Speech at the "dropping" of Halim Majeed's Monograph on the Late President of the Co-operative Republic of Guyana Linden Forbes Sampson Burnham

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Thank You, Thank You, Professor Pursoo

Distinguished guests, members of the platform party, ladies and gentlemen, comrades and friends. It is always good to appear before a friendly audience and tonight I believe I am among friends. Mr. Halim Majeed, whose night this is, I met some three years ago at the urging of a mutual friend and we have been friends since. He also read some introductory remarks I did for a book written by current Pro Chancellor at the University of Guyana, Dr. Prem Misir, and he asked me to if I would do the honor of writing similar statements for his upcoming book. Needless to say I consented.

This evening, we are assembled here for a dual purpose: First, to retrospectively and retroactively mark and commemorate the 20th anniversary of the death of one of Guyana’s greatest national heroes and patriots, one of the Founding Fathers of the new Republic- Linden Forbes Sampson Burnham. And, secondly and as importantly, we are here to celebrate the launching of Mr. Halim Majeed’s signal book on the noble, patriotic and centripetal efforts of the Comrade leader- Forbes Burnham- in the midst of seemingly impregnable difficulties facing the young nation, trying times, and internecine strife at home, to strike a bold new path towards national reconciliation and ethnic harmony, in this ‘plural society’ we know as Guyana. But more on this later.

This evening, I would like to contextualize my remarks, in the framework of two historical bookmarks or guideposts, both of which emanated from the cold war and both of which have are important and significant, I would contend, in comprehending the historical events of which Mr. Majeed has so lucidly chronicle in his book.

To do this, first, we need to highlight the period of the early 1960’s and the election of America’s first catholic President, John Fitzgerald Kennedy who, in his thematic address to the nation, outlined a new and engaging national policy of ‘other directed ness’, and a shift from America’s ‘inner directed’ isolationist
policy- albeit truncated somewhat by the entrance of this nation in World War II. It was from this policy perspective that far reaching and innovative programs such as the [international] Peace Corps, the [domestic] Vista, the Alliance for Progress in Latin America, the strengthening of the of USIS –United States Information Service- and the like were born. But even during this new age of unbridled optimism in America, and the sweeping winds of change in the colonial world, Kennedy was not immune from domestic conventional pressures to enforce the Monroe Doctrine which unabashedly stated America’s hegemonic power over the island nations in the Caribbean, and the older nation –states in the Americas-central and south.

It was in this context and against that backdrop that we now know Kennedy had attempted – on many occasions and in varied formats and conduits- to have President Fidel Castro assassinated, as he then saw Castro and his regime as a threat to America and its vital interests so defined. It was also this application and reiteration of the Monroe Doctrine that caused Kennedy to undertake the ill timed and ill advised Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba; for which he suffered immensely- internationally and domestically- for its disastrous setbacks. And, later, brought us and the world to the brink of a nuclear holocaust, when Kennedy confronted Khrushchev over the placing of nuclear weapons in our hemispheric backyard.

It was also in this context that President Kennedy and his advisers – especially Dean Rusk, (Secretary of State), and Arthur Schlesinger (special assistant and advisor), who had advised against the formidable, and at times vigorous objections of the British administration-that then Premier Cheddi Jagan not be allowed to continue to be the Chief of State in then British Guiana- and certainly not an independent Guyana- as they saw Jagan as “highly incompetent, communistically inclined and willing to establish Communist stronghold on the south American continent.” Indeed Guyanese sociologist and Maryland Professor, Dr. Maurice St. Pierre, tells us in his book, Anatomy of Resistance:
Anti-Colonialism in Guyana 1823-1966, that, “on June 21st 1962, Schlesinger who had visited BG a week earlier, wrote to Kennedy expressing the view that Jagan ‘s heart was with the ‘communist world’ and although all alternatives to him were “terrible” , he felt that if Burnham would ‘commit himself to a multiracial policy’ an independent BG would cause the US fewer problems than one under Jagan.

Suffice it to say that without the active support of the Americans - and in many ways which time does not permit me to mention at this juncture- Burnham would not have acceded to the leadership of the new Guyanese nation.

But it should also be noted that later Kennedy- even against the advice of his brother and close confidante Robert- and in an attempt to stake a new legacy in the fight against communism and regional hemispheric affairs, had begun intensive ‘backdoor communications’ with Castro and his representatives, designed to result in the normalization of relations between our two nations- America and Cuba. We now know, from recently released national security documents—formerly classified— that both Kennedy and Castro were committed to this course of action but this was severely opposed by many within his ranks and administration as it was also in Castro’s inner sanctum. Kennedy, who like Burnham was concerned with Legacy, and who faced increasing challenges to his domestic civil rights agenda and his incursions in Vietnam and from which he had begun an active reassessment, died before these historic, and far reaching overtures with Castro could be successfully finalized. Parenthetically, it should also be noted that relations between Cuba and the USA have worsened, not improved, over the years.

To fast forward historically, slightly to the late 1970’s and early 1980’s, Forbes Burnham had shifted and tilted to the left, undertook nationalization of foreign owned private property, established close relations with Cuba and Fidel Castro, and in many ways seemed to carve out a political role and national policy proclivities that were seen as anathema to US interests. To the
American political elite Burnham was viewed as a turncoat, an unreliable political actor, and worse, that had to be punished and contained. All this crescending within a context of a crusading US President Ronald Reagan who had made it his ‘casus belli’ and national mantra, the defeat of international communism – the ‘evil empire’ as he described it- and certain communists regimes or those so inclined, Nicaragua, San Salvador, Grenada, Guyana, etc-in the western hemisphere. It was in the context of Reagan’s push to defeat communism and its surrogates, by any means necessary, and the concomitant efforts at overt support for anti revolutionary/conservative forces within targeted nations, plus covert support for assassinations, economic blockades, sanctions etc, that Burnham was enmeshed when he initiated his historic attempts at rapprochement and unity talks with Cheddi Jagan. These were all designed and focused to bring about a national healing at home, and to set a stage for a new united renaissance, to attack and confront what he saw as the forces of imperialism and neo-colonialism, then arrayed against so called ‘progressive’ third world nations.

It should also be noted that there were highly placed and influential forces, both within the PNC and the government, and also in the folds of the opposition PPP, who were against these efforts, and who did their best to sabotage them. But Burnham, like Kennedy before him, saw this thrust and initiative as part of his legacy, even as there were corporal signs of his failing health and his ultimate mortality and demise.

It is to these efforts that Halim Majeed so adroitly and succinctly exposes us in his book, which give us a more positive view of this visionary leader -so often maligned and viewed as diabolic, opportunistic or worse, and to whom -incorrectly I may add- the ethnic divide and fragmentation of this young nation, and the assassination of Walter Rodney, inter alia, have been laid. Majeed is uniquely positioned to help us address and understand these issues, as he himself, and Ranji Chandisingh, had seen the positive, far reaching, nation building and altruistic traits in Burnham and,
consequently, shifted their allegiance from the PPP to the party of the future- the PNC.

Further, as one of the two designated political advisors to Forbes Burnham, Mr. Majeed was able to see Burnham at his visionary best, and to advise him of some of the consequences of his varied, nuanced political positions and policies. He was also privy- to some extent- to the manner in which reactionary and other forces - external and internal- were doing their best to perpetuate the ethnic and political divide in the young nation; and how a leader beset by these and other challenges, struggled to find a principled- but winning- position and posture. It is fascinating reading and good historiography and Mr. Majeed should be commended for this first step in what is contemplated as a ‘legacy series’.

History has shown us that most of the region and world’s greatest leaders were complex human figures; full of human foibles, personal shortcomings, and making grave missteps on their way to fame, ‘legacy’ and sometimes martyrdom. This was the case with John Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Indira Ghandi, Marcus Garvey, Nelson Mandela, Kwame Toure (Stokeley Carmichael),Kwame Nkrumah, Mahatmas Ghandi, Eric Williams, Alexander Bustamante, Cheddi Jagan, Michael Manley, for example. So it was with Linden Forbes Sampson Forbes Burnham and, I submit, that whatever his personal foibles, whatever his many missteps on the overall balance sheet of visionary leadership and adroit administrative wizardry, renowned oratorical skills, and legal prowess and finesse; his many achievements on the positive side of ledger must be chronicled, analyzed, disseminated and made permanent for historians, scholars, and for posterity.

It was in this context, that before her untimely death some two years ago , I had initiated a project with Viola Burnham, the then surviving wife of the late President Forbes Burnham , and this was to have the Burnham Papers gifted to the Yale University library, where scholars and other social commentators would have a chance to critically analyze and examine his works and policies
, with a view to solidly grounding his legacy, as a regional and international statesman, a political visionary and audacious leader. She, like I, was concerned that, unlike the late Eric Williams, Michael Manley, Grantley Adams and other Caribbean leaders of that era, whose works and papers are now deposited at major Universities and educational centers- there is no such repository of Burnham’s. Some papers of which, it is alleged, have been destroyed by the current administration in Guyana; others privately held and hoarded by former bureaucratic and political functionaries of his [Burnham’s], who are now reluctant to relinquish same without, what they consider, due compensation. She was singularly and doggedly devoted to bringing many of his speeches and papers then under her possession and control to the public fore, so that his visionary efforts at regional integration, alliance with African liberation movements, the formation of a genuine West Indian identity, and attempts to change the national mores of a multicultural Eurocentric nation, inter alia, would be realized. Unfortunately, she died before these efforts could be finalized, although she was able to read Mr. Majeed’s manuscript and to give me her impressions and views as to its completeness and historical authenticity, as she knew it. It is my fervent hope that her wishes will yet be realized.

In conclusion, it is my hope also that Mr. Majeed’s work is not the final answer, the last word, the ultimate hoorah; but, rather, the initial step, the first salvo, the pivotal ‘in limine’ document in buttressing and elucidating the legacy of one of Guyana’s greatest national heroes- LINDEN FORBES SAMPSON BURNHAM- a mission to which all fair minded and truth-seeking Guyanese should be committed, and for which we should thank Mr. Majeed for this small, but important step, in this regard. I urge you to buy this book and to publicize its availability.

Mr. Majeed, thank you for a job well done, and to you all I express my profound gratitude for your attendance this evening, and your patience with my presentation.

Guyana: One people, One nation, One destiny.
I Thank You.