

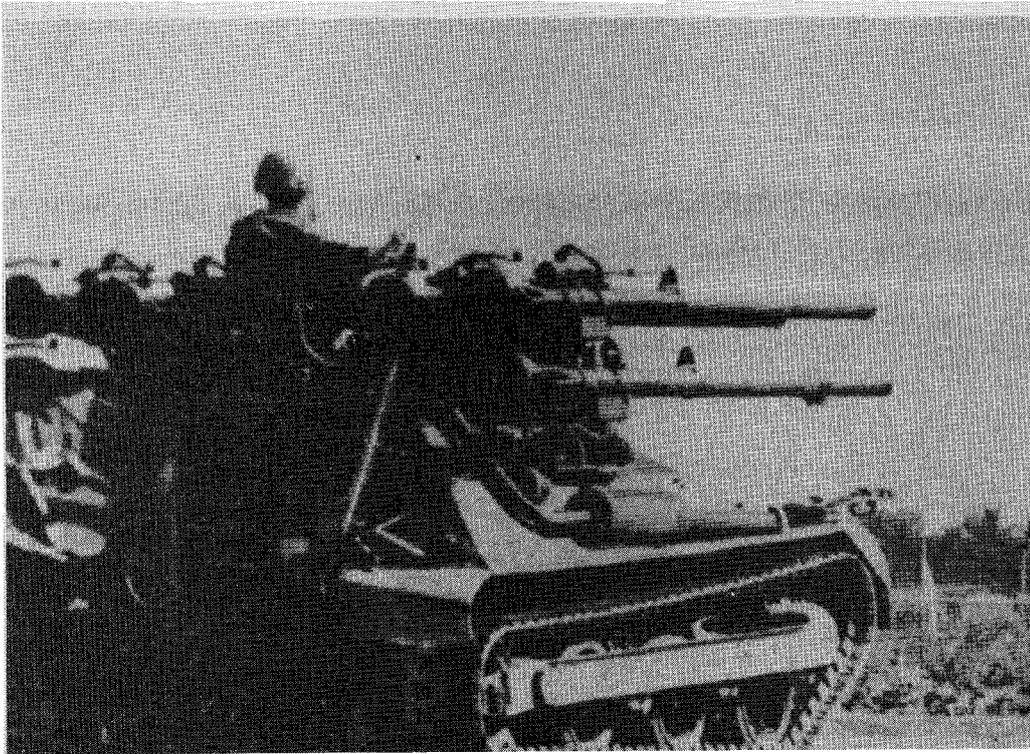
To Protect American Citizens

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When Deputy Chief of Mission Connett informed Washington of Loyalist plans to attack the Presidential Palace and other rebel targets Sunday afternoon, he and other members of the Country Team contemplated not the outbreak of civil war but the early restoration of order within Santo Domingo. For that reason, they recommended against a U.S. "show of force or other military support." But Connett also warned that if the Loyalists failed to end the "present conditions bordering on anarchy," the Embassy might have to reconsider its position on U.S. military activity. Should that happen, he advised, the Country Team might "wish later to make some use, in this connection, of naval units now en route to waters outside" the Dominican Republic.¹

The naval units to which Connett referred had been dispatched that morning at the request of State's Director of Caribbean Affairs Kennedy Crockett. Acting on a "contingency basis"—that is, without notifying the president but in accordance with established procedures—he had asked the Defense Department to send ships into Dominican waters in case American citizens should have to be evacuated. The proposed move was purely precautionary; as Connett made clear during the day, U.S. citizens and American property in Santo Domingo had not become targets of rebel violence. Yet both the Embassy and Washington expressed concern should that condition change. At 1032 Washington time, following Crockett's initiative, the JCS sent CINCLANT a message requesting that the "minimum number of vessels" needed to evacuate up to 1,200 Americans proceed to the vicinity of Santo Domingo, there to "remain out of sight [of] land until further orders issued."²

Admiral H. Page Smith, serving his last week as CINCLANT, had been receiving reports on the Dominican Republic since Saturday evening. Informed of State's request one-half hour before the JCS sent their formal message Sunday, he had already ordered Task Group 44.9, also known as the Caribbean Ready Group, to proceed from its position off Vieques Island, Puerto Rico, toward the troubled country to the west. The task group, with its assigned units rotating every three months, operated on a year-round



Dominican Crisis, 1965-1966

A U.S. Marine Corps ONTOS

basis in Caribbean waters, conducting exercises and supporting contingency operations. The group at sea in April was designated Carib 2-65 and consisted of six naval vessels and the 6th Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU). The MEU numbered 131 officers and 1,571 marines, was organized around the 3d Battalion of the 6th Marines, 2d Marine Division, and was equipped with small arms, helicopters, tanks, ONTOS, LVTs, and artillery.* Although it would require only a portion of Task Group 44.9 to evacuate 1,200 Americans, CINCLANT sent the entire Caribbean Ready Group just in case other measures, including the use of military force, should be required. Prudence dictated such a decision, given the sketchy but increasingly alarming information available to the admiral.³

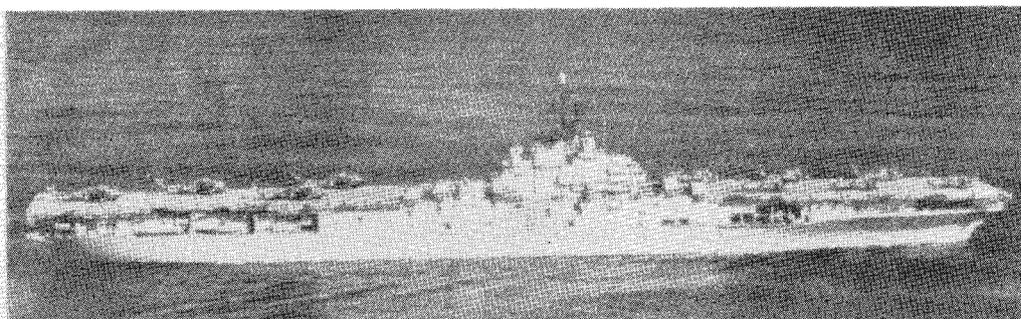
En route to their destination, Commodore James A. Dare, commander of the task group (TG 44.9), and Colonel George W. Daughtry, commander of the 6th MEU, devised an evacuation plan. Neither man wanted a confrontation with the rebels, whose composition and location were unknown to both officers. To avoid an unnecessary provocation, the two decided that on receipt of an evacuation order, they would send ashore a control element

*ONTOS are weapon systems wielding six 106-mm recoilless rifles on tracked carriages. LVTs are tracked landing vehicles.

of unarmed marines dressed in fatigues, who would supervise the loading of buses, ships, and helicopters. As a precaution, a company of armed marines wearing body armor would stand by offshore, ready to go to the control element's assistance should that group encounter rebel resistance. With the details of the plan worked out, Daughtry issued a warning order to the marines for possible evacuation operations.⁴

Early Monday morning, the task group arrived on station thirty miles off the Dominican coast, where, in another precautionary measure, Dare positioned his ships so that if called on, they could launch air strikes or amphibious operations. One problem surfaced immediately: neither TG 44.9 nor the U.S. Embassy in Santo Domingo had equipment adequate for communicating with one another. The marines offered to provide the Embassy with what communication equipment they could spare, but until the transfer could be made, the Embassy and the task group conducted business via TG 44.9's helicopters and by employing the services of Fred Lann, a U.S. Embassy official who was also an amateur radio operator. Only the radio in Lann's home proved capable of reaching Dare's flagship, the *Boxer*. As middle man, Lann relayed messages between the *Boxer* and the Embassy, keeping in touch with the Embassy by telephone and walkie-talkie until rebel movements forced him to take his radio to the Embassy's courtyard, where he operated it out of his car. The Marine communication equipment arrived at the Embassy on Wednesday, but "to the amazement of all concerned," it was not powerful enough to be received aboard the *Boxer*. Consequently, Lann continued to transmit messages for another four days, a time during which the marines became increasingly involved in the Dominican crisis.⁵

As the communication problem added to the difficulties the naval task force and the Embassy staff experienced in trying to coordinate plans for the possible evacuation of American nationals, the bloodletting in Santo Domingo continued. On Monday, 26 April, the Dominican Air Force renewed its attacks against rebel positions, and Wessin prepared to move his forces from San Isidro into the city. The *CEFA* commander and General de los Santos asked the Embassy for U.S. troops to help suppress the revolt, but



Dominican Crisis, 1965—1966

The *Boxer*, Commodore Dare's flagship



Dominican Crisis 1965-1966

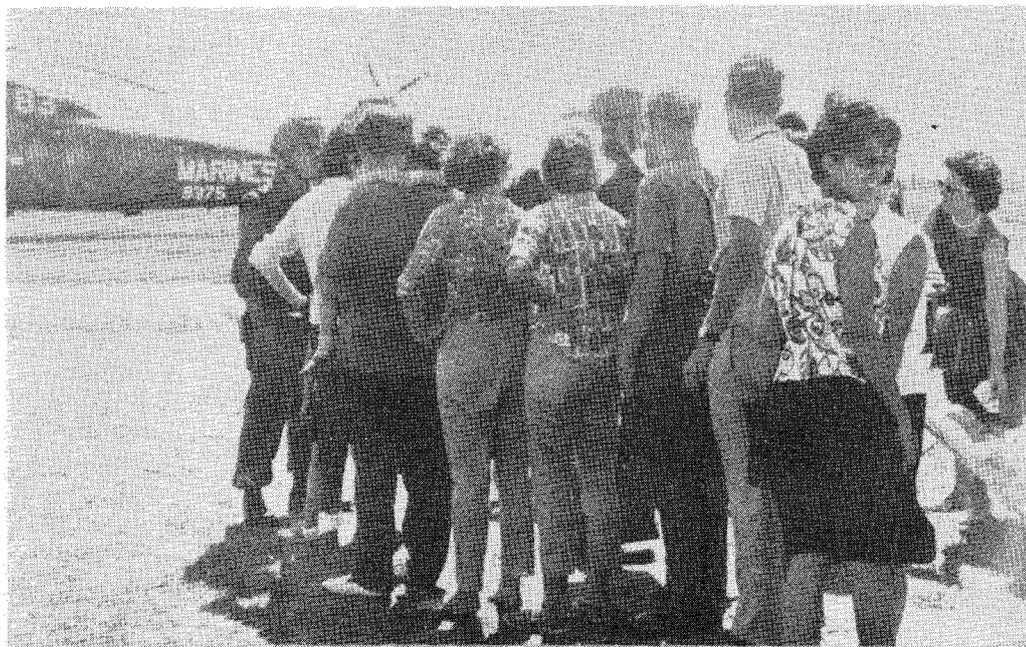
Rebels filling Molotov cocktails at a local gas station

their request was denied. Embassy officials warned State that there existed “a serious threat of a Communist takeover in this country, and very little time remains in which to act,” but they agreed with Washington that the situation did not require U.S. military intervention, especially in light of the adverse consequences such a move would have on U.S.-Latin American relations. To head off the Communists, the Embassy proposed instead a continuation of diplomatic efforts to encourage the military leaders on both sides to join in a junta pledged to free elections. Assuming that the rebels would be the more reluctant of the contending parties to accept this solution, the Embassy requested authorization to make the proposal to Molina and rebel officers in strong terms, backed if necessary by an American show of force.⁶

As it turned out, the Loyalist air strikes caused some Constitutionalist officers to approach the U.S. Embassy Monday with a request to arrange talks with the officers at San Isidro. During the course of the day, U.S. military attachés arranged four cease-fires but could not bring the two sides together. A renewal of the negotiations that had collapsed Sunday after the strafing of the Palace foundered for one simple reason that would surface repeatedly in the days ahead: whichever side thought itself to have the military advantage showed little inclination to negotiate with the other side. In their inability to arrange negotiations, Embassy officials glossed over this problem and blamed the impasse on the rebels, accusing them of using the brief cease-fires solely for the purpose of regrouping militarily.⁷ In the meantime, as each successive cease-fire broke down, the civil war gained in intensity, taking a high toll in Dominican lives.

With the streets of Santo Domingo becoming increasingly dangerous, Embassy personnel advised Americans in the country to prepare for evacuation. Mann, over Rusk's signature, instructed Connett to contact leaders on both sides of the civil war to obtain their cooperation in an immediate evacuation of American and foreign citizens. Monday afternoon, Connett met with rebel political leaders, while U.S. military attaches talked with officers on both sides. By evening, everyone had agreed to the Embassy's plan for evacuation. In brief, persons desiring to leave would congregate at the Hotel Embajador, a luxury accommodation in the suburbs of western Santo Domingo. From there, they would be taken by helicopter to U.S. naval vessels that would be allowed access to Haina, a port eight miles west of the city. In reporting the agreement to Washington, Connett recommended that the evacuation begin at daybreak, but State, citing JCS opposition to an immediate evacuation, suggested that the operation not begin until around noon. The Embassy countered by urging a midmorning operation. Connett also proposed another change in the evacuation plan: because of possible small-arms fire from rebel civilians in the area of the hotel, he recommended that helicopters not be used without first obtaining the Embassy's permission. State made no objection to the latter request but again insisted on beginning the operation at noon so that "developments next six to eight hours can be assessed."⁸

The debate over the timing of the evacuation reflected a difference in perspective between Washington decision makers and American officials in the field, a difference that is normally exacerbated during a crisis. To be sure, both groups were extremely concerned about the possibility of a Communist takeover in the Dominican Republic, and both were reluctant to countenance any overt American military intervention that would strain U.S.-Latin American relations and cast the United States in opposition to what was widely perceived as a democratic revolution. But officials in Santo Domingo, within earshot of the shooting and inundated with information (some substantiated, some not) of atrocities and Leftist machinations, perceived the situation in much more alarmist terms than did their counterparts in State, the JCS, and the White House—all far removed from the chaos and action. Washington demonstrated its relatively greater detachment by wanting to buy time in order to collect additional evidence and to give Loyalist forces a chance either to force cease-fire negotiations and the establishment of a temporary military government or to defeat the rebel movement and set up an exclusively Loyalist junta. Prior to his return to Santo Domingo, Ambassador Bennett met with the president, who reiterated that another Communist regime in the Caribbean was unacceptable and that the Embassy should promote a cease-fire and negotiations in order to prevent a second Cuba. The atmosphere in the White House appeared calm, with Johnson only mildly concerned with the prospects for a Communist takeover in the Dominican Republic. In Santo Domingo, Embassy personnel followed the president's instructions, although they were beginning to see little merit in a negotiated settlement. Given their perception of the increasingly Leftist composition of the Constitutionalist movement, they believed that negotiations would accomplish little except provide the rebels with a



Dominican Crisis, 1965—1966

American citizens line up to be evacuated from the Dominican Republic

respite during which they could consolidate their forces for the main battle to come.⁹

In the cable traffic between the Embassy and State's Operations Center, only the timing of an evacuation, not whether to conduct one, had been subject to debate. Foreign nationals wishing to leave the country began to assemble at the Hotel Embajador at daybreak Tuesday. That morning, TG 44.9 moved to within five miles of the Dominican coast, and the 6th MEU assumed a fifteen-minute alert status for evacuation operations. Before the operation could begin, though, a group of about fifty armed rebels, most of them young civilians, entered the hotel lobby about midmorning in search of an anti-Communist Dominican newsman. The journalist was not in the hotel, and the youths, before departing, took out their frustration by firing shots over the heads of the assembled Americans and by threatening some with execution. For the Americans at the Embajador, the episode was unnerving; in the eyes of U.S. officials, including President Johnson, it provided strong evidence that the rebel movement was getting out of control and raised again the ominous prospect that U.S. troops would have to be deployed to protect American lives.¹⁰

The evacuation began soon after the incident at the hotel. The JCS directed CINCLANT to order ships from TG 44.9 into Haina. The order moved down the chain of command, and two ships designated by Dare arrived at the harbor shortly after noon. A caravan of buses had already started carrying foreign nationals to the port, where a U.S. Marine control element supervised the evacuation. By early evening, over 1,000 foreign

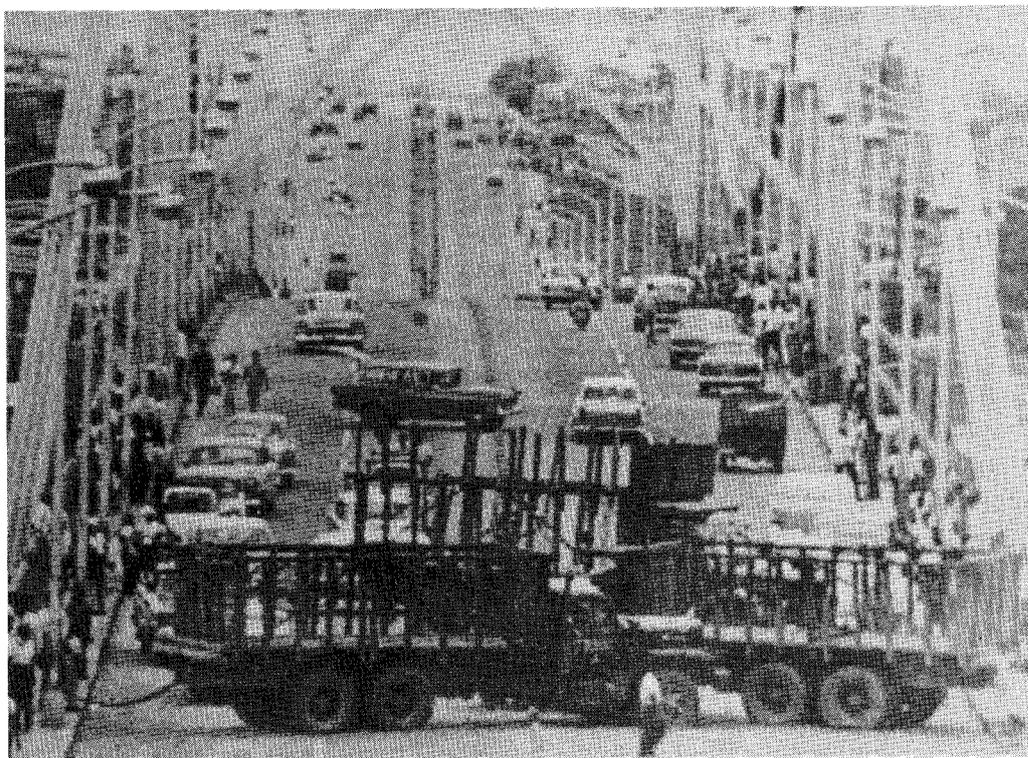
nationals were on their way to safety in San Juan, Puerto Rico.¹¹ The evacuation went without a hitch: neither side in the civil war interfered, and of the Americans who arrived at Haina, none had been physically harmed.

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While many foreigners were preparing to leave the Dominican Republic, Ambassador Bennett arrived back in the country. At the Santo Domingo airport, he was met by Colonel Daughtry, a fellow Georgian, and taken by helicopter to the *Boxer* for a brief conference with Dare. From this meeting, Bennett made his way to the Embassy via Haina. The briefing he received from his staff indicated that a military solution to the crisis might be at hand. The Mella Battalion at San Cristóbal, unwilling to accept the return of Bosch, had switched its support to the Loyalists and, under the command of General Salvador Augusto Montás Guerrero, was advancing on Santo Domingo from the west. Meanwhile, the strafing and naval bombardment of rebel positions in the capital had been followed by the long-awaited attack by Wessin's tanks, armored personnel carriers, and infantry from San Isidro. Moving under heavy fire across the Duarte bridge, the *CEFA* units engaged the enemy in what one chronicler has called "the bloodiest single battle in Dominican history," an action in which hundreds were killed or wounded. After Wessin's elite troops advanced several blocks into the city, rebel resis-



Dominican Crisis, 1965-1966

Rebels blocking the Duarte bridge to prevent Wessin's forces from entering the city

tance seemed on the verge of collapse, a prospect not in the least repugnant to Embassy officials who had probably approved the Loyalist plan.¹²

Loyalist military pressure prompted several rebel officers to visit the U.S. Embassy three times on Tuesday to request, as they had the previous day, American help in arranging cease-fire talks. During the first visit, the Embassy's military attachés contacted the Loyalists by radio and conveyed to each side the other's position. When a stalemate ensued over where to hold the proposed talks, the attachés refused to effect a compromise. Their instructions allowed them to encourage negotiations but not to enter the negotiating process. When the rebels returned to the Embassy early Tuesday afternoon, Bennett met with the officers. He told them directly that they bore responsibility for the "senseless slaughter" now taking place and that the "extreme left" was "taking full advantage of [the] situation." He reiterated that Washington preferred a cease-fire and the formation of an effective government and indicated that he was talking to both sides "in the same vein" to achieve those goals. Bennett concluded by citing the Loyalists' clear military advantage and urging the rebels "to capitulate and make [an] announcement so that [the] work of reconstruction could begin." At least one of the officers seemed receptive to this appeal. There followed a third visit by rebel military leaders in midafternoon, after which Molina Ureña agreed to come to the Embassy and confer with Bennett in person. The Constitutionlists were clearly desperate to negotiate a settlement.¹³

Following his return to the Embassy and prior to his meeting with Molina Ureña, Bennett informed State of his talk with the rebel officers, Wessin's military fortunes, and the Embassy's belief that Communists were calling the shots on the rebel side. Later, he also notified Washington that he had requested the *Boxer* and another ship to move within sight of land in order to demonstrate the U.S. presence and, by allowing the populace to see that the ships were not engaged in hostile activities, to quell rumors that the U.S. Navy was supporting the Loyalists. In carrying out the ambassador's instructions, Commodore Dare's subordinates had to maneuver their vessels through several Dominican corvettes, gunboats, and merchant ships. It was a precarious situation. "This show of force," Dare later wrote, "was conducted under circumstances which would turn any skipper's hair grey." He added that during the maneuver, "it seemed almost as though the Ambassador had the conn."¹⁴

By late afternoon, it appeared as though U.S. military measures, aside from the evacuation and show of force, would not be necessary. At 1600, "a nervous and dejected" Molina Ureña entered the American Embassy with fifteen to twenty of his political and military advisers. Bennett met for an hour with the group, whose main purpose was to have the ambassador serve as a mediator in arranging a negotiated settlement. Bennett told the Constitutionlist leaders that it was their action on Saturday that had "initiated this fratricide" and that the "senseless shedding of blood must end." The ambassador blamed the *PRD* for allowing the Communists to take advantage of the party's "legitimate movement" and denounced a variety of rebel activities including the incident at the Embajador. Citing

evidence of the Embassy's good faith, he reminded Molina Ureña that on Monday the staff had persuaded the Dominican Air Force on four different occasions not to bomb the rebels. What Bennett perhaps did not know was that the Constitutionlists had monitored telephone conversations between the Loyalists and the U.S. military attachés in which the Loyalists' plans for attacking rebel positions on Tuesday were discussed and at least tacitly approved by the attaches. When Connett later told rebel leaders that Embassy personnel knew nothing of such plans, he had unwittingly compromised the Embassy's credibility insofar as U.S. officials claimed to be neutral and evenhanded. Thus, Molina Ureña might have been disappointed, but could hardly have been surprised, when Bennett refused a request to use the Embassy's good offices to get negotiations under way. Bennett maintained that he lacked the authority to mediate, which was technically true,¹⁵ and that any "accord should be reached by Dominicans talking to Dominicans." President Johnson later wrote that Bennett's refusal to help negotiate was the ambassador's own decision but one in keeping with the general guidance he had received from State and with the U.S. policy of nonintervention.¹⁶

The meeting at the Embassy Tuesday afternoon has been the subject of much controversy, with Bennett being accused of deliberately scuttling a chance to end the civil war on terms short of a complete Loyalist victory, thus preventing further bloodshed or U.S. intervention. Possibly the meeting did represent a missed opportunity. But at the time, the absence of trust between U.S. officials and the rebels, the apparent lack of an acceptable middle ground between the warring sides, and the shared perception that Loyalist troops would soon defeat an increasingly Leftist-dominated force militated against an American diplomatic initiative, other than to suggest for the record that the two sides get together. Furthermore, even if Bennett had agreed to mediate, he would have had great difficulty in getting the Loyalists to agree to negotiate. With their offensive on the verge of success, there seemed little to talk about except a rebel surrender.

Facing imminent military defeat and dejected by Bennett's refusal to intercede on their behalf, Hernando Ramírez, Molina Ureña, and other "moderate" rebel leaders sought political asylum upon leaving the U.S. Embassy. When Bennett learned of this development, he concluded that the extreme Left would now seize complete control of the revolt. He would report to Washington the next morning that the fighting had become a "straight Communist and non-Communist struggle." In the days and weeks to come, the Johnson administration adhered undeviatingly to the line that Tuesday, 27 April, represented a critical turning point in the crisis, the point at which the Constitutionalist cause came under Communist domination. On Tuesday night, however, Bennett did not immediately perceive this as cause for undue alarm. In his report to State, he expressed the opinion that mopping-up operations by the Loyalists would soon end the radical threat. Responding to this optimistic assessment, State asked the Embassy to do what it could to prevent reprisals and atrocities by Loyalist forces. The department then sent a briefing paper to the White House predicting that Santo Do-

mingo would soon be in Wessin's hands. After discussing the report, LBJ and John McCone, who was serving his last day as director of the CIA, agreed that U.S. military intervention to restore order in the city would not be necessary. To American officials in Santo Domingo and Washington, the Dominican crisis seemed to be subsiding.¹⁷

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The optimism of Tuesday night was short lived, as the emotional roller coaster American officials had been riding since the outbreak of the revolt again took another downward plunge on Wednesday. The change in mood this time could be traced largely to one man, Colonel Francisco Caamaño Deño, the rebel officer who had arrested Reid on Sunday only to seek asylum himself later that day after the civil war broke out. His time in hiding was brief, and by Tuesday, he was in a position to accompany Molina to the meeting at the Embassy. Caamaño claimed later to have been insulted by what he considered to be Bennett's patronizing lecture. When Hernando, Molina, and other rebel leaders asked for asylum, Caamaño became the pro forma leader of the Constitutionalist forces. Few, if any, U.S. officials thought Caamaño a Communist, although there existed from the outset speculation—soon to become conviction—that his newfound leadership within the Constitutionalist movement was more nominal than real, given the restrictions placed on him by the radicals now seen to be in control of the revolt.

Caamaño did not have time for such speculation. Following the Embassy meeting, he had hastened to the rebel stronghold in Ciudad Nueva in southeast Santo Domingo, where, during the night of 27–28 April, he undertook the enormous tasks of regrouping rebel troops and planning a counterattack against Wessin's Loyalist forces. Additional weapons for the counterattack came from two police stations captured by the rebels on Wednesday morning. Caamaño participated in the attack on the first station; at the second, his followers executed the policemen captured when the station fell, an incident that would fuel doubts regarding Caamaño's actual control over the variety of armed groups in the city. A major counterattack



Dominican Crisis, 1965–1966

Rebels using captured cannons firing on government forces

against the Loyalists got under way soon thereafter. Wessin took the brunt of the attack and quickly discovered that his tanks worked to little advantage in the narrow streets of Ciudad Nueva.¹⁸

Embassy officials had yet to realize the full import of this turn of events when, on Wednesday morning, Bennett, acting on an "urgent request" from General de los Santos, asked State to seek immediate authorization for providing Loyalist forces with fifty U.S. walkie-talkies, then in storage at Ramey Air Force Base, Puerto Rico. The Loyalists needed the communications equipment to expedite what the ambassador called a "mopping up" operation. If Bennett did not yet grasp the magnitude of the rebel counterattack, he was aware that the Loyalist offensive had stalled of its own accord after its initial gains on Tuesday. Wessin had established positions on the west bank of the Ozama River but showed little inclination to expand his area of control. General Montás Guerrero, who had led the Mella Battalion into the fairgrounds in western Santo Domingo and had recaptured the Presidential Palace,¹⁹ had stopped his advance on Tuesday afternoon and had broken his force into small units, now scattered in unknown locations. Neither Wessin nor Montás had any clear idea of the opposition he faced, and neither man fully trusted the other. (One account suggests that Montás, a *Balaguerista*, stopped his drive because he "was suspicious of the course Wessin might follow, if victorious," and therefore wanted the *CEFA* commander to bear the brunt of the fighting.)²⁰ Prior to the rebel counterattack, the main problem facing Wessin and Montás, besides personal rivalry, was one of coordination and communication. Not only were their two forces out of touch, but they had no direct communications with Loyalist air and naval units either. When Bennett tried to resolve the problem, Washington turned him down. Mann directed only that walkie-talkies be sent to the *Boxer*, "just in case" the situation should deteriorate.²¹

That Caamaño's counterattack had caused the situation to deteriorate would not be fully appreciated in Washington until early Wednesday afternoon. In the meantime, Bennett reported that the Loyalists had announced formation of a military junta led by a Dominican Air Force officer, Colonel Pedro Bartolomé Benoit. In keeping with American wishes, the junta declared that its "principal purpose" was to prepare for elections and the return of a constitutional government.²²

Within minutes after reporting this development, Bennett cabled State with news that the two police stations had fallen. Two other messages followed within the hour. The second of the two reported that Ciudad Nueva was in rebel hands, although it did not elaborate the extent to which small houses had been turned into tiny fortresses, barricades were appearing at critical intersections, essential utilities had fallen under rebel control, and rebel patrols dominated the streets. The first and more detailed message again raised the walkie-talkie issue. Bennett now tried to impress upon Washington the seriousness of Loyalist reversals that morning. "It is our combined judgment that communications equipment is most critical lack in current situation" and "could well mean difference in results of present confrontation," he warned. The Loyalists, the ambassador continued after he



Col. Steven Butler

Aerial view of Ciudad Nueva

had outlined the military situation, “are not asking for offensive weapons, merely [the] means to talk.” Bennett expressed regret that “once again we have to rely on [a] military solution for political crisis engendered by the confused democratic left,” but he hastened to add that the “plain fact of situation is that . . . issue here now is fight between Castro-type elements and those who oppose it [*sic*].” In closing, Bennett indicated that he did not “wish to be over-dramatic, but if we deny simple communications equipment and [the] opposition to leftist takeover here loses . . . , we may very well be asking in near future for landing of Marines to protect U.S. citizens and possibly for other purposes. Which would Washington prefer?”²³

What the ambassador in good faith posed as a choice between troops or equipment soon became a package deal when, shortly before 1500, Colonel Benoit phoned the Embassy to request the landing of 1,200 marines “to help restore order to this country.” In a cable to State, Bennett did not endorse Benoit’s appeal; he agreed, instead, with the naval attaché’s caution that “Marines should not be used in any street-cleaning operations.” But the ambassador did indicate that Washington, still relying perhaps on the Embassy’s earlier, more optimistic, reports of that morning, might not have grasped the full gravity of the situation. A “severe test of nerves” was in progress, he reported, and the military attachés considered the outcome “still

in doubt." Bennett now suggested that State "may want to do some contingency planning in case situation should break apart and deteriorate rapidly to extent we should need Marines in a hurry to protect American citizens."²⁴

On receiving Bennett's message, Bundy telephoned Mann to discuss the possibility of U.S. intervention. Although both stated their aversion to sending marines into the country, they based their view, as Bennett feared, on the erroneous belief that the military edge still belonged to the Loyalist junta. Mann found the Embassy's pessimistic assessment of Loyalist chances difficult to believe, but he agreed with Bundy that the president needed to be briefed that afternoon on the changing situation. As a result of their conversation, Bundy authorized providing Loyalist forces the walkie-talkies, whereupon Mann requested that General Wheeler arrange for the equipment to be airlifted to Santo Domingo.²⁵ Meanwhile, Washington officials monitoring the crisis waited apprehensively for further word from Santo Domingo.

Their fears proved well founded. As President Johnson and his advisers met late Wednesday afternoon to discuss the U.S. buildup in Vietnam and the Dominican crisis, two cables, CRITIC FOUR and CRITIC FIVE, arrived from Bennett within half an hour of each other. The first telegram simply relayed the junta's plea for "unlimited and immediate military assistance" from the United States to keep the Dominican Republic from becoming another Cuba. In the second cable, which reached the White House at 1715, Bennett reported that the situation was "deteriorating rapidly." The MAAG chief, who had that day returned from Panama and visited San Isidro, had informed him that the general atmosphere among the Loyalist leaders was "dejected and emotional, with [a] number of officers weeping" and Benoit claiming that without U.S. help, the officers would "have to quit." In view of these developments, the Country Team had reached the unanimous conclusion that the "time has come to land the Marines." Bennett's final sentence was unequivocal: "I recommend immediate landing."²⁶

The desperate situation depicted by Bennett left the president and his advisers little choice but to accede to the ambassador's wishes. Johnson told McNamara to alert the forces in the area for possible landing. Mann also telephoned Wheeler with news of LBJ's instructions to "go ahead." At 1746, both Dare and the commander of Caribbean Sea Frontier (COMCARIBSEAFRON), who had operational control over TG 44.9, received instructions to alert the marines for possible landing and to await further word. At 1800, after McNamara informed Johnson that the troops were ready to move, the president authorized the landing of 500 marines for defensive operations. He also instructed specific advisers to notify the OAS regarding U.S. intentions, to arrange a meeting with congressional leaders, and to draft a statement he could read to the American people.²⁷

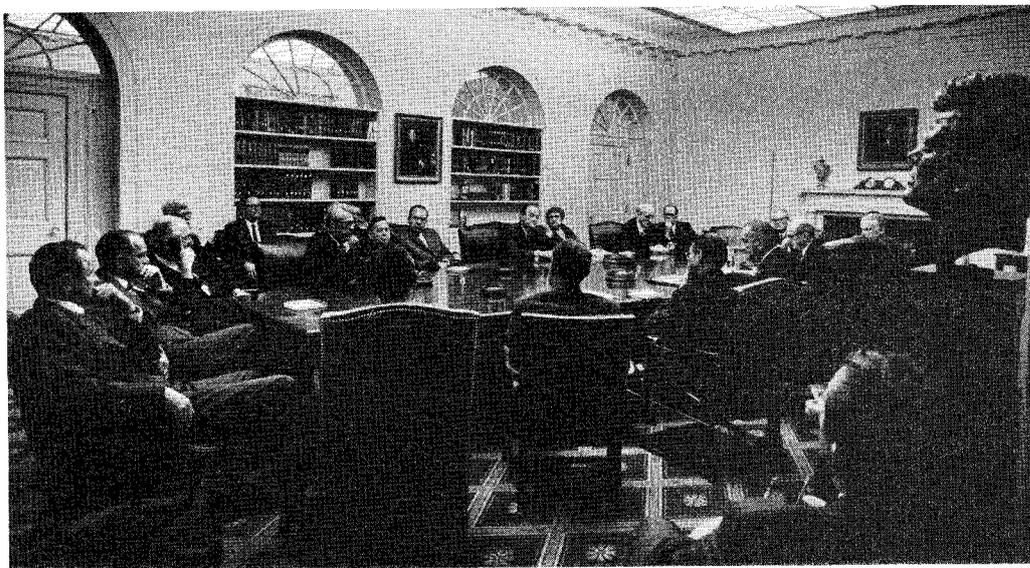
The content of the presidential statement became the subject of some debate. Secretary Rusk wanted to make at least passing reference to the Communist threat as a rationale for the troop movement. Other advisers, including Bundy and UN Ambassador Adlai Stevenson, argued that the

president should not go beyond the need to protect American lives in explaining his decision. An intervention to safeguard U.S. citizens could be justified as a limited operation that would in no way compromise the claim to neutrality the United States had staked out for public consumption; intervention "to restore order" and prevent a Communist victory would almost certainly involve the United States in openly pro-Loyalist activities likely to be condemned throughout the hemisphere as a return to gunboat diplomacy in support of a military regime. The Bundy-Stevenson view prevailed in drafting the statement but created certain problems. To provide a legal justification for intervention, the president's advisers wanted Benoit, whose junta Washington virtually regarded as the acting government of the Dominican Republic, to state explicitly that his request for intervention was based on the danger to Americans, a threat to which Benoit had made no reference in his original request for U.S. troops. Bennett had already assured Mann that Benoit had raised the issue of American lives in oral communications with Embassy personnel, but Mann told the ambassador that only a written statement from the junta leader would satisfy Washington's requirements. Presumably, Benoit would be given to understand that the debarkation of marines would be conditional on receiving such a statement.²⁸

At 1929, just minutes after Johnson, McNamara, Rusk, Ball, Bundy, Stevenson, and the new director of central intelligence, William Raborn, began briefing congressional leaders, an Embassy cable, CRITIC SIX, arrived in Washington. In the message, Bennett indicated that the Dominican police chief had informed the Embassy that "he can no longer guarantee safety [of] Americans en route [to] evacuation area." Bennett went on to explain that Benoit was sixteen miles away at San Isidro and could not be contacted except over an "open channel." For that reason, the ambassador was sending the Embassy's air attaché to obtain the statement required by Washington. "I have no doubt whatever he will give it," Bennett asserted. Benoit made good the ambassador's prediction. "Regarding my earlier request," he wrote, "I wish to add that American lives are in danger and conditions of public disorder make it impossible to provide adequate protection. I therefore ask you for temporary intervention and assistance to restore public order in this country." The air attaché returned to the Embassy with the statement at midnight, hours after Johnson had met with congressional leaders and addressed the American people.²⁹

At the time these presidential actions were taking place, over 500 combat marines had already landed in the Dominican Republic. For most of the Leathernecks, the trip from the *Boxer* to the polo field near the Hotel Embajador had been made by helicopters at dusk or in the pitch black of a rainy night. It was an impressive transit, in contrast to the confusion that characterized the coordination and control of the troop commitment all along the chain of command.

The landing of marines on the 28th took place in two phases. The first involved bringing several small units ashore to establish a landing zone in the polo field, to help evacuate Americans still gathering at the hotel, and



President Johnson briefs congressional leaders on the Dominican Crisis, 28 April 1965

to reinforce the Embassy security guard consisting of seven marines and thirty-six Dominican policemen who had sought refuge at the compound from armed mobs. A pathfinder element, military police, and a platoon of unarmed marines would be used for the polo field and hotel operations; a platoon of armed marines, reinforced by two squads, would follow for use at the Embassy. The request for these initial units went directly from Bennett to Dare, the commodore being contacted at some time between 1722 and 1745, that is, before President Johnson had authorized the large-scale landing of combat troops. The available evidence does not indicate whether Bennett or Dare required or received authorization to commit these initial units—which included the armed platoon—prior to being notified of the president's decision to commit the much larger force. Dare apparently assumed the ambassador had received such authorization, although a draft Defense Department statement indicates that Bennett's request was a "local initiative." Bennett no doubt believed that his actions were in keeping with the evacuation procedures still under way and that reports reaching him that the evacuation area and the Embassy compound were under sniper fire required him to dictate emergency measures on his own authority.

Just when Washington found out about the initial landing is uncertain. Embassy officials, in an hour-long teleconference with key State Department officials that began at 1830, referred to the landing of marines at the polo field and to the arrival of the armed platoon at the Embassy in terms that indicated State had prior knowledge of these movements. Yet Bennett's CRITIC SIX, which was dispatched at 1902, made no mention of his request to Dare. The first mention the ambassador made of the request came in a Flash cable sent to State at 1915 in which he said, in part, "I have *just* asked Boxer to provide helicopter evacuation" and Embassy security. (Italics

mine.) In explaining his reasons for doing so, Bennett stated that "I hope this action will give some heart to loyal forces." That this telegram was dispatched over an hour after the request had been made and granted can perhaps be attributed to the overloaded communications network at the Embassy, which delayed even the transmission of Flash messages.³⁰

As the evacuation and security units requested by Bennett were en route to the polo field, Dare received a directive from CINCLANT through COMCARIBSEAFRON that instructed him to land whatever marines Bennett requested. This directive stemmed from Johnson's decision concerning the 500 marines, and Colonel Daughtry immediately contacted Bennett to discuss what measures to implement. Having already asked for immediate intervention in CRITIC FIVE, Bennett took only three minutes to decide in favor of landing more combat troops. Daughtry conferred with Dare, after which two rifle companies of the 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, and an advance echelon of the battalion headquarters began moving ashore. By 1900, over 100 marines in this second phase had landed; more would follow.³¹

The timing here is again revealing in terms of coordination and communication. At 1921, well after the second phase of the landing was under way, the JCS directed that Dare *prepare* to land marines should the ambassador so request. Apparently, having alerted the marines to the possibility of intervention as Johnson was deciding the issue, the JCS had not been informed later that the operation was under way. Once they learned that several hundred armed marines were in fact landing at the polo field, the Joint Chiefs tried to get what information they could. Again, for reasons that cannot be fully documented, when they informed the president, presumably through McNamara, of the number of marines ashore, their count was inaccurate. When the president addressed the nation shortly before 2100, he stated that 400, not the actual 536, marines had landed. The Department of Defense daily report for the Dominican Republic for 28 April also lists only 400 marines on land in and around Santo Domingo.³²

The significance of the problems surrounding the landing of combat troops in the Dominican Republic should not be exaggerated. The confusion caused by inadequate communications, poor coordination, and the frenzied activities of key decision makers under stressful conditions had little impact on events of the 28th: the president had decided that armed marines would go ashore, and before midnight, they had. But the confusion revealed some shortcomings in the administration's crisis management system. How could the president and his principal advisers in Washington exert tight control over the situation if they could not receive timely and accurate information from the field? For their part, the JCS, in future directives to the unified commands and other military elements connected with the crisis, insisted that no action be taken without an appropriate execution order and that all deployments be reported to the Pentagon immediately.

The administration soon confronted another problem that called into question its ability to manage the crisis. To avoid antagonizing Latin American allies and to maintain the pretext of U.S. neutrality, the president,

as noted previously, justified the Marine landings solely in terms of "protecting American lives." Reporters arriving in Dominican waters the next day soon had reason to challenge the official position on the crisis and the landings. Aboard the *Wood County*, they overheard radio conversations between Bennett and Benoit in which the Embassy seemed to be promising the junta communications equipment, food, and other supplies, despite the proclaimed neutrality of the United States. At one point, Bennett was reported to have told Benoit, "Do you need more aid?" and "Believe that with determination your plans will succeed." When the reporters went aboard the *Boxer* to be briefed by Dare, the commodore told them that marines would stay ashore as long as necessary to "keep this a non-Communist government." For many in the audience, this was the first hint that in sending troops ashore, the administration had motives other than the safety of U.S. nationals.³³ From these early discrepancies between official pronouncements and military behavior, there emerged a "credibility gap" that would set much of the media against the administration for the duration of the Dominican crisis—and beyond. It was inevitable that at some point the military would become a part of that confrontation.

Of more immediate concern to the military were the implications implicit in the problems encountered in command, control, and communications procedures during the Marine landings. If that much confusion surrounded the task of putting 536 marines ashore, what would happen if those troops had to be reinforced, not only by the remaining marines in the 6th MEU but by U.S. Army and Air Force units as well? In short, could the military mount an effective joint operation should the situation warrant it? To this question, anyone taking part in the planning then under way for just such a contingency would have been hard pressed to give an affirmative reply.
