
STEPHEN G. RABE

For historians of U.S. foreign relations, it is a revealing statement from a quotable president. As recounted by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., in A Thousand Days, President John F. Kennedy on 7 June 1961 listed U.S. policy options for the Dominican Republic in the immediate aftermath of the assassination of dictator Rafael Trujillo. Kennedy said, "There are three possibilities in descending order of preference: a decent democratic regime, a continuation of the Trujillo regime, or a Castro regime. We ought to aim at the first, but we really can't renounce the second until we are sure that we can avoid the third." In Schlesinger's judgment, Kennedy's attitude represented a notable example of his administration's enlightened anticommunism.

Beyond serving as testimony to presidential wisdom, Kennedy's statement can be used as a reliable guide for analyzing the Latin American policy of the United States. Throughout the twentieth century, the United States consistently attempted to exclude extracontinental powers from the Western Hemisphere and to maintain its political and economic hegemony in the region. Stable, orderly regimes would protect U.S. interests, for they removed a temptation for foreigners to intervene and fostered a healthy business climate. U.S. officials professed that security, prosperity, and democracy were intertwined and that decent, democratic regimes would produce the good life for all hemispheric neighbors. But promoting elections, popular participation, and respect for civil and human rights has been subordinate to the goal of preserving peace and order in Latin America. During the intense years of the Cold War, U.S. policies toward democrats, like Rómulo Betancourt, and dictators, like Trujillo and his henchmen, hinged, as President Kennedy confessed, on the tactical question of which type of government
and leader would be most effective in thwarting Fidel Castro. Indeed, between 1958 and 1963, U.S. officials took uncommon measures in waging the Cold War because they judged that communism in the Western Hemisphere imperiled the United States, impeded the U.S. ability to act elsewhere, and threatened to become a divisive domestic issue.

In the mid-1950s, neither democracy nor decency characterized governments throughout Latin America. Dictators like Trujillo, Fulgencio Batista of Cuba, and Marcos Pérez Jiménez of Venezuela controlled thirteen of the twenty Latin American republics. The Eisenhower administration found no fault with these tyrants, regarding them as dependable Cold War allies. The dictators vigorously backed the United States in international forums, cooperated militarily, and welcomed U.S. businessmen. President Dwight D. Eisenhower once observed to National Security Council (NSC) members that “in the long run the United States must back democracies.” But prior to 1959, the president avoided raising human rights issues with any dictator. In fact, he conferred the Legion of Merit, the nation’s highest award for foreign personages, on Pérez Jiménez.

The Eisenhower administration’s smug confidence in dictators was abruptly broken in 1958. Latin American regimes began to disintegrate in the late 1950s. The dictators failed to produce the stability and economic growth that they had promised. Latin Americans also tired of the rampant repression and corruption that characterized military rule. The dictators were replaced by leaders, such as Argentina’s Arturo Frondizi, whose political base was the urban middle sections and whose programs included land reform, popular education, social services, and constitutionalism.

U.S. officials neither anticipated the mass uprisings that unseated dictators nor understood the contempt in which Latin Americans held U.S. policy. In December 1957, a month before Pérez Jiménez’s overthrow, the embassy in Caracas predicted that the military dictator would hold power, for “in the absence of democratic traditions, the majority of Venezuelans have developed what appears to be an apathetic or acquiescent attitude toward their authoritarian government.” Venezuelans, however, proved to be anything but apathetic when, in May 1958, Vice President Richard M. Nixon reached Caracas to conclude his troubled tour of South America. Nixon had been harassed by law students in Montevideo and stoned by university students in Lima, and now he was assaulted by a mob in Caracas. The demonstrators blamed the United States for the region’s social ills, charging the Eisenhower administration with supporting repressive regimes and denying Latin America economic assistance.

The administration reflexively blamed Communists for the uprisings.
Reporting to the cabinet, Nixon “emphasized that Communist inspiration was evident from the similarity of placards, slogans, and techniques.” Secretary of State John Foster Dulles agreed that the Soviet Union had cleverly infiltrated mass political movements in Latin America. But CIA Director Allen W. Dulles challenged his brother’s views, arguing that turmoil in Latin America transcended any possible political manipulation.4

Despite the CIA’s findings, U.S. officials dreaded Latin America’s democratic future. As Nixon told the NSC, the United States would normally be pleased about the expansion of democracy, but the phenomenon was occurring “in those Latin American countries which are completely lacking in political maturity.” Nixon lamented that the dictators were being replaced not by upper-class, wealthy politicians of the past but by men, like Frondizi, who “were oriented in the direction of Marxist thinking” and who were “naive about the nature and threat of communism.” The secretary of state also yearned for the old political order. Both the Middle East and Latin America were witnessing a swing away from traditional rulers and kings “in favor of a kind of dictatorship of the proletariat, which was represented by a Nasser or Sukarno, with their mass appeal.”5

These dire predictions did not initially generate a comprehensive review of U.S. policy in Latin America. President Eisenhower responded to the Nixon/Dulles colloquy by observing that much of the world equated the term capitalism with imperialism and concluding that therefore “we should try to coin a new phrase to represent our own modern brand of capitalism.” The administration’s other initiatives were similarly superficial. Eisenhower and Nixon publicly stated that the United States preferred constitutional regimes, and the administration’s new NSC statement on Latin America called for giving “special encouragement” to representative governments. The administration reminded itself, however, to be alert to the communists’ tactic of masquerading their subversive goals by allying themselves with nationalistic and progressive parties.6

The administration adhered to those guidelines in its relations with Venezuela. In August 1958, President Eisenhower denounced authoritarian rule in welcoming the new Venezuelan ambassador to Washington. But the State Department coupled that welcome with warnings to the ruling junta not to legalize the Venezuelan Communist Party. The junta, led by Admiral Wolfgang Larrazábal, ignored those warnings because Venezuelans believed a united civilian front would help keep the military in the barracks. With candidates, including Larrazábal, actually accepting the support of communists during the presidential campaign, the department decided that the reform-minded but anticommunist Rómulo Betancourt must win. Through
former Assistant Secretary of State Adolf Berle, who knew Betancourt well, the department offered the Venezuelan aid, including presumably covert assistance. A confident Betancourt apparently rejected the offer, won a decisive electoral victory, and took office in early 1959.7

Anticommunism also continued to be the predominant U.S. concern with Rafael Trujillo, although State Department officials had become exasperated with the dictator's brutality. In 1956 the dictator's henchmen kidnapped in New York City and then murdered Jesús de Galindez, a Spanish citizen and Columbia University scholar who had written a scathing indictment of Trujillo. Trujillo's men then executed Charles Murphy, an aviator from Oregon who had piloted the plane that took de Galindez from New York to the Dominican Republic. The murders gained national attention through the persistent efforts of Oregon congressman Charles Porter.8

Responding to public outrage, the State Department reluctantly investigated the murders. In one diplomat's view, the facts of the case demonstrated that the Dominican Republic's conduct was "below the level of recognized civilian nations, certainly not much above that of the communists." Nonetheless, the administration wanted amicable relations with a dictator who unfailingly backed U.S. foreign policies. In November 1958, Secretary Dulles extended an olive branch, asking the Dominican foreign minister to remind Trujillo that the United States appreciated the Dominican Republic's anticommunist leadership in the hemisphere.9

In 1958 officials focused neither on Venezuela nor on the Dominican Republic but on the disintegration of the Batista regime and the growing power of the 26th of July Movement led by Fidel Castro. The Eisenhower administration contested Castro and his movement because it believed that the revolutionaries threatened the substantial U.S. economic interests in Cuba and because it worried that communists had infiltrated the movement. Despite these fears, the administration made only ineffectual moves to deprive Castro of victory. In the aftermath of the Nixon trip and the public criticism of past support for dictators, the administration could hardly embrace its man in Havana. It hoped instead that it could find a "middle way" between Batista and Castro by persuading the dictator to step aside and schedule an election. But Batista stubbornly resisted all entreaties. In any case, U.S. officials misjudged the deterioration in Batista's position and the appeal of the Castro movement, with Ambassador Earl Smith repeatedly informing Washington that Castro lacked widespread popular support. As late as 4:00 P.M. on 31 December 1958, just hours before Batista fled the island, administration officials still thought they had time to find an alternative to Castro.10
Rafael Trujillo also dreaded Castro’s triumph. In late 1958 he urged the United States to lift its arms embargo and bolster the Batista regime in order to prevent the spread of international communism. Trujillo actually shipped small arms to Cuba, and, as he had done with Pérez Jiménez, initially granted political exile to Batista. The Dominican predicted that Castro would soon attack him. On 14 June 1959, Dominican exiles, led by Enrique Jiménez Moya, landed in the Dominican Republic. Trujillo’s forces routed the invaders. The exiles had been trained and equipped in Cuba, and their leader had served as an officer in the 26th of July Movement. Castro later confessed that he supported the invasion because of his friendship with Jiménez Moya and his hatred of Trujillo. Castro also knew that Trujillo armed Cuban counterrevolutionary forces.  

Rómulo Betancourt also plotted against Trujillo, materially supporting Dominican exiles. President Betancourt was determined to overthrow his old enemy. During the 1945–48 period, when Venezuela first experimented with democracy, Betancourt and Trujillo had feuded. Rightist Venezuelans organized in the Dominican Republic, and Dominican exiles sought haven in Venezuela. Trujillo celebrated the military *golpe de estado* of 1948 and then collaborated with Pérez Jiménez. After January 1958, Trujillo harbored right-wing Venezuelan exiles, ordered his radio stations to beam personal attacks on Betancourt, and probably authorized the planting of bombs in Caracas. In turn, Venezuela severed relations with the Dominican Republic. Venezuelans also participated in the June 1959 invasion of the Dominican Republic.  

Betancourt’s anti-Trujillista views also reflected his political principles. As author of the Betancourt doctrine, the Venezuelan argued that it was “nonsensical” to denounce totalitarian regimes in Asia or Europe and tolerate despotic governments in the Western Hemisphere. He called for the expulsion of dictatorial states from the Organization of American States (OAS).  

Turmoil in the traditional U.S. sphere of influence alarmed the Eisenhower administration. As Allen Dulles informed Secretary of State Christian Herter, the United States had become associated “in the public mind of Latin America with the extreme right, especially as the friend and supporter of the Dominican dictator Trujillo.” Even moderate leftists had become estranged, creating “a situation which abets the cause of those who want to bring the Caribbean political scene under Communist domination.” Despite Dulles’s warning, the administration rejected the Betancourt doctrine and demanded a cease-fire in the Caribbean. Hemispheric neighbors should respect the non-intervention doctrine of the OAS charter. As Assistant Secretary of State R. Richard Rubottom told Latin American diplomats, “anarchy” would ensue
if groups of "liberators" undertook "from bases in other countries to launch attacks aiming to oust violently the governments they dislike."\textsuperscript{14}

The United States tried both to reassert its hegemony and to improve its public image at a meeting of foreign ministers held in Santiago, Chile, in August 1959. The ministers met to discuss the Dominican issue and turmoil throughout the Caribbean basin. Influential OAS members, like Argentina and Mexico, enthusiastically agreed with Secretary Herter's observation that "history has shown" that democracy could not be imposed upon a country by force. Most Latin Americans, opposed to compromising the nonintervention principle, rejected the Betancourt doctrine and declined to break relations with the Dominican Republic. Herter agreed, however, to extend the Venezuelans a fig leaf to cover their diplomatic defeat. The Peace Committee, an inter-American body, would now have the power to initiate investigations of a member nation's behavior. But it would not have the power to enter the Dominican Republic without Trujillo's consent. Herter hoped that the inter-American community would hereafter focus less on Trujillo and more on Castro.\textsuperscript{15}

The looming confrontation with Castro's Cuba, however, would force the United States to choose sides in the war between Betancourt and Trujillo. By October/November 1959 the Eisenhower administration had concluded that it could no longer abide the Castro regime. The Cuban had mocked U.S. power. He had indulged in anti-U.S. propaganda, nationalized U.S. property, proclaimed Cuba's neutralism, and worked with Cuban Communists. Unchecked, Castro would, by example, undermine the U.S. position in Latin America and weaken U.S. credibility in the world. Covert actions aimed at harming Cuba began in late 1959 and were made coherent and systematic on 17 March 1960, when President Eisenhower approved a comprehensive program to overthrow Castro.\textsuperscript{16}

The Eisenhower administration desperately wanted regional allies in its war against Castro and now looked to Rómulo Betancourt and his doctrine. Although the administration had favored his election in 1958, it had not embraced Betancourt, for he was an economic nationalist who raised taxes on U.S. oil companies, which had over $2 billion invested in the country. Moreover, he had a suspect political past. As a youth, he had flirted with political radicalism, and in the mid-1950s he had published a scathing indictment of Pérez Jiménez and the oil companies. Such views earned Betancourt the disdain of some U.S. officials. In mid-1960, Vice President Nixon labeled Betancourt an "opportunistic" who accepted the support of the pro-Castroite "left." Nixon predicted that "Betancourt would take his present line until he got his way with respect to Trujillo but he would not stay with us on Castro."\textsuperscript{17}
Nixon was wrong; President Betancourt was a stout anticommunist. In front of U.S. diplomats, he laughed at his youthful infatuation with communism, and he ridiculed Juan José Arévalo, the former president of Guatemala, for equating anti-U.S. sentiment with anti-imperialism. He pledged that communists would not have a role in his government and that Venezuela would cooperate with the United States.18 Ten years of exile had been a harsh and bitter experience for Betancourt. Hoping to appease Venezuela's entrenched interest groups, Betancourt now favored an evolutionary approach to reform.

Betancourt's views on Fidel Castro also caught the administration's attention. During his triumphant tour of Venezuela in January 1959, Castro met with Betancourt and startled the president by requesting a $300 million loan and oil at discount prices. Betancourt initially characterized Castro as young and inexperienced. But his attitude hardened when Castro began to criticize Latin Americans who were not revolutionaries. In March 1959, for example, Castro insulted President José Figueres of Costa Rica, Betancourt's friend and mentor, at a rally in Havana. Thereafter, Castro publicly questioned Venezuela's reformist path. Betancourt also understood that young political radicals, who fomented violent antigovernment demonstrations in Caracas in late 1960, drew inspiration from the Cuban revolution.19

In the name of anti-Castroism, the State Department began to woo Betancourt. In August 1959 it authorized the Justice Department to arrest Pérez Jiménez, who was now hiding out in Miami, and initiate extradition proceedings against the bearer of the Legion of Merit. It promised Venezuela economic and technical assistance. The department also made certain that attacks on Betancourt, broadcast on Cuban radio, reached his ears. And, in April 1960, it agreed that the Peace Committee should investigate Trujillo's role in the latest right-wing assault on the Venezuelan government.20

On 28 April 1960, the State Department formally requested Betancourt's support. The United States was "interested" in Betancourt's declaration "that he was prepared to take the lead on Cuba, which he was certain most other Latin Americans would quickly join, if the Trujillo problem was resolved with United States cooperation." The United States, however, worried that if Trujillo fell, Castroite elements might move into the power vacuum. Betancourt responded by reiterating that his first concern was Trujillo and that he doubted communist strength in the Dominican Republic. Venezuelan and U.S. officials thereafter exchanged ideas, with U.S. diplomats counseling patience. But Assistant Secretary Rubottom also observed on 11 May 1960 that "Trujillo's days are numbered."21

The United States had in fact already turned against the Dominican dic-
tator. In November 1959, the same month that the Eisenhower administration had decided that constructive relations were over with Castro, Herter and Rubottom agreed that the United States would have to facilitate the post-Trujillo era. They reasoned from analogy. A tyrant in a sugar-producing island had again “liquidated and enfeebled” moderate political opponents and polarized the political milieu, thereby providing an opportunity for radicals. The United States would have to learn the lessons of history to prevent “a domino effect of Castro-like governments” throughout the Caribbean. In January 1960, the State Department developed a paper, approved in April by Eisenhower, that called for military intervention “to prevent a Castro-type government or one sympathetic to Castro.” But to forestall military action, the United States would persuade Trujillo to leave and would cultivate political moderates in the Dominican Republic.

The administration first tried to reason with Trujillo. During the first months of 1960, emissaries journeyed to Ciudad Trujillo to discuss with Trujillo prospects for his stepping down or permitting a free election. A comfortable exile, perhaps in Portugal or Morocco, with a “trust fund” was mentioned. But the tough old dictator resisted all blandishments, boasting that “I’ll never go out of here unless I go on a stretcher.”

The plan to encourage a Dominican opposition movement also fell apart. In January 1960, alleging an assassination conspiracy, Trujillo ordered a roundup of prominent businessmen and professionals. Henry Dearborn, deputy chief of the U.S. mission, described for Washington the Trujillo system as “an outrage abounding in trumped-up charges, arbitrary arrests, search without warrant, and inhumane treatment of prisoners.” Dearborn put the “ultimate question” to his superiors: “whether we need Trujillo’s help against international communism sufficiently to support a regime characterized by such unsavory practices.”

Although Dearborn’s colleagues in Washington agreed with him, one State Department official rejected Dearborn’s point. John C. Hill, the department’s liaison with the CIA, made a fact-finding mission to the Dominican Republic, concluding that it was impractical to attack Trujillo. Democratic elements were not yet strong enough to prevent communism in the post-Trujillo era. Anticipating President Kennedy’s formula, Hill asserted that anticommunism had a higher priority than democracy and that “we must be prepared to jump solidly on the ‘stop Castro’ animal.” It was an “ugly” choice, but the wrong choice would endanger national security and expose the department to virulent public criticism. Vice President Nixon seconded Hill’s assessment, instructing the NSC that the primary U.S. interest in the Dominican Republic was to prevent pro-Castro groups from seizing power.
Predictions of Castroism in the Dominican Republic flowed from fears and dubious historical analogies. An April 1960 National Intelligence Estimate dismissed the notion that Trujillo would be overthrown by a “Castro-like invasion or revolution,” suggesting only that if turmoil ensued after the demise of Trujillo, Castro might incite a revolution and be the “ultimate victor.” But intelligence analysts also understood that Castro no longer assisted exile movements or supported the Betancourt doctrine. Castro now realized that the nonintervention principles of the OAS would help protect the Cuban revolution. He further recognized that the U.S. preoccupation with Trujillo was evidence “that the North American government was maneuvering against the revolution” and “trying to establish a procedure which at any time could be turned against us.”

Castro reasoned well. As State Department officers noted, “the political damage resulting from a U.S. involvement in Cuba could be minimized by our first or simultaneously helping overthrow a hated dictator.” Undersecretary of State C. Douglas Dillon added that “if Trujillo could be removed from power in the Dominican Republic, while pro-Castro elements were prevented from seizing power in that country, our anti-Castro campaign throughout Latin America would receive a great boost.” Thus, in June 1960 the administration decided to pursue vigorous, even violent, measures to overthrow Trujillo. It accepted the Peace Committee’s 3 June 1960 denunciation of Trujillo, noting that it might assist “our subsequent efforts to have the Peace Committee face up similarly to the Cuban problem.” And in June it authorized a CIA proposal to make Henry Dearborn a “communications link” with Dominican dissidents who vowed to assassinate Trujillo. This authorization came shortly after President Eisenhower informed aides that he wanted Castro and Trujillo “sawed off.” Thereafter, the CIA developed plans to transfer sniper rifles with telescopic sights to Dominicans.

Even as the administration hatched assassination plots against both Castro and Trujillo, the Dominican counterattacked. On 24 June 1960 his agents detonated a bomb planted near President Betancourt’s passing automobile; Betancourt survived, but his hands were severely burned. Trujillo also tried to undermine U.S. policy within the United States. His fifty-four consulates took out advertisements in newspapers and planted stories with friendly journalists, reminding readers that Trujillo was a staunch anticommunist. Further, he bribed U.S. officials, including congressmen who sat on committees that allocated a sugar quota to the Dominican Republic. The Trujillo family controlled the island’s sugar industry.

Trujillo’s attack on Betancourt provided the administration with another opportunity to attack Castro. In August 1960, foreign ministers met in San
José, Costa Rica, to consider Trujillo’s aggression against Venezuela. Reversing the stand he took at Santiago in 1959, Secretary of State Herter embraced the Betancourt doctrine, proposing that the OAS take control of the political machinery of the Dominican Republic, oversee the end of the Trujillo tyranny, establish political parties, and conduct a free election. As Herter explained to President Eisenhower, his plan had dual objectives. A peaceful transition of power would avoid “a revolution which might well produce a communist or Castro-type government in Santo Domingo”; further, “if we prove successful in this, a very useful precedent will have been set for possible later action when the Cuban matter is before us.” Eisenhower agreed, observing that “until Trujillo is eliminated we cannot get our Latin American friends to reach a proper level of indignation in dealing with Castro.”

Herter’s call for a renunciation of the sacred nonintervention principle shocked Latin Americans and never came to a vote. OAS members condemned the Dominican Republic for its aggression but desisted from casting judgment on the internal character of the Trujillo regime. The OAS accordingly voted to break diplomatic relations with Trujillo and impose an arms embargo.

Herter also failed to attain his second objective. OAS foreign ministers declined to draw parallels between Trujillo's aggression and Castro's domestic and international policies. The ministers limited themselves to passing a bloodless resolution opposing extracontinental intervention in the hemisphere. A crestfallen Eisenhower ordered Herter not to press “weak-kneed” Latin Americans. He worried about the Cold War consequences of dividing the OAS.

For the rest of 1960 the administration oscillated between various fronts in its anti-Trujillo campaign. Following the San José conclave, it broke relations with the Dominican Republic, but it maintained three consulates on the island in order to preserve bases for CIA agents. The president also imposed punitive excise taxes on imports of Dominican sugar. The president did not want Trujillo to reap a sugar windfall in the aftermath of his July 1960 decision to cut the importation of Cuban sugar. Aware that Trujillo bribed key legislators, Eisenhower acted on his own authority because the agricultural committees refused to cut the Dominican Republic’s sugar quota.

The CIA continued to bargain with potential assassins, but with negligible results. The Dominicans altered their requests for weapons and wavered in their determination. Their caution was justified, for in August Trujillo’s security forces smashed an impending golpe. The administration also had second thoughts. In October 1960 Undersecretary Dillon informed the president that the United States was not taking “concrete moves” against Trujillo...
because it feared that his downfall would lead to “an individual of the Castro stripe in power.” The administration again unsuccessfully attempted to persuade Trujillo to participate in a peaceful transition of power. Trujillo had seemingly softened his position when he appointed prominent scholar Joaquín Balaguer as president. But Henry Dearborn, who was now consul general and de facto CIA chief of station, warned Washington not to be deceived, for there was no indication that the regime planned “to abolish arbitrary arrests, prison tortures, or reprisals against its political opposition.” Trujillo would continue “his political domination whether he is president or dogcatcher.” Dearborn concluded: “If I were a Dominican, I would favor destroying Trujillo as the first necessary step in the salvation of my country.”

Such sentiments combined with renewed Venezuelan demands for action hardened U.S. resolve. President Betancourt was frustrated that his enemy lived and still meddled in Venezuela. In December 1960 he called for another OAS probe into Trujillo’s conduct. He assured U.S. diplomats that he was “fully aware” of the Castro problem, that he believed Castro was in the Soviet orbit, and that Cuba inspired leftist riots in his country. And he began to criticize Castro in public addresses. But as a matter of personal dignity, he refused U.S. requests presented in “the strongest possible terms” to link Trujillo and Castro in a renewed OAS investigation. He repeated his pledge, however, to “head the movement of Latin American countries to dispose of the Castro problem once effective actions were taken against Trujillo.” Betancourt further promised to dispatch troops to assist a provisional Dominican government to prevent communism.

In its last days, the Eisenhower administration again accepted Betancourt’s bargain, reasoning that the Venezuelan was the “best bet” to achieve U.S. goals in the region. Betancourt had publicly broken with Castro, battled leftist opponents, and embraced international capitalism. He simply believed that foreign oil companies should shoulder an appropriate tax burden. By the end of 1960 the administration had repudiated the Dulles/Nixon thesis that Latin American democrats threatened U.S. interests. President Eisenhower caught the irony in this new approach; he confided to aides that “it was strange that he used to think of Betancourt as a leftist and now he was beginning to look like a rightist in relation to pro-Castro, pro-Communist attacks against him.”

While embracing Betancourt, the Eisenhower administration launched its final assaults on Castro and Trujillo. It dramatically increased the size and firepower of the Cuban exile army training in Guatemala, and it pressed President-elect Kennedy to do “whatever is necessary” to overthrow Castro.
It also broke diplomatic relations with Cuba on 3 January 1961, and it recommended that the new administration invoke the Trading with the Enemy Act. As for Trujillo, the administration banned the export of petroleum products, trucks, and truck parts to the Dominican Republic. The administration wanted not only to fulfill Betancourt’s request for additional economic pressure but also to mollify him. The United States would be legally obligated to purchase over two hundred thousand tons of Dominican sugar during the first three months of 1961.36

The administration also heeded the warning of intelligence analysts who predicted in late 1960 that “the days of his [Trujillo’s] regime appear numbered,” with assassination “an increasing possibility.” But they warned that “the tide is now running against the United States and the longer the current impasse continues, the more unfavorable to U.S. interests the outcome is likely to be when the Dominican pressure cooker finally explodes.” The administration accordingly revived its covert program, with Richard M. Bissell, Jr., the CIA’s deputy director of plans, speaking on 29 December of a “decisive stroke against Trujillo himself.” Recalling the hope “to move against Trujillo and Castro simultaneously,” President Eisenhower, on 3 January 1961, ordered his national security advisers “to do as much as we can and quickly about Trujillo.” Nine days later, the 5412 Committee (the special group that oversaw covert activities) ruled that the CIA could send small arms to Dominican dissidents. In the first months of 1961, Consul General Dearborn, through an intermediary, passed pistols and carbines to Dominicans.37

President John F. Kennedy pursued Eisenhower’s policies on all three Caribbean fronts. He authorized Eisenhower’s invasion plan, which culminated in the Bay of Pigs debacle of 17-19 April 1961. Thereafter, the administration developed its own covert campaign of terrorism and sabotage—Operation Mongoose—against Cuba. And the CIA continued to hatch anti-Castro assassination schemes. The Kennedy administration shared its predecessor’s conviction that communism in the Western Hemisphere imperiled the United States. As Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy put it to his brother on 19 April 1961, Castro’s triumph at the Bay of Pigs would lead him to be “more bombastic” and “more closely tied to communism.” Something “forceful and determined” had to be done because “our long-range foreign policy objectives in Cuba are tied to survival.”38

The Kennedy administration also developed an overt anti-Castro strategy, the Alliance for Progress. Through a massive infusion of public and private capital—ultimately $20 billion—the United States would build decent, democratic, and anticommunist Latin American societies. In his March 1961 speech announcing the alliance, the president also linked Castro and
Trujillo, expressing a “special friendship to the people of Cuba and the Dominican Republic—and the hope that they will soon rejoin the society of free men, uniting with us in our common effort.”

Rómulo Betancourt’s Venezuela served as the model for Latin America’s democratic development. According to Kennedy’s advisers, the future of Latin America “lay between the Castro road and the Betancourt road.” The United States needed to embrace the middle-class reformers that Dulles and Nixon had mocked in order to forestall radical change. Venezuela was the first Latin American country that President Kennedy visited. The United States also helped Betancourt calm urban areas, where leftist organizers flourished, by rushing an emergency package of $100 million in economic assistance in early 1961. Between 1962 and 1965, the United States would provide an additional $350 million in grants and credits.

Although Betancourt effusively praised the Alliance for Progress and President Kennedy, he continued to promote his doctrine and his anti-Trujillista views. The Kennedy administration quickly understood how it could enlist the Venezuelan in the war against Castro. In mid-February 1961, the president and his national security team learned from the CIA about the ongoing covert campaign against Trujillo and that the United States had passed small arms and sabotage equipment to Dominican dissidents. But the administration’s first move against Trujillo was an overt one. President Kennedy requested that Congress deny the Dominican Republic any “windfall” from Cuba’s sugar quota for the last nine months of 1961. With unified support from Republican leaders, who had conferred with Eisenhower and Nixon, the administration managed in March 1961 to push legislation out of the agricultural committees and through Congress.

Castro’s rout of the Bay of Pigs invaders caused the administration to hesitate in taking the decisive step against Trujillo. In early April the CIA had sent machine guns through diplomatic pouch to the U.S. consulate. But, on 25 April, CIA headquarters instructed Dearborn not to pass the machine guns and to inform the dissidents that the United States was not presently prepared to cope with the aftermath of an assassination. The CIA cable reflected disorder within the administration. Robert Murphy, the former undersecretary of state for political affairs, who visited with Trujillo in mid-April, urged the administration to make peace with the dictator because he had been a reliable ally and because the Dominican Republic was near Cuba. NSC Adviser McGeorge Bundy, however, warned the president that a rapprochement with Trujillo would undermine the Alliance for Progress. Moreover, Trujillo had begun to collaborate with the enemy. Dominican radio stations praised the Cuban revolution and attacked U.S. “imperialism.” Tru-
jillo's henchmen secretly conferred with Cuban and Soviet authorities. Notably, Havana no longer denounced Trujillo.42

President Kennedy took command of Dominican policy. At an NSC meeting on 5 May 1961, he ruled that the United States should not initiate the overthrow of Trujillo before knowing what government would succeed him. He also ordered the U.S. military to be prepared to invade the Dominican Republic to prevent a communist takeover. The president's ruling left Dearborn incredulous. For a year the United States had been nurturing the effort to overthrow Trujillo; it was "too late to consider whether [the] United States would initiate [the] overthrow of Trujillo." Kennedy clarified U.S. policy for Dearborn. On 25 May, "in view of the reported imminence of an attempt to assassinate Trujillo," he approved a contingency plan that authorized Dearborn to assure friendly Dominicans that they could count on U.S. military support to consolidate their hold on a post-Trujillo government. If "unfriendly elements" seized power, Dearborn had the authority to urge pro-U.S. groups to declare themselves the provisional government and request help from the United States and the OAS. The president's final word, as expressed in a cable he helped write and sent on 29 May to Dearborn, was that the United States wanted to be associated with the removal of Trujillo so as to derive credit among Dominicans and Latin American liberals but that "we must not run the risk of U.S. association with political assassination."43

The next evening, 30 May 1961, members of the "action group" of the Dominican dissidents ambushed and assassinated Trujillo. The aged dictator, traveling only with his chauffeur, was on his way to see his twenty-year-old mistress. The assassins apparently had with them CIA-supplied weapons.44

President Kennedy was perhaps surprised by at least the timing of the attack. He was in Paris meeting with President Charles de Gaulle and preparing for his meeting with Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev in Vienna. He ordered Rusk to stay behind in the United States for a day to survey the situation. Warships, loaded with twelve thousand combat-ready troops, patrolled sixty miles off the Dominican coastline. Consul General Dearborn reported that it was "highly unsafe" for him to maintain contact with the dissidents. He and CIA personnel were quickly recalled to Washington. The State Department, however, ordered them first to destroy all records concerning contacts with dissidents but not to destroy the president's last exculpatory cable of 29 May.45

Although Trujillo's death sparked a short celebration in Caracas, it did not terminate the Trujillo tyranny. Trujillo's security apparatus quickly captured or killed all but two of the conspirators. The dictator's two brothers, who controlled private armies, terrorized political opponents. Trujillo's
vindictive son, Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, Jr., or "Ramfis," returned from Europe, took charge of the armed forces, and supervised the torture and execution of the conspirators.

Back from Vienna, President Kennedy reviewed the Dominican situation with aides in early June and listed his famous descending order of preferences. Attorney General Kennedy proposed that the administration give Ramfis a chance to fulfill his pledge to move the nation toward democracy. Henry Dearborn, now back in Washington, responded that such promises "were the same moves that Trujillo had always made without any intended impact on the structure of his regime." He added that capable democratic groups existed on the island. In his last report from the Dominican Republic, Dearborn had recommended driving the Trujillo family out with military force. Others reminded that "we would do ourselves great harm" if the United States acted without the support of Venezuela. Despite this advice, Kennedy decided that the United States should delay action and monitor events. His fear of instability and communism overwhelmed his concern for the Alliance for Progress and Betancourt.

Over the next thirty months, U.S. Dominican policy reflected Kennedy's priorities. The State Department sent John Hill, its CIA liaison, to replace Dearborn as consul general. His objectives were first to prevent "Castro/communism" and then to help establish "a friendly government as democratic as possible." Joaquín Balaguer, who remained the nominal president, was informed in July 1961 that Hill had direct access to Kennedy. What Kennedy considered of "utmost importance" was that the government move toward democracy. But the president wanted Balaguer to know that he was specifically interested in the "progress of anti-Communist laws in [the] Dominican Congress, measures taken [to] exclude [the] return of Communist and Castroist exiles, and other actions taken [to] prevent infiltration and agitation by Communist-Castroist elements." The administration also assured Balaguer that the United States would lend military support to stop a "Castroist invasion" of his nation. Hill delivered the same message to Ramfis Trujillo in a series of cordial chats with the power behind the throne. This alarm about communism in the Dominican Republic again arose from analogy. U.S. intelligence analysts largely discounted the actual threat.

In deciding to work with the younger Trujillo and Balaguer, the administration assumed that their government could last until May 1962, when elections were promised. In late August, President Kennedy decided that the United States would back Balaguer because he "is our only tool" and because the "anti-Communist liberals are not strong enough." The president wistfully hoped that a Nehru-like figure would emerge who could command
popular support, tame the military, and carry out socioeconomic reform. But Kennedy would take no chances, warning aides, “We don’t want another Cuba to come out of the Dominican Republic.” He reportedly predicted that his first year in office would be successful if neither the Congo nor the Dominican Republic was lost to international communism. In the meantime, the United States would try to facilitate an orderly transfer of power by taking up the Eisenhower scheme of establishing a trust fund to entice the Trujillos into exile.48

Neither Venezuelans nor Dominicans, however, were inclined to be patient. The Venezuelans sharply rejected the Kennedy administration’s proposal for the partial lifting of OAS sanctions. President Betancourt emphasized that the “ouster of all the Trujillos [was] essential to full democratization” in the Dominican Republic. Dominicans similarly demanded democracy and staged massive antigovernment demonstrations when an OAS inspection team arrived on the island in mid-September. Intelligence analysts now understood that the Trujillos’ leaving the island had “become an obsession” for Dominicans. Dominican democrats were losing faith in the United States with a concomitant growth of “Castro-minded influence.” If the Trujillos struck a golpe, it would only polarize the international and domestic political milieu. The journalist John Bartlow Martin, whom Kennedy sent on a fact-finding mission, concurred, reporting that a renewed Trujillo regime would destroy the middle class, thereby ensuring that the next revolution would be “proletarian and leftist.”49

Confronted with the collapse of his evolutionary policy, Kennedy acted boldly. In October he dispatched State Department officer George McGhee to Ciudad Trujillo to tell the Trujillos that they must leave the island. When the family balked, Secretary Rusk warned on 18 November that the United States would not “remain idle” if the Trujillos tried to “reassert dictatorial domination.” Eight U.S. warships loomed on the Dominican horizon. U.S. jets buzzed the capital’s shoreline, and U.S. military attaches encouraged Dominican officers to desert the Trujillos. By 20 November, the Trujillo clan had fled into exile. Over the next months, the administration would threaten and cajole Dominicans into establishing an anticommunist coalition, the Council of State.50 With U.S. and Venezuelan assistance, the council held an election and in February 1963 transferred power to the winner, Juan Bosch, an ally of Betancourt.

The ousting of the Trujillos bolstered the administration’s anti-Castro campaign, for Betancourt fulfilled his pledges. He reportedly approved of the Bay of Pigs planning, although he declined to support the invasion publicly. But with the Trujillos gone, he openly espoused the U.S. cause. As
U.S. intelligence analysts noted, Betancourt’s “position at home and abroad has been strengthened by recent developments in the Dominican Republic.” In November 1961 he broke relations with Castro in protest over Cuban propaganda. He then spearheaded the campaign to exclude Cuba from the OAS system. During the October 1962 missile crisis, Venezuela stoutly supported the United States at the United Nations, and Betancourt assigned two destroyers to the naval blockade of Cuba. Further, Betancourt allegedly exchanged ideas with U.S. officials on assassinating Castro.\(^{51}\)

In 1963 the Venezuelan president intensified his anti-Castro crusade. In Washington for a state visit, Betancourt called for constant and unremitting actions against Cuba “to encircle it, to cut it off without ceasing and failing.” President Kennedy responded by writing to the CIA that “it is obvious that the Communists in Venezuela support Castro. Do we have any information that could be presented in a public forum, such as the OAS, that would indicate that the link between the anti-Betancourt terrorists and Castro is direct.”\(^{52}\) That evidence surfaced on a Venezuelan beach in 1963 when Venezuela claimed that it had discovered a small cache of Cuban arms. These arms were allegedly left for leftist insurgents determined to disrupt the November 1963 presidential election.

The Cuban intervention surprised intelligence analysts in Washington, for Castro had not been exporting arms to insurgent groups. Venezuela had previously complained about arms smuggling but conceded that surplus U.S. and Western European arms came from Panama, not communist countries.\(^{53}\) In fact, some have subsequently questioned the validity of the arms discovery. Joseph Burkholder Smith, who had previously served as CIA chief of station in Caracas, has implied that CIA operatives, responding to presidential pressure, engaged in a form of “black propaganda” and planted the arms. Philip Agee, a CIA agent who turned against the agency, also recalled that he immediately suspected that the Caracas station, working with Venezuelan agents, had planted the arms.\(^{54}\) On the other hand, in December 1963 the CIA assured President Lyndon B. Johnson that evidence “proved absolutely that arms had been imported into Venezuela from Cuba.”\(^{55}\)

Whatever the source of the arms, their discovery delighted President Kennedy and provided the new Johnson administration with an opportunity to intensify the war against Castro. In July 1964, with Venezuela taking the lead, the United States obtained an OAS resolution that condemned Cuba for its aggression and called on member states to break relations and impose economic sanctions. Cuba was effectively ostracized from the hemispheric community, with only Mexico ignoring the sanctions. The investment that the United States had made in Betancourt’s Venezuela in early 1960 had matured.
U.S. officials were also pleased that Betancourt was able to transfer the presidential sash to his duly elected successor, Raul Leoni. This marked the first peaceful transfer of power in Venezuelan history. No such historical watershed characterized the Dominican Republic, however, for Juan Bosch’s presidency lasted only seven months. A cabal of wealthy businessmen and right-wing military officers struck a golpe in September 1963, spuriously proclaiming that they were saving the nation from Castro and communism.

The United States recognized the Dominican junta, although in one final gesture to Betancourt and his doctrine it delayed recognition until after the Venezuelan election. The administration gave up on Dominican democracy because, as President Kennedy had admitted, it valued anticommunism and stability over decent, democratic regimes. Throughout 1962 and 1963, the administration discouraged the Council of State and then President Bosch from purging the Trujillistas from the Dominican armed forces. Bosch never gained effective control over the Dominican military. The administration also constantly criticized Bosch for not restricting the freedom of leftists. The U.S. ambassador complained that Bosch did not denounce communism as often as he and Dominican elites would like and once irresponsibly speculated that Bosch “has been a deep-cover communist for years.” U.S. officials did not want a restoration of a Trujillo-like regime, but they ultimately spurned Bosch for refusing “to adopt a firm policy against Communism and Castro.”

As outlined in a newspaper article written by Assistant Secretary of State Edwin Martin shortly after Bosch’s overthrow, U.S. policy had come full circle. The United States preferred tough, anticommunist democrats like Rómulo Betancourt. But it would no longer disdain military dictators. Juan Bosch and other Latin American reformers had proven inept and inexperienced. The military was a reliable anticommunist force, and Latin America needed a certain degree of authority to prevent the instability and disorder that provided opportunities for communists. Martin’s article, which President Kennedy approved, reiterated the views of John Foster Dulles and Richard Nixon and anticipated the “Mann doctrine” of the Johnson administration. Indeed, Martin published what the president had said privately when he listed his famous “three possibilities in descending order of preference” for the post-Trujillo Dominican Republic.

In the period from 1958 to 1963, the United States took extraordinary measures—assassination plots, bribery, embargoes, interventions, naval shows of force, grand economic schemes, propaganda, sabotage, and terrorism—in the area dubbed here the Caribbean triangle. Cold War anticommunism underlay these actions. But in pursuing these aggressive measures, officials were upholding customary U.S. policies. Throughout the twentieth
century, the United States has practiced sphere-of-influence politics in the Western Hemisphere: It has tried to maintain peace and order, exclude foreign influences, expand trade and investment, and shape Latin America’s development. The policies pursued by the Eisenhower, Kennedy, and subsequently Johnson administrations were rooted in that tradition.

Notes

A previous version of this essay appeared in Diplomatic History 20 (Winter 1996): 55–78.


23. Trujillo quoted in oral history of William Pawley, Herbert Hoover Library, West Branch, IA.


28. For allegations of bribery, see memorandum of conversation between president and Herter, 30 August 1960, OSS, Subject Series, State Department Subseries, box 4, folder: State Department 8–9/60 (2).


30. Slater, OAS and United States Foreign Policy, 192.


32. For CIA and Dominican Republic, see telephone calls between Allen Dulles and Herter, 19 August 1960, Christian Herter Papers, Telephone Series, box 13, folder 7/1–8/31/60, Eisenhower Library; for Eisenhower’s action see memorandum of conversation with legislative leaders, 23 August 1960, Whitman File, Legislative Leaders Series, box 3, folder: Legislative Leaders, 1960 (4).


34. Sparks to State Department, memorandum of conversation with Betancourt, 5 December 1960, FRUS, 1958–1960, Microfiche Supplement, 5:VE51.


37. Hugh S. Cumming (Bureau of Intelligence and Research) to Herter, 22 November 1960, FRUS, 1958–1960, Microfiche Supplement, 5:DR29; Bissell quoted in notes of Special Group Meeting, 29 December 1960, FRUS, 1961–1963, Microfiche Supplement,


50. Rusk warning in Department of State, Bulletin 45 (4 December 1961): 931.


