David Vine, PhD
davidsvine@proton.me

The Power Behind the Throne:
The US Government Must Face Its Responsibility for the Chagossian Exile
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The US government's role in exiling the Chagossian people frequently has been underestimated, overlooked, and at times erased entirely by journalists, international organizations, human rights groups, scholars, and others. While both the UK and US governments bear responsibility for the crime, the US government was always the senior partner: US officials dreamed up the idea for a base on Diego Garcia; insisted on the expulsion of the Chagossians; proposed the UK create the British Indian Ocean Territory in violation of UN decolonization rules; paid for the deportations; ordered the final removals from Diego Garcia; assisted in killing Chagossians' pet dogs; and covered up the crime by lying to the world. This chapter outlines the US government's role in exiling the Chagossians and outsourcing the violence of displacement to the UK government. The chapter shows how the lack of attention to the US role has been by design: US officials paid the UK in part to deal with any criticism and liability.

US Responsibility: The Historical Record
To remove any doubt about the primary responsibility of the US government in expelling the Chagossians, I will briefly outline the US role (for more details, see Vine 2011).[1]

1. US—not UK—officials conceived the idea for the base found today on Diego Garcia: Beginning around 1958, Stuart Barber and other US Navy officials identified and developed the idea for building a base on Diego Garcia as part of their "Strategic Island Concept." (The small British military outpost found on Diego Garcia during World War II closed at war's end and was not the foundation for today's base.) Barber's key role is well documented (e.g., Vine 2011, 2023; Bandjunis 2001; Ryan 1984). In an unpublished letter, Barber explained, "The concept of setting aside Diego Garcia and surrounding islands as an unpopulated strategic territory for joint US-UK use was initially mine" (Barber 1971).

2. US officials subsequently proposed the idea to the UK government—not the other way around: US Navy and other government leaders embraced Barber's "Strategic Island Concept" and its identification of Diego Garcia as a leading candidate for base development. In 1960, US Navy officials approached their British counterparts about creating one or more military bases on Diego Garcia and other islands in the Indian Ocean (Vine 2011: 68–69).

3. US—not UK—officials first proposed the creation of the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT) and violating UN rules on decolonization: US officials proposed the creation of the new colony to secure permanent colonial control of the Chagos islands amid Mauritius's push for independence. The Strategic Island Concept was premised on gaining control of strategic islands under direct US sovereignty or the sovereignty of a close European ally such as the UK or Australia. Barber explained in an unpublished letter to the *Washington Post* how "in May

1960…I was the individual who proposed the detachment of these islands from Mauritius [and] the establishment of the British Indian Ocean Territory" (Barber 1991). The US Navy subsequently "initiated negotiations…to persuade London to detach the Diego Garcia atoll" and other Chagos islands from Mauritius to create the BIOT (Bezboruah, 1977: 58). Multiple accounts confirm: "BIOT was thus the brainchild of the US Navy" (Bezboruah, 1977: 58; see also Bandjunis, 2001: 1-3; Ryan, 1984: 133; Vine 2004: 119; Vine 2011: 69).

4. US—not UK—officials insisted on the expulsion of the Chagossians from Diego Garcia and secured the possibility of expulsion from all the Chagos islands: During secret negotiations in 1964 (if not earlier) US officials indicated they wanted basing rights on Indian Ocean islands, including Diego Garcia, on the condition that they have "exclusive control (without local inhabitants)" (US Embassy London 1964). UK officials agreed.

The two government sealed the deal in the 1966 US–UK agreement. In a confidential, unpublished "agreed minute" attached to the published agreement, Britain committed to take "administrative measures" necessary to make all of Chagos and other BIOT islands available for US use. The administrative measures, the secret notes show, were any actions necessary for closing down the island plantations and "resettling the inhabitants" (Chalfont 1966).[2]

(Ultimately, evidence suggests that US officials only requested the expulsion of Chagossians from Diego Garcia. UK officials appear to have made the decision to remove Chagossians from the other Chagos islands of Peros Banhos and Salomon (Snoxell 2009). They did so, however, in a context in which US officials refused to guarantee their UK counterparts that they would refrain from building military facilities and asking for expulsions on Peros Banhos and Salomon for a period of twenty years or else compensate the UK government for any such decision (Stoddart 1969). While UK officials appear to have had additional motivations for exiling Chagossians from Peros Banhos and Salomon (Snoxell 2009), the looming prospect of US officials requesting additional deportations seems to have shaped their decision significantly.[3])

5. The US government secretly paid $14 million for the expulsion of the Chagossians and basing rights, hiding the payment from Congress, Parliament, and the world: As part of secret minutes attached to the 1966 US–UK agreement, US government officials arranged to pay the $14 million by wiping away $14 million in debt the UK government owed the US government for the development of the Polaris missile system (Vine 2011: 87–88; Bandjunis 2001: 46; US House 1975: 42–43). By erasing the UK debt, US officials avoided having to ask Congress for an authorization of funds, further concealing the plans. The payments were to reimburse the British for "all costs pertaining to the administrative detachment of the Indian Ocean islands in question and to the acquisition of the lands thereon." This was diplomatic legalese for the costs of deporting the Chagossians, buying out the plantation owners, and paying off Mauritius and the Seychelles.

When the two governments quietly published the 1966 Diego Garcia agreement in 1967, the agreement falsely said the UK would make the BIOT islands available to the United States "without charge" (United Kingdom 1966). The US government perpetuated the falsehood of non-payment in recent years when describing to the International Court of Justice "the absence of any 'lease' *or payment* by the United States" (United States of America 2018: 37, 4.7).

You don't need to be an accountant to know that removing a debt is one way one party can pay another. The US embassy in Mauritius admitted the truth in 1972, saying that the

Pentagon "acknowledged its responsibility for the removal of the Ilois [Chagossians] by *payment* of $14 million to HMG [Her Majesty's Government]"(Brewer 1972: 2, 5; emphasis added).

6. US officials ordered the final deportation of Chagossians from Diego Garcia: In late 1970 and early 1971, as the US Navy was beginning construction on Diego Garcia, US officials asked UK officials to complete the deportation of the remaining Chagossians on the island. On December 7, 1970, a joint State Department–Pentagon message told the London embassy to inform British officials that it was time "for the UK to accomplish relocation of the present residents of Diego Garcia to some other location." The message continued, "All local personnel should be moved from the western half of the island before the arrival of the construction force in March 1971. We hope that complete relocation can be accomplished by the end of July 1971" (Rogers 1970).

When a Navy commander on the island warned of "possible bad publicity" from deporting a people who had lived there for generations, the highest ranking official in the US Navy, Admiral Elmo Zumwalt, held firm. In exactly three words, Zumwalt cut off internal discussion and delivered what amounted to the final deportation order: "Absolutely must go" (1971).

7. US officials also ordered and assisted in the killing of Chagossians' pet dogs, showing direct US involvement in the deportation—contrary to later US government assertions: While Chagossians were awaiting their deportation, US military officials ordered the killing of all dogs on Diego Garcia to avoid their interfering in military operations. The British agent on Diego Garcia, plantation manager Marcel Moulinie, coordinated the killing of what he estimated as around 800 dogs. US Navy personnel assisted in the killing first by attempting to shoot and then poison the dogs. When both methods failed as efficient killing mechanisms, US Navy personnel helped herd the pets into sealed sheds, where they were gassed with exhaust from US Navy vehicles, after which their carcasses were burned (Moulinie 1999; Vine 2011: 113–114).

When in 1975 Congress held the only day of hearings it has ever held to investigate the expulsion, President Gerald R. Ford's administration falsely claimed, "All went willingly…. No coercion was used and no British or U.S. servicemen were involved" (US House 1975: 42).

8. US officials inhibited resettlement planning and refused British and Mauritian government requests that Chagossians be allowed to work on the base (as at most other US bases abroad): US officials prevented the British government from discussing the resettlement of Chagossians with the Mauritian government until after the US Navy secured funding for the base in late 1970. The US embassy in London quickly understood that the British were facing serious difficulties in arranging the deportations as a result. In January 1971, State Department Legal Adviser John R. Stevenson warned US officials:

> Although the responsibility for carrying out measures to ensure the welfare of the inhabitants lies with the UK, the US is charged under the [1966] Agreement with *facilitating these arrangements*…. The US *constrained the UK* from discussing the matter with the GOM pending the outcome of our Congressional appropriations legislation. In light of this, we are under a particular responsibility not to pressure the UK into meeting a time schedule which may not provide sufficient time in which to satisfactorily arrange for the welfare of the inhabitants. Beyond this, their removal is to

> accommodate US needs, and the USG will, of course, be considered to *share the responsibility* with the UK by the inhabitants and other nations if satisfactory arrangements are not made. [Stevenson 1971; emphasis added.]

US officials ignored this and other warnings. After construction on the base began, US diplomats began pressuring their British counterparts to complete the deportations as quickly as possible. One official later acknowledged, "In order to meet our self-imposed timetable, their evacuation was undertaken with a haste which the British could claim has prevented careful examination of resettlement needs" (Newsom 1972: 1).

The US embassy in Mauritius noted, too, that the US government had "resisted" Mauritian and British government "efforts to permit Ilois [Chagossians] to remain as employees of the facility" (Brewer 1971).

9. US officials, with UK officials, intentionally hid the development of the base and the expulsion of the Chagossians from the UN, lying about Chagossians' indigenous status to avoid the responsibilities related to the right to self-determination: The US and UK delegations to the United Nations jointly suggested a slow implementation of base construction and the deportation "to minimize adverse reaction at the UN and throughout the world." Each step should have "some logical cover," they said. "The transfer of population," they warned, "is a very sensitive issue at the UN" (see Vine 2011: 80).

The US State Department suggested "that the term 'migrant laborers' be used" to describe the Chagossians, whom they knew to have lived in the islands for generations. "Withdrawal of 'inhabitants' obviously would be more difficult to justify to [Indian Ocean] littoral countries and [UN] Committee of Twenty-four" responsible for decolonization (Rusk 1968). US officials wanted a base without the risk of eviction or local protest by a self-governing population. They protected against that risk by ensuring there would be no "inhabitants" or any indigenous population that could assert its right to self-determination at the UN (Vine 2011: 89–92).

10. US officials, with UK officials, covered up their crimes and perpetuated Chagossians' exile by censoring media and lying to Congress, the media, and the world since the 1960s: As early as 1964, for example, the State Department pressured both the *Washington Post* and the *Economist* to hold stories for months that threatened to break news about the secret planning for Diego Garcia (Vine 2011: XXXX). The published article described the population of Diego Garcia as consisting "largely of transient laborers" (Estabrook 1964: A1, A6).

Misrepresenting the Chagossians as "transient contract workers" and migrant "copra workers" became official US–UK policy to avoid public criticism. In late 1970, the State Department sent instructions to its embassies to tell the press, "The population consists of a small number of contract laborers from the Seychelles and Mauritius engaged to work on the copra plantations" (Rogers 1970). For Congress, the Navy described Diego Garcia's population as "negligible…. For all practical purposes…uninhabited" (Leddick 1969).

The role of the US government in shaping UK policy and maintaining the Chagossians' exile since the expulsion from Diego Garcia remains unclear due to the lack of transparency in US–UK intergovernmental relations and the inability to consult relevant government documents that officials have refused to provide public access to by maintaining classified status. Human

Rights Watch (2023) and others may be right in attributing the majority of responsibility for perpetuating the exile post-expulsion to the British government. Alternatively, US officials may have continued to play a leading role in determining UK policy. The US government's support, at very least, for UK policy is clear given public statements under presidents Obama, Trump, and Biden.

For those who may think I'm exaggerating the US role, I would ask simply: If the US government had never shown any interest in or taken any steps toward building a base in Chagos, would the Chagossians have been exiled? The historical record shows that the answer is almost certainly *No.* There is no evidence that the UK government had any plans for or consideration of separating Chagos from Mauritius and exiling the Chagossians. If the US government had not initiated, paid for, and orchestrated this colonial crime, Chagossians would likely be living to this day in Chagos, as part of Mauritius, just as people live on the small Mauritian islands of Agalega and Rodrigues.

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[1] Most of the US government documents and others cited are available at www.chagosarchive.org.

[2] The 1966 US–UK Diego Garcia agreement and inter-governmental negotiations allowed for forced removals from other islands to make way for additional US military facilities. There is no evidence that US officials exercised this facet of the Diego Garcia agreement or ordered the removal of Chagossians from the other Chagos islands, however this possibility exists.

[3] In requesting the twenty-year guarantee, UK officials appear to have been seeking assurance that they could make financial investments in Peros Banhos and Salomon without the danger of losing those investments and incurring the additional costs of deporting the Chagossians and closing the island plantations (Snoxell 2009: 132–133). Other motivations may have included the desire to avoid scrutiny from the UN's decolonization committee and the belief that it was "altogether more convenient not to be saddled with the administrative burden of a new populated colony with its UN reporting requirements" (Snoxell 2009: 134).