

Crisis in Caribbean—Time of

This is the sixth of 15 excerpts from former President Johnson's book, "The Vantage Point," an account of his presidency, to be published shortly.

"A TIME OF TESTING: CRISES IN THE CARIBBEAN"

I had been concerned about the Dominican Republic from the day I took office, and indeed well before that time. The Dominicans had lived for thirty years under the iron-fisted rule of dictator Leonidas Trujillo. During those years, which ended with Trujillo's assassination in 1961, those who opposed Trujillo had three choices: to go into exile, to go underground, or to remain quiet. Most Dominicans had chosen the third course.

The three decades of Trujillo's rule had left the Dominican people in poverty. Worse, it had left them with no progressive political or social leadership. A few Dominicans had made careers of political opposition and criticism from abroad, but they had little constructive to offer their people in the way of practical plans or programs. There were many who still regarded the gun and the knife as legitimate tools of politics. The spirit of freedom and the habit of political cooperation, on which economic and social progress is so dependent, were almost totally lacking on the Dominican scene. This weakness, unless rapidly corrected, promised chronic instability in the Dominican Republic.

Just beyond the horizon lay Cuba and Castro. The Communist leader in Havana was always alert to any exploitable weakness among his neighbors. He was promoting subversion in many countries in the Western Hemisphere, and we knew he had his eye on the Dominican Republic. He had already backed one attempted guerrilla invasion of that country during the Trujillo years, and he was likely to try again if he thought he could succeed. Some Dominicans were undergoing guerrilla and sabotage training in Cuba.

We were encouraged in 1962 when the Dominican people held their first free elections in recent times. I carried the best wishes of the American people to Santo Domingo that year when I attended the inauguration of the newly elected President, Juan Bosch, as President Kennedy's personal representative. However, conversations with Bosch had raised new concerns in my mind. He was an intelligent, pleasant man with an attractive personality,

Testing for New

President

and he was full of ideals, but it was my impression that he had no solid plans for overcoming the profound problems his country faced. Nor did I think he had the experience, the imagination, or the strength needed to put whatever plans he might have into effect.

Nevertheless, we wished Bosch well and did everything in our power to help him and his duly elected government succeed. With John Bartlow Martin in Santo Domingo as American Ambassador, Bosch had as sympathetic a representative of the United States as a new leader in a difficult position could have. We continued to hope that Bosch would be able to do for his people what President Romulo Betancourt had done for Venezuela after dictatorship had been overthrown there.

A military junta overthrew Bosch in September 1963. This was a major setback for our common hopes.

The temporary regime was headed by former Foreign Minister Donald Reid y Cabral, a moderate who had

"FEEDING THE HUNGRY"

I read recently in my files a memo prepared in January by a U.S. government expert on India. Analyzing the food crisis of 1965-1967, he wrote of our lines of action: "That policy was probably as uniquely the President's personal achievement as any that emerged during his administration. For weeks, he held out almost alone against the urgings of all his advisers and, later, against a shrill press."

Those who say a President is the "captive" of his advisers, or vice versa, please note.



Associated Press

U.S. Ambassador to the Dominican Republic, William Tapley Bennett, right in cap, inquires about a sector of rebel-held zone of Santo Domingo during a tour of American defense posts on Sept. 6, 1965. U.S. Army Lt. Herbert J. Lloyd of Hope, Ark., discusses position with the envoy. Weapon in the foreground is a 106mm recoilless rifle.

been abroad when the coup was carried out. Reid was fairly popular and was regarded as an honest man, but he faced difficult problems.

Reid suspected, with good reason, that a number of Dominican army officers were plotting his overthrow in the spring of 1965. He decided to move against them before their plans were completed.

From Camp David I remained in close touch by phone with Secretaries Rusk and McNamara and with McGeorge Bundy, who had gone to the White House Situation Room to follow developments. I decided that we must take precautions in case we had to evacuate American citizens from the Dominican Republic. At midmorning on Sunday, April 25, we ordered the Atlantic Fleet to move ships toward Santo Domingo. The ships were to remain out of sight of land but to stand by in case of need.

A few hours later we instructed our Embassy to contact authorities on both sides of the conflict and tell them we planned to evacuate Americans and others who wished to leave the country. We requested a cease-fire and the cooperation of the "loyalists" and the "rebels" to help us carry out this movement peacefully. We also hoped that such a cease-fire would permit the warring parties to get together and begin negotiating a settlement. But there was too much confusion and passions were running too high to get this kind of agreement quickly.

The situation in the streets of the Dominican capital was alarming. Our Embassy reported that guns had been passed out at random—many to Communist organizers, who were putting them into the hands of their followers; others to thugs and criminals, the so-called Tigres. Young boys of twelve and thirteen were swaggering around the streets with machine guns over their shoulders. Stores and houses were being looted.

Processing of evacuees continued through the night and the early hours of April 27 at the Embajador Hotel.

Some rioters entered the hotel and ran around the lobby and through the corridors brandishing their weapons and terrifying the women and children gathered there. Other rebels remained outside and began shooting their guns into the air and into the upper floors of the hotel, where a number of American families were staying. We were dealing not with an army but with a trigger-happy mob with little experience and no discipline. It was a mira-

cle that no one was killed in this incident.

I realized then that we might have to use our own forces to protect American lives in this situation. I discussed this with McNamara, and he assured me that Marines were available from the task force sent to carry out the evacuation. Additional forces had been alerted in case of need.

That same day, Tuesday, April 27, produced a critical juncture in the Dominican revolt. Regular army forces with tanks and infantry under General Wessin started to move across the Duarte Bridge over the Ozama River to the east of Santo Domingo. Another force of about 1,000 men began entering the capital from the west. The two forces were converging on the rebel stronghold in the southeast part of the city. Dominican air force planes continued to strafe rebel positions.

Provisional President Molina and his closest followers apparently decided that their cause was lost, and that it was time to salvage what they could from the rubble. They went to the American Embassy that afternoon to talk with Ambassador Bennett, who had just returned from Washington. After insisting that they check their guns at the entrance, he invited them into his office.

Bennett reported that Molina appeared "nervous and dejected." He and his backers said they were ready to negotiate. They asked the Ambassador to assume a direct role in the settlement. Bennett told them he had no authority to negotiate an agreement and urged Molina and his backers to deal directly with the regular military forces. Bennett told them that it was time an accord was reached "by Dominicans talking to Dominicans."

Molina rejected this advice. Instead he went to the Colombian Embassy and asked for asylum. Apparently, he assumed that Wessin's men were going to move forward and liquidate the rebel stronghold. Other rebel leaders, both political and military, followed his example and either went into hiding or took refuge in foreign embassies. From that point Bosch's civilian followers had no effective control over the rebel movement. For the most part, power rested with the Communists and their armed followers and with the dissident military officers and enlisted men. There was no real government of any kind.

As it turned out, Molina had misjudged the strength of the forces moving on Santo Domingo. When our Em-

bassy officers went out at dawn the next day to survey the situation, they found that Wessin's men had stopped moving. There had been a breakdown in leadership, and the regular forces were almost as dejected as the rebel leaders had been the day before. Our observers reported that control of the rebel movement was increasingly in the hands of the rebel officers and the three major Communist parties in the Dominican Republic—one oriented toward Moscow, another linked to Castro, and a third loyal to Peking. None of these parties was extremely large but all were well armed, tightly organized, and highly disciplined. Perhaps more important, they included dedicated professional revolutionaries trained to exploit the kind of situation in which they then found themselves.

It has been argued with hindsight that Ambassador Bennett should have tried to negotiate a settlement on the afternoon of April 27. It was a decision the Ambassador had to make on his own, since there was no time for consultation with Washington. He decided, in line with our general guidance to him and with our policy of nonintervention, that he should encourage the two sides to settle their differences but should not involve his government directly.

Recalling the atmosphere of violence and the passionate feelings of both sides, I question whether a settlement could have been worked out as easily as a few critics later claimed. Even when the fighting had died down and tempers had begun to cool, it took months of patient and often frustrating effort to find an agreement. All things considered, I believe Ambassador Bennett made the right decision. It is true that the rebels misjudged the military situation at that moment, but that error would have been corrected in hours or a day at the most. If they had really wanted an accommodation, they had ample means for getting in touch with the military junta rather than going into hiding.

Some of the killing was particularly savage. People were lined up against walls and shot without a trial or even a hearing. Rumors of torture and savagery were widespread. An air force colonel reported that a close friend—a high ranking police officer—had been beheaded by a mob. The log of a Panamanian ship in port at Santo Domingo contained an eyewitness account of another savage incident. The crewman had watched from the deck on April 25 as a mob cornered a policeman on the

dock, beheaded him, and carried the head on a pole around the area to arouse the people to action. An OAS study mentioned a headless corpse among those seen by its observers. Dominicans reported seeing many bodies floating down the river, some without heads. Ambassador Bennett received a photograph of another headless victim of the slaughter. I was later criticized in press comments for referring to beheadings. There is no doubt in my mind that these incidents took place. It is an unpleasant subject, but it was part of the background against which we followed developments and made decisions during this time of crisis.

At midmorning on Wednesday, April 28, Radio Santo Domingo, controlled by the regular armed forces, announced that a new governing junta had been formed, headed by Colonel Pedro Benoit of the Dominican Air Force.

One of the new junta's first acts was to contact Ambassador Bennett and ask that the United States lend 1,200 Marines "to help restore peace to the country." Bennett gave the junta no encouragement. In his cabled report to Washington the Ambassador said: "I do not believe (the) situation justifies such action at this time." He did advise, however, that we make plans "in case (the) situation should break apart and deteriorate rapidly to (the) extent we should need (the) Marines in a hurry to protect American citizens."

Within two hours, however, the Ambassador and his staff had made a new assessment. A high-priority cable—a "critic," as it is called—arrived from Santo Domingo. The Ambassador reported that the situation was "deteriorating rapidly." He warned: "American lives are in danger." He and the Country Team, composed of the top U.S. political, economic, and information officers as well as the military attaches, had unanimously concluded that "the time has come to land the Marines." Evacuation of Americans and other foreigners was continuing and protection was needed.

That afternoon, April 28, I met in the small lounge off the big Oval Office with Rusk, McNamara, Ball, Mac Bundy, and Bill Moyers. We were discussing Vietnam and Southeast Asia. We had already seen Bennett's first message advising that we hold off sending troops. As we talked, I was handed a second urgent cable from Santo Domingo saying that "the time has come." I told my advisers that I was not going to sit by and see American lives lost in this situation. If local authorities could not provide protection, we had no choice but to provide the necessary protection ourselves. They all agreed that we had to act.

I realized the importance of the decision. I knew it would attract a good deal of criticism—from Latin Americans as well as from segments of our own press. We had tried so hard, ever since the days of Franklin Roosevelt, to overcome the distrust of our neigh-

bors in the Western Hemisphere, I did not want those days of suspicion to return, the days when "Yankee imperialism" and "the Colossus of the North" were the catchphrases of anti-American propagandists. But I could not risk the slaughter of American citizens. As their President, it was my duty to protect them with every resource available to me. I would do it again to protect American lives.

In October 1963 President Kennedy had been deeply concerned about possible developments in the Caribbean and Central America. He had sent a memorandum to the Secretary of Defense noting that events in the Dominican Republic and other countries in the area might "require active United States military intervention." Kennedy was not sure we were adequately prepared for this. He asked, for example, how many troops we could get into the Dominican Republic in twelve hours, in twenty-four, thirty-six, or forty-eight hours. He asked the same question about several other countries that seemed headed for a crisis.

President Kennedy told McNamara that he thought this matter deserved "the highest priority." He asked for an

early report. In little more than a week, on October 12, 1963, the month before I became President, McNamara and the Joint Chiefs produced their report. They also informed President Kennedy that they planned to heighten our readiness by holding mobility exercises in 1964. The result of all this was that U.S. forces were ready to respond quickly when they were urgently needed.

A number of people, then and later, thought the Communist threat in the Dominican Republic was overestimated. I did not and do not think it was. Nor do I believe that the majority of involved governments and competent analysts believe, in retrospect, that the danger was not desperately serious. Unless one understands how a few purposeful men can seize power in the midst of chaos, it may be difficult to accept the idea that 4,000 members of three Communist factions in the Dominican Republic could have been victorious before the end of April. But the fact is that as the situation disintegrated after April 24, the Communists moved quickly to associate themselves with the revolt. They gathered arms and mobilized additional recruits to fight with them. By April 28 they controlled much of the military strength in the rebel movement. Most important, no leaders in either the rebel or the antirebel camp were capable of organizing effective resistance to them. Power is relative. A small group, however disciplined and determined, is not likely to prevail against a larger group under effective leadership. But a small group can prevail when it faces no effective opposition.

Between 4,000 and 5,000 armed civil-

ians were involved in the early stage of the revolt. Of these, at least 1,500 were believed by the U.S. Embassy and by our best intelligence analysts to be members of one of the three Communist parties, or sympathizers under the direct command of trained Communist leaders. Concrete information confirmed this figure. The remaining armed civilians included youngsters out for a thrill—some of them no more than twelve years old. There were also the Tigers, and other hoodlums responsible for the murders of many policemen and for much of the looting. Finally, there were the patriotic Dominicans who wanted to restore the 1963 constitution. Many of these non-Communist civilians may never have come under Communist discipline, but they did become dependent on the Communists for arms and ammunition and for leadership in "commando" units. As of April 29, 1965, with most of the modern leaders in hiding or asylum, the Communist leadership had the keys to what Lenin once called "commanding heights" of power in the Dominican Republic. Of that there is no doubt in my mind.

"BREAKTHROUGHS IN SCHOOLROOM AND SICKROOM"

Making the educational grants directly to the states would, we hoped, reassure doubters that the federal government would not endeavor to take over local school boards. The Catholics seemed likely to be satisfied, because children in parochial schools would also benefit.

Jack Valenti served as our liaison with the Vatican's Apostolic Delegate to the United States, Archbishop Egidio Vagnozzi. After the bill was completed, the delegate advised Valenti that he was in favor of it, and that the majority of the Catholic hierarchy shared his opinion. "Archbishop McIntyre of Los Angeles," Valenti reported to me, "may possibly be the only prelate who might oppose the bill."

Similarly, Lee White of the White House staff dealt with the Jewish organizations; Henry Hall Wilson worked with the Southern leaders; Douglass Cater and Commissioner Keppel remained in close touch with the powerful education lobbies.

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