

A Dictator's Death

U.S. Role on Trujillo Examined

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On the night they killed Rafael Leónidas Trujillo, an American named Henry Dearborn stayed up until dawn pursuing a bizarre trail of Caribbean intrigue.

Nearly 14 years later, the events of that evening are in the news again because of the possibility of U. S. involvement in the death of Dominican Republic dictator Trujillo is a fresh issue confronting the CIA.

Dearborn was the U. S. consul general to the Dominican Republic, the ranking representative of his government, a patient and fastidious man who is both cordial and cautious in the manner of career foreign service officers.

On the evening of May 30, 1961, he went to a party at the country club outside Ciudad Trujillo, a charity affair sponsored by the Na-

tionalist Chinese ambassador. On his way home at midnight, driving along the shore road toward George Washington Avenue, Dearborn's car was stopped by Dominican police.

Everyone out, search the car, search the Americans. The roadblock was at an isolated point beside the sea, where waves crash against coral cliffs. It was also near the spot where, less than two hours before, an assassination team of eight men, riding in three cars, had caught Generalissimo Trujillo unguarded and gunned him down. They stuffed his body in the trunk of a getaway car and drove off.

At midnight, when Dearborn and his party happened along, the Dominicans were still looking for

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CIA, From A1

the body of their fallen dictator. Dearborn cleared the roadblock and drove home.

An hour later, he got a telephone call from the assassins. "I don't remember what they said," he recalled many years later. "The message was clear." La muerte de Trujillo, it is done.

Dearborn promptly cabled Washington and went to bed. He knew who the assassins were. He had been in contact with them for months. The U.S. government, he knew, had regarded the plot with sympathy.

Over the years, tangled and exotic accounts of how Trujillo died have rumbled into print, some alleging CIA sponsorship of the plot, others denying any U.S. involvement. This fragmentary version, based on what could be confirmed by various sources, suggests a more ambiguous picture—that the U.S. government was indeed

plugged into the plot without necessarily being in control of it, that CIA-supplied arms may have been more significant as a gesture of American support than as a crucial element.

When Trujillo died after 31 years as dictator of the island nation, he was not widely mourned. The United States had treated him as a friend and ally for most of his reign, despite his reputation for ruthless fortune and murder. But in the last two years as he became more treacherous and greedy, American support withered.

The Roman Catholic church, which had coexisted uneasily with Trujillo, also turned against him. So did Dominican businessmen who found that, when an enterprise prospered, Trujillo would move in for his cut.

What the consul general also may have known was that his government, via his own consulate, had supplied the assassins with some guns, courtesy of the Central Intelligence Agency.

An hour later, Dearborn

was awakened by another phone call from the nuns at the Colegio Santo Domingo, a private school in the capital city. The bishop has been kidnaped by Trujillo thugs, the nuns said. Dearborn raced over and found a macabre scene.

Trujillo's secret police had entered the school with guns blazing, convinced that the most Rev. Thomas F. Reilly had been part of the plot because of his opposition to the dictator. Flying chips of brick had nicked the nuns, and their white cassocks were flecked with

blood. A dead dog lay across the threshold of Bishop Reilly's room. The consul general spent the rest of the night getting the American-born priest out of jail.

Dearborn is retired now, living on a quiet street in Chevy Chase, where he tends the healthy poinsettias and other living things which decorate his sun porch. He responds conscientiously to most every question about the events except to the ones about guns and the consulate. Then he replies, cheerfully: "No comment."

The Trujillo episode is one of those secret actions from the past which might still be embarrassing if it were fully explored today by any of the current investigations focusing on the government's intelligence

"The general feeling was that democracy was in its hour in Latin America," Dearborn recalled. "We took a terrible beating from the press and intellectuals who accused us of playing footsie with this monster. So there was a tremendous psychological pressure to do something."

In 1960, Trujillo sponsored an unsuccessful assassination plot aimed at President Romulo Betancourt of Venezuela. In August, the Organization of American States censured the Dominican Republic for its flagrant violations of human rights. The United States withdrew its diplomatic recognition and joined in economic sanctions. Dearborn, who had been charge d'affaires, stayed on as consul general in the country.

"There were plenty of

people in the Dominican Republic who had motives to see him (Trujillo) go elsewhere, preferably nowhere," Dearborn said. "After the United States dropped its support, this gave them the courage to make their plot, with some confidence that they would be heroes, not villains."

The policy toward Trujillo was developed in the final year of the Eisenhower administration, but carried forward without interruption by President Kennedy when he took office in January, 1961.

One of Kennedy's White House foreign policy advisers described the context of events as he saw it:

"Certainly there was no sort of constructive plot that we helped shape. We were aware, of course, that they wanted to kill Trujillo, but a lot of people wanted to kill Trujillo. I don't think we had a lot of confidence that they would succeed."

The underground involved only Dominicans, about 20 of them organized into two groups, according to two authoritative accounts by American authors, "Overtaken by Events" by former Ambassador John Bartlow Martin and "Trujillo: The Life and Times of a Caribbean Dictator," by retired international lawyer Robert D. Crassweller. Neither book offers any evidence in support of the allegations of U.S. involvement.

Many of the conspirators were members of the Dominican military with strong motives, both personal and patriotic, for vengeance against Trujillo, and Martin believes the guns used in the plot came from that country's own military, not from the CIA.

"Everybody heard that the CIA supplied the guns," said Martin, who became U.S. ambassador 10 months after the assassination. "In the Dominican Republic, they believe everything is done by the CIA. That doesn't make it so."

Only two members of the plot survived the bloody reprisals carried out by Trujillo's followers. One of them, Gen. Antonio Imbert Barreras, insisted indignantly last week that there was no

CIA involvement.

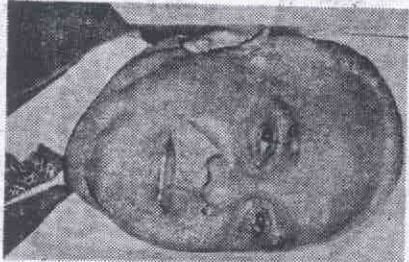
"I am very much surprised that 14 years after the death of the tyrant there should be doubt about the purely Dominican character of that action," he said. "That was based mainly on patriotism and the effort to rescue the liberty and the dignity of the Dominican people."

But two former officials, both highly placed in the Kennedy administration, also heard that the CIA had supplied weapons to the assassins—only they heard it inside the government in Washington.

"We gave them some guns and we did not try to persuade them not to go after Trujillo," said one of the sources. "We were aware this is what they wanted to do. We were also aware of their need for self-defense. Trujillo was murdering the middle class. We knew he was going to go eventually, and we wanted good relations with those who succeeded him."

If the assassins had access to their own arms in the Dominican military, why would they want or need any from the United States? One former State Department official from that era suggested a reason:

"If you were a group in a small Latin American coun-

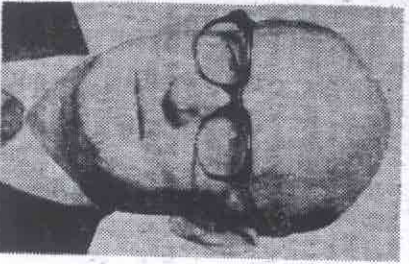


RAFAEL TRUJILLO
... slain dictator

try and you were ready to take your life in your hands and go against someone like Trujillo, it would be absolutely essential to know that the United States was going to stand behind you. You would want something to hook them on."

The details of how the guns were transmitted are still murky. Two sources said their understanding is that Dearborn was involved in the transfer, backed up by CIA contact agents. The former consul general refuses to comment.

One previously published version described an elaborate scheme to smuggle gun parts into the country in food cans shipped to a neighborhood supermarket, but several sources said it didn't happen that way.



HENRY DEARBORN
... U.S. consul general

that the weapons were not brought from outside the Dominican Republic, but supplied from within.

This version suggests that some Dominican leaders who have never been publicly associated with the plot may have been involved—a good reason why U.S. officials are still concerned about further investigation.

In any case, Dearborn speaks candidly about his contact with the underground, regularly reporting their plans back to Washington as part of his duties. The friendly communications he concedes, could be construed as tacit encouragement.

"I knew and reported that there were plots to assassinate Trujillo," he said. "I think some people get the

idea of involvement from that. It's sort of a short hop from being in contact to being involved."

Dearborn said he never met with the principals, but did pass clandestine messages in writing back and forth to others. He would meet the contacts in public places, where a friendly handshake would not seem out-of-place.

One of the public places where a lot of communication apparently went on was a supermarket owned by an American named Lorenzo Berry, better known as Wimpy. One source said messages were stuffed in grocery carts.

Berry, reached in Miami, where he now lives, insisted that he played no role in the scheme but that his store was a popular spot for middle-class patrons, including the consul general.

"We had nearly all the better people coming in all the time, sort of a meeting place," he said. "It was one of the first air-conditioned places. A lot of people made friends there."

Dearborn recounts one bit of circumstantial evidence which suggests that the United States was not really in control of events: it tried to turn off the plot at the last minute and was ignored. After the Bay of Pigs fiasco in Cuba in mid-April, Dearborn told the underground to hold back on any move against Trujillo.

"We were in contact for information purposes,"

Dearborn said, "but far from urging them to go forward, we were telling them to be cautious. It was right after the Bay of Pigs and I suppose the idea was we've got trouble enough right now... I had the feeling from them—this is our show, keep your nose out of it."

On the other hand, a Washington source who is familiar with the episode remarked: "Once you gave the weapons you had no control. These guys were patriots. They had only one thing to do."

Dearborn didn't know precisely when the event would occur. Neither did the conspirators. They were waiting for an evening when Trujillo and his driver would head for his country place in San Cristobal—without the heavy guard which usually surrounded him.

When the three-car squad caught the generalissimo that night on the shore road, the firefight included a 12-gauge shotgun, two M-1 rifles and an assortment of pistols and revolvers. It isn't established which, if any, of those weapons came from the United States.

One source who is familiar with the CIA's current explanation of events said the weapons it provided were not the ones that killed Trujillo. Another source said that, on the contrary, the American-supplied weapons "were, in fact, used to kill Trujillo."

When Dearborn cabled

Washington that night, the event apparently caught the U.S. government unprepared. Ramfis Trujillo, the dictator's son and heir to power, flew home from Europe to take command and search out the assassins—a maneuver which would never have been allowed if the plot had been better orchestrated. The conspirators were quickly hunted down, tortured and killed, though Ramfis gave up power six months later and went into exile.

Wimpy was arrested the next day, but released. Dearborn missed the generalissimo's funeral because he had to stay on duty, directing the U.S. fleet which moved off-shore in event of disruptions. Five days later, he left the country.

President Kennedy was in Paris, meeting with President Charles de Gaulle. In his absence, hurried meetings were called in Washington, chaired by Vice President Johnson, to discuss U.S. reaction. One source said that at these sessions the full extent of U.S. involvement, including the arms, was discussed.

"The Vice President and the Secretary of State indicated they did not know about it or they professed not to know about it," the source said. "But they didn't regard it as anything extraordinary. It was a different era."