposed attempt to work with Jagan was not sincere, an argument espoused particularly by Stephen Rabe and Gordon Oliver Daniels. These historians have suggested that Kennedy's policy was simply "a tactic used to appease British officials who were determined to grant independence to British Guiana at the earliest possible date."³⁹ As evidence, these historians draw on a message sent from Secretary of State Dean Rusk to the British Foreign Secretary Lord Alec Home in February 1962. In this message, sent only days after violent riots had erupted in Georgetown, Rusk informed Home that the United States

³⁷ Schlesinger to Kennedy, 12 January 1962, *FRUS, 1961-1963*, 12:261.

³⁸ Arthur Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston, 1965), p. 770.

³⁹ Rabe, *U.S. Intervention in British Guiana*, p. 258; Gordon Oliver Daniels, "A Great Injustice to Cheddi Jagan: The Kennedy Administration and British Guiana, 1961-63" (Ph.D. Diss., University of Mississippi, 2000), pp. 124-29.

had: “tried your policy of working with Jagan,” and concluded that, “...it is not possible for us to put up with an independent British Guiana under Jagan.”⁴⁰ Although these historians do agree that the documentary record is thin at best, Rabe and Daniels suggest that this message could be interpreted as evidence that the Kennedy administration simply “used the riots as an excuse to abandon a policy never truly embraced by Washington.”⁴¹

While this may have very well been the case, the lack of evidence makes it difficult to completely prove. Moreover, there is in fact convincing evidence to suggest that the Kennedy administration’s proposed attempt to work with Jagan was actually genuine. In pursuit of Kennedy’s policy, the president invited the Guianese Prime Minister to Washington in October 1961. The State Department admitted prior to Jagan’s visit that they “saw no real alternative to British policy” and thus intended to work with Jagan “if his trip was successful.”⁴² Melby summarised the administration’s course of action in a telegram to Rusk: “...ideological issues should be met fully at outset at high level ... we should tell him frankly our concern about communist involvement and tell him we expect an equally frank statement from him on his position.”⁴³ Therefore, as Schlesinger noted, “Jagan’s visit would prove to be an unparalleled opportunity to sell himself and his country to the United States.”⁴⁴ While it is possible that these officials were simply unaware about the president’s true intentions, this is probably unlikely as it would imply an incredibly disjointed foreign policy in Washington. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, and until documents which directly suggest otherwise are declassified, we can presume that the Kennedy administration had genuinely hoped to work with Jagan from August 1961.

⁴⁰ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in the United Kingdom, 19 February 1962, *FRUS, 1961-1963*, 12:264.

⁴¹ Rabe, *U.S. Intervention in British Guiana*, p. 126.

⁴² Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, p. 775.

⁴³ Melby to Rusk, 13 October 1961, *FRUS, 1961-1963*, 12:259.

⁴⁴ Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, p. 776.

Jagan's visit to the United States began with an appearance on *Meet the Press*, a weekly news programme, on 15 October 1961. Unfortunately, Jagan's performance was interpreted as "a public relations debacle" that tarnished his entire trip.⁴⁵ When asked by Lawrence E. Spivak, "Are you or are you not pro-communist?" Jagan responded by claiming that there was "a great deal of confusion as to definitions," but confirmed that he did in fact "believe in Marxism." Jagan went on, "I am a socialist in the sense that I believe that the means of production should be in the hands of the state." Spivak told Jagan that he seemed "to be avoiding a direct answer," and pressed the Guianese Prime Minister further, "Do I understand by what you are saying that you are neither a communist nor pro-communist as we understand both words today in relationship to the Soviet Union, in relationship to Communist China? Is this right?" Although Jagan responded by claiming that he was "wedded to parliamentary democracy," he went on to explain, "In the economic field, I do not believe in capitalism. I do not believe that free enterprise will develop my country." When asked about his views on "the Cuban phenomenon," Jagan simply told the panel that he and his country had "to learn from what is taking place in every area of the world."⁴⁶

Jagan's responses to the interview questions were interpreted as "inept and ambiguous" and understood simply as an attempt to "conceal his true ideological position."⁴⁷ According to Schlesinger, "Kennedy responded to the interview by calling for a re-examination of all aspects of the problem." Consequently when Jagan and Kennedy finally met ten days later, the most important agenda for the president was to decisively establish

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 778.

⁴⁶ *Meet the Press*, 15 October 1961, Audio Visual, <http://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/2703929> [accessed on 28 January 2017].

⁴⁷ Gordon Oliver Daniels, "A Great Injustice to Cheddi Jagan: The Kennedy Administration and British Guiana, 1961-63" (Ph.D. Diss., University of Mississippi, 2000), p. 124.

Jagan's position on communism once and for all.⁴⁸ All this meeting did, however, was signal the beginning of the breakdown in the cooperative relationship that the administration had hoped to establish with Jagan. The Guianese Prime Minister firstly claimed that he was "too unfamiliar with theory to distinguish between the various forms of socialism" and then declared that he was "uncommitted in the Cold War."⁴⁹ This was the exact type of neutralism which would not suffice in the opinion of American officials, especially at the height of the Cold War and in a strategically critical region like British Guiana.

Upon returning to Georgetown, Jagan embarked on a series of political manoeuvres which made American officials even more suspicious about his position on communism. In an article published in the *Trinidad Guardian* in early November 1961, for example, Jagan was reported claiming that after his country received independence, he would request financial aid from Cuba and the Soviet Union. Later that month, toward the end of an independence debate, Jagan was also reported claiming that capitalism was "a dying system" and an "evil economic structure." Equally as antagonising to American officials was an article in the Polish newspaper *Slowo Powzechne*, published on 18 January 1962, which reported that Jagan's wife, Janet Jagan, had passed through Warsaw whilst travelling to Moscow. Melby informed Rusk that such reports served only to confirm Washington's fear that Jagan was a "communist conspirator seeking to establish a second Cuba on the South American mainland."⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, pp. 778-79.

⁴⁹ Memorandum of Conversation, Kennedy, Schlesinger, Ball, Jagan, et al, 25 October 1961, 841d.00/10-2561, Central Decimal Files Box 2478, RG 59, Records of the Department of State, National Archives II, College Park, MD cited in Esposito, "The Anglo-American Intervention and Guianese Nationalist Politics," p. 121.

⁵⁰ Melby to Department of State, 15 December 1961, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, 12:260.

Two important events occurring in mid-1962 were to further impact Washington's opinion of Jagan and his party. Firstly, the PPP held its annual elections on 28 April 1962. Balram Singh Rai, the Minister of Home Affairs, reported that there had been "a radicalisation of the organisation" and weeks later he was expelled from the party because he "opposed the strong communist direction it was moving toward."⁵¹ Meanwhile, Forbes Burnham was working diligently to obtain the support of American officials and arrived in Washington in May to meet with Schlesinger. Burnham was successful in areas where Jagan had failed seven months earlier; Burnham spoke incessantly about an independent Guyana under his party establishing a strong relationship with the United States and also claimed that he would cut all ties with Cuba, the Soviet Union and other Eastern Bloc nations.⁵² In hindsight, we now know that Burnham was a socialist; however, Burnham did not allow his beliefs and intentions hamper his courtship of American officials. Also contributing to Burnham's success was the fact that Jagan had visited the United States in the same month to meet with Polish and Soviet diplomats, though did not approach or contact any American officials. This made the Kennedy administration even more suspicious about Jagan's intentions; Ambassador to the United Nations Adlai Stevenson, for example, interpreted Jagan's actions in a letter to Rusk as an intentional effort to antagonise the United States.⁵³

By mid-1962, therefore, American officials had serious reservations about Jagan, his political stance and his foreign policy intentions post-independence. By contrast, Burnham's skilful diplomacy, which seemed to address key American concerns, was received enthusiastically by officials in Washington. In spite of this, Jagan continued to be the popular

⁵¹ Melby to Department of State, 28 April 1962, *FRUS, 1961-1963*, 12:274.

⁵² Memorandum of Conversation, Burnham, Schlesinger, Moscoso, et al., 3 May 1962, 741d.00/5-362, Central Decimal Files Box 1668, RG 59, Records of the Department of State, National Archives II, College Park, MD cited in Esposito, "The Anglo-American Intervention and Guianese Nationalist Politics," p. 128.

⁵³ Stevenson to Rusk, 24 May 1962, *ibid*, p. 129.

choice to lead his country to independence both in British Guiana and in Great Britain; as Prime Minister Macmillan informed Kennedy in early June: “the United States must try and work with Jagan if he remains the choice of the people.”⁵⁴ Thus, by mid-1962, despite some opposition toward Jagan from within Washington, the Guianese Prime Minister’s fate had not yet been sealed. Less than a year later, however, on 30 June 1963, the Anglo-American alliance agreed that Burnham, rather than Jagan, would lead Guiana to independence.⁵⁵ The next chapter will thus determine why British officials changed their position on the situation so dramatically over the course of the following year.

⁵⁴ Telegram from the Department of State to U.S. Embassy, London including text of a letter from Macmillan to Kennedy, Washington, 7 June 1962, *FRUS, 1961-1963*, 12:276.

⁵⁵ Memorandum of Conversation at Birch Grove, England, 30 June 1963, *FRUS, 1961-1963*, 12:295.

Chapter Three: Anglo-American Imperatives Coalesce, 1962-1963

Throughout most of the Second World War, the United States encouraged Great Britain to withdraw from its colonial possessions and by the late 1950s, Britain was finally in the process of disassembling its empire.⁵⁶ Less than two decades after end of the war, however, American policymakers would alter their attitude toward colonialism drastically in response to a number of developments during the Cold War, particularly the Cuban Revolution in 1959. In British Guiana, for example, the United States would encourage Britain to pursue a policy of slow decolonisation and eventually intervention in the colony's politics. By 1961, however, a new international climate hostile to European imperialism combined with economic constraints meant that British officials were hoping to withdraw from its colonies as soon as possible. Thus, it would appear that the experience of decolonisation in British Guiana demonstrates a reversal in the roles of both Great Britain and the United States considering their traditional perspectives on colonial rule.

Given the British desire to withdraw from its colonial possessions as quickly as possible, in explaining why Britain eventually agreed to intervene in Guianese politics, historians have concluded that the British “acquiesced to American wishes and assisted in destroying democracy in their colony to achieve American Cold War aims.”⁵⁷ British officials were indeed required to strike a balance between their own interests, what was right by their colony and their desire to preserve the Anglo-American ‘special relationship,’ and were thus often put in a very difficult position. However, British support cannot solely be explained as acceding to American pressure. The importance of maintaining stability in British Guiana for

⁵⁶ Richard Barnet, *Intervention and Revolution: The United States in the Third World* (New York, 1968), p. 73.

⁵⁷ Gordon Oliver Daniels, “A Great Injustice to Cheddi Jagan: The Kennedy Administration and British Guiana, 1961-63” (Ph.D. Diss., University of Mississippi, 2000), pp. 124-25; Stephen G. Rabe, *U.S. Intervention in British Guiana: A Cold War Story* (Chapel Hill, 2005), p. 11.

both the United States and Great Britain has already been discussed at length within this study; therefore, as this chapter will demonstrate, the outbreak of instability and racial violence in British Guiana between 1962 and 1963, combined with Cheddi Jagan's ineffective leadership, resulted in coalescing Anglo-American interests and the joint decision to intervene in the colony's political affairs.

British Guiana's history had been characterised by a long and violent legacy of racial conflict between East Indians and the Afro-Guianese community, the two predominant ethnic groups in the colony. Although colonial structures had served to exacerbate and compound this racial animosity in Guianese society, nationalist leaders such as Cheddi Jagan and Forbes Burnham were the most decisive catalyst in igniting the flames of racial conflict. According to a British report, these men were political opportunists who, by claiming that "cultural subjugation would be the consequence if either ethnic group lost an election," exploited the racial division within the colony to gain an advantage at the polls.⁵⁸

Despite this long history of racial animosity in British Guiana, historians have described 1961 as a year of optimism and hope for the colony. Not only had the past few years been relatively peaceful, but Jagan and his People's Progressive Party (PPP) had been democratically elected once again and British officials were thus expecting to grant the country independence by mid-1962.⁵⁹ In the early months of 1962, however, the stability that the colony had experienced over the past few years began to deteriorate as Jagan's plan to introduce various new taxes was met with severe opposition. These new taxes included a duty on total sales in an effort to minimise the ability of businesses to evade paying higher taxes

⁵⁸ The National Archives, Kew, Richmond, Surrey (hereinafter TNA), Colonial Office (hereinafter CO) 1031/4493, Records of the West Indian Department, Note by Colonial Office Information Department: British Guiana Conference Failure of 1962 Deliberations, 22 October 1963.

⁵⁹ Rabe, *U.S. Intervention in British Guiana*, p. 17; Barnett, *Intervention and Revolution*, p. 103.

through claiming losses every year. This was particularly incendiary to the business community who interpreted the tax as an “anti-capitalist attempt to redistribute wealth.” Opposition was not limited to the upper echelons of the business community, however. Members of the Trades Union Council (TUC), which consisted of a significant majority of Guianese labour organisations, were severely opposed to the idea of a compulsory savings plan that the government planned to use to tax a certain percentage of wages that were above \$1,200 per year.⁶⁰

Burnham and his People’s National Congress (PNC) had always insisted that they would not sit idly by as Jagan and his party led their country to independence. Realising that Jagan could not be defeated democratically at the polls, Burnham took advantage of the opposition to Jagan’s planned taxes and called for a strike in February 1962. This strike rapidly deteriorated into racial violence as Afro-Guianese crowds attacked members of the East Indian community, burned East Indian businesses and pillaged their stores. The economy went into steep decline and a majority of the business section in Georgetown burned to the ground. Vice Consul Joseph Johnson met with a number of Guianese politicians toward the end of February 1962, all of whom explained that they were reluctant to push for Guianese independence that year given the current situation in the colony.⁶¹ That the Guianese themselves were hesitant to push for independence serves only to illustrate the severity of the situation.

⁶⁰ TNA, CO 1031/4493, Records of the West Indian Department, Note by Colonial Office Information Department: British Guiana Conference Failure of 1962 Deliberations: The Interest Taken by the United Nations, 22 October 1963.

⁶¹ TNA, CO 1031/4405, Records of the West Indian Department, House of Commons Extract From Official Report of Queens Speech Debate-Constitution, 15 November 1963.

Following this period of unrest, Secretary of State Dean Rusk sent a memorandum to the British Foreign Secretary Lord Home insisting that action be taken immediately to delay independence in the colony until Jagan and his party could be replaced by a more suitable government. British officials were angered and surprised by Rusk's suggestion that they should undermine a government in their colony that had been elected democratically. A series of contentious exchanges were sent across the Atlantic as American policymakers asserted their inability to "put up with an independent British Guiana under Jagan," while the British relayed their amazement at the "Machiavellianism" of the United States.⁶² Despite substantial animosity toward Washington's demands, however, the British Government gradually acquiesced and postponed the Guianese independence conference that had been scheduled for May that year until October.⁶³

Over the summer of 1962, the relationship between the United States and Jagan deteriorated even further. In late June, British officials held an inquiry into what had caused the riots in British Guiana earlier that year in an attempt to avoid a similar situation in the future. Over the course of the inquiry, Jagan was questioned about his ideological position and after a number of unsatisfying and indecisive responses, Jagan finally confessed: "I am a communist," a statement which seemed to confirm Washington's worst fears. In the same week, Jack Kelshall, Jagan's secretary, stated categorically that he and Jagan were both communists. American officials interpreted this as evidence that Jagan's confession the week before was in fact "party dogma" and thus should be taken seriously. The response in Washington was immediate: from this point on, the Kennedy administration ceased

⁶² Memorandum from Foreign Secretary Home to Secretary of State Rusk, 26 February 1962, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XII, American Republics*, Document 266.

⁶³ TNA, CO 1031/4493, Records of the West Indian Department, Note by Colonial Office Information Department: British Guiana Conference Failure of 1962 Deliberations: The Interest Taken by the United Nations, 22 October 1963.

“discussing strategy” in the colony and “committed [themselves] completely” to a developing a programme to destabilise Jagan and his government.⁶⁴

When the Guianese independence conference that had been postponed in May was finally held in October, British officials decided that independence would be postponed once again. Historians have argued that, realising the schism between the United States and Jagan was irreparable, British officials postponed independence again against their better judgment in an effort to avoid antagonising their ally.⁶⁵ While this probably did contribute to the British decision to postpone independence again, it is perhaps slightly simplistic to interpret it as the sole reason. British officials were themselves adamantly against the establishment of a communist government in British Guiana, for reasons discussed previously. This was demonstrated particularly by the British decision to suspend the Guianese constitution and return to direct control in 1953 over fears of an impending communist revolution.⁶⁶ Jagan’s brazen claim that he was a communist, therefore, undoubtedly worried the British Government and thus impacted their decision to postpone discussing independence again in October 1962.⁶⁷

Tensions remained high between the United States, Great Britain and Jagan over the next few months and another strike in the colony in April 1963 deteriorated into extreme racial violence once again; however, this time the strike was exacerbated by the fact that the predominantly Afro-Guianese armed civil services were key participants. The colony was still yet to recover from the damage caused by the strike in 1962 and this strike devastated the

⁶⁴ Schlesinger to Kennedy, 5 September 1962, *FRUS, 1961-1963*, 12:288.

⁶⁵ Rabe, *U.S. Intervention in British Guiana*, p. 102.

⁶⁶ TNA, CO 1031/4405, Records of the West Indian Department, Note by Alec Douglas-Home, 19 November 1963.

⁶⁷ TNA, CO, 1031/4405, Records of the West Indian Department, British Policy toward British Guiana, 1 November 1963.

economy even further, so much so that colonial governor Sir Ralph Grey declared a “state of emergency” in May. The Afro-Guianese civil services ceased accepting orders from the government and the strike was suppressed only with the arrival of the British armed forces in early June. Although peace had been restored in the colony, the civil services continued refusing to accept orders from the government and Jagan was thus effectively left as the head of an elected government that did not function. Burnham would have only ever been able to gain the support of the British Government if officials believed that a Jagan-led government would lead to internal instability after independence. The culmination of strikes by 1963 had for the first time placed this idea in the minds of British officials. The racial composition of the civil services in the colony meant that Burnham, as a member of the Afro-Guianese community, was now the only leader able to control the civil services and thus stabilise Guianese society.⁶⁸ Anglo-American imperatives in British Guiana therefore began to coalesce in mid-June 1963.

It is important to acknowledge that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had been contributing to the strife and abetting the violence in British Guiana since 1962; Stephen Rabe in particular has described the role played by American assistance in funding Jagan’s political rivals.⁶⁹ However, it is important to remember that racial violence had been a feature of Guianese life since the nineteenth century. It is also important to remember that Burnham was an opportunistic politician who had been exploiting the racial division in the colony for almost a decade.⁷⁰ Although assistance from the United States probably increased Burnham’s effectiveness, it is therefore likely that he would have exploited the racial division in British

⁶⁸ TNA, CO, 1031/4405, Records of the West Indian Department, British Policy toward British Guiana, 1 November 1963.

⁶⁹ Rabe, *U.S. Intervention in British Guiana*, pp. 75-105.

⁷⁰ TNA, CO, 1031/4405, Records of the West Indian Department, British Policy toward British Guiana, 1 November 1963.

Guiana between 1962 and 1963 in an effort to undermine Jagan regardless of American assistance.

Additionally, it was not the riots per se that pushed Britain further toward the American-held belief that Jagan was incapable of leading British Guiana to independence. Rather, it was Jagan's inability, counterweighted with Burnham's ability, to control the predominantly Afro-Guianese armed civil services. The United States bore no responsibility for the imbalanced racial composition of the civil services in British Guiana, nor their decision to stop taking orders from Jagan's government. It is thus plausible to argue that while the United States did contribute to Jagan's opposition, it is extremely simplistic to ascribe the racial animosity and violence in this period solely to American assistance. As the British Government made clear: "Jagan and his party have constituted the government of the colony for the last six years [and thus] they and their policies must bear a majority of the blame."⁷¹

Since 1961, Great Britain had been eager to free themselves of the economically draining burden that was British Guiana, though were determined to ensure that a stable government was established in the colony beforehand. Simultaneously, American policymakers had been applying pressure on the British Government to subvert Jagan and his government. As this chapter has demonstrated, structural issues within British Guiana worked in harmony with American pressure to encourage Britain to intervene in Guianese politics. After postponing independence for over a year, British officials realised that not only was the schism between American officials and Jagan irreparable, but Jagan would be incapable of

⁷¹ TNA, CO 1031/4405, Records of the West Indian Department, Outward Telegram from the Foreign Relations Office, 1 November 1963.

maintaining stability in the colony regardless. Burnham, on the other hand, who controlled the predominantly Afro-Guianese civil services, was now the only leader capable of maintaining peace in the colony at short notice and thus the only leader capable of fulfilling the British Government's primary aim. When John F. Kennedy met with Prime Minister Harold MacMillan in England on 30 June 1963, therefore, despite initial misgivings about Burnham on Britain's part, the Anglo-American alliance arrived at the mutual decision that Burnham, rather than Jagan, would be a more suitable candidate to lead Guiana to independence.⁷²

⁷² Memorandum of Conversation at Birch Grove, England, 30 June 1963, *FRUS, 1961-1963*, 12:295.

Chapter Four: Anglo-American Contention and Cooperation, 1961-1963

This chapter will examine the exchanges between American and British officials over the period 1961 to 1963 in their attempt to construct a Cold War strategy for the decolonisation of British Guiana. These exchanges demonstrate that both nations largely pursued their own interests in the colony while simultaneously remaining cognisant of their ally's objectives. The argument set forth within this chapter therefore is further testament to the contention that the British decision to intervene in Guianese politics was not solely a result of acceding to American demands. The United States was undoubtedly more focused on the necessities of the Cold War than Great Britain, however, American policymakers took British interests into account at every step; British Guiana was, after all, a British colony. Likewise, British officials would only consider a strategy for the decolonisation of British Guiana that was compatible with American Cold War imperatives. Given this degree of cooperation, the Anglo-American decision to subvert Cheddi Jagan and support a regime led by Forbes Burnham can be interpreted as a successful negotiation between Great Britain and the United States and between the necessities of decolonisation and the Cold War.

The degree of cooperation that was involved in developing a Cold War strategy for the decolonisation of British Guiana cannot be trivialised; it is perhaps best illustrated in a note from the British Foreign Office to Washington: "In reaching this difficult decision, we took fully into account United States views as expressed by Mr. Bundy (your telegram under reference) and again by Mr. Rusk in his talks with the Colonial Secretary."⁷³ Similarly, policymakers in Washington considered British objectives at every turn. In a position paper

⁷³ The National Archives, Kew, Richmond, Surrey (hereinafter TNA), Foreign Office (hereinafter FO) 371/179146, General Records of the American Department, Note from Foreign Office to Washington, 24 December 1963.

for the State Department, for example, William Burdett, the Assistant Secretary of State, explained that he understood British officials wanted to withdraw from British Guiana “as soon as possible and in an honourable fashion.” He also explained that the United States did not want to cause any “unnecessary conflict” with the British by preventing this from happening.⁷⁴ In fact, as illustrated by President Kennedy’s “whole-hearted, across the board attempt to work with Jagan” in August 1961, American officials initially appeared to assign more value to preserving their relationship with Great Britain over implementing a policy that would achieve their short-term goals.⁷⁵ The desire to avoid conflict with British officials encouraged the Kennedy administration to postpone their attempts to overthrow Jagan and try to work with him, despite misgivings and suspicions vis-à-vis his foreign policy intentions. Although this policy was undermined a little under a year later, the importance that both nations assigned to maintaining a successful partnership seems to have remained over the entirety of period under scrutiny.

The importance of maintaining this partnership surfaced again when Prime Minister MacMillan met with President Kennedy in June 1963 in Birch Grove, England. During this meeting, Macmillan pointed out that Britain had no interest in British Guiana and that their main goal now was to prepare the colony for independence by ensuring that a government capable of maintaining stability was in power. Macmillan did acknowledge, however, that the British Government was aware that Jagan had been “...increasingly in contact with Cuba, Russia and other bloc countries.” Macmillan thus agreed that there could be “little hope that

⁷⁴ Position Paper by William Burdett on Prime Minister MacMillan’s Visit to Washington, 20 April 1962, RG 59, Records of the Department of State, National Archives II, College Park, MD cited in Joshua David Esposito, “The Anglo-American Intervention and Guianese Nationalist Politics,” (Ph.D. Diss., West Virginia University, 2010), p. 75.

⁷⁵ Schlesinger to Kennedy, 12 January 1962, *Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereinafter FRUS), 1961-1963, *American Republics, Volume XII*, Document 261.

on independence Guiana would not follow the pattern of Cuba.”⁷⁶ At the meeting, officials also agreed that “Anglo-American relations would greatly suffer if a communist government were to establish power” in British Guiana; Macmillan therefore made clear that Britain would strive to appease American anxieties before granting their colony independence.⁷⁷ British officials thus framed their policy for the decolonisation of British Guiana within the larger framework of their partner’s Cold War strategy.

The Anglo-American attempt to devise a Cold War strategy for the decolonisation of British Guiana was not without its issues, however. John Hennings of the British Colonial Office, for example, commented: “...it is difficult for [American policymakers] to realise how impotent the colonial power is.” Hennings went on, “This reluctance is traditional: it is somewhat of a national heresy for Americans to believe that the colonial power against which their patriots rose and battled so heroically was really rather powerless.” Hennings then joked, “...you would think that a nation that resented imperial legislation as vigorously as they did would be among the first to recognise the consequences of legislating by Order in Counsel over the head of Dr. Jagan...Knox admits this, but suspects that there is something wrong in a world in which what was good for Sam Adams must be good for Cheddi Jagan!”⁷⁸

As this tongue-in-cheek statement suggests, the attempt to coordinate a policy for British Guiana that addressed each nation’s objectives was sometimes challenging. In particular, the degree of intervention necessary was often an area of frustration and contention. In adjusting to a new international climate that was hostile to the practice of

⁷⁶ TNA, Colonial Office (hereinafter CO) 1031/4866, Records of the West Indian Department, Brief for Prime Minister’s Talks with President Kennedy: British Guiana: Talking Points, 24 June 1963.

⁷⁷ TNA, CO 1031/4866, Records of the West Indian Department, Analysis prepared jointly by U.S. and British officials meeting in London, 25-27 June 1963.

⁷⁸ TNA, CO 1031/4866, Records of the West Indian Department, Note from John Hennings of British Embassy, Washington D.C. to Ambler Thomas of Colonial Office, 15 February 1963.

imperialism after the Second World War, British officials were hesitant to interfere in Guianese domestic affairs too aggressively. The significance of British Guiana to United States Cold War geostrategy, however, meant that officials in Washington were willing to interfere in Guianese politics as much as necessary to achieve their aims. Great Britain and the United States were thus never completely in agreement regarding how best to decolonise British Guiana. The entire decolonisation process in British Guiana was complicated even further by the British need to “incur minimal financial drain.”⁷⁹

Both nations were willing to make concessions, however, in an effort to ensure a successful partnership. The United States, for example, offered Great Britain vocal support for their policies within the international community as well as significant financial aid. William Burdett summarised: “If the U.S. could promise substantial aid, e.g., not less than \$15,000,000 per year, the British would be inclined to accede to our wishes...and if the British felt that Burnham would get arms from agencies of the U.S. government...it might prefer to postpone its departure temporarily.” Burdett went on, “If the British felt that their wishes would be heeded by the U.S. with regard to certain other problems in other parts of the world... the British Government might strive more energetically to bring about in BG a PR [proportional representation] election.”⁸⁰ Thus, the postponement of independence in British Guiana can be interpreted as a successful negotiation between Great Britain and the United States and between the necessities of decolonisation and the Cold War.

⁷⁹ TNA, Colonial Office (hereinafter CO) 1031/4866, Records of the West Indian Department, Brief for Prime Minister's Talks with President Kennedy: British Guiana: Talking Points, 24 June 1963.

⁸⁰ Gordon Knox to William Burdett. Contingency Planning for British Guiana, 2 October, 1962, Br. Guiana Briefing Papers 1.8, RG 59, Records of the Department of State, National Archives II, College Park, MD cited in Esposito, “The Anglo-American Intervention and Guianese Nationalist Politics,” p. 68.

Concessions were not always necessary though because American and British imperatives began to coalesce as it became evident in early 1963 that Jagan was unable to maintain stability in the colony. It is certainly not a coincidence that this realisation preceded the British decision to make a compromise with Washington.⁸¹ Forbes Burnham thus provided the Anglo-American alliance with the best opportunity to coordinate a strategy for British Guiana. Burnham's control of the predominantly Afro-Guianese civil services meant that he would be able to stabilise the Guianese domestic situation. Additionally, Burnham constantly explained to American officials that if his party led the country to independence, he would not identify with either Cuba or the Soviet Union and he would end current trade deals with communist nations.⁸² Supporting a regime in British Guiana led by Burnham would therefore, in theory at least, fulfil Britain's need to ensure stability in the country and simultaneously eliminate the concern within the United States that another communist government might be established in the Western Hemisphere.

Overall, this chapter has demonstrated that although both American and British officials pursued their own interests in British Guiana, both nations remained cognisant of their partner's interests. American policymakers were primarily determined to wage Cold War, while British officials were heavily engaged in liquidating their empire. However, British officials would only consider a strategy for the decolonisation of their colony that was compatible with their ally's interests. For their part, policymakers in Washington recognised that in spite of everything, British Guiana was a British colony and thus the British Government would always have the final say. The relationship was indeed contentious at times, but both nations, with the help of Forbes Burnham, were eventually able to forge a

⁸¹ TNA, Colonial Office (hereinafter CO) 1031/4866, Records of the West Indian Department, Brief for Prime Minister's Talks with President Kennedy: British Guiana: Talking Points, 24 June 1963.

⁸² Delmar Carlson to State Department, 11 September 1964, *FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXXII, Dominican Republic; Cuba; Haiti; Guyana*, Document 389.

strategy for the decolonisation of British Guiana that achieved both their short-term aims. The decision to replace Jagan with Burnham can thus be interpreted as a Cold War victory for the Anglo-American alliance.

Conclusion

The process of decolonisation in British Guiana was extremely similar to that which was taking place across the world as European colonies were being granted independence after World War II. Nationalist leaders hoped to achieve the most independent system of government possible, however, their attempts to do so would always be framed by the interests of the colonial power as well as the power struggle that emerged between the Soviet Union and the United States. Given British Guiana's proximity to the United States, as well as its significance to American Cold War geostrategy, Guianese leaders in particular would be expected to operate within a framework approved by the United States. The decolonisation of British Guiana thus became a power struggle between a Cold War superpower, a former coloniser, and Guianese nationalist leaders.

The Anglo-American decision to subvert Cheddi Jagan and instead support a regime led by Forbes Burnham can best be explained as a consequence of two predominant factors; firstly, the need for stability during both the Cold War and the process of decolonisation. In this sense, the independence process in British Guiana has provided an exceptional insight into the relationship between these two phenomena and the ways in which they affected one another. The intricate and complex relationship between the Cold War and decolonisation has become particularly evident considering the difficulties involved in coordinating a unified policy for British Guiana.

The decision to subvert Jagan can also be explained as a consequence of the American determination to ensure that pro-Western governments were in power in Latin America and the Caribbean after the Cuban Revolution in 1959. After Fidel Castro assumed power in

Cuba, United States foreign policy underwent considerable changes. In particular, the Kennedy administration vowed to take a harder line in its effort to thwart the rise of communism in the Western Hemisphere and the complexity of this change is evident in Washington's approach to British Guiana.

It has been twenty five years since the end of the Cold War and as more time passes we have been able to attain a considerably more nuanced perspective of the conflict. Historians are now encouraged to focus less on the actions of the great powers and more so on the agency of leaders in the developing world. Perhaps most importantly then, this dissertation has provided an opportunity to recognise that the actions of men like Forbes Burnham and Cheddi Jagan influenced and shaped the foreign policy decisions of the great powers of the time to a considerable degree. In this regard, this study has been a step towards revealing a more complete story of the Cold War and how it unfolded.

Although a somewhat contentious relationship at times, Great Britain and the United States were eventually able to forge a Cold War strategy for the decolonisation of British Guiana that achieved both their short-term goals. The United States put in power a Guianese leader who they believed would work within an approved Cold War framework, while the British Government established a government in Guyana that was both independent and able to maintain stability after British administrators and troops were withdrawn. In this sense, the Anglo-American subversion of Cheddi Jagan can be interpreted as a Cold War victory.

Unfortunately, however, the implications of this victory were far less positive for the people of Guyana. The sad irony of the Anglo-American intervention in Guianese politics is that in subverting Cheddi Jagan and his government in an effort to avoid a corrupt,

repressive, communist-orientated government, the Anglo-American alliance must bear part of the responsibility for its establishment. Forbes Burnham maintained his position in Guyana through false elections for sixteen years and used the Guianese armed forces to suppress the East Indian community with severe violence; by the end of the 1970s, Guyana was one of the most crime-ridden and impoverished nations in the world.⁸³ Reflecting on the consequences of the Anglo-American intervention in Guianese politics, Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. apologised publically to Cheddi Jagan in 1990. “I feel badly about my role thirty years ago,” the Kennedy aide admitted. “I think a great injustice was done to Cheddi Jagan.”⁸⁴

⁸³ Stephen G. Rabe, *U.S. Intervention in British Guiana: A Cold War Story* (North Carolina, 2005), p. 164.

⁸⁴ Stephen G. Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World: John F. Kennedy Confronts Communist Revolution in Latin America* (North Carolina, 1999), p. 94.

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