

#18 Jack Blum: Grenada

Jack Blum: I had a friend who was a reporter for Time magazine. And he called me one day and he said, I've come across this guy who has the most amazing story and if it's true, it's really something, but I've, I've got to find out if it's true. It was like, oh my God, what's going on? Who's running American foreign policy?

Naomi Fowler: The source of the reporter's story was Kevin Katke, a now infamous hater of what he saw as communists. He became an important figure in the Reagan administration. This is how the story unfolded for Jack Blum, initially through his reporter friend at Time Magazine.

You're listening to the Corruption Diaries. I'm Naomi Fowler.

Jack Blum: Well, Kevin had told him the saga of how he and a group of his friends had formed something called, I think it was the American Freedom Foundation. Kevin himself was an engineer for Macy's on Long Island. And the other members of this foundation included a guy who was a house painter, another guy who was, I believe a zoning code enforcer somewhere in Nassau County, and and so on. And they had come together as a group of guys who had been freelancing in foreign policy over a period of years. And the story was that they had gone to Jamaica on a vacation, and it was a time when Jamaica was in incredible political turmoil. There have been many times when that was the case, but in this particular case, there were two different sides vying for political power in Jamaica, and one was more socialist and the other was much more conservative. Anyway, the U.S. really was putting pressure on the election, on an election there, to make sure that Seago won the election. And these guys, quote, volunteered and connected with people who they said were connected to the Central Intelligence Agency.

What happened was they had encountered a man who ran a clothing store in Brooklyn who was a Grenadian who left the country because he thought that the country was being taken over by communists. They decided they had to help out here, you know, deliver the information about what they knew from the guy who ran the clothing store and that was how the initial contact began. They then get a call from Ollie North and people connected to the White House. Oliver North was a military guy, a lieutenant colonel, who had been seconded to the White House so that he could help run part of the Foreign Policy National Security Council operation at the White House. That was under the Reagan Administration. Kevin and his friends then get drawn up in the whole business of the Grenada invasion.

Naomi Fowler: The controversial invasion of Grenada by the United States and other Caribbean countries began in 1983. "Operation Urgent Fury" resulted in the military occupation of the country in just a few days.

Jack Blum: Oliver North was very gung-ho about doing things. So all of this information is checked out and now he proposes to the superiors at the White House that, boy, oh boy, we got to do this invasion of Grenada because there are all these horrible people and there are Americans endangered uh, because there was a medical school in Grenada that had lots of people who were American citizens who were studying medicine there. This was for people who couldn't get into medical school in the United States and would come back and then

take the boards here and able to go on and practice medicine here in the U.S. But anyway, the headquarters for the medical school was on Long Island, and that's where Kevin and his friends were operating.

So, they then begin to get tasked to do things by the people at the White House. Among other things, they were tasked to go to the medical school headquarters on Long Island and ask for a list of the Americans. And Kevin said, well, we, we said, what do we tell them? Oh, I don't know, tell him you work for the American Security Agency. And Kevin said, but there is no such agency. But he and his friends go try, and they get the door slammed on them. But then they find out that the U.S. has got a fleet ready to go invade the country. And now they're really brought into the whole discussion and the planning.

Among other things, the fleet that was ready to go and the planning that was undertaken, somebody suddenly realized that they didn't have a map of Grenada. And Kevin and his friends hustled up a placemat from a restaurant in Grenada that had a map of the island. And this thing was hustled to an aircraft carrier off the coast of Grenada and run through a copying machine and now, now the troops that were going to hit the beach all had this placemat map of the island to work from.

Well, needless to say, when this story was, was being told to my friend, who was the reporter, he's like totally incredulous. He's like, how, how can I believe this guy? What, what am I supposed to think? The way that reporters checked a lot of this stuff at the time, and possibly it's still a system in place, is that when a reporter said, look, I've gotten this kind of incredible story and I don't want you to tell me anything about the details, I just want to know, is this something that I should pay attention to or is it something that's just a figment of somebody's imagination? So the reporter calls me and says, Jack, come to dinner. We're gonna have, coming to dinner, a gentleman who will show a business card that he's in the real estate business, but really he's someone who will either warn me off the story, or indicate that, well, there's something to it but he won't do anything more, and I can't quote him, and I can't do anything with what he says, other than know that I'm on the right track or not. So we go, we go to dinner and my reporter friend is going on with this story about Kevin and the invasion of Grenada. And the gentleman who had joined us started with a martini and as the story is going on, kept ordering more martinis and, you know, indicating that, yeah, there was substance to the story. And the more I heard about it, the more incredulous I became.

After that dinner the reporter arranged for Kevin and I to meet. And Kevin is a very nice, outgoing, pleasant guy who just enjoyed playing in foreign policy, it was like, hey, this is a great opportunity, I'm being patriotic, I'm doing my duty, and so on. He, at, at the time this was going on, I'd say in his mid to late 30s, maybe early 40s, he was an average, average guy who who thought he was doing his country a great patriotic service. He was pretty forthcoming, the stories he told didn't vary you know, he told them and repeated them and the details were there and everything was fine, you know, seemed to check out.

Later, when I found out more, the story got even funnier. He gets drawn into the business of helping after the invasion. Apparently, he got a call from Ollie North, so he says. And the call was to go to the man who was running the clothing store, who had been the original source of the intelligence, and tell him that they would like him to become the provisional Prime

Minister of the new government that will be formed after the invasion. And Kevin and his friends making an appointment with him, they're gonna go visit him on a Sunday morning at his apartment. And they show up and they lay out what's about to happen. And this poor guy goes into complete shock. He can't believe what Kevin's saying that he's been talking to the White House, they'd like him to become provisional Prime Minister, and he, he interrupts this whole presentation and says, I, I've, I've got to go get some cigarettes, I'll be back in whatever. And the guy goes out and he never comes back, he's just totally terrified.

Then, then there was the day of the invasion itself, and now they get a call saying, would you temporarily take over the offices of the Grenadan mission to the United Nations? And Kevin and his friends prepare that morning to go do what the White House people had suggested. And he shows up and, and the place is locked up and he, being an engineer who deals with locks and problems like that, is busily picking the lock when a New York City cop comes along and says, well son, what might you be doing? Right? And they're getting ready to arrest him and he said, look, I'm doing this at the behest of the White House and if you don't believe me, here's who to call. And sure enough, he calls and the, and the cop is just flabbergasted and lets Kevin go, and that was that. But he never actually took over the office there of the U.N. delegation.

Well, this whole mess was a precursor to involvement in the Iran Contra affair.

Kevin turns up with something that he thinks will be useful to Ollie North. And that is that there's a guy in Brooklyn who knows about a very wealthy Arab sheikh who is prepared to give a large amount of money to support the Contras. And all he'd like is the opportunity to come meet Ollie North.

Kevin is told to talk to the guy and persuade him to come to Washington to meet North. And the guy shows up and he is wearing Saudi robes. All of the headgear that would indicate him, indicate he's a member of the Saudi royal family. And he takes the train from New York down to Washington to meet with Ollie. Ollie, in turn, refers him to these PR guys who were doing outside fundraising for the Contras. And what happened next is, is part of the comedy of life. The fake Arab sheikh, because he was not really an Arab, he wasn't really a sheikh, he was some guy from Brooklyn, proceeds to persuade the PR guys who were working for Ollie that what they ought to do is invest in a business deal he has. And he proceeds to swindle the PR guys out of a couple hundred thousand dollars and then proceeds to move on. That's just one of the bizarre side stories of the Iran Contra affair, that in all of the stuff that went on, nobody was capable of sorting out one way or another.

Naomi Fowler: *The Corruption Diaries* is a production of The Tax Justice Network, made by Naomi Fowler and Jo Barratt. Interviews with Jack Blum were recorded over several days at Jack's home in Maryland by Zoe Sullivan.