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TRIAL AND TRIBULATION IN THE STRUGGLE
FOR INDEPENDENCE IN BRITISH GUIANA

By Cheddi Jagan

In defense of constitutional democracy the late President Kennedy in 1962 addressed the following words to the then President of Venezuela, Sr. Romulo Betancourt:

I should like, through you, to extend my congratulations and those of the people of this country to the people, government and armed forces of Venezuela for their action in preserving constitutional democracy against those who have attempted to overthrow your freely elected government.

The preservation and strengthening of freely elected constitutional government is the aspiration of all the peoples of the Americas and progress in this continent under the Alianza para el Progreso depends in large measure on effecting change through peaceful and democratic means and avoiding violent interruptions of the constitutional process.

Similarly noble sentiments have been expressed from time to time by representatives of the Government of Her Britannic Majesty, who wish to project an image of themselves as upholders of the rule of law, who are only too willing to lead the colonial peoples to freedom and independence, if only the colonial peoples will demonstrate their readiness! Witness how many millions have been freed since the end of the Second World War, said one leading spokesman of the British Government, Mr. R. A. Butler, in a speech last July in Moscow. And how monstrous, said another at the United Nations, to charge Britain with neo-colonialism!

What is the reality? In British Guiana, these pious intentions and declarations stand exposed in all their nakedness. Here Western intentions have been punctuated by an alternation of force and fraud. Independence has been denied. Instead of progress and advance, there is retrogression and naked, iron-hand rule. Even the silken glove covering the iron hand was dispensed with.

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From mid 1954, the British Governor was a virtual dictator. He could arrest and detain without trial. Thirty-four of the leading members and activists of my party, including the Deputy Premier, were arrested and detained without charges, without trial. For more than three months, some languished in a fly-infested concentration camp. And the release of others is not yet in sight.

Using emergency powers handed to him by the British Government but without legislative authority, the Governor imposed draconian measures - flogging and life imprisonment - for the mere possession of firearms. Meanwhile, his storm-troops - the British Army and the Opposition-controlled Volunteer Force - resorted to intimidation and terror. The British Army is above the law - it is immune from arrest.

This reign of terror has been unleashed to break the will of the people, to cover up the sins of the colonialists. In many respects it is a repetition of Guianese colonial history a little over a decade ago.

British Guiana first appeared in the international headlines eleven years ago when, in 1953, our Constitution was suspended. At that time my party, the People's Progressive Party (PPP), participated in the Government after winning 18 out of 24 seats in the April, 1953 elections. Our overwhelming victory, unexpected by colonialists, completely upset the delicate balance written into the Constitution for the policy-making Executive Council. Consequently, in October, after only 133 days in office, my reform-minded government was forcibly removed.

The crude gun-boat suspension of 1953 was not repeated a decade later. Instead, there was suspension by stages. Early in 1961, London made three Orders-in-Council which eroded the constitutional authority of my government. Powers held by my Ministers were placed in the hands of the Governor. He was authorized to withdraw money from the Treasury without the sanction and approval of the legislature; he assumed powers held by the Minister of Home Affairs for the registration of voters and the conduct of elections; and lastly, he was put in complete control of the Emergency and of a new force, the Special Service Unit, which is no more than an arm of the police, constitutional responsibility for which rested with the Minister of Home Affairs. And then came mid-1964, the monstrous detention of 33 PPP legislators and activists.

With the detention of the Deputy Premier and PPP legislators, my government was robbed of its parliamentary majority. This, in fact, amounted to a virtual suspension of the Constitution. It would seem that the only thing which prevented the British Government from embarking on an open gun-boat suspension as in 1953 was the fear of repercussions at home and abroad.

Meanwhile, it had amended our Constitution to provide for new elections in December, 1964 under a changed electoral system before the expiration of my government's normal term of office in August, 1965. Our conventional Western first-past-the-post district or constituency system was replaced by the list system of proportional representation.

The British colonial secretary and his nominee, Governor Sir Richard Luyt, have justified the detention of PPP leaders and activists by wickedly associating them with the disturbances which have occurred this year.

The fact is that the blame for the reign of terror, arson, looting and murder since 1962 must be laid at the feet of an irresponsible Opposition, aided and abetted by big business, a corrupt, big-business controlled press and by foreign reactionary elements.

In February, 1962, they combined, to use the words of the Commonwealth Commission of Enquiry which investigated the disturbances, "to form a veritable torrent of abuse, recrimination and vicious hostility directed against Dr. Jagan and his government and each day gave fresh vigour to the agitation." The excuse for the disturbances was the budget, which was largely influenced by the Cambridge economist, Mr. Nicholas Kaldor.

It was described and attacked as "anti-working class" and "communistic." It took the Commission to point out that "the contradiction implicit in a measure being both Communist in substance and oppressive of the workers was not a matter which troubled Dr. Jagan's opponents, for political slogans are not infrequently lacking in logic, and the multitude to whom they are addressed does not possess the faculty of discerning an incongruity or fallacy in what their leaders expound before them."

The real cause of the disturbances, declared the Commission, was political rivalry and fear that the government might enact measures injurious to the proprietary rights of the upper classes and businessmen. In paragraph 45 of its report, the Commission stated:

The budget provoked fierce opposition from several quarters and was made the excuse for sustained and increasingly hostile demonstrations against Dr. Jagan and his Government. It will be seen that there was nothing deeply vicious or destructive of economic security in the budget. It had been drawn upon the advice of an experienced economist, who could not be said to have any Communist prepossessions. The budget won immediate approval from many persons. The New York Times said in an editorial that the budget was courageous and economically sound. The London Times in a leading article observed "The immediate problem for the Prime Minister, Dr. Jagan, is how to win some acceptance for his economic proposals which are courageous and certainly not far from what Guiana must have."

Another observer, Professor of Economics, Peter Newman, pointed out that the budget was the first serious attempt at self-help. In his article on "Racial Tension in British Guiana," this is how he put it:

The first budget of the new Jagan government, under the influence of the distinguished British economist, Nicholas Kaldor, seriously attempted to increase substantially the amount of locally provided funds, to a degree beyond that envisaged by the original plan. A package consisting of higher rates for old taxes (e.g. import duties), new taxes, (e.g. capital gains taxes), and a scheme for compulsory private saving, was introduced. As we shall see, the timing of these admirable self-help proposals laid them open to misinterpretation. It is ironic that the grave riots in February of this year were sparked by the first serious attempt to make the Guianese responsible for their own economic development.

In 1963, the excuse for the disturbances was the Labour Relations Bill. At the very beginning of the 11-week strike, I indicated that it was politically inspired. This was corroborated very early by Mr. Burnham, leader of the Opposition and later by Mr. Duncan Sandys. Mr. Burnham put it to me that the Labour Relations Bill was not the causa belli but the casus belli, not the cause of the occasion for the rebellion.

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There was nothing sinister about the Labour Relations Bill. It was patterned after the National Labour Relations (Wagner) Act of the New Deal Roosevelt administration. The motivation for this Bill, as indeed for its predecessor of the 1953 PPP Government, was the same as that of the New Deal administration; namely, the elimination of company unions, the ending of jurisdictional disputes and the establishment of democracy in the trade union movement. Jurisdictional disputes have long bedevilled the local trade union movement. Indeed, on April 5, 1963, eleven days after the publication of the Bill, a jurisdictional dispute between unions at the Rice Marketing Board, which management and the Trades Union Council had been unable to resolve, led to rioting and looting in the city in which one person was killed and many injured.

Opposition to the Labour Relations Bill came from many quarters - an unholy alliance of the Trades Union Council, the two Opposition political parties, big business and the press.

Observers abroad find it difficult to understand why the Government is opposed by the trades union movement. The answer is to be found in the fact that the Trades Union Council is now an arm of reaction. It is to be noted that prior to the suspension of the Constitution in 1953, the Trades Union Council pursued a militant policy. Its affiliates, catering particularly to workers in the sugar plantations, water-front, saw-mills, wood plants and quarries, were constantly engaged in militant struggles for recognition, increased wages and improved working conditions.

But this militancy also became a casualty of the Cold War. Through the influence and pressure of Mr. Serafino Romualdi of the ICFTU and ORIT, the Trades Union Council was disbanded soon after the October 1953 suspension of the Constitution and the forcible removal of the PPP from office. Six unions controlled by the Opposition, headed by the sugar industry company union, the Manpower Citizen's Association (MPCA), formed a new Trades Union Council.

The Trades Union Council, as presently constituted, is dominated by unions associated with civil servants, teachers and other government employees in postal, airline, telephone and transport services, where the political opposition is well entrenched. The leadership of this latter group comes predominantly from the middle class which to a certain extent has been pampered by colonialism, and which is fighting to preserve entrenched positions. The 1962 strike, for instance, was joined by the Civil Service Association principally because the government felt that an under-developed country like British Guiana could not afford the colonial-days' luxury of giving its Guianese civil servants free-leave return passages for themselves and their wives to the United Kingdom, along with 2 weeks annual leave and six months long leave for every three or four years of service.

It is a tragedy of British Guiana that the Trades Union Council is no longer directing its attacks against the imperialists and landlords, but against a socialist-oriented government. This explains why it has been supported by reactionary elements abroad and by big business at home. Little wonder that the Commonwealth Commission wrote critically of the TUC and its political motivations. In paragraphs 63 and 64 of its report it said:

There is very little doubt that, despite the loud protestations of the trade union leaders to the contrary, political affinities and aspirations played a large part in shaping their policy and formulating their programme of offering resistance to the budget and making a determined effort to change the government in office. It has been proved beyond all doubt that the three most important trade unionists, Mr. Ishmael, Mr. Jackson and Mr. Sankar, were deeply involved in politics.

Needless to say, had the Labour Relations Bill been enacted into law in 1963, the six-month general strike in the sugar industry in 1964 would have been avoided. There would have been no disturbances and no excuse for detaining leaders and activists of the PPP and the Guiana Agricultural Workers Union (GAWU), the union through which the sugar workers wish to be represented. Incidentally, the Governor used his new emergency powers to detain persons, but, contrary to the advice of my Council of Ministers, refused to order a poll of the workers in the sugar industry, something which is done frequently in the U.S.A.

The imperialists talk glibly about free elections and constitutional democracy; and about leading colonial peoples to freedom and independence. But they surrender principle for expediency when it suits their purpose, when their interests are threatened.

The 1962 and 1963 disturbances were designed first to attempt the forcible removal of my government from office; and secondly, to give the British Government an excuse to withhold independence and to suspend or manipulate the Constitution. Intimidation, violence and manipulation were the only weapons left in the armory of the political Opposition and vested interests. They had failed to defeat my party in three successive general elections since 1953, in spite of an engineered split in 1955, and gerrymandering of constituencies in 1957 and 1961. They saw no prospect of defeating us in the future through free and fair elections. And so they resorted to force. They needed some excuse for denying the independence which had been promised by the British Government at the London Constitution Conference in 1960 and which had been made a major issue during the 1961 elections, when the Opposition categorically stated that whichever party was victorious would lead the country to independence.

Like the split in my party in 1955, the disturbances also had the support of the British Government. I failed, both in 1962 and 1963, to get the police and security forces to take firm action to maintain law and order.

Belatedly, in August 1964, I came by chance into possession of information about a secret terrorist organization of the Opposition. This information, which was in the hands of the security branch of the police since mid-1963, was withheld from my Government.

The Governor failed to bring in British troops to aid the civil power at the time agreed upon - one o'clock in the morning instead of three-thirty in the afternoon of Friday, February 16, 1962. The police and security forces failed to take firm and effective action against the looters, arsonists and dynamiters, particularly in 1963. These facts reveal the complicity of the British Government, its connivance with and condoning of the terrorists and arsonists. Included in the series of security reports are the names of the leaders of the Peoples National Congress, the Trades Union Council, civil servants and teachers. Also named, as the financier of this terrorist organization, is a United States citizen parading in the guise of a trade unionist

That there was British and United States complicity in the attempted removal of my government from office was clearly brought out by the U.S. columnist, Drew Pearson. In an article published on March, 22, 1964 headed "Castro and Jagan" Mr. Pearson said in part:

The United States permitted Cuba to go Communist purely through default and diplomatic bungling. The problem now is to look ahead and make sure we don't make the same mistake again. We are already on the way to making it in Haiti. But in British Guiana, President Kennedy, having been badly burnt in the Bay of Pigs operations, did look ahead.

Though it was never published at the time, this was the secret reason why Kennedy took his trip to England in the summer of 1963. He had promised Premier Fanfani and Chancellor Adenauer to go to Rome and Bonn, but London was added to the itinerary only because of Kennedy's haunting worry that British Guiana would get its independence from England in July, 1963, and set up another Communist government under the guidance of Fidel Castro.

If this happened just before the Presidential election of 1964 and if at that time a Communist Guiana began seizing the Reynolds Metal's aluminum operation and other American properties, Kennedy knew the political effect would be disastrous.

It wasn't in the communique issued by the United States and England after the Kennedy-Macmillan meeting, but the main thing they agreed on was that the British would refuse to grant independence to Guiana because of the general strike against pro-Communist Prime Minister, Cheddi Jagan.

That strike was secretly inspired by a combination of U.S. Central Intelligence Agency money and British Intelligence. It gave London the excuse it wanted.

United States involvement in our domestic affairs has been very evident for some time. During the 1961 election campaign the Christian Anti-Communist Crusade by its own admission spent \$45,000 in support of the Opposition. The United States Information Services also entered the fray. They brought out their film projectors and showed anti-Communist and anti-Castro films in the streets during that election campaign. It just happened that this propaganda coincided with that of the Opposition.....

Later, Mr. William Tyler, Under-Secretary of State for European Affairs, the department under which affairs of British Guiana fall, in giving evidence before a congressional appropriation sub-committee, spoke disparagingly of my government and categorically stated that the United States government would be happy to see my government out of office.

During the whole period of the 1963 disturbances, a United States trade unionist, Mr. William McCabe, was instigating the Opposition and the Trades Union Council to continue the strike while the British trade union adviser, Mr. Walter Hood, was urging a settlement. McCabe, with the help of other United States trade unionists, the ICFTU and the American Institute of Free Labour Development, succeeded in imposing a blockage which almost completely stopped sea and air communications with the outside. Without the help given by these U.S. or U.S.-controlled organizations, the 1963 strike would have collapsed in a couple of weeks. Needless to say, had the Cuban Government not supplied British Guiana with fuel and flour, my Government would have been forced out of office.

In late 1963, U.S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk was reported to have put pressure on the British Government to delay independence and to change the electoral system.

The question might well be asked: why is it that United States policy changed towards British Guiana - changed significantly within a matter of a few months? I had received a favourable reception in Washington during my official visit in November, 1961. After my interview with President Kennedy and his aides, I was told that British Guiana would receive aid from the United States. Indeed, a few months later, in early 1962, after his interview with the editor of Izvestia, the late President said that "the United States supports the idea that every people should have the right to make a free choice of the kind of government they want. Mr. Jagan, who was recently elected Prime Minister in British Guiana, is a marxist, but the United States does not object; that choice was made by honest election which he won."

The answer to the question about the change in U. S. policy is to be found in the Cold War pre-occupation of the U.S.A. It was Cold War considerations which caused the British Government to destroy my four and one-half month-old Government in 1953. Our fate at that time was the same as that of other Cold War victims - the Gallegos Government of Venezuela in 1948; the Mossadegh Government of Iran in 1953, the Arbenz Government of Guatemala in 1954 and the Kenyatta movement in Kenya, to name a few. Today the same Cold War considerations are determining United States policies at home and abroad, and are leading to tragic events in many areas of the world. Anti-Communism was then, as it is still today, the main weapon and pretext to destroy governments like mine which are bent on radical reform and which do not see in the maintenance of the status quo a way out of the economic and social impasse.

The tragedy of British Guiana, which stems mainly from the suspension of my government in 1953 and the split of my party in 1955, is in a sense the tragedy of the United States. As I see it, the United States is caught on the horns of a dilemma.

It is this dilemma which in large measure was responsible for the tragic death of President Kennedy.

Having inherited the leadership of the West, the United States placed in Kennedy's lap the task of leading the West to victory, of winning out in the East-West confrontation, the battle between capitalism and socialism.

To attain this objective, Kennedy found himself caught in a mass of contradictions. He had to make gains on the economic and political fronts. On the political level, support from the Afro-Asian bloc, particularly at the United Nations, was becoming a decisive factor. Afro-Asian support, however, could hardly be won with a Jim Crow policy at home. Therefore the problem of Jim Crow and civil rights for United States Negroes had to be urgently tackled. On the economic front, the position of imperialism was weakening. The gap in living standards between the industrialized western countries, and the colonies and semi-colonies dominated by the West, was widening. At the same time, the gap between the rich and poor in the underdeveloped countries was also widening. If decline and resultant explosions were to be averted, something had to be done. The brains trust around President Kennedy was realistic enough to know that capitalism could not survive under existing conditions. Thus was born the Alliance for Progress and the realization of the necessity for social and economic reforms.

Today the Alliance for Progress is an admitted failure, and President Kennedy is dead. One of the ironies of our situation is that in 1962 my government had been obstructed by the United States in its attempts to carry out the very measures which the U.S. imposed as the prerequisites for Alliance for Progress Aid. And in 1963, the United States obstructed our attempt to enact a measure similar to its own Labour Relations Act to solve the 17-year-old question of the right of collective bargaining and union recognition. When I privately confronted U.S. officials about U.S. interference at the United Nations, they replied apologetically that nothing must be done to prevent Kennedy from winning a second term - British Guiana was too hot to handle!

What is your assessment of Kennedy and the United States administration, I have been asked? Some who have posed this question are highly critical of that administration. They point to the pronouncement and promise of aid given by Kennedy, and its lack of fulfillment, as well as that administration's complicity in the maneuver to oust my government from office. My assessment of Kennedy after speaking to him and his aides in November 1961, was that he was an enlightened exponent of his class; that unlike those within and outside his party who wore blinders and suffered from political myopia, he saw that unless something was done on the domestic front about the race question and on the international front about the economic question, capitalism was bound to lose out in the East-West confrontation.

His was enlightened self-interest, but the Dixiecrats and plutocrats did not have vision enough to see it that way. Abroad, the ruling landlords, compradore capitalists and military cliques, particularly in Latin America, viewed his demand for land, fiscal and monetary reforms as a challenge to be opposed and obstructed. Medicare, civil rights legislation and the Alliance for Progress were held suspect at home as "creeping Socialism!"

There is no doubt that American hysteria about Cuba has conditioned her attitude and behaviour toward other governments. Non-alignment and trade with Communist countries are regarded as heretical even though governments of under-developed countries are finding it increasingly difficult to solve their problems within the old traditional relationships. Governments which dare to adopt such "heresy" in order to alleviate generally deteriorating conditions throughout the Caribbean, Central and South America - drop in economic growth rate, fall in export prices, rise in import prices, loss of markets, balance of payment difficulties, outflow of capital, etc. - are falling prey one after another to the big-stick policy of the United States. A few years ago, election results in Argentina were cancelled; in 1963, announced elections in Guatemala were postponed because of the likelihood of a leftwing victory; radical and progressive governments in Ecuador, Brazil, Honduras and the Dominican Republic have been removed from office recently. No wonder the British historian, Arnold Toynbee could remark that "Today America is no longer the inspirer and leader of the world revolution by contrast America is today the leader of the worldwide anti-revolutionary movement in defence of vested interests. She now stands for what Rome stood for."

There is obviously need for an agonizing reappraisal. To use the words of Senator Fulbright, "We are confronted with a complex and fluid world situation and we are not adapting ourselves to it ... we are clinging to old myths in the face of new realities." Or as Walter Lippmann put it, "We look a lot like one of those prehistoric animals which was all armour and teeth but had almost no brain."

America, we are told, seeks to live in a world at peace. Mr. Walter Whitman Rostow, Head of the State Department Policy Planning Board, summed up the administration's foreign policy as follows:

We seek to build a community of independent nations, their governments increasingly responsible to the consent of the governed, co-operating of their own free will in their areas of inter-dependence, settling their disputes by peaceful means.

Speaking in the same vein, President Kennedy, in his remarkable address at Washington's American University said:

World peace like community peace does not require that each man love his neighbour - it requires only that they live together in mutual tolerance submitting their disputes to just and peaceful settlement.

I agree with these sentiments. Unfortunately, in my country they have been honoured in the breach. As to a just and peaceful settlement, to those who have shouted that an independent Guiana under Jagan would be a second Cuba and a gateway for the penetration of international Communism in South America, I have repeatedly stated our position that upon independence, my government will pursue a policy of non-alignment and friendship with all countries.

As evidence that we have no sinister intentions which might imperil the security of the United States or the Western Hemisphere, I pointed out to Mr. Duncan Sandys, the British colonial secretary, and to the Latin American group at the United Nations that I was willing, if necessary, to sign a treaty of neutrality as Austria was compelled to do. For those who charge that we propose to set up a leftist dictatorship, I refer to the Fundamental Rights section in our Constitution, placed there at my insistence and enforceable by an independent judiciary. Besides, I have suggested that Commonwealth officers could help staff our security forces, and that there could be a United Nations or British Commonwealth presence in my country to observe that constitutional guarantees were being honoured.

Despite these assurances, my experience has been that those who talk about peace abandon negotiations for the big stick. They settle outstanding issues on the basis of expediency rather than principle. The British Government did one thing in Southern Rhodesia, and exactly the opposite in British Guiana, although both are internally self-governing territories. Our traditional and conventional Western first-past-the-post district constituency system was abandoned, and the system of proportional representation, rejected in the United Kingdom and the United States of America, was imposed in Guiana. The British-appointed Governor used his emergency powers to detain thirty-four PPP leaders and activists of my party but refused to use those same powers to order an election in the sugar industry which could have once and for all settled the 17-year-old question of union recognition in the sugar industry. Such hypocrisy will bring peace neither in British Guiana nor elsewhere.