

When Freedom Fails: The Myth of Decolonization

By [Robert Hoffman](#)

In 1804, after twelve years of conflict and tens of thousands dead, General Jean-Jacques Dessalines proclaimed victory against the French and declared the new state of Haiti. It was the longest and bloodiest slave rebellion ever. Dessalines then announced that he'd be assuming the office of Emperor for Life of Haiti, the world's first independent republic ruled by African descendants. Thus began two centuries of oppression, dictatorial governance, violence, poverty, weird superstition, official corruption, and economic bottom-feeding. The recent mega-earthquake in Port-au-Prince turned the world's attention to the still uncounted dead, many of whom perished because Haiti is a state that never was. It had no chance to fail since it never succeeded. And the politically incorrect thought experiment arises: What if Haiti's revolution had been repulsed, and the French had been in charge for the last two hundred years?

France's other colonies in the 19th century saw slave revolts some years later, all of which were duds. Slavery was ended in the French overseas possessions after the February Revolution of 1848, but France ultimately absorbed all of her remaining West Indies colonies into France proper. Today, Martinique and Guadeloupe (the latter including St. Martin) are départements of the mother country, much as if they were in Provence or Ile-de-France.

The Dutch also did something along those lines with their possessions like Curaçao, Sint Maarten, Aruba, Bonaire, and Saba, among others. These islands were absorbed into the Kingdom of the Netherlands as separate nations under Dutch rule. In October of this year, that arrangement will give way to associated-state status for Curaçao and Sint Maarten and a kind of municipal status for the rest -- no longer de facto colonies, but integral parts of the Netherlands.

Thus Holland and France saw the inherent dangers in decolonization of their Caribbean lands and instead made their peoples equals, at least under the law. The British generally did the opposite, and the results have not been pretty.

Since the early settlers arrived in the mid-1600s, agriculture was for centuries the only viable business in the Eastern Caribbean, led by King Sugar. Sugarcane growing and processing was labor-intensive, unlike lesser crops like tobacco, indigo, and cotton, which were also produced in the basin. And the cheapest workers available were slaves, who were shipped by the hundreds of thousands -- some say millions -- via the infamous Middle Passage. Slavery was a dreadful institution, an assault on Christian sensibilities (Christians were largely responsible for its abolition during the first half of the 19th century), and a moral outrage. But without slavery, the West Indies would have been of no consequence economically. The slave-based sugar business made many Europeans -- and quite a few free blacks as well -- rich. Abolition did not kill off King Sugar, but it seriously damaged his health, and his formidable reign as the economic engine of the Caribbean began to fade. By the time slavery was mostly history in the New World, strains of sugar beets had been developed that flourished in the

temperate climate of Europe. Sugarcane also had political/sociological problems: In the culture of the Eastern Caribbean, sugar became intrinsically connected to the reviled practice of slavery.

Colonialism is by definition the exploitation by a strong nation of a weaker community. By this narrow measure, colonialism technically never happened in the Caribbean. The islands were settled by European whites and Brazilian Jews, while the blacks were forcibly carried across the Atlantic and put to work. Eventually, blacks constituted the vast majority of the population, and by the time emancipation came, they were the natural heirs to the islands that they had been dragged to in chains. And since there was nothing left to exploit, the Europeans more or less went home and left the place to the deracinated blacks. The Africans of the Caribbean gradually assumed the role of indigenous people, since the white Europeans had chased the actual indigenous people, the Amerindians, into Central America.

The dissolution of the British Empire after World War II released to their own devices colonies like India and Singapore and Malaysia, nations with adequate resources and hefty populations. Much smaller imperial possessions like Jamaica, Antigua & Barbuda, Barbados, and the other British Antilles with virtually no resources and sparse populations remained, like Hong Kong, crown colonies. These colonies were, in the eyes of the British, incapable of self-determination and yet had never been absorbed into their mother country's heart. It had nothing to do with race and everything to do with economics and political structures. With the rise of the Caribbean labor movements in the 1950s, the economic viability of the British West Indies colonies was even more parlous -- in fact, it was toast. And while self-rule seemed morally correct, it was politically naïve.

By the early 1960s, egged on by socialist activists and labor leaders, some of the British colonies in the basin were determined to press for independence. Decolonization movements in the Caribbean were at bottom driven by political aims but promoted as social justice. Even though plenty of power lay in the hands of the local colonial legislatures in the British crown colonies, labor leaders thirsted for more heft and to rid themselves of the paternal doting and discipline from their ultimate masters in Europe. When they approached London with their "demands" for separation, the grateful English were happy to oblige. As an Antiguan prime minister once told me, the British response was, "Where do we sign?"

But many British islands, or island groups, chose to forgo decolonization. Their leaders reasoned that casting off from the mother ship might leave them adrift, without the economic underpinnings and the robust political systems needed to sustain themselves. And they were right. With a couple of exceptions, like Barbados with its solidly royalist history and Trinidad with its rich natural resources, the self-determination road turned out to be fraught with difficulty.

From the early 1960s through the early 1980s, colonies like Jamaica, St. Kitts/Nevis, St. Vincent, St. Lucia, and Antigua "won" their independence. This opened the door for corruption, nepotism, cronyism, and manipulation by moneyed interests, like accused Ponzi schemer R. Allen Stanford, who was hounded out of Montserrat by the British in 1986 and quickly flew to the embrace of the ruling Bird family in independent Antigua. Lacking a middle class, these new nations greatly expanded their public sectors as the

squabbling socialist/labor parties based their primary appeals on improving the lot of the people with free-lunch schemes and even more government jobs. Entrepreneurial capitalism was rejected as unworkable and unseemly and would, moreover, bleed the local political interests of their clout and indispensability.

Both Taiwan and mainland China vied for the favors of independent Caribbean states, showering them (or, more exactly, their political leaders) with cash in exchange for their United Nations votes and diplomatic recognition. Cuba muscled its way into Grenada in 1983, sparking an American invasion under President Ronald Reagan. In 2005, Venezuela's dictator Hugo Chávez struck a special deal called "Petrocaribe" with Antigua, Dominica, Grenada, Jamaica, St. Kitts/Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, and Haiti, among others, to supply those independent nations with oil at preferential prices. This was, of course, a thinly-veiled stab at getting the extreme socialist foot in those countries' doors. Just last year, agreements were signed by most of the sovereign island-nations throughout the basin to form a kind of Caribbean Co-Prosperity Sphere with Venezuela calling the tune.

The British colonies that preferred to stay under the secure skirts of Mother England opted for a kind of limited autonomy that had the feel of liberty without the scary responsibilities that came with actual independence. The British Virgin Islands, Turks & Caicos, the Cayman Islands, Montserrat, and others stayed aboard. Tiny Anguilla, once lumped in with St. Kitts/Nevis and granted independence, rejected the arrangement and asked for (and got) its status as a crown colony back.

The numbers, from CIA reports, tell a sad story: The average 2008 per-capita income of British islands in the Caribbean Basin that became independent countries was \$14,187 (which includes thriving nations like Trinidad and Barbados), while the average per-capita income of the crown colonies was \$25,650, a 55-percent difference. The failed state of Jamaica had a PCI of just \$7,400; Antigua, which looks like it's currently on its way to failure, weighed in at \$14,500. For comparison's sake, the United States PCI was about \$47,000, while the United Kingdom's was about \$36,500. It comes as little surprise that millions of West Indians have migrated to the States and Britain. In the U.S. Virgin Islands, the lion's share of the immigrants from other Caribbean non-U.S. islands hail from Dominica, Antigua, St. Lucia, and St. Kitts/Nevis -- all countries that went it alone and where the British crown is now little more than a titular presence.

The British Empire is gone forever. But those Caribbean colonies that resisted the liberalist temptations of independence so ballyhooed by progressive United Nations thinkers clearly dodged a bullet. West Indian independence movements, which yet survive, are in full retreat as the vaunted promises of self-determination have been proven bogus. Today, the security of the entire Caribbean Basin is under threat from burly nations that are increasingly hostile to America, England, capitalism, and the freedom that these little nations thought they had achieved.