REVOLUTION and COUNTERREVOLUTION in the DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Why the U.S. Invaded

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This article appeared in the September 1965 issue of Monthly Review, edited by Leo Huberman (1903-1968) and Paul Sweezy.

published by
New England Free Press
791 Tremont St.
Boston, Mass. 02118

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The twentieth-century history of the Dominican Republic and its relations with the United States, ably summarized and analyzed in the article by Vicente Girbau beginning on page 9 below, displays in microcosm all the essentials of the experience of Latin America as a whole. And we see no reason to doubt that what is now happening in the Dominican Republic is prophetic of what will happen throughout Latin America in the period ahead.

Perhaps the most puzzling aspect of the Dominican situation, and in a sense the key to its real meaning, is why the Johnson administration decided on massive military intervention only four days after the beginning of the uprising. No one outside the crackpot Right ever thought that Juan Bosch or his Dominican Revolutionary Party (PRD) was Communist in any of the several meanings of that flexible term. All observers agree that it was Bosch's civilian followers, together with younger military officers disgusted with the rottenness and corruption of the regime which came to power after Bosch's overthrow, who planned the uprising of April 24th. There was never any doubt about the aims of the insurgents: reinstatement of the democratic Constitution of 1962 and restoration of Bosch to the presidency which he had won by a 2-to-1 vote in a free election. And the allegation that the uprising was "taken over" by "Communists" between April 24 and April 28 when the marines landed, was so flimsy that apparently none of the reporters on the spot even took it seriously. (See, for example, the detailed analysis of these matters by the staunchly anti-Communist Theodore Draper in the *New Leader* of May 24th.)

What, then, was the real reason for the United States military intervention? Washington of course knew that it was acting in flagrant violation of international law, of the United Nations Charter, and of specific treaty obligations to the Latin American countries. It must have been aware that the intervention would be interpreted all over the world as an act of naked imperialism, that it might be a mortal blow to the Organization of American States, and that millions of people throughout Latin America would conclude that the blocking of Bosch's return to power meant the end of all hope of social reform through legal and nonviolent means. In short, Washington must have known that it would have to pay an enormous political price in terms of what Draper called "the incalculable consequences of this adventure for years to come and in countries near and far." What persuaded Washington that it was nevertheless worthwhile to pay this price?

Probably the explanation most widely accepted among liberal and social democratic critics of Johnson's Dominican policy runs in terms of personalities. According to this view, the Embassy in Santo Domingo and the people responsible for making policy recommendations in the State Department are reactionaries or narrow-minded upper-class snobs who don't like democracy anyway and naturally support the Latin American oligarchies in their determination to hang onto their privileges at whatever cost. Through biased and/or falsified intelligence and bad advice, these people scared Johnson and his top aides into committing the grave blunder of intervening militarily against one of their most loyal and potentially effective allies, Juan Bosch. Tad Szulc, who covered the first few weeks of the Dominican crisis for the *New York Times,* presents an argument along these lines in the *Saturday Evening Post* of July 31st; and the evidence he adduces certainly shows beyond a reasonable doubt that the Embassy and State Department officials dealing with Dominican affairs were on the whole an ignorant, prejudiced, and incompetent lot who did their best to bring about exactly what happened. If we are nevertheless unwilling to accept this as an *explanation* of what happened, it is because we do not for a moment believe that the top policy makers in Washington—Johnson, Rusk, Bundy, McNamara,

the military leaders in the Pentagon—are such weak fools as the argument obviously implies. It is much wiser to assume that they knew perfectly well what they were doing and were willing to pay the high political price of military intervention because they believed the alternative to be more dangerous.

What could have led them to this belief?

The answer must be sought in the actual course and chronology of events in Santo Domingo. (In what follows we rely on the account presented by Tad Szulc in the *Saturday Evening Post* article cited above.) The uprising began early Saturday afternoon, April 24, when rebel civilians captured the main radio and TV station in Santo Domingo and announced that the government had fallen. They were immediately joined by two army camps on the outskirts of the city. Crowds rushed into the streets to celebrate what they thought was already a victorious revolution. However, the illusion was short-lived: government forces soon recaptured the radio station and issued an ultimatum to the army camps to surrender by 5 p.m. The military was now sharply split into two factions—one centering on the two rebellious army camps and the other, under the command of General Wessin, on the San Isidro air force base a dozen miles outside the capital. A clash was unavoidable, and the fact that the San Isidro faction had control over the available planes and tanks gave it a definite military advantage. It was undoubtedly with a view to offsetting this advantage that the leaders of the uprising took a fateful step: they opened the arsenals of the two army camps and the downtown police stations under their control. In Szulc's words, "men, women, and teen-agers—Communists and non-Communists alike—were allowed to help themselves to anything they wanted. Suddenly the city turned into an armed camp." It is not clear exactly when this happened, but according to Szulc's account it was an accomplished fact by early Sunday afternoon (April 25). Thereafter it was largely the armed civilians who, with a courage and heroism of the highest order, repulsed Wessin's tanks and brought the old military machine, built up during the Trujillo era and trained and lavishly equipped by the United States, to the brink of total destruction. It was at this point, on April 28th, that Johnson made his decision to send in the marines and para-

troopers. As Bosch said at the time on the "Face the Nation" TV program: "When they landed, Wessin y Wessin's forces were defeated. Twenty-four hours more and the Dominicans would have solved their own problems."

The statement was of course not literally true: problems like those of the Dominican people cannot be solved in 24 hours, or even in 24 months. But all the same it pointed to the most important truth of all: in another 24 hours the greatest obstacle to the solution of the Dominican people's problems would have been removed. Just as Batista fled from Camp Colombia on the outskirts of Havana on January 1, 1959, so Wessin would have fled from San Isidro on April 29, 1965. Santo Domingo would have been in the hands of its armed citizens, and there is no reason to doubt that the uprising would have spread immediately to the rest of the country.

If we are to understand United States policy, it is necessary to indulge in a little speculative history. What would have happened in the Dominican Republic if the uprising had succeeded as it was on the verge of doing on April 28th?

First, Juan Bosch would have returned to receive a hero's welcome. He would have been reinstated in the presidency, parliament would have reconvened, and the Constitution of 1963 would have been proclaimed the law of the land. Outwardly the situation as it had existed in September, 1963, before the anti-Bosch *coup d'état,* would have been restored. But beneath the surface everything would have been different.

The Dominican Constitution of 1963 was a progressive document along the lines of, though more moderate than, the Cuban Constitution of 1940. It provided for land reform, modern labor and social welfare legislation, separation of church and state, and the usual guarantees of democratic freedoms. Bosch was elected President on a platform promising to implement the Constitution, with his support coming almost entirely from the lower middle and working classes who would be the main beneficiaries. During his seven months in office, however, he was not able to accomplish very much—partly because the existing state apparatus was totally unsuited to the purposes of social reform, but even more because a serious attempt to carry out his promises would necessitate curtailing the privileges of the

oligarchy, and any move in that direction would immediately trigger a military coup against which Bosch had no defenses whatever. The wonder is not that he accomplished little but that he managed to accomplish anything at all and to remain in office for a period of months rather than days.

How different it would have been if Bosch had returned to power last April in the wake of a triumphant revolution! With the old military machine in ruins and the people armed, not only would he have been in a position to carry out the reforms promised in the Constitution of 1963; he would have been under enormous pressure to go faster and further than he and his associates could possibly have contemplated in the conditions of 1962-1963. From being a brake on reform activity, military force would have turned into an accelerator.

There is no mystery about what needed, and still needs, to be done in the Dominican Republic. The people are desperately poor. "Most of them," a reporter quoted a United States marine on duty in Santo Domingo as saying, "are just hungry. That's what the trouble is about." (*New York Times,* May 24.) And the same newspaper the same day carried a Washington dispatch which reads in part:

> A recent economic study presents a grim picture of the Dominican Republic as a land of near-starvation and underscores the grave task that will confront whatever government emerges after the present crisis. . . .
>
> The report was prepared by Nathan Koenig, an economic consultant with the Department of Agriculture, and is based on a first-hand study of farming, food processing and distribution in the Caribbean country. . . .
>
> "An exceptionally large proportion of the population is inadequately fed and poorly nourished," the report says. "Only a small number of people enjoy a reasonably adequate diet."

Any serious attempt to cope with this situation would have to include the liquidation of the miserably inefficient system of latifundism, and the mobilization for domestic investment of the economic surplus which is now consumed or wasted by the local oligarchy or sent abroad as profits and other remittances to parent corporations in the United States. And these steps, it is safe to say, could be carried through only by means of a far-

reaching expropriation of land and capital from the existing owners, Dominican and foreign.

No one can say how Juan Bosch, inescapably confronted with these tasks and backed by an armed citizenry, would have acted. Perhaps he would have allowed himself to be guided by the logic of the situation, as Fidel Castro had done six years earlier when he came to power in a Cuba afflicted with the same problems which face the Dominican Republic today. If Bosch had chosen this course, he could certainly have relied on the enthusiastic support of his armed followers; but just as certainly it would have brought him into increasingly sharp conflict with the privileged minority in his own country and the corporations and their government in the United States. On the other hand, wishing to avoid such a conflict, Bosch might have temporized, carrying out only relatively superficial reforms and hoping to be able to reconstitute a professional military machine while effectively disarming the people. In this he would of course have enjoyed the support of the privileged minority and the United States; the growing conflict would have been between him and his own followers. In this situation, the latter would undoubtedly have turned to more radical leaders who, with the armed citizenry behind them, would have been in a position to oust the president and proceed with a program of fundamental structural reforms.

We are thus led to the conclusion that the triumph of the Dominican uprising would very likely have produced exactly what Washington most feared—another Cuba. Juan Bosch could have led the way if he had chosen to do so; if not he would have been replaced by others with more determination and a greater understanding of the needs of their people. In other words, the particular personality and inclinations of the man in whose name the uprising was organized were not the decisive factors in 1965, any more than his election to the presidency had been in 1962. The decisive factor was the location of armed force—in the right-wing officer corps in 1962-1963, potentially in the armed people in 1965. It was to keep this potentiality from being realized that Washington was prepared to pay the enormous political price entailed in open military intervention. And from Washington's point of view—that is, the point of

view of the giant multinational corporations—the decision was unquestionably a rational one. A victory for the Dominican Revolution would have meant not only the loss of the hundreds of millions of dollars invested in that small country; even more important, it would have given an enormous boost to the revolutionary forces all over the world struggling to escape from the oppression and exploitation of monopoly capital and its local henchmen and allies.

Recent Dominican experience thus proves once again the truth of Mao Tse-tung's dictum that political power grows out of the barrel of a gun. It also proves that the men in charge of the Washington government are better political scientists than their liberal critics. And it proves something else too: that the substitution of an American counter-revolutionary military force for a Dominican counter-revolutionary force cannot solve a single one of the problems that gave rise to the uprising in the first place. On the contrary, it has exacerbated all these problems and added new ones. Writing from Santo Domingo on May 14th, Tad Szulc stated:

> A growing consensus among Dominicans and Americans here is that the United States may now be forced to keep occupation troops here for long months, if not years, amid the rising hatred of the Dominicans, who greatly admired the United States until recently. (*New York Times,* May 15.)

How great the admiration for the United States may have once been we do not know, but at any rate nothing that has happened in the nearly three months since this was written has cast doubt on the rest of the statement. Whatever "solution" is worked out to the problem of forming a new Dominican government—and as of early August none is in sight—it is clear that real power will continue to grow out of the barrels of American guns.

Every effort will no doubt be made to disguise this fact. A new army of Dominican mercenaries will be organized and trained under new Trujillos. The regime of murder and torture which Trujillo and his successors maintained for more than a quarter of a century will be continued, with Dominicans doing most of the dirty work. But all these will be mere instruments

of American rule, and they will not obviate the necessity for the United States to keep in being a permanent occupation force either in the Dominican Republic itself or ready at a moment's notice to re-invade the country.

But this is not all. It is certain that the Dominican people will not voluntarily surrender the arms they acquired during the first days of the uprising. Already newspaper accounts speak of massive smuggling of guns and ammunition out of Santo Domingo to hiding places in the countryside, and this movement will doubtless be accelerated if and when the Constitutionalist leaders sign some sort of agreement with the Americans and their San Isidro puppets. (It is also possible that no such agreement will be concluded and that the problem will be "solved" by an all-out assault on downtown Santo Domingo. But the Americans are obviously anxious to avoid such a bloody debacle, which could only have the effect of hastening developments in the rest of Latin America.) "There will," says an editorial in the *New York Times* of August 2nd, "certainly be student fighters in the mountains of the Dominican Republic when a settlement of the political situation is reached." One can go further and predict that to an ever increasing extent violent repression and violent resistance will be the dominant modes of life in the Dominican Republic. Such are the fruits of foreign-imposed counter-revolution.

If we focus exclusively on the Dominican Republic there is no visible way out of the impasse: the United States clearly has the military power to maintain the occupation indefinitely. But revolution and counter-revolution in the Dominican Republic are not isolated phenomena. They are part of a developing world-wide struggle which has already burst into open flames in Southeast Asia and Central Africa and which is flickering and smoldering throughout the colonial, semi-colonial, and neo-colonial world. Has the United States the power to stamp out or control the fire throughout the vast regions of Asia, Africa, and Latin America? This is the decisive question of the second half of the twentieth century on which ultimately the fate of us all depends.

Those of us who do not think so, who believe that sooner or later the people of the United States themselves are going to

have to choose between being bled white and forcing their rulers to come to terms with history, can only hope that the lessons of the Dominican affair will be well learned. Counter-revolutionary force solves nothing: it merely breeds more crises and more violence, and in the long run it will lead to the destruction of those who use it.

(August 5, 1965)