
I N T R O D U C T I O N

Rita felt like she'd been sliced open and all the blood spilled from her body.

"What happened to you? What happened to you?" her children cried as they came running to her side.

"What happened?" her husband inquired.

"Did someone attack you?" they asked.

"I heard everything they said," Rita recounted, "but my voice couldn't open my mouth to say what happened." For an hour she said nothing, her heart swollen with emotion.

Finally she blurted out: "We will never again return to our home! Our home has been closed!" As Rita told me almost forty years later, the man said to her: "Your island has been sold. You will never go there again."

Marie Rita Elysée Bancoult is one of the people of the Chagos Archipelago, a group of about 64 small coral islands near the isolated center of the Indian Ocean, halfway between Africa and Indonesia, 1,000 miles south of the nearest continental landmass, India. Known as Chagossians, none live in Chagos today. Most live 1,200 miles away on the western Indian Ocean islands of Mauritius and the Seychelles. Like others, 80-year-old Rita lives far from Mauritius's renowned tourist beaches and luxury hotels. Rita, or Aunt Rita as she is known, lives in one of the island's poorest neighborhoods, known for its industrial plants and brothels, in a small aging three-room house made of concrete block.

Rita and other Chagossians cannot return to their homeland because between 1968 and 1973, in a plot carefully hidden from the world, the United States and Great Britain exiled all 1,500–2,000 islanders to create a major U.S. military base on the Chagossians' island Diego Garcia. Initially, government agents told those like Rita who were away seeking medical treatment or vacationing in Mauritius that their islands had been closed and they could not go home. Next, British officials began restricting supplies to the islands and more Chagossians left as food and medicines dwindled. Finally, on the orders of the U.S. military, U.K. officials forced the remaining islanders to board overcrowded cargo ships and left them on the docks in Mauritius and the Seychelles. Just before the last deportations, British agents and U.S. troops on Diego Garcia herded the Chagossians' pet dogs into sealed sheds and gassed and burned them in front of their traumatized owners awaiting deportation.

The people, the descendants of enslaved Africans and indentured south Indians brought to Chagos beginning in the eighteenth century, received no resettlement assistance and quickly became impoverished. Today the group numbers around 5,000. Most remain deeply impoverished. Meanwhile the base on Diego Garcia has become one of the most secretive and powerful U.S. military facilities in the world, helping to launch the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq (twice), threatening Iran, China, Russia, and nations from southern Africa to southeast Asia, host to a secret CIA detention center for high-profile terrorist suspects, and home to thousands of U.S. military personnel and billions of dollars in deadly weaponry.

“You were born—”

“Peros Banhos,” replied Rita Bancoult* before I could finish my question.

“In what year?”

“1928. . . . The thirtieth of June.”

Rita grew up in Peros Banhos’s capital and administrative center, *L’île du Coin*—Corner Island. “*Lamem monn ne, lamem monn reste*,” she added in the songlike, up-and-down cadence of Chagossians’ Kreol: La-MEM moan NAY, la-MEM moan rest-AY. “The island where I was born is the island where I stayed.”¹

Corner Island and 31 neighboring islands in the Peros Banhos atoll form part of the Chagos Archipelago. Portuguese explorers named the largest and best-known island in the archipelago Diego Garcia, about 150 miles to the south. The archipelago’s name appears to come from the Portuguese *chagas*—the wounds of Christ.²

“And your parents?” I asked. “What island were your parents born on?”

“My parents were born there too,” Rita explained. “My grandmother—the mother of my father—was born in Six Islands—*Six Îles*. My father was also born in Six Islands. My grandfather was born there too. My grandmother on my mother’s side was born in Peros Banhos.”

Rita does not know where her other ancestors were born, one of the injuries still borne by people with enslaved forebears. However, she remembers her grandmother, Olivette Pauline, saying that Olivette’s grandmother—Rita’s great-great-grandmother—had been enslaved and had the name “Masambo” or “Mazambo.” Rita thinks she was a *Malgas*—a person from Madagascar.

* Rita’s last name has since changed to Isou, but for reasons of clarity I will refer to her throughout by the name Bancoult.

Rita and her family are some of Chagos's indigenous people.³ Chagossians lived in Diego Garcia and the rest of the previously uninhabited archipelago since the time of the American Revolution when Franco-Mauritians created coconut plantations on the islands and began importing enslaved and, later, indentured laborers from Africa and India.

Over the next two centuries, the diverse workforce developed into a distinct, emancipated society and a people known initially as the *Ilois*—the Islanders. Nearly everyone worked on the coconut plantations. Most worked in the production of copra—dried coconut flesh—and coconut oil made by pressing copra. The people built the archipelago's infrastructure and produced its wealth. As some maps still attest, the islands became known as the “Oil Islands”—meaning coconut oil, not the petroleum that would prove central to the archipelago's recent history. A distinct Chagos Kreol language emerged. The people built their own houses, inhabited land passed down from generation to generation, and kept vegetable gardens and farm animals. By the time Rita was a mother, there were nurseries and schools for her children. In 1961, Mauritian colonial governor Robert Scott remarked that the main village on Diego Garcia had the “look of a French coastal village miraculously transferred whole to this shore.”⁴

While far from luxurious and still a plantation society, the islands provided a secure life, generally free of want, and featuring universal employment and numerous social benefits, including regular if small salaries in cash and food, land, free housing, education, pensions, burial services, and basic health care on islands described by many as idyllic.

“You had your house—you didn't have rent to pay,” said Rita, a short, stocky woman with carefully French-braided white hair. “With my ration, I got ten and a half pounds of rice each week, I got ten and a half pounds of flour, I got my oil, I got my salt, I got my dhal, I got my beans—it was only butter beans and red beans that we needed to buy.

“And then I got my fresh fish, Saturday. I got my salted fish too, of at least four pounds, five pounds to take. But we didn't take it because we were able to catch fish ourselves. . . . We planted pumpkin, we planted greens. . . . Chickens, we had them. Pigs, the company fed them, and we got some. Chickens, ducks, we fed them ourselves.

“I had a dog named *Katorz*—Katorz, when the sea was at low tide, he would go into the sea. He caught fish in his mouth and he brought them back to me,” recalled Rita 1,200 miles from her homeland.

“Life there paid little money, a very little,” she said, “but it was the sweet life.”

During the winter of 1922, eight-year-old Stuart Barber was sick and confined to bed at his family's home in New Haven, Connecticut. A solitary child long troubled by health problems, Stu, as he was known, found solace that winter in a cherished geography book. He was particularly fascinated by the world's remote islands and had a passion for collecting the stamps of far-flung island colonies. While the Falkland Islands off the coast of Argentina in the South Atlantic became his favorite, Stu noticed that the Indian Ocean was dotted with many islands claimed by Britain.⁵

Thirty-six years later, after having experienced a taste of island life as a naval intelligence officer in Hawai'i during World War II, Stu was drawing up lists of small, isolated colonial islands from every map, atlas, and nautical chart he could find. It was 1958. Thin and spectacled, Stu was a civilian back working for the Navy at the Pentagon.

The Navy ought to have a permanent facility, Stu suddenly realized, like the island bases acquired during the Pacific's "island hopping" campaign against Japan. The facility should be on "a small atoll, minimally populated, with a good anchorage." The Navy, he began to tell his superiors, should build a small airstrip, oil storage, and logistical facilities. The Navy would use it "to support minor peacetime deployments" and major war-time operations.⁶

Working in the Navy's long-range planning office, it occurred to Stu that over the next decades island naval bases would be essential tools for maintaining military dominance during the Cold War. In the era of decolonization, the non-Western world was growing increasingly unstable and would likely become the site of future combat. "Within the next 5 to 10 years," Stu wrote to the Navy brass, "virtually all of Africa, and certain Middle Eastern and Far Eastern territories presently under Western control will gain either complete independence or a high degree of autonomy," making them likely to "drift from Western influence."⁷

All the while, U.S. and other Western military bases were becoming dangerous targets of opposition both in the decolonizing world and from the Soviet Union and the United Nations. The inevitable result for the United States, Stu said, was "the withdrawal" of Western military forces and "the denial or restriction" of Western bases in these areas.⁸

But Stu had the answer to these threats. The solution, he saw, was what he called the "Strategic Island Concept." The plan would be to avoid traditional base sites located in populous mainland areas where they were vulnerable to local non-Western opposition. Instead, "only relatively small, lightly populated islands, separated from major population masses, could be safely held under full control of the West." Island bases were the key.

But if the United States was going to protect its “future freedom of military action,” Stu realized, they would have to act quickly to “stockpile” island basing rights as soon as possible. Just as any sensible investor would “stockpile any material commodity which foreseeably will become unavailable in the future,” Stu believed, the United States would have to quickly buy up small colonial islands around the world or otherwise ensure its Western allies maintained sovereignty over them. Otherwise the islands would be lost to decolonization forever.⁹

As the idea took shape in his head, Stu first thought of the Seychelles and its more than 100 islands before exploring other possibilities. Finally he found time to gather and “scan all the charts to see what useful islands there might be”: There was Phuket, Cocos, Masirah, Farquhar, Aldabra, Desroches, Salomon, and Peros Banhos in and around the Indian Ocean alone. After finding all to be “inferior sites,” Stu found “that beautiful atoll of Diego Garcia, right in the middle of the ocean.”¹⁰

Stu saw that the small v-shaped island was blessed with a central location within striking distance of potential conflict zones, one of the world’s great natural harbors in its protected lagoon, and enough land to build a large airstrip. But the Navy still needed to ensure it would get a base absent any messy “political complications.” Any targeted island would have to be “free of impingement on any significant indigenous population or economic interest.” Stu was pleased to note that Diego Garcia’s population was “measured only in the hundreds.”¹¹

When in late 1967 a mule-drawn cart ran over the foot of Rita’s three-year-old daughter Noellie, the nurse in Peros Banhos’s eight-bed hospital told Rita that the foot needed an operation. She would have to take Noellie to the nearest full-service hospital, 1,200 miles away in Mauritius.

Going to Mauritius meant waiting for the next and only boat service—a four-times-a-year connection with the larger island. Which meant waiting two months. When the boat finally arrived, Rita packed a small box with some clothes and a pot to cook in, locked up the family’s wood-framed, thatched-roof house, and left for Mauritius with Noellie, her husband, Julien Bancoult, and their five other children.

After four days on the open ocean, the family arrived in the Mauritian capital, Port Louis, and rushed Noellie to the nearest hospital. As Rita recalled, a doctor operated but saw immediately that the foot had gone untreated for “much too long.” Gangrene had set in. Noellie died a month later.

Mourning her death, the family had to wait two months until the departure of the next boat for Chagos. With the departure date approaching, Rita

walked to the office of the steamship company to arrange for the family's return. There the steamship company representative told her, "Your island has been sold. You will never go there again," leaving Rita to return to her family speechless and in tears.

When Julien finally heard his wife's news he collapsed backwards, his arms splayed wide, unable to utter a word. Prevented from returning home, Rita, Julien, and their five surviving children found themselves in a foreign land, separated from their home, their land, their animals, their possessions, their jobs, their community, and the graves of their ancestors. The Bancoult's had been, as Chagossians came to say, *derasine*—deracinated, uprooted, torn from their natal lands.

"His sickness started to take hold of him," Rita explained. "He didn't understand" a thing she said.

Soon Julien suffered a stroke, his body growing rigid and increasingly paralyzed. "His hands didn't move, his feet didn't move. Everything was frozen," Rita said. Before the year was out, she would spend several weeks receiving treatment in a psychiatric hospital.

Five years after suffering the stroke, Julien died. Rita said the cause of death was *sagren*—profound sorrow.

"There *wasn't* sickness" like strokes or *sagren* in Peros Banhos, Rita explained. "There wasn't that sickness. Nor diabetes, nor any such illness. What drugs?" she asked rhetorically. "This is what my husband remembered and pictured in his mind. Me too, I remember these things that I've said about us, David. My heart grows heavy when I say these things, understand?"

After Julien's death, the Bancoult's son Alex lost his job as a dockworker. He later died at 38 addicted to drugs and alcohol. Their son Eddy died at 36 of a heroin overdose. Another son, Renault, died suddenly at age eleven, for reasons still mysterious to the family, after selling water and begging for money at a local cemetery near their home.

"My life has been buried," Rita told me from the torn brown vinyl couch in her small sitting room. "What do I think about it?" she continued. "It's as if I was pulled from my paradise to put me in hell. Everything here you need to buy. I don't have the means to buy them. My children go without eating. How am I supposed to bear this life?"

"Welcome to the Footprint of Freedom," says the sign on Diego Garcia. Today, at any given time, 3,000 to 5,000 U.S. troops and civilian support staff live on the island. "Picture a tropical paradise lost in an endless

expanse of cerulean ocean,” described *Time* magazine reporter Massimo Calabresi when he became one of the first journalists in over twenty-five years to visit the secretive atoll. Calabresi earned the privilege traveling with President George W. Bush and Air Force One during a ninety-minute refueling stop between Iraq and Australia. “Glossy palm fronds twist in the temperate wind along immaculate, powder white beaches. Leathery sea turtles bob lazily offshore, and the light cacophony of birdsong accents the ambient sound of wind and waves,” he reported. “Now add concrete. Lots and lots of concrete. . . . Think early-’70s industrial park.”¹²

Confined to an auditorium during his stay (but presented with a souvenir t-shirt bearing “pictures of scantily clad women and mermaids” and the words “Fantasy Island, Diego Garcia”), Calabresi was prevented from touring the rest of the island. If he had, he would have found what, like most overseas U.S. bases, resembles a small American town, in this case magically transported to the middle of the Indian Ocean.

Leaving Diego Garcia International Airport, Calabresi might have stayed at the Chagos Inn; dined at Diego Burger or surfed the internet at Burgers-n-Bytes; enjoyed a game of golf at a nine-hole course; gone shopping or caught a movie; worked out at the gym or gone bowling; played baseball or basketball, tennis or racquetball; swam in one of several pools or sailed and fished at the local marina; then relaxed with some drinks at one of several clubs and bars. Between 1999 and 2007, the Navy paid a consortium of private firms called DG21 nearly half a billion dollars to keep its troops happy and to otherwise feed, clean, and maintain the base.

The United Kingdom officially controls Diego Garcia and the rest of Chagos as the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT). As we will later see, the British created the colony in 1965 using the Queen’s archaic power of royal decree, separating the islands from colonial Mauritius (in violation of the UN’s rules on decolonization) to help enable the expulsion. A secret 1966 agreement signed “under the cover of darkness” without congressional or parliamentary oversight gave the United States the right to build a base on Diego Garcia. While technically the base would be a joint U.S.-U.K. facility, the island would become a major U.S. base and, in many ways, *de facto* U.S. territory. All but a handful of the troops are from the United States. Private companies import cheaper labor from places like the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Mauritius (though until 2006 no Chagossians were hired) to do the laundry, cook the food, and keep the base running. The few British soldiers and functionaries on the atoll spend most of their time raising the Union Jack, keeping an eye on substance abuse as the local police force, and offering authenticity at the local “Brit Club.” Diego

Garcia may be the only place in what remains of the British Empire where cars drive on the right side of the road.

In the years since the last Chagossians were deported in 1973, the base has expanded dramatically. Sold to Congress as an “austere communications facility” (to assuage critics nervous that Diego Garcia represented the start of a military buildup in the Indian Ocean), Diego Garcia saw almost immediate action as a base for reconnaissance planes in the 1973 Arab-Israeli war. The base grew steadily throughout the 1970s and expanded even more rapidly after the 1979 revolution in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan: Under Presidents Carter and Reagan, Diego Garcia saw the “most dramatic build-up of any location since the Vietnam War.” By 1986, the U.S. military had invested \$500 million on the island.¹³ Most of the construction work was carried out by large private firms like long-time Navy contractor Brown & Root (later Halliburton’s Kellogg Brown & Root).

Today Diego Garcia is home to an amazing array of weaponry and equipment. The lagoon hosts an armada of almost two dozen massive cargo ships “prepositioned” for wartime. Each is almost the size of the Empire State Building. Each is filled to the brim with specially protected tanks, helicopters, ammunition, and fuel ready to be sent off to equip tens of thousands of U.S. troops for up to 30 days of battle.

Closer to shore, the harbor can host an aircraft carrier taskforce, including navy surface vessels and nuclear submarines. The airport and its over two-mile-long runway host billions of dollars worth of B-1, B-2, and B-52 bombers, reconnaissance, cargo, and in-air refueling planes. The island is home to one of four worldwide stations running the Global Positioning System (GPS). There’s a range of other high-tech intelligence and communications equipment, including NASA facilities (the runway is an emergency landing site for the Space Shuttle), an electro-optical deep space surveillance system, a satellite navigation monitoring antenna, an HF-UHF-SHF satellite transmission ground station, and (probably) a subsurface oceanic intelligence station. Nuclear weapons are likely stored on the base.¹⁴

Diego Garcia saw its first major wartime use during the first Gulf War. Just eight days after the U.S. military issued deployment orders in August 1990, eighteen prepositioned ships from Diego Garcia’s lagoon arrived in Saudi Arabia. The ships immediately outfitted a 15,000-troop marine brigade with 123 M-60 battle tanks, 425 heavy weapons, 124 fixed-wing and rotary aircraft, and thirty days’ worth of operational supplies for the annihilation of Iraq’s military that was to come. Weaponry and supplies shipped from the United States took almost a month longer to arrive in Saudi Arabia, proving Diego Garcia’s worth to many military leaders.¹⁵

Since September 11, 2001, the base has assumed even more importance for the military. About 7,000 miles closer to central Asia and the Persian Gulf than major bases in the United States, the island received around 2,000 additional Air Force personnel within weeks of the attacks on northern Virginia and New York. The Air Force built a new thirty-acre housing facility for the newcomers. They named it “Camp Justice.”

Flying from the atoll, B-1 bombers, B-2 “stealth” bombers, and B-52 nuclear-capable bombers dropped more ordnance on Afghanistan than any other flying squadrons in the Afghan war.¹⁶ B-52 bombers alone dropped more than 1.5 million pounds of munitions in carpet bombing that contributed to thousands of Afghan deaths.¹⁷ Leading up to the invasion of Iraq, weaponry and supplies prepositioned in the lagoon were again among the first to arrive at staging areas near Iraq’s borders. The (once) secret 2002 “Downing Street” memorandum showed that U.S. war planners considered basing access on Diego Garcia “critical” to the invasion.¹⁸ Bombers from the island ultimately helped launch the Bush administration’s war overthrowing the Hussein regime and leading to the subsequent deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and thousands of U.S. occupying troops.

In early 2007, as the Bush administration was upping its anti-Iran rhetoric and making signs that it was ready for more attempted conquest, the Defense Department awarded a \$31.9 million contract to build a new submarine base on the island. The subs can launch Tomahawk cruise missiles and ferry Navy SEALs for amphibious missions behind enemy lines. At the same time, the military began shipping extra fuel supplies to the atoll for possible wartime use.

Long off-limits to reporters, the Red Cross, and all other international observers and far more secretive than Guantánamo Bay, many have identified the island as a clandestine CIA “black site” for high-profile detainees: Journalist Stephen Grey’s book *Ghost Plane* documented the presence on the island of a CIA-chartered plane used for rendition flights. On two occasions former U.S. Army General Barry McCaffrey publicly named Diego Garcia as a detention facility. A Council of Europe report named the atoll, along with sites in Poland and Romania, as a secret prison.¹⁹

For more than six years U.S. and U.K. officials adamantly denied the allegations. In February 2008, British Foreign Secretary David Miliband announced to Parliament: “Contrary to earlier explicit assurances that Diego Garcia has not been used for rendition flights, recent U.S. investigations have now revealed two occasions, both in 2002, when this had in fact occurred.”²⁰ A representative for Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said Rice called Miliband to express regret over the “administrative error.” The State

Department's chief legal adviser said CIA officials were "as confident as they can be" that no other detainees had been held on the island, and CIA Director Michael Hayden continues to deny the existence of a CIA prison on the island. This may be true: Some suspect the United States may hold large numbers of detainees on secret prison ships in Diego Garcia's lagoon or elsewhere in the waters of Chagos.²¹

"It's the single most important military facility we've got," respected Washington-area military expert John Pike told me. Pike, who runs the website GlobalSecurity.org, explained, "It's the base from which we control half of Africa and the southern side of Asia, the southern side of Eurasia." It's "the facility that at the end of the day gives us some say-so in the Persian Gulf region. If it didn't exist, it would have to be invented." The base is critical to controlling not just the oil-rich Gulf but the world, said Pike: "Even if the entire Eastern Hemisphere has drop-kicked us" from every other base on their territory, he explained, the military's goal is to be able "to run the planet from Guam and Diego Garcia by 2015."

Before I received an unexpected phone call one day late in the New York City summer of 2001, I'd only vaguely known from my memories of the first Gulf War that the United States had an obscure military base on an island called Diego Garcia. Like most others in the United States, I knew nothing of the Chagossians.

On the phone that day was Michael Tigar, a lawyer and American University law professor. Tigar, I later learned from my father (an attorney), was famously known for having had an offer of a 1966 Supreme Court clerkship revoked at the last moment by Justice William Brennan. The justice had apparently succumbed to right-wing groups angered by what they considered to be Tigar's radical sympathies from his days at the University of California, Berkeley. As the story goes, Brennan later said it was one of his greatest mistakes. Tigar went on to represent the likes of Angela Davis, Allen Ginsberg, the Washington Post, Texas Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison, and Oklahoma City bomber Terry Nichols. In 1999, Tigar ranked third in a vote for "Lawyer of the Century" by the California Lawyers for Criminal Justice, behind only Clarence Darrow and Thurgood Marshall. Recently he had sued Henry Kissinger and other former U.S. officials for supporting assassinations and other human rights abuses carried out by the government of Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet.

As we talked that day, Tigar outlined the story of the Chagossians' expulsion. He described how for decades the islanders had engaged in

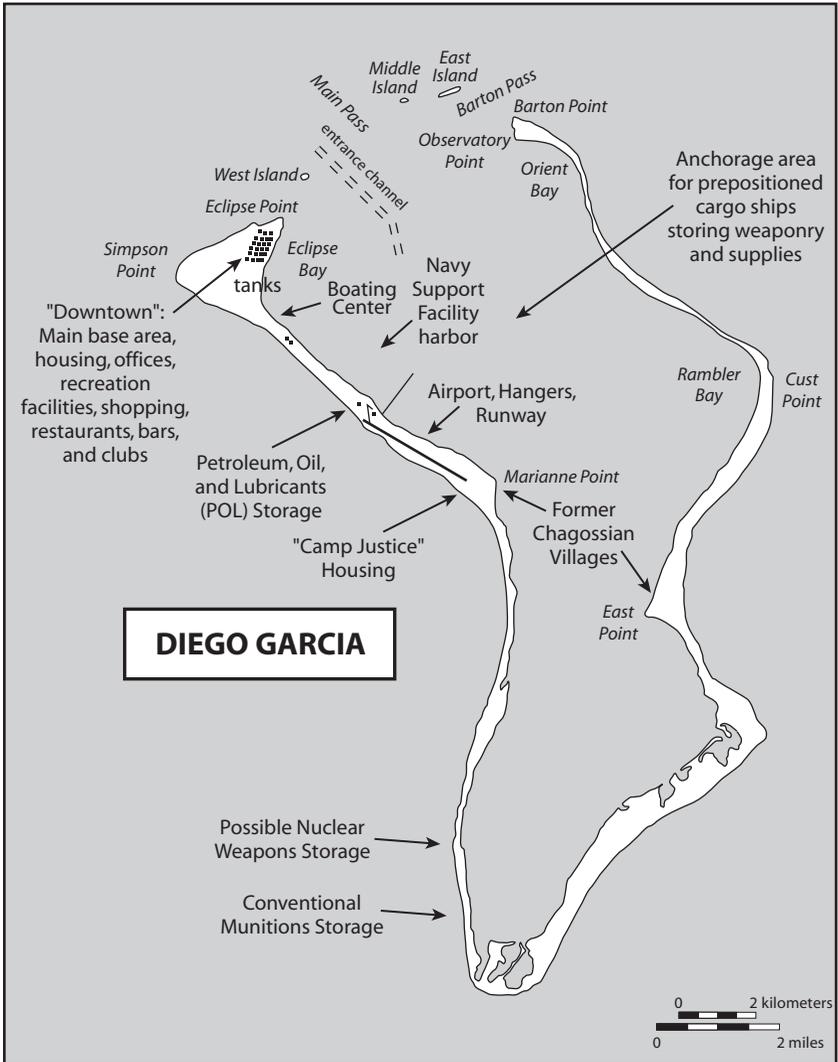


Figure 0.2 Diego Garcia, with base area at left.

a David-and-Goliath struggle to win the right to return to Chagos and proper compensation.

In 1978 and 1982 their protests won them small amounts of compensation from the British. Mostly, though, the money went to paying off debts accrued since the expulsion, improving their overall condition little. Lately, they had begun to make some more significant progress. In 1997,

with the help of lawyers in London and Mauritius, an organization called the Chagos Refugees Group, or the CRG, had launched a suit against the British Crown charging that their exile violated U.K. law. One of Nelson Mandela's former lawyers in battling the apartheid regime, Sir Sydney Kentridge, signed on to the case. And to everyone's amazement, Tigar said, in November 2000, the British High Court ruled in their favor.

The only problem was the British legal system. The original judgment, Tigar explained, made no award of damages or compensation. And the islanders had no money to charter boats to visit Chagos let alone to resettle and reconstruct their shattered societies. So the people had just filed a second suit against the Crown for compensation and money to finance a return.

Through a relationship with Sivarkumen "Robin" Mardemooto, a former student of Tigar's who happened to be the islanders' Mauritian lawyer, the CRG had asked Tigar to explore launching another suit in the United States. Working with law students in his American University legal clinic, Tigar said he was preparing to file a class action lawsuit in Federal District Court. Among the defendants they would name in the suit would be the United States Government, government officials who participated in the expulsion, including former Secretaries of Defense Robert McNamara and Donald Rumsfeld (for his first stint, in the Ford administration), and companies that assisted in the base's construction, including Halliburton subsidiary Brown & Root.

Tigar said they were going to charge the defendants with harms including forced relocation, cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment, and genocide. They would ask the Court to grant the right of return, award compensation, and order an end to employment discrimination that had barred Chagossians from working on the base as civilian personnel.

As I was still absorbing the tale, Tigar said his team was looking for an anthropology or sociology graduate student to conduct some research for the suit. Troubled by the story and amazed by the opportunity, I quickly agreed.

Over the next six-plus years, together with colleagues Philip Harvey and Wojciech Sokolowski from Rutgers University School of Law and Johns Hopkins University, I conducted three pieces of research: Analyzing if, given contemporary understandings of the "indigenous peoples" concept, the Chagossians should be considered one (I found that they should and that other indigenous groups recognize them as such); documenting how Chagossians' lives have been harmed as a result of their displacement; and calculating the compensation due as a result of some of those damages.²²

While I was never paid for my work, ironically enough, big tobacco helped foot some of the bill: Tigar reimbursed my expenses out of a human rights litigation fund he had established at American University with attorney fees won in a Texas tobacco suit.²³

Not long after starting the project, however, I saw there was another side of the story that I wanted to understand. In addition to exploring the impact of the expulsion on the Chagossians, I wanted to tell the story of the United States and the U.S. Government officials who ordered the removals and created the base: How and why, I wanted to know, did my country and its officials do this?²⁴

Between 2001 and 2008, I conducted research with both the islanders and some of the now mostly retired U.S. officials. To understand something of the fabric and texture of Chagossians' lives in exile, I lived in their communities in Mauritius and the Seychelles for more than seven months over four trips between 2001 and 2004. This meant living in the homes of Chagossian families and participating actively in their daily lives. I did everything with the people from working, cooking, studying, cleaning, praying, and watching French-dubbed Brazilian telenovelas on Mauritian TV to attending weddings, baptisms, first communions, public meetings, birthday parties, and funerals. In addition to hundreds of informal conversations, I conducted more than thirty formal interviews in Mauritian Kreol, Seselwa (Seychelles Kreol), English, and French, and, with the help of dedicated Mauritian interviewers, completed a large survey of living conditions with more than 320 islanders. I complemented this work by going to the British Public Records Office and the national archives of Mauritius and the Seychelles to unearth thousands of pages of historical and documentary records about the history of Chagos, the expulsion, and its aftermath.²⁵

Back in the United States, I moved from New York to my hometown of Washington, DC, to try to understand the officials responsible for the base and the expulsion. I had no interest in turning them into caricatures, and wanted to dedicate the same anthropological attention and empathy to them that I had focused on the islanders.²⁶ During more than seven months of concentrated research in 2004 and 2005, and continuing over the next two years, I interviewed more than thirty former and current U.S. Government officials, primarily from the departments of Defense and State and the Navy, as well as journalists, academics, military analysts, and others who were involved in the story or otherwise knowledgeable about the base.²⁷

Unfortunately, I was unable to speak with some of the highest-ranking and most influential officials involved. Many, including White House official Robert Komer and Admirals Elmo Zumwalt and Arleigh Burke,

were deceased. Two, Paul Nitze and Admiral Thomas Moorer, died early in my research before I could request an interview. Others, including Henry Kissinger, did not respond to repeated interview requests.

After repeatedly attempting to contact Robert McNamara, I was surprised to return to my office one day to find the following voicemail: “Professor Vine. This is Robert McNamara. I don’t believe I can help you. At 91, my memory is very, very bad. And I recall almost nothing about Diego Garcia. Thank you.”

When I hurriedly called him back and asked if he had any memory of conversations about people on the island, he responded, “None.”

When I asked why the Department of Defense would have wanted to remove the Chagossians, he said, “At 91, my memory’s bad.”

I asked if he could recommend anyone else to speak with. “No,” he replied. I asked if he could suggest any other leads. “None,” he said. Fumbling around to think what else I could ask, I heard McNamara say quickly, “Thank you very much,” and then the click of the connection going dead.

With these kinds of limitations, I balanced my interviews with an analysis of thousands of pages of government documents uncovered in the U.S. National Archives, the Navy archives, the Kennedy and Johnson presidential libraries, the British Public Records Office, and the files of the U.S. and British lawyers representing the Chagossians.²⁸ While the Navy’s archives proved a critical resource, all the files from Stu Barber’s office responsible for the original base idea had been destroyed.²⁹

While many of the relevant surviving documents were still classified (after 30–40 years), Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests revealed some formerly secret information. However, government agencies withheld hundreds of documents, claiming various FOIA exemptions “in the interest of national defense or foreign relations.” Tens of other documents were released to me “in part”; this often meant receiving page after page partially or entirely blank. Britain’s “30 year rule” for the automatic release of most classified government documents, by contrast, revealed hundreds of pages of critical material, much of it originally uncovered by the Chagossians’ U.K. legal team and a Mauritian investigative reporter and contributing to the 2000 victory.³⁰

Like trying to describe an object you can’t actually see, telling the story of Diego Garcia was further complicated by not being able to go to Diego Garcia. The 1976 U.S.-U.K. agreement for the base restricts access “to members of the forces of the United Kingdom and of the United States” and their official representatives and contractors.³¹ A 1992 document ex-

plains, “the intent is to restrict visits in order . . . to prevent excessive access to military operations and activities.”³² Visits by journalists have been explicitly banned, making the island something of a “holy grail” for reporters (only technically claimed by the recent ninety-minute visit of President Bush’s reporting pool, during which reporters were confined to an airport hangar). In the 1980s, a *Time* magazine chief offered a “fine case of Bordeaux to the first correspondent who filed a legitimate story from Diego Garcia.”³³

The U.S.-U.K. agreement does allow visits by approved “scientific parties wishing to carry out research.” Indeed scientists, including experts on coral atolls and the Royal Navy Bird Watching Society, have regularly surveyed Diego Garcia and the other Chagos islands. Encouraged, I repeatedly requested permission from both U.S. and U.K. representatives to visit and conduct research on the islanders’ former society. After months of trading letters with British officials in 2003 and 2004, I finally received word from Charles Hamilton, the British Indian Ocean Territory administrator, stating that “after careful consideration, we are unable to agree at the present time to a scientific visit involving a survey of the former homes of the Chagossians. I am sorry to have to send you such disappointing news.”³⁴ All my other requests were denied or went unanswered. John Pike described the chance of a civilian visiting Diego Garcia as “about as likely as the sun coming up in the west.”

Still, if I had had a yacht at my disposal, I could have joined hundreds of other “yachties” who regularly visit Peros Banhos, Salomon, and other islands in Chagos far from Diego Garcia. (Enterprising journalist Simon Winchester convinced one to take him to Chagos in 1985, even managing to get onto Diego Garcia when his Australian captain claimed her right to safe harbor under the law of the sea.³⁵) Many yachties today enjoy the “island paradise” for months at a time. They simply pay a fee to the BIOT for the right to stay in the territory and enjoy beachside barbecues by the “impossibly blue” water, parties with BIOT officials, and free range over the islands and the Chagossians’ crumbling homes. “Welcome to the B.I.O.T.,” a sign reads. “Please keep the island clean and avoid damage to buildings. Enjoy your stay.”³⁶

Sadly, the Chagossians are far from alone in having been displaced by a military base. As we will see in the story ahead, the U.S. military has exhibited a pattern of forcibly displacing vulnerable peoples to build its military bases. In the past century, most of these cases have taken place

outside the United States. Generally those displaced have, like the Chagossians, been small in number, under colonial control, and of non-“white,” non-European ancestry. Some of the examples are relatively well known, like those displaced in the Bikini Atoll and Puerto Rico’s Vieques Island. Others have, like the Chagossians, received less attention, including the Inughuit of Thule, Greenland, and the more than 3,000 Okinawans displaced to, of all places, Bolivia.

It is no coincidence that few know about these stories. Few in the United States know that the United States possesses some 1,000 military bases and installations outside the fifty states and Washington, DC, on the sovereign land of other nations. Let me repeat that number again because it’s hard to take in: 1,000 bases. On other people’s sovereign territory. 1,000 bases.

More than half a century after the end of World War II and the Korean War, the United States retains 287 bases in Germany, 130 in Japan, and 106 in South Korea. There are some 89 in Italy, 57 in the British Isles, 21 in Portugal, and nineteen in Turkey. Other bases are scattered around the globe in places like Aruba and Australia, Djibouti, Egypt, and Israel, Singapore and Thailand, Kyrgyzstan and Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates, Crete, Sicily, and Iceland, Romania and Bulgaria, Honduras, Colombia, and Guantánamo Bay, Cuba—just to name a few (see fig. 2.1). Some can still be found in Saudi Arabia and others have recently returned to the Philippines and Uzbekistan, where locals previously forced the closure of U.S. bases. In total, the U.S. military has troops in some 150 foreign nations. Around the world the Defense Department reports having more than 577,519 separate buildings, structures, and utilities at its bases, conservatively valuing its facilities at more than \$712 billion.³⁷

It’s often hard to come up with accurate figures to capture the scope of the base network, because the Pentagon frequently omits secret and even well-known bases—like those in Iraq and Afghanistan—in its own accounting. In Iraq, as President Bush’s second term came to an end, the military controlled at least 55 bases and probably well over 100. In trying to negotiate a long-term military agreement with the Iraqi Government, the Bush administration hoped to retain 58 long-term bases in the country as part of a “protracted” presence of at least 50,000 troops, following the South Korean model; originally U.S. officials pressed for more than 200 military facilities. In Afghanistan, the base collection includes sixteen air bases and may run to over eighty in total amid similar Pentagon plans for permanent installations.³⁸

While Pentagon and other officials have been careful never to refer to bases in Iraq and Afghanistan as “permanent,” the structures on the ground

tell a different story: A 2007 National Public Radio story reported that Balad Air Base near Baghdad, one of five “mega bases” in Iraq, housed some 30,000 troops and 10,000 private contractors in facilities complete with fortified Pizza Hut, Burger King, and Subway outlets and two shopping centers each about the size of a Target or Wal-Mart. “The base is one giant construction project, with new roads, sidewalks, and structures going up across this 16-square-mile fortress in the center of Iraq, all with an eye toward the next few decades,” Guy Raz explained. “Seen from the sky at night, the base resembles Las Vegas: While the surrounding Iraqi villages get about 10 hours of electricity a day, the lights never go out at Balad Air Base.”³⁹

If you are anything like me and grew up in the United States, you may have a hard time imagining another nation occupying a military base on your nation’s territory—let alone living next to such “simulacrum of suburbia” found the world over.⁴⁰ In 2007, Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa offered some insight into this phenomenon when he told reporters that he would only renew the lease on the U.S. military base in Ecuador if the United States agreed to one condition: “They let us put a base in Miami—an Ecuadorian base.”

“If there’s no problem having foreign soldiers on a country’s soil,” Correa added, “surely they’ll let us have an Ecuadorian base in the United States.”

The idea of an Ecuadorian military base in Miami, of a foreign base anywhere in the United States, is unthinkable to most people in the United States. And yet this is exactly what thousands of people in countries around the world live with every day: Military forces from a foreign country living in their cities, building huge military complexes on their lands, occupying their nations. About 95 percent of these foreign bases belong to the United States. Today the United States likely possesses more bases than any nation or people in world history.⁴¹ Not to be confined to the globe alone, the Pentagon is making plans to turn outer space into a base as part of the rapid militarization of space.⁴²

Growing recognition about the U.S. overseas base network has mirrored a renewed acknowledgment among scholars and pundits, following the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, that the United States is in fact an empire.⁴³ With even the establishment foreign policy journal *Foreign Affairs* declaring, “The debate on empire is back,” conversation has centered less on *if* the United States is an empire and more on *what kind* of empire it has become.⁴⁴

Too often, however, the debates on empire have ignored and turned away from the lives of those impacted by empire. Too often analysts turn to abstract discussions of so-called foreign policy realism or macro-level

economic forces. Too often, analysts detach themselves from the effects of empire and the lives shaped and all too often damaged by the United States. Proponents of U.S. imperialism in particular willfully ignore the death and destruction caused by previous empires and the U.S. Empire** alike.⁴⁵

In 1975, the *Washington Post* exposed the story of the Chagossians' expulsion for the first time in the Western press, describing the people as living in "abject poverty" as a result of what the *Post's* editorial page called an "act of mass kidnapping."⁴⁶ When a single day of congressional hearings followed, the U.S. Government denied all responsibility for the islanders.⁴⁷ From that moment onward, the people of the United States have almost completely turned their backs on the Chagossians and forgotten them entirely.

Unearthing the full story of the Chagossians forces us to look deeply at what the United States has done, and at the lives of people shaped and destroyed by U.S. Empire. The Chagossians' story forces us to focus on the damage that U.S. power has inflicted around the world, providing new insight into the nature of the United States as an empire. The Chagossians' story forces us to face those people whom we as citizens of the United States often find it all too easy to ignore, too easy to close out of our consciousness. The Chagossians' story forces us to consider carefully how this country has treated other peoples from Iraq to Vietnam and in far too many other places around the globe.⁴⁸

At the same time, we would be mistaken to treat the U.S. Empire simply as an abstract leviathan. Empires are run by real people. People made the decision to exile the Chagossians, to build a base on Diego Garcia. While empires are complex entities involving the consent and cooperation of millions and social forces larger than any single individual, we would be mistaken to ignore how a few powerful people come to make decisions that have such powerful effects on the lives of so many others thousands of miles away. For this reason, the story that follows is two-pronged and bifocaled: We will explore both sides of Diego Garcia, both sides of U.S. Empire, focusing equally on the lives of Chagossians like Rita Bancoult and the actions of U.S. Government officials like Stu Barber. In the end

** Throughout the book I use the term *U.S. Empire* rather than the more widely recognized *American Empire*. Although "U.S. Empire" may appear and sound awkward at first, it is linguistically more accurate than "American Empire" and represents an effort to reverse the erasure of the rest of the Americas entailed in U.S. citizens' frequent substitution of *America* for the *United States of America* (America consists of all of North and South America). The name of my current employer, American University, is just one example of this pattern: Located in the nation's capital, the school has long touted itself as a "national university" when its name should suggest a hemispheric university. The switch to the less familiar U.S. Empire also represents a linguistic attempt to make visible the fact that the United States is an empire, shaking people into awareness of its existence and its consequences.

we will reflect on how the dynamics of empire have come to bind together Bancoult and Barber, Chagossians and U.S. officials, and how every one of us is ultimately bound up with both. ^{***49}

To begin to understand and comprehend what the Chagossians have suffered as a result of their exile, we will need to start by looking at how the islanders' ancestors came to live and build a complex society in Chagos. We will then explore the secret history of how U.S. and U.K. officials planned, financed, and orchestrated the expulsion and the creation of the base, hiding their work from Congress and Parliament, members of the media and the world. Next we will look at what the Chagossians' lives have become in exile. While as outsiders it is impossible to fully comprehend what they have experienced, we must struggle to confront the pain they have faced. At the same time, we will see how their story is not one of suffering alone. From their daily struggles for survival to protests and hunger strikes in the streets of Mauritius to lawsuits that have taken them to some of the highest courts in Britain and the United States, we will see how the islanders have continually resisted their expulsion and the power of two empires. Finally, we will consider what we must do for the Chagossians and what we must do about the empire the United States has become.

The story of Diego Garcia has been kept secret for far too long. It must now be exposed.

*** Those interested in reading more about the book's approach as a bifocaled "ethnography of empire" should continue to the following endnote.