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Bodies on the Doorstep: Jamaica in the 1970s



🕒 December 27, 2016 📁 A Moment in U.S. Diplomatic History

The island country of Jamaica in the Caribbean Sea experienced strong economic growth following its independence in 1962. This economic growth was fueled in part by private investments in bauxite, an aluminum ore, as well as tourism, and the manufacturing industry. The Labor Party that had controlled the government was ousted in 1970 when the growth stopped. A democratic-socialist party, known as the People's National Party (PNP), came into power in 1972 with a socialist plan that would rewire Jamaica's education and health programs. By 1980, Jamaica's gross national product had declined to some 25 percent below the 1972 level. Increasing debt at home and abroad drove the government to seek aid from the International Money Fund and the United States.

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Michael Norman Manley, a Democratic Socialist, served as the fourth Prime Minister of Jamaica from 1972 to 1980 and from 1989 to 1992. To the chagrin of many in the United States, Manley encouraged and sustained relations with the leader of an island just north of Jamaica: Fidel Castro of Cuba.

President Jimmy Carter nominated Frederick Irving to be United States Ambassador to Jamaica. In his oral history interview, Irving recounts dealing with the so-called Jamaican Mafia and their scare tactics, his relationship with Manley, and the unexpected benefits of having your phone tapped. United States Ambassador to Jamaica from 1977 to 1978, Frederick Irving was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in February 2013.

To read more about the [Caribbean region](#), [dangerous posts](#), or [economic conditions](#), please follow the links.

“It was pretty dangerous. I got tired of walking over dead bodies”



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IRVING: Phil Habib [Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs] called me and said Secretary [of State Cyrus] Vance wants me to go to Jamaica as ambassador. And by this time Carter has become president. I said, "I can't because I've already accepted a job at Harvard and I had already submitted my resignation for retirement [from the Foreign Service.]" (Irving is seen at left.)

So he said, "Vance said that it would be in the interest of the country if [Irving] went to Jamaica." You know, if the Secretary of State asks you to do something, you tend to do it.

And so I called Harvard and Harvard said it would give me a two-year extension before I had to come to the job. So I told Vance I will do it, provided it does not exceed two years. He said "fine" because, he said, if I couldn't turn Michael Manley, the Prime Minister [of Jamaica], around within two years it's hopeless. So we went to Jamaica.

That was a dangerous place; dead bodies were on the doorstep of the embassy every day....It was pretty dangerous. I got tired of walking over dead bodies. I was losing junior officers because the wives were scared and they wanted out. I couldn't blame them.

I liked [Michael Manley, Prime Minister of Jamaica from 1972 to 1980] him. I really did. I found that I could talk to him. As stated, he was very friendly to Castro. As a matter of fact... one day Castro was making an official visit to Jamaica and Manley asked the diplomatic corps whether they would be at the airport when Castro arrived. He said that he would appreciate it.

The diplomatic corps said if the American ambassador will be there they'll be there too. Manley came to me and asked will I. I said "oh sure, but I don't want any conversations with him. If I have to shake his hand, I'll shake his hand, but I'd like to avoid it."

I called the State Department and asked "what do you think of this?" I happened to get a deputy assistant secretary of the Latin American Bureau who was a political appointee who had just gotten the job, I think three months before. And all I got was a, "Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God, I don't know what to tell you."

So I said, "OK, I'm going to change what I'm asking. I'm not asking you anything; I'm just informing you." And she said "OK, thank you very much. I appreciate your informing that."

Castro came, I shook his hand. Walter Cronkite, the TV Nightly News program anchor, had cameramen in Jamaica. And I was the key story on his program. The Secretary of State got a letter signed by 53 congressmen wanting to know why there is a communist as ambassador to Jamaica.

[The] Secretary [of State] backed me up completely. I was living dangerously during that period I guess. But I landed on my feet...

“Don’t worry about Manley. I’ve got him in my back pocket”

You know, every ambassador makes a call on the Prime Minister. Let me tell you about a previous U.S. ambassador’s call on the Prime Minister. The fellow that told this to me escorted [Previous Ambassador Vincent de Roulet] to meet the Prime Minister.



When Michael Manley (seen right) put out his hand to shake de Roulet’s, our ambassador said, “Sorry Mr. Prime Minister, but I don’t shake hands with a black man.”

And this has to be true, because the Jamaican chief of staff to Michael Manley also told this to me, so it has to be true. And why Manley tolerated him is beyond me.

Also, about a year or so later, there was a hearing on a Jamaican bauxite issue, and also drugs, you know, because Jamaica was a hot place for marijuana. There was another job that was in my portfolio — to get Jamaica to stop producing marijuana.

De Roulet was called to testify at the Senate hearing about this topic and about bauxite. He replied that we would have no trouble on bauxite and all that. So the stupid de Roulet says, “Don’t worry about Manley. I’ve got him in my back pocket.” And this was a public hearing, open to the public. It hit the press.

So when de Roulet came back to Kingston two days later, he was declared *persona non grata*, which was obviously what they should do, what Manley should have done, kicked him out right away.

us-embassy-kingston-jamaica

And another thing about de Roulet is that he had rubber stamps made up in the form of animals. Like he'd say, "The DCM, from now on when I want to send for you or send a piece of paper to you, you will be the lion. And here's the stamp." For economic officer, "You will be the tiger. Here's the stamp." And that's

how he communicated to members of the embassy, with these rubber stamps.

Also, the symbol of the embassy (the U.S. Embassy in Kingstown is at left), you know, the big medal round thing, he took it off and put it on his yacht. He had a yacht in Kingston that was bigger than the biggest military vessel in Kingston. And that used to grate the government. Again, I was told this by the prime minister's office.

So he got kicked out and who should he be replaced by? By another guy, political, who was almost as bad. And that guy interfered openly and blatantly in local elections in Jamaica. And that didn't sit too well with the government. But they let him stay.

And each guy said that they paid \$300,000 ... to the Republican National Committee. De Roulet said he thought he was getting Austria and I forgot what the other guy was supposed to have said he was getting — I think France or something like that. And what did they do? They sent him to, quote — well, I'll use the more polite term — a "negro" country, unquote.


So this is the situation I walked into.

There were two political parties mainly, the National Party and the People's Party. The National Party was Manley and the other party, the People's Party, was very, very much pro-American. I called on both party heads, of course, and when I met the party that was defeated, the People's Party, the

seaganm-manley-bob-marley-1978

first thing he said was, "I suppose we'll have the same relationship as my predecessors — that I will keep him very much informed on at least a weekly basis if not daily on my conversations with Prime Minister Manley, and I would seek his advice on matters." That was [Prime Minister of Jamaica 1980-1989 Edward] Seaga. (Manley, singer Bob Marley and

Apparently, our two ambassadors had a close relationship with Seaga, and it was a question in my mind as to who is running the embassy, Seaga or our ambassadors. So I said, "Well, Mr. Seaga, I'm neutral when it comes to the political parties and I'm sure that you will know what I'm doing in the country, the same way that the government is knowing. And there are some things I'm sure of course that I will not tell you."

 f1e3958707614a52187ca2cd031a44f6 So he got mad and said, "Then you're going to have a hard time here, and I'm going to see to it," or something like that. So I figured oh boy.

I got invited by the yacht club for afternoon coffee. So I went. Made up of all white people. And they told me what a close relationship they had with my two predecessors and they assume I will continue the practice of any time a white person or white Jamaican or, or a member of the yacht club wants a visa, can they assume it will be automatic?

And I said no, you cannot assume it's going to be automatic as far as I'm concerned. The ambassador cannot interfere in the issuance of visas. And whatever happened before I arrived, if it's legitimate fine, if it isn't, then forget it. And that was the last time I got invited there...

Now, another thing on the political side, Manley said his government will be open to me. Interesting — as we were having a cup of coffee when I presented my credentials, Manley asked, "Oh by the way, do [you] have a yacht?"

And I said, "Mr. Prime Minister, no, I don't. I have only a canoe. But don't get me wrong, I sure would like to have a yacht."

We both had a laugh and he said, "You know, I like you."

"On my first day at the embassy, there was a dead body on the doorstep of the embassy"

On my first day at the embassy, there was a dead body on the doorstep of the embassy. And I said, "What in the world is going on?" So we had the body removed.

I figured, “Oh boy, here we go again. This must be a sign of anti-Americanism.” And I had CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) do a little investigating, and they told me that the body of yesterday was a Manley’s Party body guy.

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The body the next day was Seaga’s body guy. This went on, believe it or not, for two weeks. Each day a dead body on my embassy doorstep.

So I figured, you know, this can’t go on because I had suddenly two young FSO [Foreign Service Officer’s] wives are scared and they wanted to go home. And I couldn’t really stop them because they were really frightened.

So I asked the CIA who their leaders were, which I then named the “mafia”. And they gave me the names of the mafia chiefs, if you will, of each of the parties.

Each political party had a military force or police force of their own. They were the ones who were leaving the dead bodies. So I called them to the embassy and the first thing I had them do is give the Marine Guards all the weapons they were carrying. And believe it or not, these guys had a total of 17 knives and three pistols that the Marine Guard confiscated before they were allowed to see me. And I read the riot act to them.

I said, “I am tired of your leaving dead bodies here. If you want to kill each other, that’s your business. But it’s my business if you put them on my doorstep and I’m giving you a warning. You’re going to regret doing this. Now, let’s make a deal.”

And we had a long conversation. I finally got them to agree that they will not harm me, harm my wife, my family, or any other person who was with me, politicians of any or both parties – also, that they will no longer leave dead bodies on my embassy doorstep.

It worked very well... Sometimes a politician of one party wanted to go to another part of Kingston controlled by the other party. I would escort him. Formerly, if he tried it, he would find a knife in his back!...

[The gangs were] was a local thing, but they figured why not have it do double duty, because there was a lot of anti-Americanism. And I think Habib and the Secretary of State really assessed the situation quite accurately. [Jamaicans] didn't like Americans. Castro had a great influence on the government and somewhat on even the opposition

party. So I at least calmed some of the anti-Americanism by the blatant members of the party that were the dangerous members of the party.

My wife moved in on the various organizations, and they liked her very much. My wife was active in local community affairs. She was an expert on early childhood education.

In one of her endeavors, she found that there was no such school in Jamaica. So she went to the Minister of Education and talked him into the need for that kind of a teacher's organization. And he said, "Oh yes, it's in the fifth year, the third five-year plan." My wife told him politely, of course, that wasn't good enough. He then said, "You've got me convinced, but you should see Manley."

And so she made an appointment to see Manley and she talked to him and Manley said, "Oh, that's in the fifth year of the third five-year plan." And by the time she left Manley's office, it was moved up to the first year of the first five-year plan.

The business community noticed improvements in U.S.-Jamaica relations. There was a saying that Castro built schools throughout Kingston; there was Mrs. Irving who taught in them. And my wife got on friendly terms with a lot of opposition people. They kind of changed their mind each time, saying we are not such bad people.

That really impressed the Teacher's Association. And Manley said he liked her and he would hope that he would have more contact with her. So right away we're starting to eat into the strident anti-Americanism...

Then a voice broke in and said, "You know, the ambassador's right"

I've also got to tell you that during my two years in Jamaica the government had my phone tapped. He knew I knew and I knew that he knew he was tapping it. So we were always

And another thing, Manley saw that they were losing tourism. I said to him, "You know, tourism is a big moneymaker in Jamaica. Has it occurred to you to say "please and hello" and all that sort of stuff?" And he said, "Well, it's worth a try." And again, we moved in.

Manley still didn't admit that he was tapping my phones. When my staff and I had telephone conversations, I warned them, "Don't talk in specifics." (Manley is seen with Castro at left.)

Well, one day the AID chief and I had a disagreement during a phone conversation. And then a voice broke in and said, "You know, the ambassador's right. Because I'm the one [who was] monitoring the phone that day."

Then she says, "Oops!" And then she begged me not to tell the government. I said, "Oh, I knew you were listening in, so forget it." Well, that won another friend in the phone system...

So you see, little by little by little we chipped away to a point where, when we left, Michael Manley, for the first time since he said he's been a prime minister, he gave a luncheon reception in honor of my wife. The Foreign Minister, when it was customary for him to give a luncheon in honor of a departing ambassador, scheduled one for me and my wife.

When we got there, I looked and I said, "You know, I don't know these people." And my wife said, "Oh yes," they're *her* contacts. I said, "Oh, this is not for me. It's a scheme to have it look legitimate. It's really for her."

And when it came to the speech by the Foreign Minister to which I was supposed to respond, I said, "Mr. Foreign Minister, you know and I know that this is really for Dorothy. So I'm going to let her respond to your speech," so we all had a good laugh and we all had a good time.

The Minister of Interior, who, you know, handles the police, also, had a reception in our honor. He made a speech saying, "We're sorry you must go, Mr. Ambassador, but must you take Dorothy with you? She is irreplaceable."

So I said, "Fine. I agree with you completely. So Dorothy, you respond." So we all had a good laugh. And she did. And by that time, within two years, I think I could say the anti-Americanism did get lower.



The State Department was pleased. President Carter sent me a personal message when I indicated I wanted to leave. He asked me to stay, but I felt that it was time to leave.

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