

GREAT INJUSTICE DONE TO JAGAN - SCHLESINGER

What was it John Milton said in Areopagitica? "As good almost kill a man as kill a good book: who kills a man kills a reasonable creature, God's Image; but he who destroys a good book, kills reason itself, kills the Image of God, as it were in the eye."

In the days of censorship - by threat of cutoff of government funding, by conglomeration, by obsessive bottomlining and even by self - it is easy to forget the power of art and particularly of books. Perhaps that's what John Kennedy had in mind when in the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs, he remarked to historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. "I hope you kept a full account of that." Schlesinger had understood that the President wanted no note takers on his staff, but Kennedy said "No, go ahead. You can be damn sure that the CIA has its record and the Joint Chiefs theirs. We'd better make sure we have a record over here." Hence, *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House*, Schlesinger's admiring memoir written after the assassination.

Cut now to the NATION office twenty-six years later. Our guests and speaker at a seminar for the NATION staff and interns is Cheddi Jagan, three times popularly elected Prime Minister of British Guiana prior to its independence in 1964 and today the leader of Guyana's largest political party. Jagan wrote in a book, *The West On Trial: The Fight for Guyana's Freedom* (Seven Seas Books, 1966), in which he charged but for US intervention, he and his party would have won the Guyanese election of 1964 and ushered the country into its new era of independence (and perhaps, we would add, have avoided some of the bloodshed, racial conflict, misery and chaos that came in the wake of his party's defeat). As proof of Kennedy Administration Intervention, he cited *A Thousand Days*, in which Schlesinger said he reported to the president that Jagan's opponents "would cause us many fewer problems." Jagan was under suspicion because of his Marxist wife and his leftist politics, as evidenced by his responses during a Meet the Press Interview, and, writes Schlesinger there was a way to beat him. Jagan's parliamentary strength was larger than his popular strength: he had won 57 per cent of the seats on the basis of 42.7 per cent of the vote. An obvious solution would be to establish a system of proportional representation, which on Schlesinger's recommendation and with the collusion of the British, was finally done. Jagan was out.

Enter Professor Archie Singham, member of THE NATION's editorial board, longtime Caribbeanist and activist-scholar. At Singham's suggestion, we sent a copy of relevant passages of Jagan's book to Schlesinger, suggesting that the Pulitzer Prize winner join the seminar. The cold war must indeed be over: Schlesinger, who has had a long but uneasy history with THE NATION, called to say he would accept with great anticipation.

Those present witnessed a rare thing: a private public apology. Schlesinger was quick to say, "I felt badly about my role thirty years ago." He conceded that Jagan was right about US intervention, although he said the United States was motivated less by a security concern about a communist threat in the hemisphere than by a domestic political concern. "There was great feeling after the Bay of Pigs, where the impression arose that Eisenhower had prepared an expedition to get rid of Castro, that Kennedy had lacked the resolution to follow through it. It was just politically going to look very bad if the dominoes began to fall in South America... The fear was that Congress might use aid to British Guiana as a means of attacking the whole aid bill then before it... Then of course what really happened was the CIA got involved, got the bit between its teeth and the covert action people thought was a chance to show their stuff... I think a great injustice was done to Cheddi Jagan."

For his part, Jagan emphasized on the need for a multi-class, multi-ethnic, pluralistic coalition government with free press guarantees, suggests how far he too has moved from the stereotypical cold war "deep pro-communist emotion" attributed to him in *A Thousand Days*.

The Jagan-Schlesinger encounter, then, yields three morsels to ruminate over. First, it provides yet another example of the danger to our values and to innocent Third World parties afflicted by cold war obsessions; second, it suggests the importance of establishing some international procedures (perhaps building on UN experience in Namibia and Nicaragua) for the supervision and monitoring of elections globally, beginning with Guyana; and finally coming back to Areopagitica, it reminds us that "books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life to them to be as that soul was whose progeny they are; nay they do preserve as in vial the purest efficacy and extraction of that living intellect that bred them."

Dr Jagan's views is somewhat supported by Nigel Fisher's biography of the late Ian MacLeod, at that time British Secretary of State for the Colonies. Says Fisher:

"Although the West Indies were within the the American sphere of influence, the Unites States Government never sought to influence British policy in our attempt to establish a workable island Federation. But in the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs, the Americans were natrually interested in British Guiana and did not care for the prospect of an independent, Jagan-let, Castro-type government on the South American mainland.

"President Kennedy told MacLeod of his anxities during a long talk in the Oval Room at the White House. He said he understood our policy, but he hoped we would not move too quickly towards independence. MacLeod replied 'Do I understand, Mr President, that you want us to de-colonise as fast possible all over the world except on your own doorstep?' President Kennedy laughed and said 'Well that's probably just about it.' MacLeod answered that he appreciated the President's point of view, but that our policy to bring Guyana to independence would continue. The American attitude did not slow down his (MacLeod's) approach, although the serious racial strife between the African and Indian communities in the colony a year or two later, and the difficulty of getting any agreement on the Constitution between Cheddi Jagan and Forbes Burnham did impose an inevitable delay."

As I sat talking with Dr Jagan in his busy office, with lieutenants moving in and out with various administrative requests, I wondered what was his future. At 58 he had been three times his country's elected leader but now, though controlling perhaps the largest party numerically, he was an almost ineffectual leader of the Opposition. Indeed, for a long time he would not take his place as a Opposition member, but later rejoined Parliament to fulfil a policy of critical support. What of his future?

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