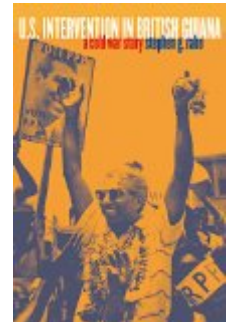


Stephen G. Rabe. *U.S. Intervention in British Guiana: A Cold War Story.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005. 240 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2979-0.



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In several respects Stephen Rabe's book is an important addition to the growing number of scholarly works on Guyana, and, more particularly, the period roughly from the end of the Second World War to independence in 1966. As the title indicates, his work is not a general text on the period, but one that focuses specifically on U.S. involvement in the political life of the country as Guyana sought to dismantle colonialism through the process of constitutional evolution. The book begins with a short introduction dealing with the physical landscape of the country. It identifies the main ethnic groups, and presents a brief overview of the political struggles, roughly from the post-World War II period to 1992, when Dr. Cheddi Jagan and the People's Progressive Party (PPP) recaptured power after being in the political wilderness for twenty-eight years, during which time the People's National Congress (PNC) under Forbes Burnham held power. Successive chapters focus on the following topics: "British Guiana, 1831-1953"; "Imperial Adjustments, 1953-1960"; "Covert Intervention, 1961-1962"; "Proportional Representation, 1963-1964"; "Guyana, 1965-1969." The conclusion of the book entails a summary of

the author's views on what happened in Guyana between 1953 and 1969, and particularly the role of the United States in undermining a fledgling "democracy" because of its rabid fear of communism.

Rabe's book is by no means unique, in the sense that the general outlines of the United States' largely covert involvement in Guyana's politics have already been discussed in varying details and at varying levels of sophistication by several scholars. Among the earliest of those scholars was Arthur Schlesinger, in his famous work on the administration of President John F. Kennedy, titled *A Thousand Days*.^[1] Thomas J. Spinner, Jr. also dealt with this subject, though with less academic competence.^[2] More recently, Guyanese sociologist Maurice St. Pierre has written a concise and balanced assessment of the period under review, using newly released documents in Britain and the United States. Since the publication of Rabe's book, Clem Seecharan has also written a very detailed account of Guyana during the period of Jock Campbell's (of Booker's) residence there.^[3] Seecharan has taken a much harsher

stance than most other scholars against what he regards as Cheddi Jagan's doctrinaire approach towards politics that, in his view, helped to lead to his political demise.

Rabe's work is important because he uses a wide variety of new sources, particularly in the United States, that have recently been made available to the public. He was thus able to trace very carefully the evolution of U.S. policy towards Guyana in a much more meticulous and persuasive way than previous scholars. He documents the covert role of the highly influential American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), American Institute of Free Labor Development (AIFLD), and other non-governmental organizations, which employed U.S. federal funds to support anti-Jagan factions and foment social and political unrest in Guyana in order to create instability or even spread chaos in the country. He also deals with the British governors' detailed reports on Guyana and notes their persistent view that the situation on the ground was not as threatening as U.S. and other outside sources made it out to be. They generally saw no reason to declare states of emergency in the country, detain politicians, or delay elections.

For some time the U.S. government was quite uncertain whether to support the regime of Dr. Cheddi Jagan in Guyana's evolution to independence, or intrigue to create a regime change through manipulation of the electoral system and the ballot in favor of Forbes Burnham, his arch rival after 1957. President Kennedy, after giving Jagan an interview and assessing information on him from the consular authorities in Guyana and other sources, concluded that his proclivities towards communism made him a danger to hemispheric interests and security. At the same time, both the U.S. and British governments were wary of supporting Burnham, whom they regarded as more untrustworthy and much more devious than Jagan, but who, from a political standpoint, posed a lesser danger (pp. 66-67, 79, 94, 98 and

passim). Interestingly, both Rabe and St. Pierre have come firmly to this interpretation of the two individuals.

An important theme which Rabe stresses repeatedly is the great contradiction in U.S. policy on colonialism in the case of Guyana. During and after the Second World War, successive U.S. governments had persistently taken an anti-colonialist stance. On August 14, 1941 Franklin D. Roosevelt had joined with Winston Churchill, the British prime minister, in issuing the Atlantic Charter, article three of which read "they respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live; and they wish to see sovereign rights and self-government restored to those who have been forcibly deprived of them." [4] While the British and the Americans differed on the interpretation of the clause, the latter made it quite clear that in their view it referred not only to those European countries that had lost their sovereignty to the Nazis and Fascists, but also to all countries under the yoke of colonialism.

However, when it came to Guyana, the U.S. government repeatedly urged the British government to delay independence for that country until a more ideologically favorable political regime was in office. The American government was unequivocal that it was "not possible for us to put up with an independent British Guiana under Jagan," and that Jagan should be ousted from power and "should not accede to power again" (pp. 93, 94; see also pp. 91, 75-76, 82, 128). The British government was careful to point out more than once to its U.S. counterpart that such a policy was inconsistent with the latter's public rhetoric on decolonization. For instance, Rabe quotes Harold Macmillan, British Prime Minister, that he had read with "amazement" the contents of one of the letters from Dean Rusk, U.S. secretary of state, and had found some of his views "incredible." Macmillan went on to marvel: "How can the Americans continue to attack us in the United Nations on

colonialism and then use expressions like these which ... [are] pure Machiavellianism" (p. 94).

The British government was much less convinced that Jagan's communism was really of the "radical" Soviet type. Moreover, that government noted that Jagan had been elected to office on a democratic ballot and thus reflected the political inclination of the majority of Guyanese. However, such arguments fell on deaf ears in the United States. If successive U.S. governments were sure of one thing it was that Jagan should not take the country into independence. Rabe has documented and analyzed the course of events that led to this decision very carefully and skillfully, showing clearly that U.S. commitment to democracy and decolonization was severely compromised by the unbounded fear of allowing a communist beachhead to become established on the South American continent. Fidel Castro's move towards the communist camp only made the United States more determined than ever to prevent a second "communist" country from developing in the hemisphere (p. 81).

British policy, of course, fluctuated somewhat during this period, depending upon the particular regime in power and the individual who headed the Colonial Office. However, relentless badgering of British politicians (one reads between the lines even some annoyance at Westminster due to U.S. machinations) gradually wore them down and made them agree to introduce the proportional representation (as distinct from the 'normal' constituency) system as the best way of getting rid of Jagan (pp. 96-97, 102, 118 and *passim*). Rabe, as other writers before him, notes Jagan's political naivete in leaving it up to the British to decide what political system would be adopted, but neither he nor any other writer has convincingly explained why Jagan took that stance. It might well be that Jagan was firmly convinced that the die was cast and that he could not stop the march of events. He was quite aware of U.S. intrigues to bring him down, as many of his speeches and

written works indicate, though he could not have been aware of the extent of that country's involvement in Guyana's politics.[5]

Another interesting aspects of Rabe's work is the detailed discussion of the U.S. "operatives" in Guyana, both official and unofficial. We now know from works that are being produced on other Caribbean, Latin American, and African countries that the consular authorities seem to have had a hand in every pie, and to have reported in minute detail on almost every aspect of the country's political, economic, and often, social life. This was certainly the case with respect to Guyana. The authorities there reported even on the private life of Janet Jagan, the wife of Cheddi Jagan, and on an alleged romantic affair she had outside of her marriage (p. 91). They hoped that such an affair would drive a wedge between her and her husband, thus removing from him the person whom they regarded as his ideological mind. The consular penchant to "dig up dirt," in the interest of maintaining U.S. control over the country and the hemisphere, is one of the most striking features of the documentary evidence that is coming to light. While scholars knew about several local groups and persons in Guyana being on the U.S. payroll, few would have been aware of the extent to which the United States used its funds to buy, or seek to buy, its way into nearly all the main groups that were opposed to Jagan's Government, including the Man Power Citizen's Association under Richard Ishmael, the United Force under Peter D'Aguiar, and the People's National Congress under Forbes Burnham (pp. 83, 90, 99-101, 113, 130).

While, as noted above, Rabe's book is strong on the detailed reconstruction of American involvement in Guyana's politics, using largely American sources, it contains a number of weaknesses. One of these is insufficient use of British original sources and very little use of Guyanese ones. He might also have done some fieldwork in Guyana and interviewed some of the actors on the scene at the time, several of whom are still

alive and articulate. Greater use of the local sources would almost certainly have modified his position on several matters, including ethnic relations, and the factors that affected the economy in the immediate pre-independence and early post-independence periods. Instead, he chooses to rely heavily on a number of partisan secondary works for much of the information on these issues, and on consular and other U.S. perceptions of what was happening in the country. One of his secondary sources is Thomas Spinner Jr.'s *A Political and Social History of Guyana* (referred to above), of which I was quite critical in a review.[6] Rabe does not show any awareness of St. Pierre's work, published several years before his own (he does not refer to it either in the text or the references). Consultation of this work might have enriched his own discourse, especially on British policy on the country and local Guyanese sentiments about what was taking place. His final chapter, which deals with the Burnham regime during the period 1965 to 1969, is particularly skewed. One gains the distinct impression that the author is not really *au fait* with the country and its peoples, and is writing from too distant a perspective.

Take, for instance, his discourse on racism. He implicitly charges the British Colonial Government with racism against the Indians with respect to the armed forces that were dominated numerically by Blacks. In his words, "Indians had historically been denied the chance to join security forces" (p. 91). He also declares that Indians "had historically been denied educational opportunities in the colony's Christian schools" and were therefore unable to pass the examinations for entry into the police force (p. 127). While Rabe is factually correct about the small number of Indians in the security forces, he is quite incorrect to imply that this was deliberate colonial policy up to at least World War II. Several studies on Guyana and Trinidad have shown that up to that time (and later) Indians were reluctant to enter Christian schools (which were the numerically dominant schools at the time) because of fear that they

would compromise their religion. Gradually, they began to build their own religious-based schools, before the educational system was largely "secularized" from the 1960s. Moreover, the urban areas, where the best schools were located, were mainly populated by Blacks. These factors largely explain the small Indian presence in the educational and security institutions of the country. Dale Bisnauth states that the Indians in Guyana underwent "a process which some would argue led to cultural encystment," before branching out into the wider society beginning around 1930.[7] This is much closer to the truth.

Rabe's treatment of ethnicity (racism) as a political tool, and the ethnic violence that took place, is also less than balanced. He seems to come firmly to the conclusion that it was the PNC under Burnham that either first appealed to "race" as a political tool, or in any event mainly promoted racism to gain political objectives. He cites, in particular, the view of Governor Ralph Grey to reinforce his point (pp. 54, 79). He also put forward the view that Cheddi Jagan explicitly rejected racism but could not control his supporters who "chanted the Hindi slogan 'Apan Jaaht' or 'Vote for your own'" (p. 79). Those of us who lived through the horrible period of the early 1960s in Guyana were aware that the race card was being played on both sides, and that each was blaming the other for doing so. We may never know the truth about how it originated, but it is particularly naive to blame a single party or individual for this circumstance.

At the same time it is plausible that any appeal to race was more likely to benefit the PPP than the PNC, due to the larger number of Indians than Blacks in the country's population. Rabe himself states that at the end of World War II "Indians had become the largest group in the colony with 163,343 people. British Guiana's blacks numbered 143,385" (p. 21). Neither Rabe nor any other scholar has offered a convincing argument as to why Burnham should have pushed "racism" more

than Jagan, in light of the figures mentioned above. It is more plausible to believe that both major political parties sought to use the race card discreetly while trying to win persons of various ethnic groups to their side. The rank-and-file party members or supporters might well have been the ones largely responsible for the public touting of racism which was to create so much strife in the years immediately before independence.

Rabe makes a number of other unsubstantiated claims, some of which are simply wrong while others need qualification. His view, for instance, that Burnham denied Indians, the majority population, economic opportunities (p. 5) is grossly overstated. He notes that a large number of Indians left the country during Burnham's regime, and that the exodus from the country included "educated Indians and blacks" (p. 164). However, he fails to make the valid point that emigration was driven largely by economic deprivation, rather than racial antagonism, nor does he attempt to give the ethnic distribution of the migrants.[8] All sectors of Guyanese society have been critically aware that Indians fared much better than Blacks economically during Burnham's regime, whether because, or in spite, of his policies.

Rabe is much more accurate when he asserts that Indians were denied political opportunities (p. 5) because of Burnham's extensive rigging of the votes with U.S. connivance for a number of years. However, later he departs again from balanced scholarship by asserting that Indians were "excluded from exercising power" (p. 151). This statement, standing without qualification, conveys the impression that either there were no Indians in Burnham's government or that all of them played subaltern roles. The reality was quite different. No doubt, both for pragmatic reasons and because Burnham genuinely respected the talents of some Indians (as Jagan was to do later on with respect to Blacks), he always had a minority of highly talented Indians in important govern-

mental roles. We will simply mention here Sir Shridath Ramphal (nominated by Burnham's government for the knighthood), Attorney General and later Minister of Foreign Affairs, before becoming Secretary General of the Commonwealth, and still later Chancellor of Warwick University, the University of Guyana, and the University of the West Indies; Vincent Teekah, Minister of Education; Ranji Chandisingh, General Secretary of the PNC and Deputy Prime Minister; Dr. Mohammed Shahabuddeen, Attorney General, who later became the first Caribbean legal luminary to become a judge of the International Court of Justice, among many other distinctions; and Sir Lionel Luckhoo (again knighted during Burnham's regime), Guyana's High Commissioner to Britain and one of the most distinguished criminal lawyers within the Commonwealth, famous for 245 consecutive, successful defenses in murder cases. These were not simply lackeys (or "stooges," as one writer put it with respect to Ramphal and Shahabuddeen).[9]

One wonders whether Rabe's failure to mention any of these important figures (except Teekah, whose murder was attributed by some persons to the machinations of Burnham and/or other members of his party) was inadvertent or deliberate. In any event, such omission is likely to give a skewed interpretation of the ethnic composition of Burnham's government. Rabe may insist that they had no "power" under the "dictatorship" of Burnham. If that is so, then we would have to draw the same conclusion for all Burnham's ministers of government of all ethnic groups. Burnham's authority/power, in this respect, would hardly have been different from that which other heads of government exercise in Third World, and sometimes First World, jurisdictions.

Rabe also gives the impression that Burnham's regime was marked by widespread murders of his political opponents and what he terms a "reign of terror" against Indians, comparable to that of "the grotesque dictator Idi Amin" of Ugan-

da (pp. 163-164). Actually, during the twenty-one years that Burnham held power, Guyana is known to have had only five assassinations of political or semi-political figures--Jesuit priest Bernard Darke (1979), Vincent Teekah (1979), Edward Dublin (1980), Walter Rodney (1980), and Ohene Koama, alias Neville Jacobs (1981). Dr. Joshua Ramsammy (1971) was also severely wounded when an attempt was made on his life. It is important to emphasize that the regime gained infamy, and rightly so, particularly for the assassination of Rodney, arguably the most well-known international Black scholar at the time. However, even if we attribute all the murders listed above to Burnham specifically, they do not amount to a regime given over to assassination of political opponents. That Burnham's regime practiced the politics of intimidation, fear, firing people from jobs, and making life miserable for a number of persons, is indisputable. However, the remarkable aspect of his regime is that he held no political prisoners, and politicians generally were able to travel the length and breadth of the country without a retinue of bodyguards.

Finally, we must address Rabe's statement that Burnham's economic policies reduced the country to a "facsimile of Haiti" (p. 164). This is perhaps the most ludicrous charge against his regime. While it is true that in terms of per capita income, Guyana was not very far from Haiti, in actual living standards it was considerably better off than that country. Unlike Haiti's, the country's infrastructure was never laid bare under Burnham's regime. Guyanese, especially Indians, also grew and sold a considerable amount of produce in the daily markets and on the roadsides. Burnham's policy of import substitution failed badly because of a number of factors, including ineptitude of government officials, strikes, bad decisions concerning the restructuring of the economy, especially the way in which he went about the nationalization of important assets, and the downturn in international markets, especially following the 1973 oil crisis. Burnham's economic

regime might be termed a disaster for the country, but it certainly never bore any remote resemblance to that of Haiti.

Notes

[1]. Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965).

[2]. Thomas J. Spinner Jr., *A Political and Social History of British Guiana, 1945-1968* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1984).

[3]. Clem Seecharan, *Sweetening Bitter Sugar: Jock Campbell, the Booker Reformer in British Guiana 1934-1966* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2005).

[4]. Quoted in Wm. Roger Louis, *Imperialism at Bay 1941-1945: The United States and the Decolonization of the British Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), pp. 123-124. See also Rabe, pp. 34-35.

[5]. See, for instance, his book, *The West on Trial: The Fight for Guyana's Freedom* (London: Michael Joseph, 1966).

[6]. Reviewed in *Caribbean Contact* August 1985, p. 15.

[7]. Dale Bisnauth, *The Settlement of Indians in Guyana 1890-1930* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2000), p. 224. See also pp. 225-228.

[8]. However, he makes the point that it was not only Indians that Burnham's regime oppressed, and that his oppression included members of the multiethnic Working People's Alliance (p. 164).

[9]. "Guyana Palace," <http://www.guyanapalace.com/forums/forums/thread-view.asp?tid=3578&posts=30> (last visited on August 28, 2006).

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