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Communists on the Brain: U.S. Intervention in the Dominican Republic

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I

With the free Republics of Latin America, I have always felt—and my country has always felt—very special ties of interest and affection…Together we share and shape the destiny of the new world.¹

On April 24, 1965, violence erupted in the Dominican Republic. This small Caribbean nation was no stranger to violence or political upheaval. Only four years before, it had witnessed the assassination of Raphael Trujillo, leader of the oppressive regime in power since 1930. Juan Bosch, who was elected President in 1962, lasted only seven months in office before being overthrown himself. In the wake of Bosch’s departure, a military triumvirate became the ruling authority in the Dominican Republic. That governing body also soon lost support, and in April 1965, various groups opposed to Donald Reid Cabral, head of the Triumvirate, staged a revolt, ostensibly to restore the deposed Juan Bosch to power.

The Dominican Republic is located approximately eight hundred miles from the coast of the United States. Partly because of this proximity, America has had a long history of intervening in Dominican affairs. However, after the adoption of the Good Neighbor Policy by the Franklin Roosevelt administration, the U.S. had avoided direct intervention in Dominican affairs. But only three days after the revolt began, President

Lyndon Johnson ordered U.S. troops to land there. At first, the number of American soldiers was small. On April 28, 1965, there were only about 500 U.S. troops on the island under the guise of a rescue mission to evacuate American citizens, embassy officials, and other foreign nationals from what the administration called a “grave situation.” Less than a week later, however, there were twenty-three thousand U.S. soldiers stationed there, and Johnson had decided intervention was necessary to prevent a communist takeover.

The Dominican Revolt of 1965 created a crisis of American policy by revealing the incompatibility of the Good Neighbor Policy with the Monroe Doctrine and the Containment Policy in Latin America. In practice, the U.S. had abandoned the Good Neighbor Policy, but continued to proclaim its adherence. To save face and preserve some semblance of following its own policies, the administration was forced to play a verbal shell game to justify its decisions. The situation in the Dominican Republic was not a total failure of policy as some have suggested. Nor was it the fault of the embassy. American policy in the Dominican Republic was at a crossroads created by the Cold War climate, not because the administration did not know what to do, but because it needed to carry out actions that could be justified by contradictory policies—America needed to intervene without being regarded as interventionists.

The Monroe Doctrine has served as a cornerstone of American foreign policy in Latin America since it was first adopted in 1823. It rejects the legitimacy of European influence in Latin American nations. As

4 Draper, The Dominican Revolt, 5.
originally constructed, the policy was meant to prevent former European colonial masters from reasserting control over Latin American countries that had gained independence and to prevent foreign nations from “gain[ing] a foothold in adjoining territories.”

Of course, the Monroe Doctrine appealed to U.S. self-interest. Ignoring the autonomy of Latin American countries, the doctrine “presumes that Latin American and Caribbean people neither have the right, nor… the critical faculties to opt rationally and intelligently for an economic or political system not molded on that of the United States.”

Rather, America has considered this side of the Atlantic to be its domain, and thus the doctrine has provided the justification for U.S. intervention in Latin America throughout history.

Eventually, Roosevelt’s Good Neighbor Policy superseded this activism, and non-intervention became the preferred policy for a brief period. Post-World War II conditions, however, intensified international tensions and occasioned a new general foreign policy. Initially created to prevent the spread of communism in Europe, the policy of containment became the guiding principle of Cold War foreign policy. The Cold War policy of containing communism, however, contradicted the Good Neighbor Policy being employed in Latin America. It is through this Cold War Containment lens that the U.S. response to events in the Dominican Republic must be viewed.

The primary failure of U.S. policy was that a clear and specific policy toward the Dominican Republic and the particular conditions which existed within it was nonexistent. The U.S. lacked a policy that could rectify the incompatibility of broad U.S. policy objectives.

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7 Dietz, “Destabilization and Intervention in Latin America and the Caribbean,” 4.
officials had warned of the dangers of these shortcomings well before the 1965 revolt. In 1964, the embassy warned the State Department that, “it is time we sat down to map out a program for the Dominican Republic which is geared to developments that are occurring there.”

The report further stated that events in the Dominican Republic could lead to “deterioration in political and economic conditions which could lead to a Castro-type takeover.” It was important that the United States “not simply react to the situation as it develops,” but rather have a plan in place to prevent such an occurrence or limit its success. The warning went unheeded, and when the situation fell apart, America’s response seemed reactionary, frenzied, and inconsistent. The administration was constantly changing the direction of public discourse to keep up with changing events and justify policy decisions.

II

The American nations cannot, must not, and will not permit the establishment of another Communist government in the Western Hemisphere. This was the unanimous view of all the American nations when, in January 1962, they declared, and I quote: “The principles of communism are incompatible with the principles of the inter-American system.” That is what our beloved President John F. Kennedy meant when, less than a week before his death, he told us: “We in this hemisphere must also use every resource at our command to prevent the establishment of another Cuba in this hemisphere.”

The biggest influence on America’s policy toward the Dominican Republic was an event that had occurred elsewhere in the Caribbean six years earlier. America’s primary focus in policy toward the Dominican

9 Ibid., 8.
Republic was in the context of preventing a “second Cuba,” a fear that was somewhat exaggerated but not entirely fallacious. Theodor Draper states that from the beginning “the U.S., on the basis of ambiguous evidence, assumed...that the revolution was communist dominated, or would certainly become so.” Actually, U.S. assumptions about communism in the Dominican Republic were in existence long before the beginning of the revolt. Upon taking office, President Johnson proclaimed that “The communists are hard at work to dominate the less developed nations of...Latin America,” and numerous reports indicated an inclination for policy makers to be suspicious of a communist plot.

This assumption was part of a long term Cold War mentality, and fears of communist expansion dominated foreign policy decisions. Long before the 1965 revolt, intelligence officials warned that “Castro will probably supply [subversive leftist leaders] clandestinely with small amounts of material aid, and they may attract the support of other Dominican elements, including erstwhile moderates.” While evidence at that time was deficient, the report stated that “over the longer run, the present limited threat of insurgency could increase sharply.” Conditions in the Dominican Republic did little to alleviate these concerns. The Dominican people “are seething with unrest and frustration...The poor and unemployed ... appear to be steadily drifting leftward in their

12 Draper, The Dominican Revolt, 65.
13 Lyndon Johnson, “Special Message to Congress on Foreign Aid, January 14, 1965.” Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Book I, 44.
sympathies. They are, of course, on [the] receiving end of [a] heavy stream of radio and word of mouth propaganda from [the] extreme left.”  

Even when not germane to the issue at hand, officials were so focused on preventing a second Cuba that they saw communism everywhere. “Point is, rumors, whether or not based on fact, have caused [a] split in armed forces unity—a very effective Communist [strategy],” stated one report on the discord in the Dominican armed forces.  

When the revolt began, and it appeared that some of the opposition factions had ties to the extreme left, conditions seemed to fit into the American policy paradigm perfectly. James Dietz states:

The post-Second World War foreign power obsession has been, of course, the need to contain the spread of communism and socialism—systems that, in this view, expand only under the direction of Moscow or Peking, or Havana…and that do so only by infiltrating other governments either through hard line agents under international party discipline, or through the more dangers avenue of fellow travelers and innocent and naive liberals [i.e. Bosch] who unwittingly serve the international communist conspiracy by favoring communist goals like agrarian reform, anti-poverty programs, rights of unions to organize, political and human rights, income redistribution, and the like.

Since the ascension of the Triumvirate, the “basic thrust of U.S. policy toward the Dominican Republic … remained the same: to prevent any threat to U.S. security by promoting immediate stability and guarding against ‘Castro-Communist’ gains.” The failure to prevent a communist takeover in Cuba was a huge black eye for America. With that defeat at the forefront of their minds, administration officials’ perceptions of reality became skewed to the point of paranoia. Every situation was

17 Dietz, “Destabilization and Intervention in Latin America and the Caribbean,” 4-5.
18 Lowenthal, The Dominican Intervention, 30.
seen through “red” glasses, and officials read much communism into the situation. Bruises from the Cuban Revolution not only influenced America’s approach to the Dominican Republic, it also shaped how the U.S. would intervene. The failure of the Bay of Pigs incident weighed heavily on Johnson and his advisors as they considered the direct role of American forces in the Dominican Republic.\(^{19}\) Officials were very cautious about how the military should be involved. Certainly there would need to be evidence to justify intervention, and intervention should not have appeared unilateral. Regardless, officials recognized that, whatever action was taken, “we shall be misunderstood, and we shall be attacked by those who want revolution immediately and by those who want no changes at all.”\(^{20}\)

Critics of intervention have been outspoken in their assertion that the administration’s painting of the rebels as communistic was “one of the most cynical deceptions of our time.”\(^{21}\) The communist threat, they argued, was invented by those seeking to retain power, as a means to enlist the United States to prop up their crumbling regime.\(^{22}\) Theodore Draper argues that to interpret events as being orchestrated by Castro was inane. Castroites, “flushed with a lighting victory over the entire Dominican military” would not have missed the “golden opportunity to wage a holy war of ‘national liberation’ against direct U.S. military intervention.”\(^{23}\) The assertion, however, “that the whole affair was a hoax or cover up is…incorrect.” There was sufficient evidence to warrant

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 107.
\(^{22}\) Piero Gleijeses, \textit{The Dominican Crisis}, 179.
\(^{23}\) Draper, \textit{The Dominican Revolt}, 112-113.
U.S. suspicions of communist involvement.\textsuperscript{24} Although the extent of communist infiltration could not be ascertained, American officials had no doubt that “a modest number of hard-core Communist leaders in Santo Domingo [had] managed by superior training and tactics to win for themselves a position of considerable influence in the revolt.”\textsuperscript{25} One month after American soldiers arrived, Johnson affirmed that “a well-trained, disciplined band of Communists was prevented from destroying the hopes of Dominican democracy.”\textsuperscript{26} He conveniently ignored that the only democratically elected leader of the Dominican Republic was prevented from returning to power by the U.S. intervention.

Reports from intelligence agents, embassy officials, and other observers confirmed the presence of communist operatives. Consistent with the idea that the “high motives [of the initial revolt had] been misused by a small band of conspirators who receive their directions from abroad,” former ambassador John Bartlow Martin reported that rebels had distributed weapons to the populace, including a large number of communists.\textsuperscript{27} Intelligence agents witnessed known communist operatives participating in the rebel movement.\textsuperscript{28} Administration officials reported that armed bands of communists were roaming the streets at night and terrorizing citizens, even firing on the American Embassy while the Ambassador was contacting Washington via telephone from under a desk.\textsuperscript{29} These statements served a number of purposes. First, they provided
\textsuperscript{24} Slater, Intervention and Negotiation, 35-36.
\textsuperscript{26} “Commencement Address at Baylor University, May 28, 1965,” Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Book I, 594.
\textsuperscript{27} “Radio and Television Report to the American People..., May 2, 1965,” 472.
\textsuperscript{28} John Bartlow Martin, Overtaken by Events: The Dominican Crisis from the Fall of Trujillo to the Civil War, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 647, 650, 673.
\textsuperscript{29} Telephone Conversation Between the Undersecretary of State of Economic Affairs (Mann) and President Johnson, April 27, 1965, FRUS, 1964-1968, XXXII: 63; Lyndon Johnson, “The Presidents News Conference of June 1, 1965.” Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States,
the necessary justification for sending troops. Second, the frightening and bloody tales helped sway American public opinion to support further U.S. actions. Finally, these stories motivated Congress to loosen its purse strings and fund these and other military operations intended to prevent the spread of communism around the world. Johnson told Congress that “each Member...who supports this request [for additional military appropriations in Vietnam and the Dominican Republic] is voting to continue our effort to try to halt Communist aggression.”

Continued intelligence operations and observations after the initial American deployment yielded further evidence of communist involvement, and the embassy increasingly emphasized the signs of communist influence. Even writers critical of intervention admit that there was communist involvement in the revolt. While communist operatives may have been participating, even constituting an important element in the Constitutionalist camp, there was very little evidence “linking any Communist country to the planning, organization, or direction of the movement.” Ambassador Martin had no doubt that there was a danger of communist takeover. His reports paint a much more violent picture than reported in historical accounts of journalists. He corroborated reports that many men with known communist ties were active at rebel strong points and also reported that communist operatives knew that they would not succeed if the American military intervened and discussed withdrawing from overt participation to obscure their involvement.

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31 Lowenthal, The Dominican Intervention, 78, 87, 97; Gleijeses, The Dominican Crisis, 229-230; Draper, The Dominican Crisis, 66-67.
33 Martin, Overtaken by Events, 673-676, 686, 705; Lowenthal, The Dominican Intervention, 129.
At the very least, what started out as a legitimate attempt to establish democracy was “superseded by…evil forces.” Johnson maintained that “Communist leaders, many of them trained in Cuba, seeing a chance to increase disorder, to gain a foothold, [had] joined the revolution.” American intentions in the Dominican Republic were “in keeping with the principles of the inter-American system…to prevent another Communist state in this hemisphere.” Of course, as time progressed, further evidence of communist involvement was scarce, putting Johnson on the defensive, yet again. The President was forced to back away from some of the bold pronouncements. Responding to reporters’ inquiries, President Johnson said:

I will say that the threat was greater before 21,000 Americans arrived there. It always is. The Communists did not, in our judgment, originate this revolution, but they joined it and they participated in it. They were active in it, and in a good many places they were in charge of it…We think that following the action that this nation took—it served a very good purpose and some of the men who had originally participated in the revolution, and had to take asylum, retuned and more moderate forces took leadership—the Communist elements have not been so active, although their presence is still noted hour by hour.

Historian Abraham Lowenthal agrees that as long as U.S. troops were present, the danger of communist takeover was dramatically reduced.

34 “Radio and Television Report to the American People..., May 2, 1965,” 471.
35 Ibid., 473.
36 Draper, The Dominican Revolt, 138.
37 “The President’s News Conference of June 1, 1965,” 613-614.
38 Lowenthal, The Dominican Intervention, 129.
We are going to have to really set up that government down there, run it, and stabilize it some way or another. This Bosch is no good.\(^{39}\)

To complicate matters, America was somewhat unsure about which side to support. From one perspective, the U.S. should have supported the return of the legitimately elected Juan Bosch. They chose not to do so, however. Thus America once again found itself at the crossroads of two incompatible policies—protecting and promoting democracy throughout Latin America and preventing the spread of communism there as well. Much of the U.S. response stemmed from a distrust of former President Juan Bosch.\(^{40}\) Bosch was elected President of the Dominican Republic in 1962, but Americans interpreted his ascension as bringing “into office a Dominican regime … eager to assert its sovereignty.”\(^{41}\) Bosch, they felt, would be less likely to succumb to American influence. While the U.S. had supported the Bosch regime during its brief tenure, it did so cautiously, suspicious of Bosch’s ties to leftists. Before his overthrow, American officials expressed concerns about Bosch’s commitment to American principles. Ambassador Bennett stated that, “my own feeling is that Bosch is basically anti-American.”\(^{42}\)

Despite his legitimacy, America failed to support Bosch in 1963. Instead, America allowed a regime with a much stronger anti-communist stance to seize control.\(^{43}\) As early as January of 1964 intelligence officials pointed to Bosch’s reluctance to stand up to communist intrusions. In

\(^{39}\) “Telephone Conversation Between the Under Secretary of State for Economic Affairs (Mann) and President Johnson, April 26, 1965,” \textit{FRUS}, 1964-1968, XXXII: 62.
\(^{40}\) Slater, \textit{Intervention and Negotiation}, 25.
\(^{41}\) Abraham Lowenthal, “The United States and the Dominican Republic to 1965,” 38.
\(^{42}\) “Letter from the Ambassador to the Dominican Republic (Bennett) to the Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs (Mann), February 2, 1965,” \textit{FRUS}, 1964-1968, XXXII: 54.
\(^{43}\) Draper, \textit{The Dominican Revolt}, 8.
their view, “Bosch reacted vigorously against Communists and Castroists only when he thought they posed direct challenges to his own position.”

Abraham Lowenthal states, “Since the fundamental American objective in the Dominican Republic was never really to help Bosch or even rule his country, but rather to prevent a ‘second Cuba,’ the U.S. government’s reaction when Bosch was overthrown was not surprising.”

The 1965 revolt began as an attempt to restore Bosch to power and was supported by a number of groups—many with communist inclinations—who banded together to oppose Reid. Already weary of Bosch and fearful of the spread of communism in Latin America, the U.S. was reluctant to support his return to power, and some officials intentionally cast aspersions that he and the communists were indistinguishable. Reported communist involvement in the revolt only served to increase American concern about Bosch. There was some question as to whether Bosch had “sold out to the Communists before the revolt…[or whether] the revolt was co-opted by communist agents.”

Though he was living under American protection in Puerto Rico, “America came to treat Bosch’s party as if it had a permanent burden of proof that it was not seeking or even accepting Castro-Communist support.”

Whether Bosch was directly involved with a communist plot was undetermined, but American officials still expressed doubts about him. Even if he wasn’t privy to communist plots, American officials did not “think that [he] understands the Communist danger … [W]e are afraid… that if he gets back in, he will have so many [communists] around him;

45 Lowenthal, “The United States and the Dominican Republic to 1965,” 52.
46 Slater, Intervention and Negotiation, 19-20.
47 Draper, The Dominican Revolt, 86-88.
48 Ibid., 133.
49 Lowenthal, “The United States and the Dominican Republic to 1965,” 54.
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and they are so much smarter than he is, that before you know it, they’d begin to take over.” As far as America was concerned, Bosch would be used and discarded by the Communist operatives once the revolt successfully overthrew the Triumvirate. At the same time, despite America’s inclination to support Reid Cabral, it was clear that he would not come out on top of the revolt. Officially, the United States made a “strong effort to avoid tying ourselves too directly to … any one group,” all-the-while working behind the scenes to support a military junta.

IV

In those early terrible hours, we did what we had to do. Remembering Simon Bolivar’s admonition that “to hesitate is destruction,” as your President I did what I had to do.

From the beginning, the administration had been sensitive to the principle of non-intervention. The official line of American policy had to be expressed in such a way as to simultaneously meet multiple goals without revealing their incompatibilities. Johnson needed to intervene in the Dominican Republic without having the appearance of meddling in the nation’s affairs. In truth, however, the United States had abandoned the principle of non-intervention long before 1965. America had intervened in Latin American affairs a number of times since the adoption of the Good Neighbor Policy—the policy of containment trumped non-intervention every time.

50 “Telephone Conversation Between the Under Secretary of State for Economic Affairs (Mann) and President Johnson, April 27, 1965,” 65.
53 “Commencement Address at Baylor University, May 28, 1965,” 593.
54 Lowenthal, The Dominican Intervention, 24.
and U.S. actions elsewhere in the world gave clues as to the nature of American behavior toward the Dominican Republic had any crisis developed. President Johnson left little doubt as to American intentions four months before the revolt in his State of the Union Address: “We are prepared to live as good neighbors with all, but we cannot be indifferent to acts deigned to injure our interest, our citizens, or our establishments abroad.”

Despite claims to the contrary, behind closed doors U.S. officials made no effort to deceive themselves. They were “quite open on the phone about their right to promote military, diplomatic, and political victories… while pretending to be neutral on all of these fronts.” America had, and would continue to, exert influence over the situation. Carefully watching the situation, officials hoped that a military junta would emerge to put down any communist elements, but expressed concerns that “there are only a few Dominicans qualified to help run the government. When you are that thin it does not take much to upset everything.” Embassy officials evaluated the potential victors in the dispute, deciding which one would be in America’s best interest: “If we are to influence Dominicans… and counter leftist efforts to poison the popular mind, we must lose not time.” When Under Secretary of State Mann suggested that the U.S. support Balaguer, a former cohort of Trujillo, President Johnson replied, “Well, try to do it. Try to do it some way.” Of course, this ran counter to

58 Lowenthal, The Dominican Intervention, 82; “Memorandum from Robert M. Sayre of the National Security Council Staff to the President’s Special Assistant (Dungan), October 15, 1964,” FRUS, 1964-1968, XXXII: 42.
60 Telephone Conversation Between the Under Secretary of State for Economic Affairs (Mann) and President Johnson, April 26, 1965, 63.
Johnson’s public pronouncement that “We support no single man or any single group of men in the Dominican Republic.”

There is evidence that the U.S. even orchestrated the Dominican request for assistance. While American officials strongly suspected communist involvement, evidence was insufficient to warrant an invasion. When Dominican Air Force Colonel Pedro Benoit emphasized the communist flavor of the revolt, perhaps playing to U.S. concerns that the Dominican Republic could become the next Cuba, he was “instructed what to say in order to get the U.S. troops that he wanted.” Instead of emphasizing communist gains, American officials requested that the colonel rephrase his request to stress that American lives were in danger. By the time the appropriately worded request made it to American officials, U.S. troops were already ashore.

None of these facts mean that the U.S. abandoned the concept of or appearance of non-intervention. Even when planning intervention, officials were sensitive to the façade of non-intervention, and worked hard to portray the response as positively as possible. After news of the revolt, Johnson stated that, “We profoundly deplore the violence and disorder in the Dominican Republic. The situation is grave and we are following it closely. It is our hope that order can be promptly restored and that a peaceful settlement of the internal problems can be found.” Early statements such as these recognized the need not to appear meddlesome and denied aspirations to send an occupying force, but cautiously tested the waters. Once the decision had been made to intervene, official

62 Lowenthal, The Dominican Intervention, 84-85, 102; Draper, The Dominican Revolt, 120.
statements were preemptively defensive. When addressing the American people, Johnson assured them that “even though we are deeply saddened by bloodshed and violence..., we had no desire to interfere in the affairs of a sister republic ... On Wednesday afternoon, there was no longer any choice for the man who is your President.”65

To justify intervention, Johnson needed a valid cause. At first, the U.S. simply called for a cease fire and ordered the evacuation American citizens.66 The first wave of troops was necessary to protect Americans and facilitate evacuations. As proof of the necessity for U.S. troop presence, President Johnson affirmed to the American people that there was an immediate danger.67 Dominican officials had informed the American Embassy that “the governmental authorities could no longer protect us...Only an immediate landing of American forces could safeguard and protect the lives of thousands of Americans and thousands of other citizens of some 30 other countries.”68 If the U.S. were truly committed to non-intervention, however, the active involvement of American troops would be unnecessary following the evacuations of over 6,500 people from forty-six countries.69 To justify U.S. presence, American statements took a new direction, justifying U.S. occupation on the basis of preventing the spread of Communism. However, these statements only cautiously moved away from non-interventionism: “Neither we nor any other nation in this hemisphere can or should take it upon itself to ever interfere with

69 “Commencement Address at Baylor University, May 28, 1965,” 593.
the affairs of [the Dominican Republic] or any other country.”

Despite this admonition, Johnson asserted that intervention could become necessary, “only—repeat—only when the object is the establishment of a communistic dictatorship ... So ... it is our mutual responsibility to help the people of the Dominican Republic toward the day when they can freely choose the path of liberty and justice and progress.”

Ever on the defensive, President Johnson constantly denied that American actions were imperialist or aggressive: “We are not the aggressor in the Dominican Republic. Forces came in there and overthrew that government and became aligned with evil persons who had been trained in overthrowing governments and ... establishing Communist control and we have resisted that control and we have sought to protect our citizens against what would have taken place.”

Not only were American interests at stake, but so was the future of “our sister Republics...and the values of all the American Republics.” In response to reporters’ questions during the subsequent occupation of the Dominican Republic, Johnson stated, “We didn’t start that. We didn’t intervene ... We were not the perpetrators. But ... we ... took the necessary precautions.”

A central element in this stance was to iterate that intervention had the sanction of numerous Latin American nations. The Organization of American States (OAS) was critical in this effort: “Prior to our intervention, we consulted and discussed the gravity of the situation there with 14 Latin American nations.”

In truth, the OAS was a virtual puppet organization completely dominated by the United States, but its sanction...
at least gave the appearance of multilateral support. The administration constantly drew upon language that suggested the operations had the sanction of the region at large. “For the first time in history,” President Johnson told students at Baylor University, “the Organization of American States has created and sent to the soil of an American nation an international peace-keeping military force.” The purpose of this force was to fend off forces that threatened “the principles of the inter-American system.” America was not intervening in Dominican affairs so much as it was fulfilling its commitment to preserve “the right of all of the free people of this hemisphere to choose their own course without falling prey to international conspiracy from any quarter.”

The administration itself seemed unsure about why the United States was in the Dominican Republic. At times, President Johnson insisted that “99 percent of our reason for going in there was to… provide protections for these American lives” But at the same news conference, the President also stated that “the principles of communism are incompatible with the principles of our inter-American system,” suggesting that containment was the motive. Were American troops in the Dominican Republic to prevent the spread of communism or to protect American citizens? It depends upon which policy was being called upon. Preventing the spread of communism was compatible with the Monroe Doctrine and Containment, but contrary to non-interventionism. Using American troops to protect American lives and facilitate the evacuation

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76 Dietz, “Destabilization and Intervention in Latin America and the Caribbean,” 6; Lowenthal, “The United States and the Dominican Republic to 1965”, 49.
77 “Commencement Address at Baylor University, May 28, 1965,” 594.
79 Ibid., 466.
80 “The President’s News Conference of June 1, 1965,” 616.
81 Ibid., 615.
would be permissible under the Good Neighbor Policy, but could not explain why soldiers were there after evacuations were complete. This awkward stance created an environment where President Johnson felt it necessary to make outrageous statements and would draw criticism from contemporary observers and modern historians who believe he deliberately misled the American people. Johnson reported that a number of “prime leaders in the rebel forces were men with a long history of communistic association… [and] had been trained by Communist forces.” Additionally, the President reported that there was widespread violence in the streets and severe damage to several embassies.\textsuperscript{82} Intervention was necessary “to stop the wholesale killing of hundreds and even thousands of Dominicans.”\textsuperscript{83}

When Theodore Draper states that, “There is no doubt that the threat of Communism rather than danger to American lives was [Johnson’s] primary reason for recommending military intervention,” he intends the statement to be a criticism—Johnson deliberately misled the American people by exaggerating the influence of communists as an excuse to intervene.\textsuperscript{84} But intervention based on the expansion of communism was justifiable in and of its own right. Draper fails to recognize that, although the administration did make exaggerated claims, there was significant, albeit circumstantial, evidence of communist involvement. America had committed many more troops in Korea and Vietnam—two nations much farther from American borders—based upon the policy of containment, and intervention was all the more necessary given the Dominican Republic’s proximity to the United States.

\textsuperscript{82} “Remarks to Committee Members on the Need for Additional Appropriations,” 490.
\textsuperscript{83} “The President’s News Conference of June 1, 1965,” 611.
\textsuperscript{84} Draper, \textit{The Dominican Revolt}, 122, 159-169.
In the dark mist of conflict and violence, revolution and confusion, it is not easy to find clear and unclouded truth.  

Historical interpretations of U.S. intervention in the Dominican Republic in 1965 can be grouped into two categories. The first are stalwart supporters of U.S. actions as a justified measure to contain the spread of communism. The second group can be considered outspoken critics of a neo-imperialistic attempt by the U.S. to influence a tiny nation on its periphery which it deemed incapable of self-government. Neither of these viewpoints provides an accurate and unbiased evaluation of the events. Each side assumes a conspiratorial element, either carried out by the U.S. government or by communist operatives. Evidence of either is scant.

Ultimately, Dominican intervention was “the natural consequence of the attitudes and assumptions with which American officials generally approached the Dominican Republic.” In the climate of the Cold War, American concerns about the spread of communism were in a heightened state. Conditions in the Dominican Republic were ripe for a communist uprising, and movements that smacked of socialism were not unknown there. When the revolt began, numerous organizations joined, many of which had expressed socialist ideas. The very leader whom the rebels wanted to reinstate had been suspected of being soft on communism. Under these circumstances, the slightest evidence of communist plot was taken as undeniable proof. This “gap between Dominican realities and American perceptions” determined the path that the U.S. would take.

86 Slater, Intervention and Negotiation, 191; Lowenthal, The Dominican Intervention, 132-135.
87 Lowenthal, The Dominican Intervention, 150.
88 Lowenthal, The Dominican Intervention, 34.
American actions were coherent, logical, and consistent with the policy of containment and the Monroe Doctrine.89 The U.S. could not risk delay. To quote President Johnson out of context, “In this situation delay itself would be decision—the decision to risk and lose the lives of thousands of Americans and thousands of innocent people from all lands.”90

But sending troops into an independent “sister Republic” based on such flimsy evidence was unacceptable. Such behavior was discordant with the principles of the Good Neighbor Policy. To rectify this, U.S. officials orchestrated a statement to the effect that American lives were in danger from Dominican officials whose status as true representatives of the Dominican government was questionable at best. This statement provided justification for the initial deployment, putting American resources in position for further operations and buying time for the administration to jump through the verbal hurdles created by incompatible policy statements.

Intervention in 1965 should not have been surprising to anyone familiar with the long-term diplomatic relationship between the U.S. and Dominican Republic.91 In the long history of U.S.-Dominican relations, intervention was the rule rather than the exception. “Throughout almost two centuries of United States-Latin American relations, one must conclude that the U.S. has exercised political and economic dominance... Latin American states usually have been in a subordinate and dependent role. Cold War years have seen strong reaction to real and alleged communist penetration.”92 The absurd attempt to maintain the image of adherence to the Good Neighbor Policy complicated matters, and the

89 Gleijeses, The Dominican Revolt, 182.
90 “Radio and Television Report to the American People..., May 2, 1965,” 471.
91 Lowenthal, The Dominican Intervention, 7, 15.
inaccuracies of President Johnson’s public pronouncements have served
as fodder for his critics. In the attempt to appear to be a Good Neighbor,
the administration was forced to make bold and, at times, inaccurate
statements.

Despite efforts to spin the information to fit into policy molds,
the U.S. decision to intervene stemmed directly from a fear of communist
takeover. Ultimately, anti-communist stability was more important than
democracy or non-interventionism in the Dominican Republic.93 The
men responsible for the United States’ response to the Dominican crisis
“believed themselves [to be] engaged in an international struggle against
Communism, and…had just committed themselves to an expanded war in
Asia [on that basis.]”94

One rebel participant downplayed America’s concern about
communist elements in the Dominican revolt. American diplomats, said
General Caamaño, “have Communists on the brain.”95 It is true that
many of the reports of communist activities were exaggerated by the
administration at the time, but these embellishments have had the effect of
discrediting communist involvement altogether. Since it is known that the
administration overstated the facts, it has been assumed that the existence
of communist operatives was fabricated. This is a misinterpretation.
The exaggerations were not totally fictitious. The facts were embellished
because the evidence at hand was circumstantial. The CIA, in a document
that is still predominantly classified, asserted that “the prospect at the time
of U.S. intervention clearly was one in which a movement increasingly
under the influence of Castroites and other Communists was threatening

93 Slater, Intervention and Negotiation, 31; Gleijeses, The Dominican Crisis, 284.
94 Lowenthal, The Dominican Intervention, 152.
95 General Francisco Caamaño, quoted in Draper, The Dominican Revolt, 90. Caamaño’s
dismissal of the idea that communists were involved in the revolt should be subject to some
scrutiny, as Caamaño later fled to Cuba to lead a guerilla group.
to gain the ascendancy in the Dominican Republic.”96 Of the writers who have commentated on the matter, those who generally distrust this assertion are either journalists or rebel participants. The journalists lacked access to internal information and based much of their interpretation on interviews conducted with rebels. Rebel participants seething with discontent, whose efforts were thwarted by the U.S. intervention, have been reluctant to admit the extent of communist involvement, as that might mar the noble effort to restore a constitutional leader that they portrayed.97 American officials who have written on the subject, such as Ambassador Martin, on the other hand, had access to documentary evidence that has since been declared confidential, but have much to lose by admitting any transgressions on the part of the United States. Perhaps the truth can only be ascertained when all documents have been released, but until then, historians must make do with the evidence available.

97 See Pons, The Dominican Republic.