

# **Subversion In British Guiana: Why And How The Kennedy Administration Got Rid Of A Democratic Government - President John F. Kennedy**

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On June 30, 1963, President John F. Kennedy, his British counterpart Harold Macmillan, and a coterie of ambassadors, Foreign Ministers and assistants, met for talks at scenic Birch Grove, England. A joint press communique revealed that the delegations discussed issues of mutual and global importance, such as the multilateral force treaty. However, nowhere in the text of the communique is it mentioned that the question of British Guiana (now Guyana) figured prominently in the Birch Grove discussions. Macmillan's memoirs and those of Presidential Aide Theodore Sorenson and Secretary of State Dean Rusk all fail to acknowledge that British Guiana - a small, economically backward colony in South America with the population of a small American city - was actually the first subject on the agenda that summer day in 1963. Even Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.'s Pulitzer Prize-winning history of the Kennedy Administration only covers the Birch Grove meeting in one cryptic sentence: "... Macmillan said no on multilateral force and yes on British Guiana." It is only in recent years, with the partial declassification of documents surrounding U.S. relations with British Guiana, do we learn what Macmillan agreed to: a covert scheme to remove Cheddi Jagan, British Guiana's left-leaning but democratically elected leader, from power.

Origins: 1953-1961

The origins of this little-known tale of subversion (little-known because details remain secret even to this day) go back to 1953, when Jagan's Peoples' Progressive Party (PPP) first came to power in the colony of British Guiana. The PPP's leaders were young, independence-minded Guianese who, by and large, looked to socialism to end the cycle of economic dependency that colonialism had brought to their colony. Jagan openly expressed his admiration for communist governments - a politically naive move, in the context of the West's 1950s anticommunist fervor. It is little wonder, then, that the British Government used Jagan's first contentious piece of legislation, a 1953 labor relations bill that proposed an overhaul of the colony's labor union system, as proof that the PPP wanted to take British Guiana down the slippery slope towards communism. The British Government dissolved the PPP government only 133 days after the 1953 elections and quickly threw Jagan in prison.

In 1957, the Guianese people reelected Jagan and his PPP under a new and more restrictive constitution. This time, Jagan's first effort was to draft, in true "socialist" fashion, a Five-Year Plan for the economy. Because the British Guianese legislative assembly did not have taxation powers, Jagan sought foreign loans to implement his plan. He flirted with the Communist Bloc and Cuba and received some lucrative offers, all of which the British government in London disallowed. But Jagan remained determined to get the money he needed to implement his economic plan. So, in August 1961, after winning yet another election, he prepared to take his crusade for development aid directly to President Kennedy's Oval Office.

Jagan and the United States: "Whole-hearted Cooperation?"

It would be a gross exaggeration to say that all Americans knew or even cared about Cheddi Jagan; but those who did clearly did not like him. State Department files in the U.S. National Archives hold many hundreds of letters from U.S. citizens hostile to the idea of another Castro in the American hemisphere. The State Department responded to many of these letters by gently informing the writers that the British Guianese elected Jagan in a free and fair election and, despite what they read in the newspapers, Jagan never actually called himself a communist.

In the Senate, Thomas Dodd saw Jagan as a proverbial wolf in sheep's clothing, akin to Fidel Castro, who came to power in Cuba on a platform of reform and democracy - only to show later his communist stripes. For Dodd, the fact that Cheddi Jagan denied being a communist was irrelevant: "If an animal looks like a duck, walks like a duck and lives habitually with ducks, I believe that every rational person would be prepared to agree that the animal in question is a duck." The Senator cautioned President Kennedy against cooperating with Jagan, noting that "being nice" to communists, like Josef Tito in Yugoslavia, did not work out to be in the best interests of the United States.

Secretary of State Dean Rusk agreed with Dodd's assessment. Believing Cheddi Jagan to be "very far to the left indeed," Rusk argued that Jagan's continued presence in Guianese politics would be a "setback" for the hemisphere. "In the final analysis," Rusk noted, "we should plan for the possibility that we will have no responsible alternative but to work for Jagan's political downfall."

But in late 1961, President Kennedy and his Special Assistant, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., were not yet convinced of the threat Jagan posed to the United States, and despite public and congressional aversion to Jagan, they both believed that an amicable working relationship with Jagan's PPP would be the best and safest course of action. Unfortunately, when Jagan came to the United States in late October 1961, he failed to make a good impression on Kennedy. His refusal to say anything negative about the Soviet Union during an appearance on "Meet the Press" angered the President because it made cooperation politically difficult. Moreover, during the meeting, Jagan failed to convince Kennedy of his sincerity by side-stepping when questioned about his ideological beliefs. "Well, Bevanism, Sweezyism, Hubermanism, Baranism - I really don't get those ideological subtleties," Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., recorded him as saying. Still, though Kennedy privately confided that he doubted Jagan would remain committed to parliamentary democracy, he wanted to try to woo him into the democratic camp. Thus, at the end of 1961, the U.S. government's official policy was a "whole-hearted, across-the-board effort to work with the new Jagan Government and to foster effective association between British Guiana and the West." But before the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID) could send the nearly 1.5 million dollars (U.S.) in technical aid that Kennedy allotted to British Guiana, a political riot broke out in the colony on February 16, 1962, forcing the United States to rethink its policy towards Cheddi Jagan.

#### Toward a New Policy (1962)

The February 1962 riot had a profound impact on U.S. policy toward British Guiana. If Kennedy's policy of cooperation was, before the strike, politically dangerous in light of congressional opposition to the Jagan government, it was even more so afterwards. How could the President justify cooperating with a government that very obviously did not have the full support of its people?

For this reason, Dean Rusk reversed U.S. policy towards British Guiana shortly after the riot. In a once Top Secret missive to his British counterpart, Lord Home, Rusk stated that "it would not be possible to put up with an independent British Guiana under Jagan." The inference in this sentence is unmistakable: Rusk wanted the British to do something about this colonial nuisance.

But what? Deposing a democratically elected leader was a thorny affair in which the British government did not want to become involved. Besides, at seven million dollars (U.S.) a year, British Guiana's colonial status was a drain on British coffers. Removing Jagan and reimplementing direct rule would raise that figure to twenty million dollars (U.S.). What is more, the British government could not see what all the fuss over Jagan was about. To them he was not the fearsome communist boogie man the United States made him out to be. In Colonial Secretary Reginald Maudling's words, he was little more than a "naive London School of Economics Marxist filled with charm, personal honesty and juvenile nationalism."

In short, the British government saw it as neither desirable nor necessary to get rid of Jagan simply because U.S. knee-jerk antimarxists disagreed with his ideological disposition. Colonial Secretary Maudling summed up the British feeling

over Jagan most concisely when he asked Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., tongue in cheek: "if you Americans care about British Guiana so much, why don't you take it over? Nothing would please us more."

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