

American Foreign Policy and Forced Regime
Change Since World War II

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Forcing Freedom

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CHAPTER 2

The Dominican Republic

Abstract This chapter examines the American intervention in the Dominican crisis of 1965. The first part of the chapter outlines the buildup to the intervention and the subsequent American invasion. The second part of the chapter evaluates the degree to which the intervention was truly focused on delivering democracy to the country. It first attempts to identify the degree that a desire to install democracy played in the Johnson administration's decision to intervene. Subsequently, it investigates the degree to which the post-intervention American actions were focused on delivering democracy in the Dominican Republic.

Keywords Dominican Republic · Johnson · Democracy · Intervention · United States

1 INTERVENTION HISTORY

In 1966, the USA staged a military intervention in the Dominican Republic, ostensibly to settle a violent conflict between supporters of former President Juan Bosch (the Constitutionals) and those of President Donald Reid Cabral (the Loyalists). The background to the intervention is complicated and heavily overshadowed by American involvement. In order to understand the lead-up to this intervention, it is necessary to discuss a few relevant developments that occurred in the five years leading up to that event.

On May 30, 1961, Generalissimo Rafael Trujillo, the Dominican Republic's long-time strongman, was assassinated in Santo Domingo, marking the beginning of an extended period of considerable political uncertainty for the country. After initiating a set of unpopular economic reforms, Joaquin Balaguer, Trujillo's president-designate, was forced to leave the country (Hartlyn 1998, 75). Balaguer was replaced by a seven-person Council of State, which was created on behalf of the country with the assistance of the Organization of American States (OAS) and the USA in order to manage the country until democratic elections could be held. The members of the Council were from "business and professional interests" who had been prominent opponents of Trujillo (Atkins et al. 1998, 126). Elections were scheduled for December 1962 (*ibid.*, 127). The field of parties contesting the election was a crowded one, and "the campaign was disorganized and fraught with widespread tensions and allegations of fraud (Hartlyn 1998, 77)."

The populist, left-leaning PRD (Democratic Revolutionary Party) and its "charismatic, mercurial, democratic" leader, Juan Bosch, won both the congressional and presidential elections. Bosch proceeded to attempt to bring about a social revolution (Wiarda 1980, 250).

Bosch's attempts to bring about reforms were short-lived, however. In September 1963, just seven months after his inauguration, he was removed from power in a military coup and subsequently forced into exile. Hartlyn (1998) argues that it is difficult to identify exactly where to place the blame for Bosch's ouster, but that the country's particular history of democracy and democratic traditions played a significant role: the country's politics consisted of "a constant struggle among changing alliances of civilian and military cliques (80)."

As a result of this unsettled atmosphere, the opposition from "the country's economic elites and their party, the UCN (National Civil Union)," which managed to exploit fears of a Communist takeover, played an influential role in fueling instability (*ibid.*, 79). The inability of Bosch to directly address the fears of the opposition also played a role. The 1962 intervention thus returned power to the upper and middle classes, the same groups who had governed under the Council of State (Wiarda 1980, 253).

One must recognize that the USA had taken at least a few measurable steps to ensure that the 1962 elections were free and fair. First, they ensured that OAS observers were present. The Dominican election was the very first one in which OAS observers were sent for this purpose.

Hartlyn (1998) argues that, in fact, the USA “anxiously wanted a democratic government in the country to succeed, especially in the context of the recently launched Alliance for Progress.” The fact that democratic elections took place at all was, according to Hartlyn, largely due to the “extensive involvement of the United States” (82).

It appears to be the case, however, that America’s desire for procedural democracy ultimately took a back seat in its foreign policy to anti-communism. In the end, while the USA did not directly support the overthrow of Bosch, neither did it offer him any assistance when it became aware of attempts to oust him from power.

The regime that would replace Bosch was a “triumvirate” led by Donald Reid Cabral, an American-educated businessman, who according to Wiarda was viewed as both corrupt and repressive by large segments of the population. As a result, “resentment grew from many sources, including trade unions, intellectuals, and the middle class, and even the business community” [and thus] “with the military holding power behind the scenes, the new triumvirate found itself trapped between the political extremes” (1980, 254).

Growing dissatisfaction led to another military rebellion on April 24, 1965, which demanded Bosch’s restoration. “Urged on by Washington,” the insurgents, commanded by Colonel Francisco Caamaño (a tobacco merchant and former Minister of Foreign Relations for Bosch), removed the Reid junta from power on April 28 (Glejeses 1978, 266). The country was thus split between two groups: the Loyalists, who favored Reid’s return, and the Constitutionals, who favored Bosch.

With the country erupting into civil war, and the PRD militia on the verge of defeating the regular Dominican armed forces, the USA dispatched 42,000 troops to the island on April 28, 1965, in support of the anti-Bosch and Caamaño forces (Lowenthal 1991, 78).

The USA may also have intervened in part due to fears of a Communist takeover. According to the National Security Archive, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff issued the following commands to the general in charge of the operation, Bruce Palmer, Jr.:

Your announced mission is to save US lives. Your unannounced mission is to prevent the Dominican Republic from going Communist. The President has stated that he will not allow another Cuba—you are to take all necessary measures to accomplish this mission. You will be given sufficient forces to do the job.¹

After taking control of the country, the Americans initiated negotiations with all parties to iron out a pathway toward elections. The agreed outcome of these talks was that a provisional government, headed by moderate politician Héctor García-Godoy, would be put in place until elections could take place in nine months. On September 25, Juan Bosch returned to the country (Crandall 2008, 88). The primary candidates for the election would be Juan Bosch and Joaquin Balaguer.

On June 1, 1966, Balaguer came to power in an election that was viewed by most international observers as being free and fair. As we will see in the next section, however, the objectivity of the USA in the election process has been questioned by some scholars.

The intervention was a significant event; it was the first direct invasion by American forces in Latin America since 1928, and it set the tone for future American involvement in such places as Grenada, Panama, El Salvador, and Haiti. In the decades since the intervention, the country has struggled to achieve some level of democratic legitimacy. In 2018, fifty-three years after the intervention of 1965, the country is classified as “partly free” by Freedom House, and the government continues to have a problematic record in certain areas of governance such as rule of law and transparency. The struggles of the country over a very long time period suggest that we should reject any claim that the intervention put the country on a clear path toward democracy.

2 WAS IT AN FD INTERVENTION?

2.1 *Democratic Intent*

To what degree did a concern for democracy on the part of the American leadership play a role in the 1965 intervention? A review of academic opinion on the matter suggests that the reality may be much more complicated than a simple “yes” or “no” answer could provide. A wide range of academic opinion exists on the Dominican intervention. In fact, several key factors—geopolitical, bureaucratic, personalities of leaders, and the desire to protect American citizens and business interests, to name a few—all appeared to play a role in how the events of 1965 and 1966 unfolded.

Cynics point to the fact that the 1965 Dominican “crisis” occurred at the height of the Cold War, a time when security concerns dominated American foreign policy decisions. In particular, in the wake of Castro’s takeover of Cuba, the concerns about even the slightest possibility that

the Dominican Republic might be the next “domino” in the region must have been prominent in the thought processes of decision makers in the Johnson administration. It is unlikely, however, that Johnson intervened for this purpose alone.

In reality, the decision to intervene appeared to lack a unitary purpose or design. Instead, in many ways, it appears to reflect many of the characteristics inherent in the “bureaucratic politics” model of foreign policy decision making that Graham Allison outlines in his seminal book, *Essence of Decision* (1971). In the “bureaucratic politics” model, actors within a government behave according to their own organizational and personal interests. Moreover, the process as a whole is guided by bargaining among key actors and influenced by the degree of power individuals can exert over the situation. Policies that result from such a process, according to Allison, can be disjointed and produce sub-optimal outcomes.

In the Dominican case, Slater (1967) argues that American policies regarding how to handle the Dominican situation were rather complex, involving personalities, separate institutions, and “overlapping bargaining processes that we call the state” (146). Lowenthal (1972) argues that the American leadership initially favored the installation of a military junta to avoid a Communist takeover, but that over time they became skeptical that this strategy would be effective (73). This uncertainty meant that the State Department and the CIA had differing opinions on how to deal with the instability:

There were a number of different actors involved. Even the Dominican military was split. “Hostility erupted when the Communist party and other left-wing organizations were outlawed. Reid also faced controversy when he attempted to restrain corruption in the military. Senior officers who had profited under Trujillo felt that they were being threatened while junior officers welcomed the reforms believing that they meant promotions. The Dominican Republic quickly began to fragment. Some senior military officers support the return of Balaguer, others within the military and leftist groups sought the return of Bosch, other military leaders and the U.S. supported Reid, while others in the military desired the establishment of a military junta. (Ibid., 147)

The Dominican intervention of 1965, then, does not appear to conform to a simple description of American motives and decision making. In fact, the decision to intervene may have been based in part on misinformation. Lowenthal argues that there was probably not even a

“necessity” for the intervention. Arguing that the USA may have misinterpreted the PRD’s usurping the military in 1965 an anti-American or pro-Castro action, the author believes that in reality the PRD constituted no threat—and would likely have been an excellent partner in the American-led Alliance for Progress (*ibid.*, 143).

Moreover, the situation on the ground was somewhat chaotic, which makes it difficult to assess the role of democratic intent in the decision to intervene. Most of the US Embassy staff members in Santo Domingo were out of town during the crisis, which compromised the reliability of reports on the situation on the ground. According to one account, the understaffed Embassy decided to label the coup a left-wing attack, raising “the ideological issue that would dominate the deliberations of the U.S. policymakers in the days to come and the public controversy over American intervention for years thereafter” (Gomez 1997). As it is difficult to assess precisely what the Johnson administration knew and when it knew it, the degree to which this was an intervention to restore order rather than an anti-communist or pro-democratic move may never be completely clear.

What is clear, however, is that anti-communism was a significant concern of the Johnson administration and that the president, while supposedly reticent to intervene, was concerned with the possibility of “another Cuba.” The following report by the CIA reflects this concern:

Should the forces of General Elias Wessin y Wessin, supported by the major elements of the air force and elements over the next several hours or days be unable to defeat the revolution that started last Saturday, the Dominican Republic in my opinion will be so far on the way to becoming another Cuba that the tide may well not be able to be turned back, unless the U.S. takes prompt and strong action...Communists are gathering arms and reportedly have a real “in” with at least one arsenal. They set up strong points within the city. (CIA Report on Whether the Dominican Republic Will Turn into Another Cuba, April 27, 1965. Referenced in Crandall 2008, 65)

Crandall elaborates on this anti-communist focus:

As the events of the day following Reid’s removal indicate, President Johnson was constantly peppered with reports about the Communist threat implicit in a Bosch return. This is what led him to decide to move beyond the much less controversial evacuation of American nationals and to intervene politically and militarily in the Dominican civil war to prevent the Communist Scenario from unfolding. (*Ibid.*, 65)

In this uncertain environment, several interrelated concerns were in the minds of the administration. Among them were the safety of American citizens, responding to the coup, ending the polarized situation in the country, and making sure that neither a communist nor a right-wing dictatorship would emerge.

Within this *mélange* of factors, the desire for democracy never appeared to be at the forefront of American strategic concerns. Wiarda (1980) argues that the American intervention was meant to “frustrate... the movement to restore democratic rule.” In fact, he argues, looking at the whole affair as an intervention at all is a bit wrongheaded: “the distinction between intervention and non-intervention is virtually meaningless in the Dominican case, since U.S. involvement has been continuous, in one form or another, for over a century” (256).

What kind of political outcome did the Americans want? Chester (2001) reviewed declassified documents from McGeorge Bundy and Arthur Schlesinger, the National Security Advisor and the Special Assistant to the President, respectively. The documents focus on the role that Thomas Mann, Johnson’s Assistant Secretary of State of Inter-American Affairs, played during the crisis and subsequent intervention. Chester argues that Mann’s focus was on putting together a provisional, “non-political” government that would avoid social reform and keep the military intact (discussed in McPherson 2015, 31–34). If we accept Chester’s position, the Dominican intervention was less about preserving democracy than it was about America maintaining law and order in keeping with its self-appointed role as hemispheric policeman.

Glejeses takes a somewhat different position, claiming that the Americans had been in favor of a conservative military junta (and therefore against the Constitutionlists) from the beginning, a fact that if true would mean that all American actions to sponsor free and fair elections in the country were shambolic (in Wiarda 1980, 250). If we are to believe Glejeses, unless halting Communism can in and of itself be considered a pro-democracy step, the desire for democracy did not play a vital role in the Dominican intervention. Moreover, the author claims that it is difficult to believe that a Communist takeover was really in the cards in 1966. This would mean that the Americans probably intervened out of a desire to send a message to Castro and the Soviets about American resolve rather than because they believed that Bosch and the Constitutionlists presented an imminent threat of a Communist takeover.

2.2 *Actions*

On the surface, the Americans appeared to be focused on creating a reasonably free and fair atmosphere for the 1966 elections. By most accounts, there were few problems with vote rigging, intimidation, or other irregularities. This sense that the election was “normal” is arguably reinforced by the argument made by some scholars, including Wiarda (1980, 252), that even had there been no American influence over the process at all, Balaguer still stood a good chance of winning the election. Crandall (2008) agrees, pointing out that public opinion had not been particularly favorable toward Bosch during his presidency (91).

The Americans took several steps to ensure free and fair elections. According to Beigbeder (1994), a group of 20 American observers representing both political parties from 13 states concluded that the elections had been “an outstanding act of democratic purity.” Beigbeder also points out that a three-member OAS team was sent to offer technical assistance in order to “assess the electoral laws and preparations” (233).

The USA and the OAS also made efforts to ensure that elections were mostly free of procedural problems. Slater (1967) argues that an election group including a “UN mission, OAS electoral assistance mission, and a group of 70 American liberals, headed by [Presbyterian minister] Norman Thomas and [civil rights leader] Bayard Rustin” agreed that the election was a free and fair one, despite the fact that “most of these groups were overwhelmingly pro-Bosch or at least liberal in their sentiments” (161).

Thus, the USA appeared to successfully ensure that a nominally “free and fair” election took place. However, there are those who dispute that the American role was a neutral one:

There is a widespread assumption that only rightist intimidation or rigging could explain the election result. There is a story of Johnson exploding about reading a pre-election poll result with Bosch in the lead and saying he couldn't handle that. Not what he wanted, and humiliating to his administration. (Ibid., 162)

Slater's view is that the USA decided on free and fair elections “shortly after the intervention” (ibid., 163). Moreover,

While the assessment that Bosch could be beaten by Balaguer played a role of some importance in that decision, the administration did not waver from it even after a pre-election embassy assessment pointed to a probable Bosch victory. On the contrary, all available evidence indicates that the United States applied persistent and sustained pressures to ensure that the elections would be free and fair and that a Bosch victory would be accepted by the Dominican armed forces. (Ibid., 164)

Slater argues that, given America's involvement in the Vietnam conflict at the time, the American decision was not likely to have been based on an "abstract commitment" to free and fair elections. However, President Johnson's "well-known" desire to be viewed by posterity as the president who staved off a dictatorship may have played a strong role. Essentially, the administration had to go to great lengths to ensure that elections were "universally accepted" in world opinion as genuine—even if this meant a possible Bosch victory:

With the Dominican Republic swarming with OAS observers, U.S. and Latin American journalists, labor-union missions, and representative of private groups, nearly all of them pro-Bosch, suspicious of US Policy, and assiduously on the lookout for signs of tampering, there was little prospect of U.S. shenanigans, or even a too-obvious preference for Balaguer, going unexposed. In short, for the elections to be seen as free, they *had* to be free. (Ibid., 165)

The Johnson administration's desire to appear completely neutral, Slater argues, was so strong that "the worried conservatives were surprised at the [American] embassy's refusals to exercise even informal influence to try to persuade several splinter right-wing candidates to withdraw from the race in order to avoid splitting the Balaguer vote" (ibid., 166).

Glejeses (1978) paints a different picture of the events surrounding the election. While he concedes that the climate around the 1966 election involved some incidences of violence against right-wing groups, "the great majority of those killed by unknown assassins, or openly by the police and armed forces, were *Boschistas* or supporters of the far left, as were those who suffered arrest, beating, and persecution." The author argues that although Balaguer was free to travel around the country "making eloquent speeches," the *Boschistas* were "hounded by the police" (280).

The atmosphere surrounding the elections, Gleijeses argues, resulted in a predictable response by the Dominican voters:

The Dominican people understood a simple reality. In September 1963, the armed forces had overturned Bosch's electoral victory. Then in April 1965, the United States had invaded the country to prevent his return to the presidency...The Yankees and their "loyalist" protégés controlled the country, and if Bosch won the elections, they would drown his victory in blood. (Ibid., 281)

Gleijeses accepts that electoral fraud was quite limited if present at all. But he argues that intimidation tactics against the *Boschistas* and an awareness among American leaders that the "wrong" decision would invite more American military action meant that in reality, the elections "were not free at all," and that many Dominicans (including Bosch himself) believed that the elections must have been rigged (ibid., 173). Slater adds that most Dominicans realized that Balaguer was the "American" candidate, and perhaps thought that voting for Balaguer would bring more "economic assistance and general support" (1967, 181).

Lowenthal (1972) claims that the official American line of impartiality was patently untrue, as the United States had such strong anti-Bosch sentiments that it was incapable of refraining from taking sides. He argues that the perception of bias against Bosch "had the effect of emboldening anti-Bosch supporters and eliminating moderates in the Bosch camp" (145). Thus, the mere perception of American bias appears to have made a difference, if we are to believe Lowenthal, since voters were subtly conditioned to vote for the pro-American candidate.

Crandall (2008) believes that the true effect of American involvement may be difficult to ascertain. On the one hand, he believes that there is evidence to support the argument that Dominican public opinion probably favored Balaguer over Bosch. On the other hand, however, Crandall is convinced that the Americans were manipulating the electoral process:

We know that the Dominican people voted enthusiastically for Bosch back in 1962, yet his tenure as president was viewed largely as disappointing. This fact helps explain why opinion polls in pre-crisis 1965 had

Balaguer ahead of Bosch. Amazingly, Balaguer's margin of victory over Bosch in 1966 closely mirrored the pre-1965 polling numbers. In other words, *it is not unreasonable to conclude that Bosch would have lost a free and fair election to Balaguer* [emphasis mine] even if the United States had not intervened in 1965 or provided secret funds to the Balaguer campaign in 1966. (91)

The Americans certainly were fully aware of some of the potential factors that might bias the results in "their" candidate's favor, as the following State Department memo of April 28, 1966, illustrates:

The US is almost certainly viewed as anti-Bosch and committed to the Balaguer candidacy. This will give Bosch the benefit of anti-Yankee prejudice at the polls. At the same time, many Dominicans will recognize that, without US economic aid and its steadying influence exercised through the OAS and the IAPF, no solutions to the country's grave political and economic problems are possible. Many such people will vote for Balaguer despite a possible distaste for the Yankee presence. (Crandall 2008, 91)

Unfortunately, there is not, and likely never will be, a consensus on exactly how free and fair the elections of 1966 were. The election itself appeared to have been run in a relatively straightforward fashion, relatively free of manipulation. However, the nearly century-long involvement of the USA in Dominican affairs and some evidence of American attempts to increase the odds of victory for Balaguer mean that this historical event will likely never emerge from a cloud of suspicion.²

NOTES

1. In National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book #513, Edited by David Coleman. http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB513/#_edn2, Quoted in Editorial Note, US Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-68*, 32: doc. 43.
2. US Department of State, formerly classified document: "Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968," Volume XXXII, Dominican Republic; Cuba; Haiti; Guyana (Document 171). April 12, 1966. Cited in Crandall (2006).

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