

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

NOT ANOTHER CUBA:

LYNDON JOHNSON AND THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, 1956-66

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NOT ANOTHER CUBA

Abstract

This Honors Thesis will examine President Lyndon Johnson's foreign policy surrounding America's complex diplomatic relationship with the Dominican Republic throughout the 1960s. Regarded throughout the last few decades as a less dramatic or telegenic study, the Johnson administration's involvement in the Dominican Republic has been largely overlooked and forgotten. In the wake of an emerging third generation of scholarship, historians are now beginning to uncover the intricate entanglement of information and circumstances supporting Johnson's role in establishing the parameters of U.S. policy.

At the heart of this discussion exists a robust argument currently taking place among scholars who debate the efficaciousness of Johnson and his staff in regards to foreign policy decisions. In no such theater of American influence is the current argument more heated than Johnson's approach in the Dominican Republic. Reviewing the scope of recent scholarship available (including the works of Peter Felten and Randall B. Woods, among others), this Honors Thesis will seek and defend a definitive position concerning the conclusive success or failure of the Johnson administration in the Dominican Republic.

NOT ANOTHER CUBA

Not Another Cuba: Lyndon Johnson and the Dominican Republic, 1965-66

President Lyndon Johnson's foreign policy decisions surrounding the Dominican Republic represent one of the most significant instances of American interventionism in the Western Hemisphere. Regarded throughout the last few decades as a less dramatic or telegenic study than the Vietnam War, the Johnson administration's involvement in the Dominican Republic has been largely overlooked and forgotten. Yet, the United States' brief military and diplomatic intercession in this backwater Caribbean nation would send socio-political shockwaves throughout the Latin world. From covert ground operations to high-profile political standoffs, the Dominican Republic would experience the end of an ironfisted tyrant, as well as the beginning of modest social and democratic sentiments, all in a matter of less than a decade.

In the wake of an emerging third generation of scholarship, historians are now beginning to uncover the intricate entanglement of information and circumstances supporting Johnson's role in establishing the parameters of U.S. policy in the Dominican Republic. The 1965 constitutional revolt has received minimal scholastic coverage from a handful of twentieth century historians, and evaluations of Johnson's intervention remain mixed at best. Eminent Johnson scholar Randall B. Woods sympathetically describes the work of the President as one of Johnson's characteristic efforts "to save American lives, to prevent as far as possible bloodletting among the locals, and forestall if not the reality then the appearance of a Communist takeover."¹ Likewise, Peter Felten argues that Johnson achieved his primary objective in the intervention *at minimum*, due to the President's "persistent pursuit of his overall policy outlines and in part from

¹ Randall B. Woods, "Conflicted Hegemon: LBJ and the Dominican Republic," *Diplomatic History* 32, no. 5 (Nov. 2008): 766, accessed February 27, 2013, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2008.00727.x>.

his permitting of others to shape the details of events in Santo Domingo.”² While most commentators provide full disclosure in terms of administrative breakdowns and shortcomings as they unfolded from the White House, social-minded historians like Eric Thomas Chester view the intervention as more of a self-inflicted crisis—where Johnson became a victim of the circumstances he created for himself. Nevertheless, this variety of assessments provides a fertile foundation for discussion on the Dominican Republic intervention as well as American foreign policy at large.

Every study of a presidential era undergoes a certain prioritization of political, diplomatic, and economic issues dictated by cultural relevance and global resonance. After enough time has passed, however, historians move outward to the historical issues that receive little attention in the immediate years following the departure of an administration. As H.W. Brands, editor of *Beyond Vietnam: The Foreign Policies of Lyndon Johnson*, explains, “Studies of the Truman administration foreign policy eventually moved beyond arguments about who started the Cold War; scholars of the Eisenhower administration got past debates whether Dwight Eisenhower or John Foster Dulles wore the foreign policy pants in that Republican administration.”³ Such has become the case of President Lyndon Johnson’s intervention in the Dominican Republic from 1965 to 1966.

At the heart of this discussion exists a robust argument currently taking place among scholars who debate the efficaciousness of Johnson and his staff in regards to foreign policy. In no such theater of American influence is the current argument more heated than Johnson's

² Peter Felten, “Yankee, Go Home and Take Me With You: Lyndon Johnson and the Dominican Republic,” in *Beyond Vietnam: The Foreign Policies of Lyndon Johnson* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1999), 98.

³ H.W. Brands, ed., *Beyond Vietnam: The Foreign Policies of Lyndon Johnson*, 3.

approach in the Dominican Republic. In a classic example of American interventionism rooted in the ideals of the Monroe Doctrine from the early nineteenth century, Johnson sought to exercise America's hegemonic influence in the Western Hemisphere: "Johnson opposed a 'second Cuba,' and he favored the creation of a stable, pro-Washington and at least mildly democratic government in Santo Domingo."⁴ President Kennedy had envisioned the Dominican Republic as an optimal region to exhibit his reformist credentials, but Johnson intended to utilize this sphere of influence as more of a *diversion*: "President Johnson never considered Santo Domingo to be a vital concern for its own reasons; instead, he saw the Dominican Republic, and Latin America in general, as a distraction from the Great Society and Vietnam."⁵ Johnson's pragmatic approach to foreign relations in Latin America is a crucial dynamic to understand in light of his actions.

Political turmoil in the Dominican Republic originated from its harsh dictator Rafael Trujillo and his puppet president, Joaquín Balaguer. After three decades of stalwart rule, Trujillo was assassinated in May of 1961, ushering in a new era of instability for the Dominican Republic. The nation's first free election in decades installed the democratic-leftist Juan Bosch as the new president, and the national legislative body was controlled by his Dominican Revolutionary Party.⁶ When right-wing military leaders drove him from office in the fall of 1963, his party (the DRP) watched in silence. A civilian Triumvirate endorsed by the military emerged in his place, but little progress was made in easing tensions surrounding high unemployment and corruption within the military. In only two short years, the Triumvirate was

⁴ Ibid., 98.

⁵ Ibid., 99.

⁶ Ibid., 99.

at the precipice of implosion. With these developments taking place in 1965, the U.S. State Department began to seriously consider the standard policies for the Dominican Republic, which was on the brink of a serious political paradigm shift.⁷

The cautious and often mixed response by the Johnson administration in this affair reflects the difficulty the President experienced in forming a consensus around which political faction to support and how to implement a plan of action in the Dominican Republic. The administration made several executive blunders in trying to please a mixture of diverse domestic viewpoints, including liberals who considered the designation of ‘Communism’ in the Dominican Republic as an overreach, as well as conservatives who were angered “by proclaiming neutrality in what it presented as a classic Cold War struggle.”⁸ In the end, Johnson was successful in achieving his modest goal of securing a stable democratic government in Santo Domingo as outlined above. However, this narrative of international relations is unique in Johnson’s decision to allow both administration officials and Dominicans to exercise certain liberties in accomplishing the White House’s mission in a form of ‘hands-off intervention.’⁹

Despite the countless historical forces and variables at work during the turbulent 1960s, including the inevitable turn of events that would reshape the Cold War landscape, one thing is certain: the 1965 constitutionalist revolt of the Dominican Republic bore the unique imprint of Lyndon Johnson. This single international dispute would come to dominate Johnson’s agenda in its most heated months. As Woods attests, “From late April through June 1965, Lyndon Jonson would spend more time on the situation in the Dominican Republic than he would on any other

⁷ Ibid., 99.

⁸ Ibid., 107.

⁹ Ibid., 127.

issue, including civil rights and Vietnam.”¹⁰ With the strongest critiques of Johnson’s policy decisions arising from a debate over *tactics*—more clearly defined here as the art of disposing various diplomatic and military resources—one can begin to understand how the subjective dynamics of Johnson’s personality played a crucial role in the process.¹¹ From the delegation of critical responsibilities to the pacification of the U.S. media, Johnson’s distinct persona is a watermark on the Dominican Republic intervention; and the development of his robust character reaches back into Johnson’s early days.

Early Influence: Johnson’s Family Dynamics

A comprehensive examination of Johnson’s Dominican Republic intervention would be incomplete without a glimpse into the President’s upbringing. As Randall Woods explains, personal traits of historical figures, while frequently overlooked, serve as one of the most compelling agents in the unique unfolding of history: “Vast historical forces—institutions, class conflicts, economics, social movements—are crucial, often decisive, but discreet individuals and their personal characteristics have had and continue to have a significant impact on historical events.”¹² Johnson’s parents, both of whom conveyed a complex set of ideals that became dualistic at times, had a profound impact on his life in terms of personal development and leadership principles. Sam Ealy Johnson wore many hats throughout his life. Beginning as a school teacher, Sam would eventually become a rancher and politician. In every role, he was a

¹⁰ Randall B. Woods, *LBJ: Architect of American Ambition* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 624.

¹¹ Eric Thomas Chester, *Rag-Tags, Scum, Riff-Raff, and Commies: The U.S. Intervention in the Dominican Republic, 1965-66* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 266.

¹² Randall B. Woods, “Conflicted Hegemon: LBJ and the Dominican and the Dominican Republic,” *Diplomatic History* 32, no. 5 (Nov. 2008): 749.

coarse, overbearing man who enjoyed plenty of liquor. He detested religious fundamentalists and disregarded their politics as hypocritical gestures.

Sam's wife Rebekah, on the other hand, would project a completely different influence on her impressionable son. Woods comments, "His wife was a devout Southern Baptist and a teetotaler, totally enamored of the English Romantics and the memory of her sainted father."¹³ With a marriage spanning thirty years and full house of five children, Sam and Rebekah habitually battled each other in the presence of their children. Their Johnson City home included two porches representing two distinct domains. "On one Sam entertained his rowdy friends and on the other Rebekah hosted the ladies and gentlemen (mostly ladies) of Johnson City."¹⁴ Yet, despite the contrasting convictions of his parents, Lyndon gained a mutually-held sentiment for civic action. Instilled with a deep sense of responsibility from a young age, Lyndon Johnson inherited his parents' fervor for public service.

Both Sam and Rebekah made it a priority to remain well-informed on political matters at the local and national level. They believed in the power of the Social Gospel and its potential to reform the American landscape.¹⁵ And fortunately for Lyndon, as the eldest son, his parents poured all of their resources and ambitions on him. Lyndon Johnson's 1937 announcement of a Congressional campaign was significant because it came from the front porch of his family home in Johnson City. His hometown declaration not only promoted a sense of local interest among his supporters, it was a ceremonial action taken in honor of his family whom he so earnestly sought to please. Elated with his father's reaction, Johnson recalls, "He looked out into all those

¹³ Ibid., 749.

¹⁴ Ibid., 750.

¹⁵ Ibid., 750.

faces he knew so well and then he looked at me and I saw tears in his eyes as he told the crowd how terribly proud he was of me and how much hope he had for his country if only his son could be up there in the nation's capital with Roosevelt and Rayburn and all those good Democrats."¹⁶

Long before Johnson was "the most ardent presidential lawmaker of the twentieth century," he was well accustomed with meeting the demands of competing interest groups.¹⁷ However, Johnson was not motivated by a faint desire for appeasement or the mere approval of his superiors; on the contrary, he was passionate in the pursuit for the materialization of ideals that were wholly his own. The training ground of his childhood would forge his character and determination for the immense political challenges that would permeate his presidency.

Complicated Politics: Sino-Soviet Imperialism and Domestic Anti-Communism

Johnson found the politics surrounding Cold War affairs to be a treacherous web of conflicting interests at home and abroad. With the stability of the republic hanging in the balance in the midst of an onslaught of explosive social issues, the President found it impossible to satisfy every domestic interest group. John F. Kennedy's assassination remained fresh in the minds of the nation's citizens, creating new causes for division: "The new president feared that the killing might be traced to Moscow or Hanoi or, God forbid, Birmingham."¹⁸ The Cold War was clearly a global struggle grounded in ideological differences—'taking sides' was not the issue. However, the details of strategy and intervention were highly debated facets of the discussion. The Johnson administration consistently presented a forceful and involved foreign policy to fight Communism around the world, but the President faced a formidable resistance at

¹⁶ Quoted in Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1991), 91.

¹⁷ Woods, *LBJ: Architect of American Ambition*, 440.

¹⁸ Woods, "Conflicted Hegemon," 751.

home as well. Woods comments, “If maintaining some sort of international stability in a postcolonial world beset by the forces of Sino-Soviet imperialism were not enough, Johnson had to deal with the ongoing threat to his policies posed by domestic anti-Communists.”¹⁹

The 1960s fostered a new generation of the American radical Right that was fueled by its obsession with anti-Communists. Classified by *Time* magazine as “the ultras,” these young, progressive political activists identified Communism as the ultimate threat to Western Civilization.²⁰ With no tolerance for politicians who even appeared to temporize the issue, this new brand of McCarthyism feared domestic subversion as much as the Sino-Soviet imperialists halfway around the world. The ultras became primary culprits in racially motivated crimes, motivated by a fundamental zeal that became repulsive to mainstream conservatives: “Whether in the speeches of South Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond or in the pages of the *Citizen*, the national publication of the white supremacist Citizens’ council of America, segregations lambasted the civil rights movement as a Communist conspiracy to undermine American society.”²¹

The ultras were balanced by an equally raucous group of Washington liberals, “who believed that U.S. intervention into the affairs of its sister republics was immoral and counterproductive no matter what the circumstances.”²² Decrying intervention as bullish and irresponsible, these opponents were just as numerous as the ultras of the Right: “Heading critics of U.S.–Latin American policy was a group of U.S. senators—Ernest Gruening of Alaska, Wayne Morse of Oregon, George McGovern of South Dakota, Frank Church of Idaho, and Bill

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 751.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 751.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 752.

²² Woods, *LBJ: Architect of American Ambition*, 625.

Fullbright of Arkansas.”²³ These Washington liberals, who came to include more powerful figures like Robert Kennedy with time, resented the ‘Castro fixation’ of the conservatives; however, the ultras were not entirely incorrect in their diagnosis of Latin America—especially when it came to the despotic rule of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina in the Dominican Republic.

Prologue of Oppression: The Trujillo Era

The Dominican Republic found itself in serious internal strife by the 1960s, but this political impasse was preceded by a reign of terror that spanned over three decades. As historian Eric Chester explains, “For more than thirty years, Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina ruled the Dominican Republic as his own personal fiefdom, plundering, looting and raping at will.”²⁴ Citizens lived under a constant fear of intimidation and oppression, striving to live under the scrutiny of notorious state intelligence agencies, which sought to purge society of dissenters by any means necessary. Possessing not one single redeeming quality, this brutal regime would nonetheless maintain a passive branding of approval from the United States for most of its duration.²⁵

American troops occupied the Dominican Republic beginning in 1916 in order to conserve a sense of stability in an otherwise broken society that largely resembled its precursory model as a territory of the Spanish colonial empire. This occupation was limited and depended heavily upon local support: “Although marine detachments were deployed in the larger cities, the United States relied on local troops to suppress the recurring rebellions that flared in the rural

²³ See Robert D. Johnson, “Ernest Gruening and Vietnam,” in R.B. Woods, *Vietnam*, 65-68.

²⁴ Eric Thomas Chester, *Rag-Tags, Scum, Riff-Raff, and Commies: The U.S. Intervention in the Dominican Republic, 1965-66*, 12.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

areas.”²⁶ Following the path of an extensive historical directory of global dictators and tyrants, Trujillo rose to prominence through his decorated career in the National Guard. As the United States began withdrawing marines in 1924, Trujillo was already firmly in a position to seize his own destiny as a serious political force; he simply needed to wait for the optimal conditions for a takeover.

Trujillo’s opportunity arrived in 1930 when the delicate political balance of the Dominican Republic, bowing under the pressure of a sham rebellion, left an opening for him to brush aside the weak civilian rule and assume supreme authority. Working to broaden his influence and support beyond family and a limited collection previously established confidants, Trujillo reached out to his expanding base of military personnel: “Through kickbacks on military contracts, as well as an array of other scams, military commanders were kept corrupted and loyal.”²⁷ Trujillo’s ironclad rule created a tangible transformation of the Dominican landscape, which became filled with military barracks and barbed wire fences. From the decrepit urban centers to the dusty rural countryside, the Dominican Republic was markedly quiet through oppression and fear.

During Trujillo’s rule, the Dominican Republic’s military prowess continued to rise significantly. When compared to surrounding forces in Central America and the Caribbean region, the Dominican Republic military had expanded to become a top contender in terms of manpower and material resources.²⁸ But Trujillo’s armed forces did not constitute his only

²⁶ Ibid., 12.

²⁷ Ibid., 13.

²⁸ Piero Gleijeses, *The Dominican Crisis: The 1965 Constitutionalist Revolt and American Intervention* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 20.

means of influence in the daily lives of the oppressed citizens. On the true extent of Trujillo's control, Piero Gleijeses comments, "He dominated not only the political system, the press, the radio, and the fledgling trade unions, but also the masonic lodges, executive clubs, chambers of commerce, and professional associations—in short, every group able to exert even limited political influence on public life."²⁹ With no viable domestic force of opposition, Trujillo effectively created a trans-generational culture of helplessness, a nationwide sentiment that would inevitably develop into sullen complacency without an agent of intervention.

From a diplomatic standpoint, the United States had no interest in meddling with the brutal regime, especially through the first half of Trujillo's reign. Washington's staunch ideological position against international Fascism and Communism stood above any other global concern, including Trujillo's oppression. In fact, the United States government viewed the dictator as more than a neutral force in the Caribbean: "Trujillo was a trusty ally: he had been the foremost antifascist in Latin America when the United States went to war with the Axis, and the most vehement anticommunist in the hemisphere during the Cold War."³⁰ However, Trujillo's ambition to become the Dominican Republic's sole economic proprietor raised the attention of "big brother" under the Eisenhower administration.

Trujillo sought to gain economic dominance by purchasing back American sugar companies who held properties in the Dominican Republic. In 1952, to expedite his plan, Trujillo constructed the country's leading sugar mill in a small port along the Caribbean coast called Haina. By pressuring the smaller surrounding plants into liquidation, he quickly swallowed up market space. Within a few years only La Romana—the largest sugar plantation

²⁹ Ibid., 22.

³⁰ Ibid., 22.

in the Dominican Republic—remained as the solitary U.S. owned sugar corporation. Trujillo knew that any interference with La Romana would result in unwanted attention from the United States, but his hasty acquisitions had already sent a bold message abroad. By 1956, his personal holdings accounted for 63 percent of all sugar production in the Dominican Republic.³¹ The tipping point, however, would come in 1959 with the rise of Fidel Castro in Cuba.

Eisenhower was quick to offer his assessment of Castro's abrupt victory. Popular support throughout the Western Hemisphere alarmed the President, and a warm reception by many in the United States troubled him even further. Washington had depended on the Dominican Republic for Cold War defense operations throughout the 1950s, which included the implementation of ballistic missile tracking systems just off of Trujillo's closely-monitored coasts. However, these measures of appeasement agreed upon by Trujillo's regime were not enough to sway Eisenhower's opinion of the Dominican Republic as a purveyor of communist sentiments.³²

It was at this most sensitive juncture that Trujillo made a reckless decision to eliminate one of his most formidable enemies, Rómulo Betancourt. Betancourt managed to barely escape a car bomb attack on June 24, 1960, but not without being hospitalized with intense burn wounds. This erratic, life-threatening act against Betancourt resulted in Washington's firm breaking of diplomatic relations with the Dominican Republic. Trujillo, suddenly faced with the challenge of deflecting international pressure in the midst of this failed assassination attempt, shuffled his executive subordinates in an effort to relieve scrutiny on his regime. Despite these efforts on Trujillo's end, the newly elected John F. Kennedy had already taken up the mantle of

³¹ Chester, *Rag-Tags, Scum, Riff-Raff, and Commies*, 15.

³² *Ibid.*, 15.

Eisenhower's skeptical outlook on the Dominican Republic. Seeking to engage the volatile situation strategically, the Kennedy administration would resort to highly clandestine operations that would rattle the hemisphere.³³

Kennedy was understandably hesitant in his analysis regarding the intervention—particularly in a U.S. ordained assassination plot against Trujillo. Chester notes, “Since the Dominican Republic and Cuba had consistently been linked together, the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961 led Kennedy to reassess his support for Trujillo’s removal.”³⁴ Despite Kennedy’s reluctance to approve the plan, ground logistics were already in motion to carry it out, which included smuggling weapons into Santo Domingo for this very purpose. On May 29 of 1961, Kennedy cabled the U.S. embassy in the Dominican Republic, warning that the “U.S. as [a] matter of general policy cannot condone assassination.”³⁵ Kennedy’s cautious words were not enough to sway the opinion of Henry Dearborn, the deputy chief of mission who had remained in Dominican Republic after the 1960 withdrawals as Washington’s ranking official. The night of May 30, 1961, unfolded much like a classic Hollywood gangster film in Santo Domingo. A few unmarked vehicles followed Trujillo’s flashy limousine along a winding coastal highway just outside the city. When the moment was right, the tailing vehicles trapped Trujillo’s car, and a frenzied gunfight followed. Thirty years of despotic rule was ended with a bloody struggle, but as Eric Chester keenly observes, democracy was far from secured in the Dominican Republic: “... the transition of democratic rule could only begin when Trujillo’s

³³ Ibid., 17.

³⁴ Ibid., 17.

³⁵ Bernard Diederich, *Trujillo: The Death of the Goat* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1978), 43.

death brought with it the end of the Trujillo dynasty... one outcome did not necessarily follow from the other.”³⁶

The Road to Revolution: The Rise of Juan Bosch and the PRD

With the top-secret assassination freshly cemented in history, Washington was now directly obligated to take yet more active measures to construct a stable, democratic leadership structure in this immense power vacuum. As the Central Intelligence Agency began a large-scale reassessment of all major political players in the Dominican Republic, the charismatic personality of Juan Bosch attracted U.S. diplomats. Bosch was born in 1909 in La Vega, a provincial town located about an hour’s drive outside of Santo Domingo. Raised with a humble upbringing, Bosch would quickly discover a natural talent for writing, and he used his power with words to voice his public opposition to the Trujillo regime during his college years. After a brief stint in jail for his outspoken views, Bosch made the decision to leave the Dominican Republic in 1936: “For twenty-five years, he remained in exile, becoming the popular focus for the deepening resistance movement.”³⁷ After three years in Cuba, Bosch collaborated with a group of fellow Dominican exiles and founded the Dominican Revolutionary Party, the PRD. He would serve as the prominent figurehead for the PRD for nearly three decades. Attracted by Bosch’s social-democratic tendencies and widespread support among the people of the Dominican Republic, Washington would target Bosch and utilize him as a political bonding agent in the perilous situation of his native country. “During the five volatile years following

³⁶ Chester, *Rag-Tags, Scum, Riff-Raff, and Commies*, 17.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

Trujillo's assassination, the central dynamic depended on one colorful personality, Juan Bosch, and the shifting attitude adopted by the U.S. government toward him."³⁸

Washington possessed no long-term plan for the Dominican Republic. Compelled by a sense of paternal hemispheric responsibility, however, foreign policy officials were now all but forced to work towards a resolution. The Dominican Republic was regarded as "a sick, destroyed nation, to be viewed as one ravaged by a thirty years war, even one to be occupied and reconstituted. . . . Not only did we have no democratic traditions or institutions to build on, worse, we confronted deep-rooted traditions or institutions of authoritarianism and anarchy."³⁹ With the absence of even a single political structure or program to work with, the U.S. would have to resort to a controlled equipping of personnel on the ground in order to foster a semi-autonomous political movement, and with it, a radically new cultural landscape.

For this very reason, U.S. policy makers turned to Bosch for support. The CIA created the Institute for Political Education (IPE), which became fully operational by October of 1960. The school's purpose was "to train high and medium level cadres for the Latin American left-of-center political parties, in both ideological and tactical fields."⁴⁰ Bosch was recruited to Coronado, Costa Rica, to lead instructional courses at the IPE headquarters in early 1961. The social-democratic political philosophy promoted at IPE complemented the ideals of the Kennedy administration, which was "convinced that it was essential to provide an attractive alternative to

³⁸ Ibid., 17.

³⁹ John B. Martin, *Overtaken by Events: The Dominican Crisis from the Fall of Trujillo to the Civil War* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 81, 31.

⁴⁰ Sacha Volman, "Latin American Experiments in Political and Economic Training," typescript, Washington D.C., Brookings Institute, 1964.

Castro and the Cuban revolution.”⁴¹ Bosch’s willingness to participate in this CIA-funded operation contributed to Washington’s growing admiration for him.

In the meantime, Washington faced possible domestic complications with reactions from the American press. The turmoil in the Dominican Republic had the potential to further sour American opinion of foreign policy, particularly in Latin America. However, receiving some unexpected support from an unlikely source, former Trujillo loyalist and current President Joaquín Antonio Balaguer Ricardo sought to salvage his disheveled personal political standing by endorsing the upcoming 1962 general election and welcoming back the countless exiles. “Wishing ‘to normalize the civic life of the Dominican nation,’ he made an eloquent appeal to the ‘democratic’ opposition to show itself.”⁴² The U.S. press received these measures with genuine optimism:

The successors to... Trujillo... have surprisingly been doing all the right things, and are not yet giving their many and powerful enemies any valid reasons for attacking them.⁴³

Their adept policy of reforming the worst features of Trujilloism and welcoming the OAS has gained them some favour with the United States and other American republics, which feared above all the rise of a Dominican Fidel Castro phoenix-like from the ashes of a country torn asunder in chaos. The Dominican Government’s promise of amnesty for political exiles and its program of allowing them political ha[s] also been praised.⁴⁴

The world must wait. It would be ironical to complain about the new Dominican regime because it has not lived up to expectations of brutality, strife and political extremism.⁴⁵

Balaguer, a supporter of the ‘anti-communist’ Dominican Revolutionary Party, worked to reinforce the power and mobility of the PRD by offering amnesty to key vanguard members of

⁴¹ Chester, *Rag-Tags, Scum, Riff-Raff, and Commies*, 22.

⁴² Gleijeses, *The Dominican Crisis*, 38.

⁴³ Editorial, *New York Times*, June 8, 1961, 34.

⁴⁴ *Hispanic American Report* 14, no. 7 (Aug. 1961): 506.

⁴⁵ Editorial, *New York Times*, June 8, 1961, 34.

the party who were living in exile. Bosch returned triumphantly to the Dominican Republic as the PRD's candidate. The National Civic Union, the UCN, was the major political party of opposition for the PRD. The UCN's presidential candidate, Viriato Fiallo, possessed strong oligarchical ties that dampened his appeal among the poor majority. The CIA predicted a strong showing of support for Bosch in the months leading up to the general election as his campaign gained substantial momentum. When election day finally arrived on December 20, 1962, Bosch won an impressive 58 percent of the popular vote. The election results proved that Bosch's message of social reform and personal liberty resonated with the people of the Dominican Republic. The Kennedy administration was hopeful, despite some internal skepticism surrounding Bosch's skill as a leader. The team in Washington "remained confident that Bosch could be controlled, and that his regime could provide a showpiece as a moderate left alternative to social movements demanding a radical restructuring of the social hierarchy."⁴⁶ Unfortunately, Kennedy and his advisors could not foresee the ominous details of the future, which would result in a total breakdown of stability in the Dominican Republic, as well as a historic rerouting of executive direction in America.

Democracy Derailed: The Military Coup of 1963

Bosch's inauguration in February of 1963 signaled the Dominican Republic's first real taste of democracy. With genuine intentions to deliver the reform promised by the Dominican Revolutionary Party, Bosch introduced a new liberal constitution and commenced planning for drastic land reform. Bosch believed radical redistribution of property could offer the mass peasantry a fair chance at economic success and social elevation. His plan, however, would be poorly received by Washington, and for good reason:

⁴⁶ Chester, *Rag-Tags, Scum, Riff-Raff, and Commies*, 29.

Estates larger than the prescribed limit would be seized over a five-year period. A 20 percent tax, to be paid in land only, would be levied. Thus all land over the legal limit would be transferred to the state without compensation by the end of five years, and then distributed to landless peasants. While the prime target of this plan was the Dominican oligarchy, U.S. holdings, especially La Romana, were bound to be affected.⁴⁷

Kennedy and his staff declared the policy disastrous regardless of Bosch's plans for execution of the drastic measure. After receiving strong warnings against the plan from Washington, Bosch reversed his policy. Publicly declaring the recent government acquisitions of Trujillo-era properties as adequate, Bosch would no longer pursue the vast private land holdings of the powerful oligarchy. Despite Bosch's hasty self-rebuke, the detrimental effect of his drastic proposal had already taken root. The most wealthy and powerful members of society were alienated in Bosch's egalitarian vision for the Dominican Republic, and Washington's trust in Bosch as a competent and stable leader was quickly deteriorating as well.

Bosch's failure to provide social reform resulted in the oppositional uprising of the Dominican elite, who plotted to overturn his democratically elected government. From the outset, the United States had adopted a utilitarian approach to Bosch in his usefulness to the American agenda. Consistently identified primarily as a figurehead, Bosch was viewed by Washington as an important, yet expendable resource for their fundamental goal of restraining Communism from infecting the Dominican Republic. Consequently, U.S. foreign policy officials intended to "put [their] own people close to" Bosch, and then run the government without him, thus initiating a "covert power takeover."⁴⁸

Mindful of this plan from the beginning of Bosch's short-lived presidency, Washington was nonetheless challenged by a full-blown military coup in September of 1963, which upset the

⁴⁷ Ibid., 33.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 37.

political balance in the Dominican Republic beyond U.S. intentions. After a mere seven months in office, Bosch was stripped of his authority and the Dominican Republic was thrown back into tyranny. By the end of 1963, the Dominican Republic's tumultuous political upheaval would be matched with an American tragedy that would change the course of history for both nations in a symbiotic manner.

The Kennedy Assassination and Johnson's Ascension

On November 22, 1963, American morale was rocked to its very core with the assassination of President Kennedy. In an instant, Lyndon Johnson was launched into the helm of presidential leadership, taking the oath of office on Air Force One on the emergency return flight to Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland. With the newly widowed former First Lady at his side, Johnson intended to make his agenda of memoriam very clear: "From the moment Johnson set foot on the ground as president, he worked to win the loyalty of Kennedy's top advisers in order to demonstrate the continuity he felt the country yearned for."⁴⁹ For Johnson, such continuity entailed retention of Kennedy's personnel and, more importantly, his policies.

Case Study: Lyndon Johnson's Tortured Leadership Approach

A somewhat complex political enigma, Johnson frequently oscillated from a state of disgruntled humility to imperious satisfaction throughout the duration of his political career. Since his early days in the Senate, Johnson's demeanor was characteristically dominated by his outlook on the welfare of his campaign. Fluctuations in poll numbers resulted in drastic mood swings; his political aides bore the majority of his wrath, occasionally subjected to harsh harangues in public venues. His first presidential bid for the Democratic Party in 1960 landed

⁴⁹ Langston, *Lyndon Baines Johnson*, 165.

Johnson the vice presidency through negotiations with the widely popular Kennedy campaign.⁵⁰ However, Johnson's recurring anguish reached new extremes following Kennedy's narrow presidential victory. "When serving in the purgatory of the vice presidency, Johnson underwent another, more lasting, period of self-pity and reckless personal behavior, including excessive drinking."⁵¹ Kennedy's sudden assassination sent Johnson back into a commanding state of crisis control where he could thrive. With the constricting circumstances of political monotony behind him once again, Johnson would seize the opportunity to make the policies conceived by his predecessor cemented in his own legacy as the 36th President.

Towing the Line: Johnson's Foreign Policy Heritage

As the renowned Eisenhower biographer Stephen Ambrose argues, conflicts like the Dominican Republic intervention (and Vietnam, to be sure) were grounded in modern American liberalism. Johnson's foreign policy found its heritage in figures like Harry Truman, whose 'big brother' interventionist approach had led to mobilization in Korea in 1950. Communism was a foreign epidemic to be vanquished, and no single nation held a greater responsibility for the containment of political oppression abroad than the U.S. This immense responsibility was primarily justified through America's superior resources: "The United States, as [Ted] Sorensen put it, 'could supply better training, support and direction, better communications, transportation and intelligence, better weapons, equipment and logistics' to halt Communist aggression."⁵² Johnson's approach to the Dominican Republic intervention represented a strong affirmation of

⁵⁰ Thomas S. Langston, *Lyndon Baines Johnson* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2002), 69.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁵² Stephen E. Ambrose, *Rise to Globalism: American Foreign Policy since 1938*, 7th rev. ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 194.

these preexisting party ideals, which were set into motion more than a generation before his ascension to the presidency.

A more immediate propulsion also existed with the newly-established Kennedy legacy. Gradual escalation had brought the Kennedy administration modest success on the international stage, but Johnson possessed underlying disagreements on *why* gradual escalation should be implemented: “The great difference between Kennedy and Johnson was that the Texan believed that idealism ought to be the driving force behind U.S. foreign policy; LBJ and his advisers thought JFK had been too transparent in wielding social justice and democracy as tools with which to defeat Sino-Soviet imperialism.”⁵³ Instead of acting as the initiating agent for global change against Communism, Johnson and his advisors felt that preexisting foreign policy could only be perceived as passive, secondary responses to an active Soviet agenda. Looking to powerful mentor figures such as Franklin D. Roosevelt, Johnson sought to turn the Cold War into a domestic campaign for nation building at home, thereby simultaneously serving American interests and social justice needs abroad.⁵⁴ However, the ever-shifting political paradigm of the Dominican Republic was experiencing yet another metamorphosis, forcing Johnson to set aside domestic reform and turn his undivided attention to the entanglement of the Dominican crisis.

New Leadership: Lyndon Johnson and the Triumvirate

After the military coup overthrew Bosch with minimal effort, a junta comprised of three leaders assumed power. “Headed by Emilio de los Santos, who had previously acted as chief of the electoral tribunal supervising the elections of December 1962,” Woods explains, the new

⁵³ Woods, “The Politics of Idealism: Lyndon Johnson, Civil Rights, and Vietnam,” 7.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

triumvirate was initially met with insubstantial movements of retaliation.⁵⁵ However, as the triumvirate gradually constricted dissident forces through the familiar grip of repression, insurrectionary sentiments consolidated once again in the barrios of Santo Domingo.

If Kennedy had been skeptical of Bosch's capabilities, Johnson had his mind made up. In a bold move of policy furtherance, Johnson chose to offer legitimate standing to the triumvirate: "On December 12, 1963, the United States recognized the junta, and immediately began assisting the Dominican military efforts to destroy guerilla bands."⁵⁶ Donald Reid Cabral, one of the most wealthy and privileged members of the Dominican oligarchy, quickly rose to the helm of leadership in the triumvirate. Although Reid Cabral lacked a dynamic speaking ability and popular support like Bosch, Washington was thrilled because of his serious personal demeanor, moderate political stance, and invaluable leadership experience accumulated during the Trujillo years. Stressing pragmatism over principle, U.S. officials expressed cautious optimism in these new developments.

Lacking an inspirational aura like Bosch, Reid Cabral proved to be a rather dull political leader. More importantly, his administrative actions quickly became violent reminders of the bloody past. Woods explains, "Indeed, under his rule, trade union leaders were jailed, left-wing newspapers were banned, and the death squads that had been such a prominent part of the Trujillo regime returned."⁵⁷ These frighteningly familiar conditions spawned a resurgence in the Dominican Revolutionary Party on behalf of the common man. Supported by the masses of

⁵⁵ Chester, *Rag-Tags, Scum, Riff-Raff, and Commies*, 41.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁵⁷ Woods, *LBJ: Architect of American Ambition*, 623.

peasants and workers, this counter-movement also included a vital contingent of liberal military officers.⁵⁸

Countercoup to Civil War: The Spring of 1965

Tension rising from Reid Cabral's dissenters continued to mount until April of 1965, when both the Dominican government and U.S. embassy would be shocked by the unlikely success of a rebel coup waged by left-leaning military insurgents. The U.S. government had placed itself in a precarious position through the endorsement of Reid Cabral's regime, "a government that lacked even a shred of popular support."⁵⁹ This ill-informed foreign relations decision would result in a dramatic turn of events just two years later. Roughly two hours into the morning of April 25, 1965, some four or five hundred rebel troops marched directly into the capital. Meeting virtually no resistance at all, a "cry of freedom pierced the tranquil night."⁶⁰

The rebels chose diplomacy over violence, avoiding bloodshed by circumventing armed confrontations that they could have easily won. Although Reid Cabral's palace defense stood unshaken, the leader's fate was already decided. Yet, as Gleijeses notes, Reid Cabral's imprisonment did not restrict him from exerting influence in this odd position, "an anachronism remained that became increasingly absurd as the hours passed: Reid Cabral was still the president of the Triumvirate and was still ensconced at the Presidential Palace, the one place his authority continued to hold some force."⁶¹

The rebel occupation of the capital forced the American embassy to reevaluate the power of the rebel forces. As the rebellion unfolded, U.S. diplomats became increasingly aware of the

⁵⁸ Ibid., 623.

⁵⁹ Chester, *Rag-Tags, Scum, Riff-Raff, and Commies*, 46.

⁶⁰ *Hymn to the Constitutionalist Revolution*, by Aníbal de Peña.

⁶¹ Gleijeses, *The Dominican Crisis*, 175.

substantial network of dissenting Dominican military leaders. For example, Colonel Julio Amado Calderón Fernández—commander of the Presidential Guard—was absolutely instrumental in neutralizing defense regiments at the Palace on April 25. When Reid Cabral was left with no choice but to resign just hours after the commencement of the occupation, the U.S. team grasped the magnitude of the movement: “The embassy now realized that only strong American pressure on the Dominican military chiefs might convince them to defend the Triumvirate—instead of contributing to its fall.”⁶²

As the officials at the embassy struggled to get a grip on the rapidly unfolding events in Santo Domingo, the rebel forces moved quickly to secure other objectives. Access to mass communication was essential for the rebels if the constitutionalist revolt was to be a success: roughly half of the population of the Dominican Republic was illiterate in 1965: “By three in the afternoon, Radio Santo Domingo had been taken by the rebels, who were issuing appeals heard throughout the country for massive peaceful demonstrations in support of Bosch.”⁶³ By the evening of April 25, demonstrators filled the streets of the inner city, boldly responding to the revolutionary radio waves.

The evening of April 27 brought with it the marquee battle of the revolution. Junta military forces loyal to the government sought to retake the capital from their home base in San Isidro, which was located eight miles northeast of city. The junta’s forces met rebel resistance at the San Duarte Bridge, and the battle that ensued represents what Chester has identified as “a most unusual event in Latin American history.”⁶⁴ Defying all odds, the rebels successfully held

⁶² Ibid., 179.

⁶³ Chester, *Rag-Tags, Scum, Riff-Raff, and Commies*, 49.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 46.

off the far superior loyalist militants of the Armed Forces Training Center (CEFA), the nucleus of the junta's fighting force during the popular uprising, first assembled by Trujillo in 1959. Santo Domingo had progressed into a full-scale warzone, and Washington could not afford to remain an indolent third party: "The United States could either accept the victory of the popular uprising, or it could employ its military might and intervene with overwhelming force."⁶⁵ However, the Johnson administration not only required a decisive plan of action, it also needed a viable rationale for intervention that would satisfy the U.S. media as well the international community of the Western Hemisphere.

Johnson found his answer in the one thousand American citizens taking shelter in the Ambassador Hotel in the heart of Santo Domingo. Seeking refuge from the loyalist air raids and armed conflicts throughout the city, the American civilians necessitated an immediate plan of evacuation that called for boots on the ground, Johnson believed. Consequently, on the evening of April 28, he ordered five hundred marines into action. Then Johnson faced the media: "An hour later, he went on television to announce that the troops were being dispatched 'to protect American lives.'"⁶⁶ The American citizens were evacuated from neighboring polo fields to the coast with relative ease. Johnson had capitalized on a reasonable opportunity of entry, but now faced a tougher decision, "whether to pull out and leave the Dominicans to themselves or to intervene massively to determine the outcome of the onrushing civil war."⁶⁷ As time would reveal, this initial deployment represented a major turning point in the Dominican crisis; with

⁶⁵ Ibid., 46.

⁶⁶ Woods, *LBJ: Architect of American Ambition*, 625.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 625.

fears of Communism—frequently unsubstantiated, nonetheless—fueling the intelligence community, the United States had reached the point of no return.

Indeed, Johnson's subsequent decisions to swell the American military presence in Santo Domingo were undisputedly driven by panic-stricken delegates on the ground. Abe Fortas, an American intermediary for Bosch and longtime confidant of Johnson, exhibited this propensity perhaps more clearly than any U.S. diplomat in a morning phone call to Johnson on April 30. Speaking of the alleged communist agents within the insurgency, Fortas cautioned Johnson from San Juan, Puerto Rico:

They're killing our people. They've captured tanks now and they've taken over the police, and they're marching them down the street and they're saying they're going to shoot them if they don't take over. Now, our CIA says this is a completely led, operated, dominated—they've got men on the inside of it—Castro operation. That it started out as a Bosch operation, but he's been moved completely out of the picture. Since last Saturday Bosch lasted for a few hours. Then Castro started operating. They got forty-five more in there last night—Castro-trained, Castro-operated. They are moving other places in the hemisphere. It may be part of a whole Communist pattern tied in with Vietnam. I don't think that God Almighty is going to excuse me for sitting with adequate forces and letting them murder human beings.⁶⁸

With faulty intelligence coming through the cables from exhausted ambassadors, Johnson was captivated by this self-induced panic; momentum for manpower quickly escalated as a result. Chester asserts, "At the zenith of the Dominican crisis, in early May of 1965, there were as many U.S. troops stationed in and around Santo Domingo as there were positioned in South Vietnam."⁶⁹ The intervention force totaled 22,000 marines by May 17, compared to the few thousand fledgling rebel combatants. Serving as a special presidential envoy to the Dominican Republic that very month, John Bartlow Martin advised Washington of the loyalist military

⁶⁸ LBJ and Abe Fortas Conversation, Apr. 29, 1965, in Beschloss, *Reaching for Glory*, 297-300.

⁶⁹ Chester, *Rag-Tags, Scum, Riff-Raff, and Commies*, 3.

leaders who refused to fight with confirmation of the extensive U.S. military backing: “The gutless Generals” were “waiting for the U.S. to do the job for them.”⁷⁰ Contrary to his predictions and hopes, Johnson’s decision to display overwhelming force in the Dominican crisis actually bolstered the U.S. military’s *active* involvement in the conflict.

Intervention Scorned: Johnson in the Media

Despite the inconceivable amount of time Johnson spent in briefings and conference calls that could last well into the early morning, he fixedly monitored the press reports on the intervention. What Johnson discovered, to his utter dismay, was coverage that exhibited mounting opposition to the intervention, including many that were downright erroneous. Johnson protested to special advisor McGeorge Bundy, “I just watched the television shows tonight, and the CBS reporter from down there said we ran wild through the rebel zone and just invited people to shoot us and try to stir up trouble. We are just mean sons o’ bitches and outlaws and they are nice, virtuous maidens.”⁷¹ Speaking to NBC correspondent John Chancellor, one of Johnson’s few allies in the press, the President confided, “I have to be very careful, because I don’t want to say a guy who disagrees with me is a communist or I’m a McCarthy.”⁷² Johnson’s ongoing battle to mollify the media and soothe American morale at large proved to be a daunting challenge for the Commander-in-Chief.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 84, 90-92.

⁷¹ LBJ and M. Bundy Conversation, May 7, 1965, WH Tapes, Transcripts of Telephone Conversations, 7607, LBJL.

⁷² LBJ and John Chancellor Conversation, May 2, 1965, WH Tapes, Transcripts of Telephone Conversations, LBJL.

Bitter Closure: Rebel Defeat and the Election of 1966

An open engagement between U.S. marines and the rebel forces on June 15 reduced the insurgents to shambles. Chester writes, “When paratroopers from the 82nd Airborne Division crushed the toughest rebel units, they convincingly demonstrated that they could occupy the rebel zone at will, and with minimal casualties.”⁷³ The rebel leadership’s only reasonable option was to concede to a free, democratic election to be held on June 1, 1966—a plan formulated by the adept U.S. ambassador Ellsworth Bunker. The familiar personalities Bosch and Balaguer emerged as leading candidates for the election, “leaving the rebels with hope that something could yet be salvaged from the popular rebellion.”⁷⁴ Washington was firm in its clandestine position to block Bosch from ascending to the presidency; Johnson and his supporters were finished with Bosch. However, it was crucial that Balaguer win convincingly despite overwhelming popular support for Bosch. As Chester concludes, “In the end, the election was a sham, invalidated by widespread violence, manipulated by election laws, and massive fraud in the tabulation of votes.”⁷⁵ Balaguer was the new president of a war-weary Dominican Republic, and he would remain in power for the majority of the next three decades. Despite the Johnson administration’s many imprudent decisions and unscrupulous tactics, Washington declared the intervention a success with the Dominican Republic’s newfound regularity.

⁷³ Chester, *Rag-Tags, Scum, Riff-Raff, and Commies*, 219.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 219.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 220.

Conclusion: Rationales for Intervention

Lyndon Johnson's handling of the 1965 constitutionalist revolt in the Dominican Republic is certainly worthy of criticism on several different fronts, but evaluations of his rationale for intervention should be balanced with understanding regarding his administration's limitations in terms of timing and information. The potential for the spread of Communism through Latin America was a legitimate concern. As Gleijeses argues, in the wake of the rebel victory at the San Duarte Bridge, "the specter of a second Cuba was suddenly not a distant possibility, but an immediate reality."⁷⁶ The power of 'Red paranoia' acted, in the very least, as a significant motivation for intervention in the minds of Johnson and his top foreign policy advisors; however, it is safe to conclude that these fears also compelled Johnson and his team to make hyperbolic assessments regarding the presence of pro-Communist agents in Latin America on more than one occasion.

All things considered, the intervention appears to have been necessary—if not for the determent of Communism in the Dominican Republic, the very preservation of a failing Caribbean neighbor who faced impending political implosion. Johnson's legacy can stand honorably on this point. Nevertheless, preexisting ideological doctrines and bureaucratic momentum contributed to the actualization of the intervention more than any other force: "‘Never a second Cuba’ was the imperative rule of the U.S. policy in the Western Hemisphere, a rule accepted by one and all, a basic tenet of the Kennedy legacy, one that nobody challenged."⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Gleijeses, *The Dominican Crisis*, 292.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 293.

Appendix: Johnson and the Vietnam War

The year 1965 also marked the beginning of extensive military involvement for the United States in Vietnam. The American position on South Vietnam's capacity to resist a Hanoi-directed insurgency from the North shifted from doubtful to bleak, and the result was a large-scale, drawn-out American military intervention that left both U.S. soldiers and citizens with feelings of disillusionment and bitter resentment. A decade of fighting in Vietnam would claim the lives of over 58,000 American soldiers with no clear victory for the mission of global democracy. Undoubtedly, President Lyndon Johnson's decision for heavy engagement in Vietnam is an integral point of discussion for any assessment of his tenure in office. As comprehensive research on the Johnson administration has suggested, the Vietnam War was waged for a wide range of purposes, including longstanding domestic political motives and contemporary ideological imperatives for social justice.

One fundamental misnomer surrounding the Vietnam War is the precipitate classification of this conflict as 'Lyndon Johnson's War.' In some respects, this is simply not the case. Korea and China represented preceding conflicts that had pitted Johnson's Democratic Party against the dissatisfied Republicans. Historian Thomas Langston explains, "The Democrats had been in power when the United States, as Republicans said, 'lost China.'"⁷⁸ Consequentially, the Democrats adopted a more aggressive approach in future international disputes, siding with the Republicans when Communism disrupted Asian territories. This was an initiative inherited by Johnson on behalf of his party allegiance, a reactionary measure taken in the face of both surging globalism and classic stateside politics.

⁷⁸ Thomas S. Langston, *Lyndon Baines Johnson* (Washington D.C.: CQ Press, 2002), 177.

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