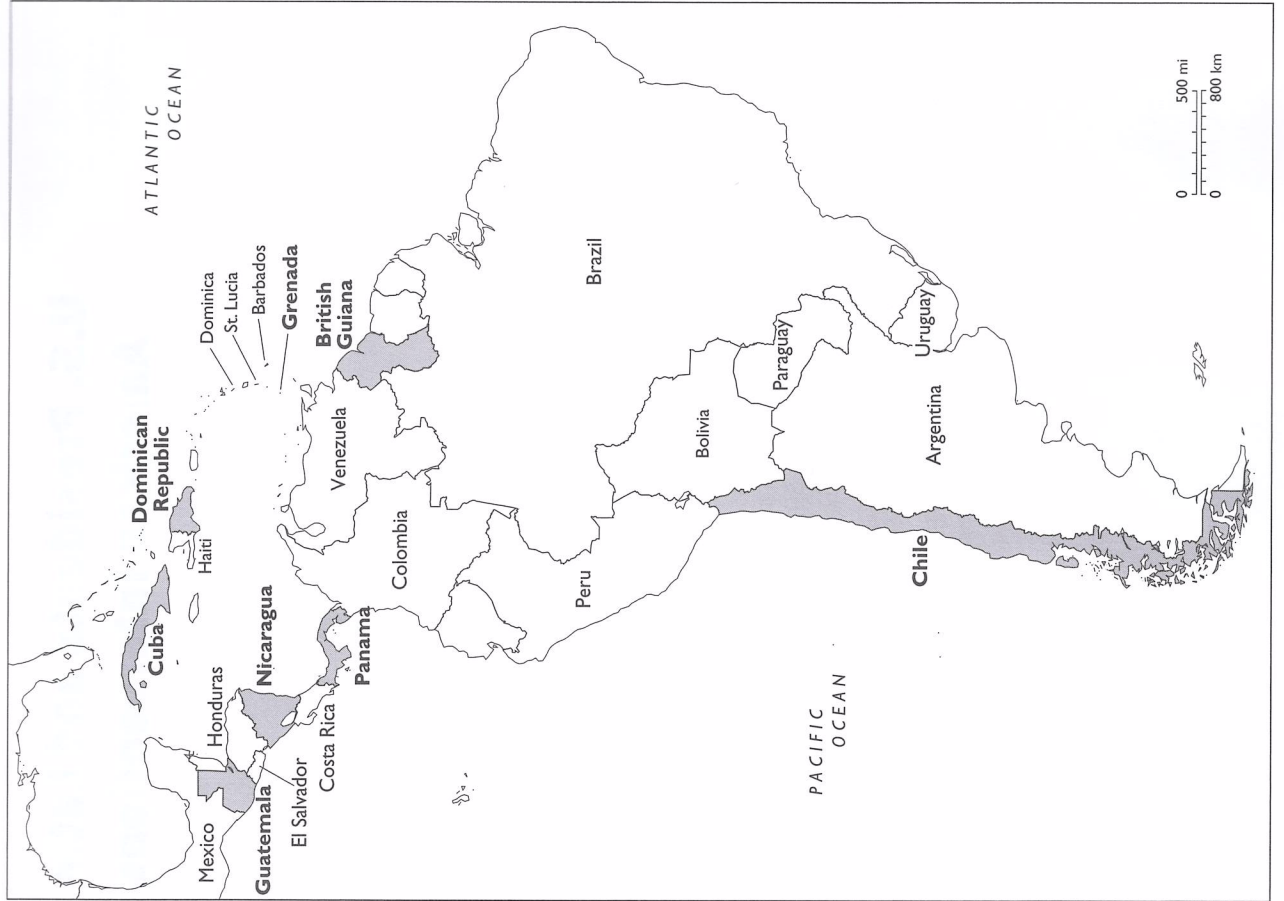


U.S. Presidents and Latin American Interventions

Pursuing Regime Change in the Cold War

Michael Grow



hemisphere. In a 1990 seminar on the Guiana intervention sponsored by the editors of the *Nation*, he explained that “there was a great feeling after the Bay of Pigs, where the impression arose that Eisenhower had prepared an expedition to get rid of Castro, that Kennedy had lacked the resolution to follow through on it. It was just politically going to look very bad if the dominoes began to fall in South America.”⁵⁶ When subsequently asked to assess the relative extent to which factors of economics, security, ideology, and politics influenced the U.S. decision to intervene in Guiana, Schlesinger responded that

Kennedy wanted to avoid the domestic political consequences of a communist state on the mainland of South America. Cuba was bad enough, and another communist gain would have played into the hands of the Republicans. Barry Goldwater seems a rather sensible fellow today; but take a look at his book of 1962 *Why Not Victory?* and you will understand the national mood that JFK had to take into consideration. I do not think Kennedy otherwise gave a damn about British Guiana. There were no persuasive “economic, security or ideological” reasons for us to care.⁵⁷

By the time Jagan was maneuvered out of office in December 1964, Lyndon Johnson had succeeded Kennedy as president and a new Labour government headed by Harold Wilson had come to power in Great Britain. Shortly before taking office, Wilson had attacked the Guianese election plan as “a fiddled constitutional arrangement,” raising fears in Washington that his government might renege on Macmillan’s commitment to oust Jagan. U.S. concern centered on the possibility that Wilson might postpone the Guiana election or simply grant the colony immediate independence with Jagan still in power. The latter step, a National Security Council paper warned the president, would only intensify fears in U.S. public opinion that British Guiana was about to become “a second communist beach head in the hemisphere.” “This would have most unfortunate consequences in the U.S.,” it noted. In response, the White House moved quickly to discourage Wilson’s government from taking any steps that would “cause our BG policy to slip off the tracks at this late stage.” In separate talks with Wilson and Foreign Minister Patrick Gordon Walker in late 1964, Johnson personally asked the new British leaders “not [to] change the election schedule or procedures.” Wilson complied, and the arrangements for Jagan’s electoral overthrow proceeded as planned.⁵⁸

Johnson had more daunting problems to deal with, however. During his first eighteen months as president, he learned that without a large-scale U.S. military intervention South Vietnam would soon fall to the communists and that hemispheric allies Brazil and the Dominican Republic were about to become “new Cubas” in Latin America.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dominican Republic, 1965

The last thing Lyndon Johnson needed was an international crisis—in Latin America or anywhere else. Johnson’s focus was on domestic affairs, and it was there that he intended to make his mark as president. Elevated to office by Kennedy’s November 1963 assassination, he immediately laid out an ambitious political agenda for himself: first, to win a full four-year term of his own in 1964, and then to establish his historical reputation as a great president by carrying out the most extensive program of domestic social reforms since Franklin D. Roosevelt. Included among the Great Society reform programs that Johnson hoped to steer through Congress were civil-rights and voting-rights laws, antipoverty and jobs programs, guaranteed health care for the poor and elderly, federal aid to education, and initiatives to clean up the environment and beautify the nation. As far as foreign policy problems and international crises were concerned, Johnson regarded them essentially as unwelcome distractions from the challenges of constructing his Great Society at home. As a White House assistant observed early in his presidency, Johnson “would chop off the rest of the world if he could” in order to devote his full attention to domestic policy issues. He “wishes the rest of the world would go away and we could get ahead with the real needs of Americans,” another aide noted.¹

But the rest of the world would not go away. From the moment Johnson entered office, Vietnam intruded into virtually every aspect of his domestic political agenda. Within days of Kennedy’s assassination, Johnson’s national security advisers were warning him that a South Vietnamese military collapse was imminent and that the small southeast Asian ally would soon become a Communist-controlled state unless the United States intervened. “It’s going to hell in a handbasket out there,” Johnson told an aide after being briefed by the U.S. ambassador in Saigon, Henry Cabot Lodge, less than a week into his presidency. “If we don’t do something, [Lodge] says, it’ll go under—any day.”² The principal danger, Johnson learned, was that a communist victory in Vietnam would undermine U.S. international credibility. According to the CIA, the fall of South Vietnam would be “profoundly damaging” to U.S. international prestige “and would seriously debase the credibility of U.S. will and capability to contain the spread of communism elsewhere. . . . Our enemies would be encouraged and there would be an increased tendency among other states to move toward a greater degree of accommodation with the Communists.” “If we leave Vietnam with our tail between our legs,” the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff warned, “the consequences of this defeat in the rest of Asia, Africa, and Latin America would be disastrous.”³

Johnson was reluctant to order a major deployment of U.S. military forces to Vietnam, fearing that to do so would divert public attention and budgetary resources from his Great Society initiatives at home.⁴ Other political considerations, however, argued in favor of an expanded U.S. military commitment, and those considerations ultimately proved decisive in his calculations.

For Johnson, communist expansionism in Vietnam was not only a challenge to U.S. international credibility—it was a test of his administration's credibility and of his personal credibility as president. From the start, he worried that if he allowed Vietnam to "go under," the Soviets and Chinese would conclude that his administration was weak. "They'll think with Kennedy dead we've lost heart," he told White House assistant Bill Moyers in late November 1963; "they'll think we're yellow and don't mean what we say. . . . They'll be taking the measure of us. They'll be wondering just how far they can go." Worse still, the communists would conclude that the new president personally lacked mettle. According to Johnson, "The whole Communist world was watching to see any sign of weakness or temporizing or compromising or running on the part of the President. . . . If I'd let [communist aggression in Vietnam] go unchallenged, they'd have said, 'Well, he's a weak sister. He hasn't got any steel in his spine, and hell, we don't need to pay any attention to him. He's a pushover.'"⁵

Johnson was well aware that an image of international weakness could also have devastating domestic political repercussions. He feared that the loss of Vietnam to communism, and the conservative political firestorm that would inevitably follow, would undermine his ability to function effectively as president—just as the loss of China in 1949 and the angry right-wing backlash that it provoked had crippled an earlier Democratic president's political fortunes.⁶ As Johnson later explained to historian Doris Kearns:

I knew that if we let Communist aggression succeed in taking over South Vietnam, there would follow in this country an endless national debate—a mean and destructive debate—that would shatter my Presidency, kill my administration, and damage our democracy. I knew that Harry Truman and Dean Acheson had lost their effectiveness from the day that the Communists took over in China. I believed that the loss of China had played a large role in the rise of Joe McCarthy. And I knew that all these problems, taken together, were chickenshit compared with what might happen if we lost Vietnam.⁷

If he abandoned Vietnam to the communists, Johnson told a newspaper publisher in February 1964, the Republicans would have a field day: "God Almighty, what they said about us [Democrats] leaving China would just be warming up, compared to what they'd say now." His political concerns were more than hypothetical. By early 1964, prospective Republican presidential nominees Richard Nixon and Barry Goldwater were already attacking him for his lack of firmness in

Vietnam and for "napping" while the situation "drift[ed] toward disaster." From the start, Johnson recognized that the loss of Vietnam could undermine him politically.⁸

Above all, however, Johnson was afraid that if he failed to defend South Vietnam aggressively he would lose his effectiveness with Congress and be unable to obtain passage of the Great Society reform programs on which his dreams of presidential greatness rested. To successfully move his reform legislation through Congress, Johnson knew that he needed cooperation from conservative southern Democrats and Republicans—groups that, as historian H. W. Brands notes, "did not take kindly to weakness in Vietnam." If he let South Vietnam fall to the communists, he would only provoke the wrath of powerful conservatives who controlled the key committees that would approve or defeat his legislative proposals. To hold back from full-scale U.S. military involvement in Vietnam, Johnson concluded, would ultimately doom his Great Society to defeat.⁹ "If I don't go in now," he said, "and they show later that I should have gone, then they'll be all over me in Congress. They won't be talking about my civil-rights bill or education or beautification. No sir, they'll push Vietnam up my ass every time. Vietnam. Vietnam. Vietnam. Right up my ass."¹⁰

If Vietnam wouldn't go away, neither would Latin America. Less than two months into Johnson's presidency, a wave of violent anti-U.S. rioting broke out in Panama. The instigators were Panamanian students protesting the hegemonic U.S. presence in their country, but LBJ interpreted the riots as another challenge by the forces of international communism, in this case "Fidel Castro, working closely with the Panamanian Communist party." Although U.S. military forces from the Canal Zone managed to restore order after three days of fighting, Johnson was only partially relieved. "We had passed our first test in Latin America," he later recalled, "but I knew it would not be the last. Castro certainly had not abandoned his plans for testing the United States and its new President."¹¹

Three months later, Johnson's national-security advisers informed him that Brazil was in danger of falling under communist control. The cause of U.S. concern was a recent leftward tilt by Brazil's populist president, João Goulart. A wealthy ranch owner, Goulart had built a successful political career by cultivating the workers in Brazil's docile, state-controlled trade union movement. As president, however, he found his moderately nationalistic and mildly redistributionist programs blocked at every turn by Brazil's conservative-dominated congress. Meanwhile, his traditional power base in organized labor was growing increasingly unmanageable as communists and other radical organizers fought to free the trade union movement from its clientelistic subordination to the state. In early 1964, Goulart moved leftward in a search for political support. Working closely with radical labor leaders and left-wing nationalists, he attempted to mobilize Brazil's

working-class masses as a support base for his stalemated government.¹² At a massive public rally in Rio de Janeiro in mid-March—with prominent leftist leaders seated conspicuously on the platform behind him—Goulart decreed limited land expropriations and urban rent controls, nationalized Brazil's privately owned oil refineries, and called for large-scale agrarian reform and the enfranchisement of illiterates. Other speakers demanded the legalization of Brazil's communist party and the replacement of the Brazilian Congress by "a popular Congress made up of laborers, peasants . . . and authentic men of the people." Following the rally, the Brazilian communist party announced that it had adopted "a position of firm support for President Goulart."¹³ To many observers, Brazil's leader appeared to be recklessly gambling that he could harness the forces of the radical Left to his faltering populist regime without becoming their prisoner. Anticipating a disastrous outcome, nervous Brazilian conservatives cautioned Goulart to heed the ancient Chinese proverb: "He who rides the tiger dare not dismount."¹⁴

U.S. officials thought the odds favored the tiger. By late March, the State Department had concluded that Goulart was planning to nullify Brazil's constitution and establish "an authoritarian regime politically far to the left," after which his Marxist supporters would muscle him aside and seize complete control of the government.¹⁵ "My considered conclusion," ambassador Lincoln Gordon reported on March 28, "is that Goulart is now definitely engaged on a campaign to seize dictatorial power, accepting the active collaboration of the Brazilian Communist Party and of other radical left revolutionaries to this end. If he were to succeed it is more than likely that Brazil would come under full Communist control, even though Goulart might hope to turn against his Communist supporters on the Peronist model which I believe he personally prefers. A desperate lunge for totalitarian power might be made at any time," Gordon warned.¹⁶

In the White House, Johnson and his advisers were prepared to take any action necessary to prevent a communist takeover. Brazil, after all, was no mere Guiana or Guatemala. Brazil was the fifth-largest country in the world. It was endowed with enormous resources. It held a commanding geostrategic position in the South Atlantic. It bordered on ten other Latin American states. In short, Brazil's loss to communism would have strategic consequences "far greater than the loss of South Vietnam." And the political consequences would be nothing short of catastrophic. In Johnson's view, the loss of Brazil would be the equivalent not just of "another Cuba" but of "another China" in the Western Hemisphere.¹⁷

Nevertheless, U.S. policy makers had reason to believe that unilateral U.S. action would not be necessary. For several weeks, right-wing Brazilian military leaders had been confidentially telling U.S. officials in Brazil that the armed forces would soon move forcefully to end Goulart's dalliance with the Left. On March 31, Brazilian army units launched a coup d'état to remove Goulart from power. Seeing the unfolding coup as "an opportunity . . . that may not recur," Johnson instructed his advisers to "take every step we can" to assure its success. Within hours,

a powerful U.S. aircraft-carrier task force was headed for the Brazilian coast to demonstrate visible U.S. support for the coup and to provide air support and troops if needed. In addition, the Pentagon made preparations to deliver some 550,000 barrels of emergency fuel supplies and 110 tons of weapons and ammunition to the Brazilian armed forces to sustain them in the event of a lengthy civil war. As it turned out, however, no U.S. assistance was needed. Within days, Goulart fled the country, the military took control of the Brazilian government, and the Pentagon canceled its military support operations before U.S. forces and supplies reached their destination. Johnson had been fully prepared to carry out a large-scale U.S. military intervention—one that quite likely would have been "the largest in the history of the Western Hemisphere," according to historian Gaddis Smith. But in the end, Brazil's generals took care of the problem on their own.¹⁸

Thirteen months later, Johnson learned that "Castroite Communists" were about to seize control of the Dominican Republic. In April 1965, supporters of former president Juan Bosch—a democratically elected reformer who had been ousted by conservative military forces in 1963—launched a revolution aimed at restoring him to power. On April 25, pro-Bosch military officers and representatives of Bosch's Dominican Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Dominicana, or PRD) seized the presidential palace in Santo Domingo and announced plans to bring Bosch back from exile to reestablish his constitutional government. As rebel troops occupied the capital, the country's three small Marxist political parties declared their support for the pro-Bosch, or "constitutionalist," revolution. Almost immediately, however, conservative (or "loyalist") military forces counterattacked in an effort to prevent Bosch—who as president had sought to subordinate the armed forces to civilian control and curb military corruption—from regaining power. Army units from the San Isidro military base outside Santo Domingo began moving into the capital, while air force pilots strafed the presidential palace and naval commanders threatened to bombard the city. By the afternoon of April 27, the constitutionalist rebels were calling for a cease-fire and appeared ready to abandon their revolution. That night, however, a few rebel military commanders rallied their forces in a desperate, last-ditch defense of the revolutionary cause. In "the bloodiest single battle in Dominican history," rebel partisans led by Col. Francisco Caamaño Deño drove the conservative military forces out of the capital. By the twenty-eighth, rebel forces had regained their momentum, the demoralized loyalist military had retreated back to San Isidro, and Juan Bosch was preparing to return home from exile to reclaim his government.¹⁹

From the start, U.S. officials in Santo Domingo interpreted the constitutionalist uprising as the potential prelude to a communist takeover. Embassy reporting focused on the presence of Marxists within the rebel ranks, warning that the rebel-

lion's PRDista leadership was in danger of being pushed aside, and the rebellion taken over, by radical elements. On the afternoon of April 25, shortly after the revolt began, the embassy cabled Washington that "all members of country team feel strongly it would be against U.S. interests for Bosch [to] return to DomRep and resume power at this time especially in view of extremist participation in coup and announced Communist advocacy of Bosch's return." U.S. military attachés, the embassy added, "have already stressed . . . our strong feeling" to the country's anti-Bosch military leaders "that everything possible should be done to prevent a Communist takeover."²⁰ Meanwhile, the local CIA station was transmitting alarmist reports of "significant Communist participation" on the rebel side. According to CIA reports, fourteen known "Dominican Communists" were in the rebel-held presidential palace holding discussions with PRD leaders, at least two of whom were themselves possible "Communist sympathizers," while in the streets, "trained communist guerrilla fighters" were organizing popular resistance, distributing weapons, and forming paramilitary commando units. As the fighting intensified, both the embassy and the CIA station filed frightening reports of radical "Castroite" behavior on the constitutionalist side: bearded men with machine guns had appeared on rebel television "spouting pure Castroism" and providing instructions in the making of Molotov cocktails; captured policemen were being placed, Cuban-style, against a *paredón* (wall) and shot; the severed heads of murdered loyalists were being paraded through the streets.²¹

On April 28, after rebel forces turned back the loyalist military advance and the tide of battle suddenly turned in their favor, U.S. ambassador William Tapley Bennett informed Washington that the situation was deteriorating rapidly. Loyalist forces were "tired . . . discouraged . . . [and] disorganized," he reported, while at San Isidro the general atmosphere was "dejected and emotional, with [a] number of officers weeping." On the rebel side, many moderate PRD leaders had abandoned the struggle on the twenty-seventh, when defeat seemed certain, and, according to Bennett, Marxist activists had filled the leadership vacuum. "Leadership of rebellious forces," he cabled Washington, was "now clearly extreme left, Castro-type with some befuddled military officers." "The issue here now," he stated categorically, "is a fight between Castro-type elements and those who oppose." Bennett recommended that "serious thought be given in Washington to armed intervention which would go beyond the mere protection of Americans." If loyalist forces failed to defeat the constitutionalists, he warned, "power will be assumed by groups clearly identified with the Communist party." "My own recommendation and that of [the] country team," he concluded, "is that we should intervene to prevent another Cuba from arising out of the ashes of this uncontrollable situation." Within hours, Johnson landed a 1,500-man Marine Corps expeditionary unit in Santo Domingo.²²

The Marines were deployed primarily for psychological effect rather than for combat purposes. U.S. officials hoped that the arrival of U.S. troops would boost

the loyalists' sagging morale and encourage them to resume offensive military operations against the constitutionalists. Such hopes quickly faded. Instead of launching an offensive, loyalist forces remained inactive, apparently concluding that they could now "safely withdraw from the frontline" and let U.S. forces reestablish order. By April 29, U.S. officials in Santo Domingo were painting an increasingly bleak picture of the situation. Communist-led mob violence was spreading, and rebel atrocities were increasing, embassy and CIA cables reported. According to the embassy, the rebels were gaining rapidly in confidence and firepower; they were reportedly capturing police strongholds throughout the capital and distributing weapons to street followers in preparation for a decisive assault on San Isidro. Ambassador Bennett estimated that rebel forces numbered approximately 1,500 paramilitaries "under the direct leadership of experienced Communist-trained fighters," along with nearly 1,000 pro-Bosch army troops, and between 1,000 and 4,000 young "hangers-on." Arrayed against that communist-led insurrectionary force, he reported, were a mere 1,700 loyalist troops scattered at locations in and around the city, troops that in Bennett's view probably lacked the will "to see this thing through." Against the backdrop of Bennett's increasingly pessimistic cables, the CIA now confirmed that as many as eight of the rebels' top leadership posts were held by communists.²³

Based on these reports, the White House quickly ordered a massive deployment of U.S. military forces to Santo Domingo. In the early hours of April 30, units of the U.S. Army's 82nd Airborne Division began landing at San Isidro. Within days, nearly 23,000 U.S. troops were in the country carrying out a full-scale military intervention. First, U.S. forces set up a defense perimeter around San Isidro to secure the base from rebel attack. They then advanced into Santo Domingo, cutting a military corridor through the heart of the city that split the constitutionalist forces in two. Confronted by insurmountable U.S. firepower, rebel leaders agreed to a truce in early May. Four months later—wary, demoralized, and besieged by U.S. and loyalist forces—they accepted a U.S.-brokered peace agreement that left power largely in the hands of Dominican conservatives.²⁴

What Johnson did not know was that his decision to intervene had been made on the basis of inaccurate information. From the start, the embassy and CIA station grossly exaggerated the extent of communist influence in the rebellion. The three small Marxist-Leninist organizations that supported the constitutionalist side—the Popular Socialist Party (Partido Socialista Popular), the 14th of June Revolutionary Movement (Movimiento Revolucionario 14 de Junio), and the Dominican People's Movement (Movimiento Popular Dominicana)—had few members, fewer weapons, no charismatic leaders, and little popular support; they were also wracked by bitter internal divisions within their ranks. They participated in the fighting. They helped mobilize the residents of Santo Domingo's lower-class *barrios*. They may have been partially responsible for some of the isolated atrocities and occasional excesses of "popular justice" that occurred during the fighting.

And their spokesmen occasionally appeared on rebel television. But Dominican Marxists exercised little influence within the constitutionalist leadership and certainly never dominated the rebel movement. From the uprising's inception down to the final peace settlement, civilian moderates and anticommunist military officers remained in control of the movement. Weak and divided, with only "a handful of leaders and a few hundred followers," the Dominican Republic's "communists" had little prospect of emerging as the revolution's vanguard. As Juan Bosch later remarked, "There were not enough communists in my country to run a good hotel, let alone the country."²⁵

Why then did U.S. officials overstate the communists' influence so fervidly in their field reports? In part, to protect their careers. By 1965, U.S. diplomats in the Dominican Republic and throughout Latin America suffered from a nervous condition that journalist Philip Geyelin dubbed the "Cuban syndrome." After the Cuban revolution, Geyelin suggests, U.S. Foreign Service officers "were quite aware that fortune had not smiled upon the hapless colleague who happened to be holding down the Cuban desk when Fidel Castro delivered himself up to communism." In subsequent outbreaks of revolutionary violence in the region, therefore, U.S. diplomats tended instinctively to err on the safe side by highlighting any and all evidence of Marxist influence in order to safeguard themselves against accusations that they had failed to identify a potential "second Cuba" in formation.²⁶ In the Dominican case, Ambassador Bennett later admitted to political scientist Howard Wiarda that the embassy staff had overreacted to the threat of a communist takeover because they knew that failure to predict events earlier in China and Cuba, and the loss of those countries to communism, had destroyed the careers of many of their Foreign Service colleagues. Based on Bennett's candid admission and interviews with other U.S. officials, Wiarda concludes that "the Embassy knew, given the weakness of the Dominican leftist groups," that a second Cuba in the Dominican Republic "was an unlikely possibility; but it was unwilling to take a chance." Faced with a violent power struggle between the moderate but communist-supported Bosch and "an authoritarian but 'anti-communist' military," it unhesitatingly reduced the conflict to a Cold War confrontation between communism and anticommunism. "The main reason the Embassy took this stand," Wiarda believes,

was not because it reflected accurately the real situation in the DR but because of career considerations on the part of the foreign service officers. Knowing what had happened to those State Department officials who had failed to see the Marxism-Leninism of the earlier Chinese and Cuban revolutionaries and who had been professionally disgraced or drummed out of the foreign service for their oversight, the [foreign service officers] in Santo Domingo were determined not to make the same mistake. So even if the chances of a Marxist triumph in the Dominican Republic were only 1 or 2 percent, the Embassy could

not take that chance. Better to err on the safe "anti-communist" side than to risk a definite career-ender by saying the revolution was non-communist.²⁷

Similar considerations apparently influenced the CIA station's reporting. Bennett's predecessor, John Bartlow Martin, noticed on several occasions during his ambassadorship that "routine CIA reports on the Castro/Communists . . . gave rumors a credibility far higher than I would have. . . . In reporting a Castro/Communist plot, however wildly implausible," Martin noted, "it is obviously safer to evaluate it as 'could be true' than as nonsense."²⁸

Another reason why U.S. diplomats and intelligence officers overstated the communist role was because they had been badly misled by their loyalist allies. At the time of the 1965 revolution, the embassy maintained an extremely close relationship with the country's conservative elites. State Department undersecretary George Ball later described Ambassador Bennett as "a conservative Georgian who instinctively tended to favor the established hierarchy" and whose "basic sympathies were clearly with Colonel Wessin," the loyalists' chief military commander. Conversely, neither Bennett nor his second in command, Deputy Chief of Mission William Connett, had any significant ties to the PRD or the country's leftist parties. "Tap [Bennett] didn't seem to know anyone to the left of the Rotary Club," an embassy colleague noted, while Connett "seemed to be ill at ease with people who were not correctly dressed."²⁹ As a result, when the fighting broke out, the embassy relied heavily on its conservative contacts as sources of intelligence information about the rebels. Those conservative contacts, in turn, quickly took advantage of the opportunity to manipulate U.S. perceptions. In an apparently coordinated campaign to enlist U.S. support on their behalf, loyalist leaders and their supporters immediately inundated local U.S. officials with warnings that the constitutionalist uprising was a Marxist-led revolution and that "the return of Bosch would mean surrendering the country to communists." They informed their U.S. contacts that Bosch's movement had fallen under the control of "Fidelista communist elements" and "Moscow." They fed them false stories of rebel atrocities and exaggerated reports of rebel extremism. They claimed to have communications intercepts linking the rebel leadership to Cuba. Under stress and fearful of underestimating the danger, the embassy and CIA station forwarded the loyalist reports to Washington as information obtained from reliable sources.³⁰

The loyalists not only influenced U.S. perceptions—they openly invited the United States to intervene on their behalf. Before the first day of fighting had ended, the embassy reported that San Isidro's military commanders were already inquiring about "what U.S. support they could expect." Their first request for U.S. troops came the following day. By April 28, as military momentum swung toward the rebel side, they were openly begging for U.S. intervention. That afternoon, loyalist leader Col. Pedro Bartolomé Benoit delivered a formal written

request to U.S. officials in Santo Domingo asking the U.S. government to "lend us its unlimited and immediate military assistance" to help put down the rebellion. In justifying the request, Benoit claimed that the "revolutionary movement . . . is directed by Communists and is of authentic Communist stamp, as shown by the excesses committed against the population, mass assassinations, sacking of private property, and constant incitations to fight broadcast by Radio Havana." If the rebels were victorious, he warned, they would "convert this country into another Cuba." Benoit continued his entreaties on the twenty-ninth, when, according to the embassy, he "appealed repeatedly for U.S. military assistance."³¹

Consequently, U.S. officials in Washington could hardly be blamed for concluding that a communist takeover of the Dominican Republic was imminent and that only U.S. intervention could prevent it. A steady influx of distorted information and exaggerated reports from Santo Domingo had led them to believe that the country's anticommunist military forces were collapsing in the face of uncontrollable revolutionary violence and that Castro-type communists were about to seize power. The U.S. ambassador and Dominican military leaders were urgently calling for immediate U.S. intervention. From the information available in Washington, the situation seemed "ominously reminiscent of the last days of Batista" in Cuba. There seemed little choice but to intervene.³²

It was evident by April 30 that the White House was operating on the basis of erroneous impressions. That morning, as Johnson ordered the 82nd Airborne to Santo Domingo, he informed his top national-security advisers that he could not permit the Dominican Republic to become a second Cuba and that he was "not going to sit here and let Castro take that island." That evening, in a brief public announcement of the troop deployment, he told the nation that "there are signs that people trained outside the Dominican Republic are seeking to gain control." In a national television address two days later, he justified the intervention by explaining that "Communist leaders, many of them trained in Cuba, seeing a chance to increase disorder, to gain a foothold, joined the revolution. They took increasing control. And what began as a popular democratic revolution, committed to democracy and social justice, very shortly moved and was taken over and really seized and placed in the hands of Communist conspirators."³³ Judged by such statements, presidential perceptions bore little resemblance to Dominican realities.

A standard interpretation of the Dominican intervention is that Johnson overreacted to the exaggerated threat of a communist takeover because he was misled by faulty intelligence.³⁴ To conclude, however, that the president and his advisers were merely unwitting and gullible victims of bad intelligence information would not be entirely accurate. Although their knowledge of the situation in Santo Domingo came from embassy and CIA reports, White House officials were by no means uncritical consumers of that information. They discounted some of the more exaggerated CIA allegations. They also acknowledged privately that U.S. intelligence sources had failed to produce any conclusive proof that the rebellion

was communist-dominated. In an off-the-record interview with journalist Arthur Krock on April 29, for example, Johnson dismissed CIA claims that as many as eight of the top rebel leaders were communists by remarking that "for all we know there are 800 leaders." In reality, Johnson told Krock, "no one on earth knew if this was a pro-Castro or Communist affair." The following day, as Johnson was preparing to explain the intervention in a national television address, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara warned him that he would have "a pretty tough job proving" that people trained outside the Dominican Republic were "seeking to gain control." When the president "asked if the CIA could document Castro's involvement . . . McNamara replied that he didn't think so." National Security Adviser George Bundy also expressed doubt that the "Communists were that much in control" of the rebel movement and advised Johnson not to "point the finger that hard at the Communists" in his speech. On the thirtieth, as U.S. troops poured into Santo Domingo, George Ball of the State Department cautioned *New York Times* columnist James Reston to avoid giving too much emphasis to communist participation in the rebellion because, according to Ball, the situation was "highly confused." There were "some Communist elements . . . fighting on the rebel side," Ball said, but "there is no evidence that this thing has been captured" by communists. Lt. Gen. Bruce Palmer Jr., the military officer who commanded U.S. forces during the intervention, states that Johnson's principal advisers all "recommended against immediate intervention" on April 30 because they believed the administration needed more "time to . . . gather credible, hard evidence of the imminent danger of a Communist coup." According to Palmer, "The truth was that no one had a handle on what was going on in Santo Domingo" when Johnson made the decision to intervene.³⁵

In the end, however, no matter how confused the picture or how thin the evidence, Johnson proved to be as susceptible to the "Cuban syndrome" as his subordinates in Santo Domingo. As the reports of escalating violence and growing communist influence poured in, he too concluded that it was better to err on the safe side and not risk the possibility, however remote, that the handful of Marxists participating on the constitutionalist side might somehow seize control of the rebellion. After all, as administration officials high and low were fond of noting, Fidel Castro had launched *his* successful revolution with only twelve men. The Castro analogy was clearly in Johnson's mind as he unleashed U.S. military forces on the constitutionalists. When Secretary of State Rusk pointed out in an April 29 White House meeting that not all of the Dominican rebels were communists, the president immediately reminded him that not all of the Cubans who had helped Castro come to power had been communists, either.³⁶ According to Philip Geyelin, who covered the intervention for the *Wall Street Journal* and subsequently published an insightful book about Johnson's foreign policy, the prevailing view in Washington during the Dominican crisis "was that a dozen trained Communists, in the right place at the right time, might have captured control, or at least gained

a solid foothold, in any rebel movement coming to power under such chaotic conditions. This was the crux of Johnson's thinking, according to those closest to him. For him, it was never necessary to satisfy himself that the revolution was Communist-controlled, or that it *would* produce another Cuba. The point was that it *might*. That risk he found unacceptable.³⁷

It was unacceptable to Johnson because a second Cuba in the Western Hemisphere could undermine his entire domestic political agenda. Johnson knew that a communist takeover of the Dominican Republic would inevitably provoke an angry domestic backlash against his administration. He was acutely aware, in Piero Gleijeses' words, "that he would incur the wrath of the American people if he allowed a 'second Cuba'" and that "American public opinion and the U.S. Congress would be pitiless to a president" who permitted the loss of another Caribbean ally to communism. Throughout the crisis, Johnson repeatedly expressed his fear that a failure on his part to prevent a leftist victory in the Dominican civil war would cost him the political support of the American people. "If I send in Marines, I can't live in the Hemisphere," he confided to congressional leaders early in the crisis, but "if I don't, I can't live at home." "I realize I am running the risk of being called a gunboat diplomat," he told his aides, "but that is nothing compared to what I'd be called if the Dominican Republic went down the drain." "I know what the editorials will say," he added, "but it would be a hell of a lot worse if we sit here and don't do anything and the Communists take that country."³⁸

Domestic political considerations were clearly in the minds of the president and his top advisers when they made the decision to intervene on April 30. During the morning meeting at which the decision was finalized, McGeorge Bundy remarked that "one thing is clear: a Castro victory in the D.R. would be the worst domestic political disaster we could possibly suffer." After the meeting, the president used nearly identical language when he told his long-time friend and adviser Abe Fortas: "I think that the worst domestic political disaster we could suffer would be for Castro to take over." The Republican hawks will "eat us up if I let Cuba come in there," he told Senator Mike Mansfield that same morning. "They'll say, 'Why did you sit on your big fat tail?'"³⁹ Meanwhile, Jack Valenti, the president's aide and media adviser, was reinforcing Johnson's concern that a second Cuba in the Caribbean would be a domestic political nightmare. Valenti, however, saw an opportunity for the administration to turn a dangerous situation to its political advantage. If the president could successfully persuade U.S. public opinion that the threat of a communist takeover was serious, Valenti suggested, Johnson could turn a potential disaster into a resounding political victory.⁴⁰

Several U.S. officials who were intimately involved in the intervention subsequently confirmed that political considerations played a central role in Johnson's decision to intervene. According to General Palmer, the commander of U.S. military forces in Santo Domingo during the intervention, the president "faced a large domestic political problem. Having seen Eisenhower criticized for 'losing' Cuba

and Kennedy humiliated by the Bay of Pigs failure, Johnson was determined that no similar disaster would befall him: there would be no 'second Cuba' while he was president."⁴¹ John Bartlow Martin, who served as Johnson's special envoy to Santo Domingo during the intervention, concurred. "It was politically impossible in the United States to accept a revolutionary Communist regime in the Dominican Republic," he wrote. "We could not permit it on the simple ground that public opinion in the United States would not have tolerated a second Cuba in the Caribbean."⁴² Undersecretary of State George Ball, who was present at most of the key White House meetings leading up to the intervention, later referred to the public clamor that would have arisen if the Dominican Republic had been taken over by Marxists. "I think this very deeply concerned the President," Ball wrote.⁴³

Johnson's principal political concern was that a foreign-policy disaster in the Dominican Republic might derail his Great Society legislative initiatives at home. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. had already warned the White House that failure "to avert a Communist takeover" would "probably" mean "losing the House of Representatives next year." Few scenarios could have been more disturbing to a president determined to achieve greatness by enacting a far-reaching program of domestic reforms. More immediately, the White House was busy steering some of its most ambitious proposals—including a landmark voting-rights bill, increased funding for a "war on poverty," and Medicare—through Congress as the Dominican crisis unfolded. Any failure on Johnson's part to hold the line against further communist expansionism in the Caribbean would be certain to antagonize the powerful congressional conservatives who held the fate of the president's legislative proposals in their hands, damaging the fragile coalition he was cobbling together in support of his domestic reform programs. On the other hand, an aggressive U.S. military response to the ostensible Marxist threat in Santo Domingo would emphatically strengthen the president's stature in the eyes of the hardcore anticommunists on Capitol Hill. By opting for military intervention in the Dominican Republic, historian Peter Felten suggests, Johnson was attempting "to appease conservatives on foreign policy in order to win their tolerance of reform at home."⁴⁴

From the initial Marine landing of April 28 onward, Johnson and his foreign-policy team orchestrated a series of White House briefings and "targeted leaks" to persuade key congressional leaders that Castro-trained agents were active within the rebel leadership and that the administration was taking effective measures to prevent a "Moscow-financed, Havana-directed plot" from taking over the Dominican Republic. Soon, influential conservative Democrats—Carl Albert of Oklahoma, L. Mendel Rivers of South Carolina, and Armistead Selden Jr. of Alabama, among others—were publicly praising the president's decision to land the Marines as "absolutely necessary." According to Felten, Johnson used the crisis in part to rally conservative southern Democrats behind him, "distracting them from intraparty disputes over reform" and helping them "swallow the bitter pill of voting rights legislation which was making its way through Congress."⁴⁵ At the same time,

intervention effectively precluded the administration's Republican opponents from impeding Johnson's legislative efforts on Capitol Hill with charges that he was "soft on communism." On the evening of April 28, shortly after ordering the first contingents of U.S. Marines into Santo Domingo, Johnson summoned Everett Dirksen and Gerald Ford, the Republican minority leaders of the Senate and House respectively, to the White House. "I want you to know," he reportedly told the two GOP leaders, "that I have just taken an action that will prove that Democratic presidents can deal with Communists as strongly as Republicans."⁴⁶ From the start, Felten concludes, it was clear that "domestic political calculations played the largest role in determining [Johnson's] actions."⁴⁷

And then, of course, there was always Vietnam to worry about. Johnson's decision to intervene in the Dominican Republic coincided directly with his fateful and wrenching decision to defend South Vietnam with U.S. military forces. In February 1965, the president had accepted his advisers' recommendation to carry out a sustained campaign of U.S. bombing attacks against North Vietnam in an effort to relieve communist military pressure on Saigon and force the North Vietnamese government to the negotiating table. Within weeks, however, he was advised that the bombing campaign—Operation Rolling Thunder—would not, by itself, stave off the imminent fall of South Vietnam. Accordingly, in early April, Johnson ordered an initial deployment of 20,000 U.S. ground troops to South Vietnam to combat communist insurgents. Then, three days before the constitutional uprising broke out in Santo Domingo, he agreed to commit an additional 50,000 U.S. troops by midyear.⁴⁸

The deepening U.S. involvement in Vietnam directly influenced Johnson's response to the Dominican situation in several ways. He was concerned, among other things, that the emergence of a potential second Cuba in the Caribbean would complicate his ability to build public support for a major U.S. military intervention in southeast Asia. How could he persuade the American people that U.S. soldiers should risk their lives fighting communists in an obscure country half way around the world if, at the same time, he allowed a seemingly Marxist-hued revolution to proceed unchallenged on the very doorstep of the United States? According to George Ball, "Johnson's use of excessive power and effort in the Dominican Republic reflected a wider preoccupation. We were just on the verge of committing large numbers of American combat forces to Vietnam and the President feared that a disaster close to home might lead more Americans to challenge our adventure ten thousand miles away."⁴⁹

Strategic military considerations also played a role in Johnson's decision to intervene. General Palmer recalls that "on the eve of the 1965 Dominican crisis . . . hostilities in southeast Asia had taken center stage. The Caribbean, however, was no less strategically important to the United States than before, and the Dominican question confronted President Johnson with the need to take swift, decisive action in this area if U.S. forces were to undertake a major commitment in Vietnam

halfway around the world." According to Palmer, Johnson was "determined to bring an end to the fighting in Santo Domingo and avoid a festering sore" in the Caribbean so that the United States could "commit its power in southeast Asia without having to worry about the security of the Western Hemisphere."⁵⁰

Concern for U.S. international credibility also intruded heavily into the decision-making process. Johnson and his advisers saw a direct connection between the Dominican crisis and the credibility of U.S. policy in Vietnam. In their view, the upheaval in Santo Domingo was in some respects "a litmus test of U.S. resolve" in the fight against communism in Asia. With a major U.S. military intervention just getting under way to deter communist aggression in South Vietnam, administration officials worried that a weak or passive response on their part to a potential communist challenge in the Caribbean would send entirely the wrong signal to the North Vietnamese government at a critical juncture in the war. Any appearance of U.S. weakness or vacillation in the Dominican Republic, they feared, might cause Hanoi's communist leaders to doubt the seriousness of the U.S. military commitment in Vietnam. If the North Vietnamese didn't take the administration's threats seriously, they would continue their military operations in the south, refuse to participate in peace talks, and generally remain undeterred in their drive to bring all of Vietnam under communist control. Dean Rusk, among others, argued that the administration would weaken its hand in Vietnam if it failed to demonstrate its strength in Santo Domingo. Johnson "reportedly wondered aloud how anyone could believe his determination in Indochina if he appeared weak in the Caribbean." "What can we do in Vietnam if we can't clean up the Dominican Republic?" he asked his advisers on April 30.⁵¹

If the administration regarded the Dominican crisis as a test of U.S. resolve in Vietnam, it looked upon Vietnam as a test of U.S. credibility worldwide. Like Kennedy before him, Johnson believed that if the United States did not come to South Vietnam's defense, the damage to U.S. prestige around the world would be irreparable. "Our allies not just in Asia but throughout the world would conclude that our word was worth little or nothing," he later wrote. "Those who had counted so long for their security on American commitments would be deeply shaken and vulnerable." Worse still, he feared, a U.S. failure to stand firm in Vietnam would only encourage new communist aggressions elsewhere. "I was as sure as a man could be," Johnson recalled, "that if we did not live up to our commitment in Southeast Asia," the Soviets and Chinese Communists

would move to exploit the disarray in the United States and in the alliances of the Free World. They might move independently or they might move together. But move they would—whether through nuclear blackmail, through subversion, with regular armed forces, or in some other manner. As nearly as one can be certain of anything, I knew they could not resist the opportunity to expand their control into the vacuum of power we would leave behind us.⁵²

Above all, however, Johnson feared that the fall of South Vietnam would cripple him politically at home just as the loss of China had crippled Truman. Throughout the spring of 1965, he remained "terrified" by the prospect that the loss of Vietnam to communism would trigger a devastating backlash of right-wing political recrimination in the United States—one that, in his words, would "shatter" his presidency and "kill" his administration. And, as always, his deepest fear was that "those damn conservatives in Congress" would punish him for losing Vietnam by rejecting his domestic reform proposals and in the process destroy the Great Society on which his hopes of presidential greatness were founded.⁵³ Unknowingly, and to their grave misfortune, the Dominican Republic's constitutionalist rebels had launched their revolution at precisely the moment in U.S. political history when, in LBJ's words, "two great streams in our national life"—"the dream of a Great Society at home and the inescapable demands" of U.S. "obligations" in Vietnam—were converging to decide the fate of Johnson's presidency.⁵⁴

For Johnson, then, the Dominican crisis was essentially an unwelcome distraction from what he regarded as far larger and more pressing issues. Yet the possibility, however remote, that a constitutionalist victory might usher in a second Cuba in the Caribbean made it a crisis that he could ill afford to treat lightly. And so Johnson intervened in Santo Domingo with massive military force, unleashing 23,000 U.S. troops on the constitutionalists in what George Ball describes as a deliberate display of "Texan overkill."⁵⁵ He did so precisely in order to send an unmistakable message to multiple audiences, foreign and domestic: that under the Johnson administration, and under Lyndon Johnson's personal presidential leadership, the United States was fully prepared to project its power internationally in defense of its interests.

The intervention was in part a demonstration to communist leaders in Hanoi, Moscow, Beijing, and Havana that America's new president was tough enough to stand up to them—that he would respond forcefully to their international challenges. From the earliest days of his presidency, Johnson believed that the communist world was testing him to see whether he was "a weak sister" or "yellow." In the Caribbean, he later recalled, he had no doubt that Fidel Castro "had decided, perhaps with Soviet encouragement, to take the measure of the new President of the United States, to push me a little and see what my response would be."⁵⁶ A strong response, Johnson hoped, would deter the communists from testing him further; a show of strength—a large-scale U.S. military response in the Dominican Republic, in Vietnam, or in both if necessary—might persuade them to leave him alone. And Johnson desperately wanted the communists to leave him alone internationally because—as he said in reference to Vietnam—he had "bigger things to do right here at home."⁵⁷

The intervention was also a demonstration to domestic U.S. audiences that Lyndon Johnson was a strong president—a president who would take swift and decisive action to prevent a potential new security threat from arising in the hemi-

sphere, a president to whom the political epithet "soft on communism" could not be applied. Among the intended recipients of that message were conservative forces in Congress and the American electorate generally, an electorate that in Johnson's view would "forgive you for anything except being weak."⁵⁸ Both of those domestic audiences LBJ regarded as critical components of the political support base that he needed to complete his Great Society reform agenda and secure a prominent place in history.

In the end, however, Johnson's efforts at message-sending produced only mixed results at best. The intervention blocked a constitutionalist victory and prevented the restoration of a Juan Bosch government under which the Dominican Republic's minuscule Marxist Left might have enjoyed increased freedom and perhaps even a small degree of influence. On the other hand, communist leaders elsewhere in the world remained unintimidated by the display of U.S. power. If anything, the Cubans accelerated their promotion of Marxist revolutionary movements in Latin America in the latter half of the 1960s, while Vietnam's communists persevered doggedly in their campaign to conquer the south, eventually forcing the United States to accept a humiliating military withdrawal and consolidating their control over the entire country in 1975.

At home, meanwhile, Johnson's assertive interventionism produced short-term gains, but at a heavy long-term cost. The intervention proved to be popular with the U.S. public; according to a mid-May Gallup poll, 76 percent of those surveyed approved the sending of U.S. troops to Santo Domingo, while only 17 percent objected. Republicans and conservatives heaped accolades on the White House for its handling of the crisis. Former president Eisenhower praised Johnson's decision to send in U.S. military forces as "exactly right," while Richard Nixon publicly supported the intervention as a necessary step to thwart what he called "the taking over of another independent country by Communists." Even Barry Goldwater, the Republican candidate trounced by Johnson in the 1964 election, called the president's action "just as right as the day is long." On Capitol Hill, the intervention helped lessen the rancor of southern conservatives as they grudgingly accepted defeat in their efforts to block the administration's voting-rights legislation.⁵⁹ Johnson also used the intervention to secure congressional ratification of his controversial decision to expand U.S. military operations in Vietnam. On May 4, two days after informing the nation that U.S. troops were fighting in Santo Domingo to prevent "Communist conspirators" from taking over the Dominican Republic, the president presented Congress with an urgent request for \$700 million in emergency military appropriations. The funds were needed, he told congressional leaders, to meet the "unusual and unanticipated" challenges that the administration faced "in both the Viet-Nam theater and the Dominican Republic." To reject the request, Johnson implied, would mean denying support to "those brave men" who

at that moment were “risking their lives” fighting communism in the field. Congress quickly passed the appropriation with only 10 dissenting votes, thereby giving its tacit consent, almost without debate, to the escalating U.S. military involvement in southeast Asia. By tying his Vietnam funding request to the fight against communist aggression in the Caribbean, Johnson had managed to obtain what historian Lloyd Gardner describes as “a new ‘small-scale Tonkin Gulf Resolution’” that “substituted . . . Dominican rebels for . . . North Vietnamese PT boats.”⁵⁰

What Johnson had not foreseen, however, was the havoc that the intervention would wreak on his own liberal political base. Many U.S. liberals regarded Juan Bosch as the Dominican Republic’s best hope for democratic reform, and for them the intervention was nothing less than a tragically misguided U.S. attack on the forces of progressive change in Latin America. The administration’s grossly exaggerated allegations of communist influence in the rebellion struck many liberals as evidence that U.S. foreign policy was suffering from delusions of anticommunist paranoia, while the White House’s heavy-handed military response to the crisis seemed disturbingly reminiscent of an earlier era of benighted U.S. imperialism in the Caribbean that Franklin Roosevelt’s enlightened Good Neighbor policy had brought to an end. “In short,” Brian VanDeMark writes, the Dominican intervention “outraged American liberals”—and the “angry liberal reaction” that it provoked quickly “sheared away the left wing of Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society consensus.”⁶¹ Within days, *New York Times* and *Washington Post* editorials were questioning the president’s decision to return to the policy of the “Big Stick.” By early May, Democratic senators Mike Mansfield of Montana and Joseph Clark of Pennsylvania were expressing concern that the intervention would reignite Latin American fears of U.S. gunboat diplomacy and thereby strengthen Fidel Castro’s hand throughout the hemisphere. Soon other prominent Democrats, including liberal senators Robert Kennedy and Frank Church, together with J. William Fulbright, the influential chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, were openly criticizing Johnson’s handling of the crisis. By the summer of 1965, the intervention had opened a serious breach between the president and his liberal supporters in Congress, the press, and the academic community.⁶² Over the next three years, the administration’s escalating military commitments in Vietnam then widened that breach beyond repair, ultimately destroying Johnson’s presidency.

CHAPTER FIVE

Chile, 1970

President Nixon was enraged. When Ambassador Edward Korry entered the Oval Office on October 13, 1970, to discuss U.S.-Chilean relations with the president, Nixon was slamming his fist into the palm of his hand and fuming, “That sonof-a-bitch, that sonofabitch!” The “sonofabitch” in question, Nixon quickly explained, was “that bastard Allende”—a profane reference to the newly elected president of Chile, Salvador Allende.¹

Nixon had ample reason to dislike Allende. The new Chilean president was, after Fidel Castro, one of Latin America’s most prominent Marxist political leaders. Allende and Castro were close friends and fellow revolutionaries. Allende, however, rejected the Cuban model of insurrectionary violence and armed struggle as a strategy for socialist revolution in Chile. Instead, he was committed to pursuing a peaceful, democratic “road to socialism” in his country—a *via parlamentaria*, or “parliamentary path,” in which Chile’s Marxist forces would first mobilize mass-based electoral support to win power democratically and then, once in control of the government, use constitutional processes and legislative enactments in the congress to construct a socialist society. The end result, Allende promised, would be a uniquely Chilean experience—a socialist revolution carried out in a framework of “democracy, pluralism, and liberty.” If his revolutionary strategy succeeded, he believed, Chile would become a “second model of the transition to a socialist society,” a peaceful, democratic alternative to the Soviet, Chinese, and Cuban models.²

Allende’s commitment to the *via parlamentaria* spanned some four decades. A founding member of Chile’s Socialist Party in 1932, minister of health in a Popular Front government during World War II, and a senator in the Chilean congress from 1945 to 1970, he had spent his entire political career as “a normal, democratic politician” working for socialist change from within Chile’s traditional institutional structures.³ Now, with his electoral victory in the 1970 presidential election, he had an historic opportunity to make his vision of a nonviolent, democratic Marxist revolution in Chile a reality.

Not all of Allende’s supporters shared their leader’s commitment to parliamentary democracy, however. Allende had campaigned for the presidency as the candidate of Unidad Popular (Popular Unity, or UP), a heterogeneous and fractious electoral coalition of leftist parties consisting of Chile’s Socialists and Communists along with four smaller organizations. The Chilean Communist Party—generally regarded as “the largest, best-organized, and most disciplined of its kind in Latin America”—was pursuing the *via parlamentaria* largely for reasons of tactical op-