The Day Johnson Regretted: The Dominican Intervention April 28, 1965

Nancy Battista

UNC Charlotte History Department

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Memories of the Johnson administration call forth the Vietnam War, the Great Society, and the civil rights movement. But hidden away for many lurks the US unilateral intervention in the Dominican Republic which began on April 28, 1965. For little over a year more than 20,000 Marines would attempt to quell what started as a civil disturbance. What prompted LBJ to get embroiled in another military action when he had many other battles both domestic and international to contend with? Moreover how did the US justify this act of aggression on another sovereign state?

To understand the motives of the Johnson administration’s decision to intervene in the DR, Dominican Republic/US history must be explored. This paper examines the two prong efforts of Cold War policy makers that LBJ chose to surround him. These stalwart anti-communists and veterans of previous administrations orchestrated Johnson’s Latin American policies while keeping US national security priority one. First, they implemented aggressive actions overtly and at times covertly to influence the politics of other states. They hoped they could forestall the ideals of Fidel Castro from further seeping into the Caribbean Basin. Second, they developed a diplomatic foreign policy strategy that put stability over democracy. In so doing, they backed dictatorial leaders whose actions fomented civil discontent and disturbance. Also, they compounded matters by implementing an intelligence machine that provoked the situation and distorted or misinterpreted the communist threat. In an environment of heightened communist apprehension and the eruption of civil disruption the CIA intelligence became distorted and exaggerated. While protecting US national security and US democracy the State Department inhibited the rights of underdeveloped nations. From these policies the US Dominican intervention evolved.
As justification of this action the US looked to past arguments for its superiority. As US power and influence grew so did its belief that it held a special place as peacekeeper, mediator, and area security authority. This research connects the ideas used by former presidents and policy makers to legitimize their use of military force in Latin America and contrasts them to the unspoken but implied ones that Johnson administrators applied to the Dominican conflict. These include Manifest Destiny, the Monroe Doctrine and the theory of the white man's burden. Enhancing and understanding the motivation and justification of this ill-advised intervention can be helpful to understanding foreign policy and history during the Cold War period.