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E. The Dominican Republic

1. Summary and Conclusion

In late 1960 and 1961, the United States, having abandoned its policy of nonintervention in the Dominican Republic, sought to bring about the overthrow of the regime of Generalissimo Rafael Trujillo and the establishment of a moderate successor government. To accomplish this result several measures were undertaken on the diplomatic level and the Special Group (predecessor of the Forty Committee) approved a program of covert action as well. At their direction the CIA encouraged a group of internal dissidents along with several exile organizations. On May 30, 1961, members of the internal group assassinated Trujillo.

There was no direct American participation in the assassination. The idea originated with the Dominicans; they acquired some of the weapons on their own; and they did the detailed planning. They were never subject to American supervision or control.

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On the other hand, CIA and State Department officers in the Dominican Republic were in regular contact with the plotters before the assassination, and they were well aware of the group's lethal intentions. The CIA had told the group of practical problems with several earlier assassination plans; it had offered to train a member of the group in the use of explosives to kill Trujillo.

As a gesture of American support, three revolvers and three carbines, along with limited supplies of ammunition, were passed to the plotters about two months before the assassination. One of the carbines was reportedly left at the scene of the crime. Four submachineguns were also sent to the Dominican Republic by diplomatic pouch. They were withheld from the plotters because of last-minute State Department objections.

It appears that high-level State Department and White House officials first learned guns had been provided to potential assassins some six weeks after the transfer, and about two and a half weeks prior to Trujillo's death. A statement of policy was prepared and approved by the President, reading "we must not run risk of U.S. association with political assassination, since U.S. as a matter of general policy cannot condone assassination. This last principle is overriding and must prevail in doubtful situations." The preparation of this message, and the required coordination,

consumed about two weeks. There is no evidence of any effort during this period to recover the weapons or otherwise interfere with the assassination plans. The policy statement was cabled to the Dominican Republic on May 29, the day before the successful assassination attempt. Both the Consul General and the CIA Station Chief in Ciudad Trujillo promptly protested this change in the policy which they had followed in the belief it had been approved by appropriate authority. Before these cables were received in Washington, Trujillo was dead.

2. (Proposed) General Conclusion and Recommendation

The Commission concurs in the position taken in the policy statement. We have concluded that there was an improper level of American involvement in the death of Generalissimo Trujillo. That is so even though the assassins might have been able to procure equivalent weapons from other sources. We also conclude that despite the apparent good faith of the persons concerned, there was inadequate consideration of the risks of such involvement and inadequate supervision and coordination of the operation.

We recommend that in the future, weapons should be supplied to plotters of a coup or revolution only in the rarest of circumstances, if at all. In passing on such activities the approving authority should consider carefully the potential damage to the foreign relations of the nation and the feelings of the American people if such activities become known. In our judgment eventual disclosure is inevitable.

The procedures of the CIA should be modified to require the concurrence of the Department of State before weapons, ammunition, explosives, and similar items are transmitted by diplomatic pouch. The treaty obligations of the U.S., including particularly those under the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relation should be observed and fulfilled in good faith.

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3. The Chronology

a. The Background

Rafael Trujillo came to power in the Dominican Republic in 1930. By 1960 he was notorious because of the corrupt and regressive nature of his regime, because of his systematic use of torture and murder as tools of government, and because of his intervention in the affairs of other nations. The country was in considerable turmoil as the result of several attempts to overthrow the government, sponsored by other Latin American countries.

The policy of the United States at the beginning of 1960 was to refrain from actions which would hasten Trujillo's downfall but to identify, develop, and encourage a moderate group which would take power in the event of Trujillo's death, flight, or overthrow. This policy of non-intervention, although clearly required by treaty, convinced many Latin Americans that the United States supported and maintained the Trujillo regime. Leaders such as President Betancourt of Venezuela, whose support the United States badly wanted in connection with operations against Castro, conditioned their support on U.S. assistance in toppling Trujillo. In April the President approved contingency planning for a more active U.S. role in the event the political situation in the Dominican Republic continued to deteriorate.

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b. The Rifles

In May the American Ambassador to the Dominican Republic returned to Washington for consultations. Both State Department and CIA files indicate that he reported the dissidents needed weapons, particularly a "small number of high-powered rifles with telescopic lenses." The Ambassador has no present recollection of any such request. He is confident that he made no serious effort to obtain them. Nevertheless, the request went forward. Near the end of June, according to CIA files, the Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs approved the provision of "a small number of sniper rifles or other devices for the removal of key Trujillo people from the scene," and requested that they be supplied at the earliest possible moment. Neither the CIA officer who obtained this approval nor the Assistant Secretary, now both retired, has any recollection of this meeting.

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c. Explosives

On June 24, 1960, Trujillo sponsored an unsuccessful attempt on the life of the President of Venezuela; as a result the United States and other OAS countries severed diplomatic relations in August. Consular relations were retained.

The Commission Staff interviewed the foreign service officer who served as Deputy Chief of Mission before the severance of relations, and as Consul General thereafter. It was his recollection that the dissidents had no definite assassination plans in mid 1960, although they did speak of that course as the only way out of the conditions under which they lived. It was not until early 1961, as he recalls, that the dissidents began formulating specific plans to kill Trujillo. The cables and memoranda of the period tend to confirm this recollection.

Nevertheless, the CIA continued at intervals during 1960 to discuss with the dissidents means for the assassination of Trujillo. A memorandum in October 1960 reflects that the dissidents planned to kill Trujillo with a bomb, detonated from a remote point, and then to take over the nation by means of an armed uprising, coordinated with other paramilitary action. A more detailed proposal along similar lines appears to have been provided by the dissidents in December.

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On December 29, 1960, the Deputy Director for Plans presented the Special Group with a program for covert action to bring about Trujillo's overthrow. A portion of the program called for Agency and consular officials in Ciudad Trujillo to continue to work with the internal dissidents to promote an uprising and the establishment of a moderate pro-U.S. successor to the Trujillo regime. The plan, as initially approved by the Special Group, contained no provision for supplying arms or explosives to the internal dissidents.

Two weeks later, the Department of State, on its own motion, obtained Special Group consent to have the internal dissidents furnished "limited supplies of small arms and other equipment," meaning explosives, subject to the condition that these materials be provided to the dissidents at a point outside the country itself. The internal State Department memorandum which led to this proposal stated there would be no thought of toppling the government by any such "minor measure," but some sabotage potential would be placed in the hands of the pro-U.S. opposition with a corresponding boost to their morale and their opinion of the United States. The station and the consulate were informed of the Special Group action on January 19, 1961, the last day of the Eisenhower Administration. President Kennedy was informed of the Special Group action not later than mid-February.

The Commission finds no reason to believe that any member of the Special Group intended to authorize the furnishing of assassination weapons. However, those CIA officials who had been involved in dealings with the dissidents very likely believed that the Special Group had authorized support of the planned assassination and armed uprising.

d. Revolvers.

During the early months of 1961 the CIA Station and the consular officials in Ciudad Trujillo kept in close touch with the dissidents, and they were aware of their various schemes to assassinate Trujillo. Although these officials apparently took no active role in the development of plans, they did on occasion discuss and criticize plans developed by the dissidents. In mid-February, two members of the dissidents' "Action Group", which was to carry out the actual assassination, came to the United States. They met with both CIA and State Department officers. During these meetings they stated repeatedly that the key to the success of the plot would be the assassination of Trujillo. The evidence is insufficient to permit a conclusion how far this knowledge went within the State Department.

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In March matters took an active turn. In a cable on March 4, a letter on March 16, and an airgram on March 22 the Consul General in Ciudad Trujillo reported that plans for Trujillo's assassination were coming to a head. He requested additional authority to supply the pro-U.S. dissidents with weapons.

Similar requests were made by the CIA Station Chief of his headquarters. Three times headquarters responded that it could not comply with these requests because the restrictions imposed by the Special Group precluded the introduction of arms into the Dominican Republic by Americans.

On March 22, the CIA Station Chief renewed his request that headquarters send him three .38 calibre revolvers and ammunition by diplomatic pouch. He stated that without some show of support the United States would lose the dissident group entirely, while if it supplied weapons it might have some control over the timing of their use.

On the same day, March 22, representatives of the CIA met with the State Department officer who served as their point of contact with the Department's Bureau of Inter-American Affairs. Three days later, on March 25, the Deputy Director for Plans cabled the station setting forth United States policy with respect to the Dominican Republic and stating that the revolvers and ammunition would be sent by diplomatic pouch in the near future.

There is nothing in either CIA or State Department files to indicate whether the Department was consulted on this decision. The memories of the participants are hazy on the matter, but there are indications that the CIA did discuss the introduction of handguns into the Dominican Republic and believed it obtained approval. The then Deputy Director for Plans testified that as the territorial restriction on delivery of weapons was initially imposed at the request of the Department of State, he would have considered the State Department's willingness to waive the restriction as adequate authority and probably would not have returned to the Special Group for formal approval. He observed that the members of the Group or their staffs might have been advised informally.

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The use of a diplomatic pouch to send weapons for such purposes was prohibited by regulations of the CIA's Clandestine Services, and it is also illegal under international law. The Deputy Director of Plans approved the waiver of the internal regulations. There is nothing to indicate that the Department of State was informed of the use of the pouch, and the fact that the March 25 cable instructed the Chief of Station not to advise the Consul General of the use of the pouch suggests that the CIA acted unilaterally in this regard.

The CIA files indicate that the revolvers were passed to the dissidents, and the Department of State files indicate that one was passed by the Consul General and the other two by Agency officers. Neither the Consul General nor the former Chief of Station has any particular recollection of the matter.

e. Carbines

On March 26, the day after CIA decided to furnish the revolvers, the station cabled that it had found three M-1 carbines in the consulate, left behind by departing naval personnel. It requested magazines for the weapons and permission to pass them to the dissidents. On March 29 the Assistant Deputy Director for Plans responded that he was pouching the magazines, and that headquarters was "inclined to

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favor" passing the weapons and ammunition.

Another meeting was held with the Department of State on March 31. The State Department memorandum makes no mention of any discussion either of the furnishing of ammunition or of authority to pass the weapons, but the Deputy Director for Plans granted authority to pass the carbines the same day. Both the State Department liaison officer, who prepared the memorandum of the meeting, and the Consul General are clear in their recollection that the State Department in Washington did not learn of the pass of the carbines until the Consul General was in Washington several weeks after the pass took place. Nothing in CIA files indicates that this decision was coordinated in advance with the Department of State. It is possible that the CIA understood its initial authorization with respect to the handguns to extend to the carbines as well. It is also possible that CIA decided the Special Group restriction on importation of weapons did not apply, as the carbines were already inside the Dominican Republic.

CIA cabled its Station Chief on April 5 to request the Consul General not to comment in his correspondence with the Department that the arms and ammunition were being passed. A reassuring reply from the Consul General was received two

days later. The CIA Station Chief, who would not have been involved in any coordination at the headquarters level, speculated that this injunction may have been designed to keep the State Department from knowing "officially" that the weapons were being passed.

It is clear that the coordination on the decision to provide the carbines was inadequate. It is impossible to determine from this evidence where the fault lies.

f. Submachine Guns

As early as March 20, the consulate and the station in Ciudad Trujillo had been informed that the assassins intended to kill Trujillo when he visited his mistress--substantially the plan followed some two months later. Although the plan originally called for Trujillo's dispatch inside his mistress' residence using silenced weapons, the group requested five M-3 submachineguns and 1500 rounds of ammunition for self defense in case the assassination plans went awry and there was a firefight with Trujillo's security forces. In its March 25 cable, headquarters replied that it was prepared to provide these weapons when the dissidents developed the capacity to receive them at sea or in a cache on the coast,

but that for security reasons they could not be sent by pouch.

The Chief of Station returned to Washington for consultations in early April. He was able to convince his superiors that the pouch was the only feasible and secure means of getting the weapons into the Dominican Republic for delivery to the dissidents. The Deputy Director for Plans approved on April 10, and the pouch was sent on April 14 but with the restriction that the weapons not be passed without further approval. The files show that there was no coordination with the Department of State in Washington. Because of the Bay of Pigs landing on April 17, the station and the consulate were never given authority to supply the weapons to the dissidents and they never did so.

On May 2, as the result of repeated entreaties from the station and the consulate, the Deputy Director for Plans approved a cable for the DCI's release, stating that as it appeared the Action Group was prepared to act whether or not the submachineguns were provided, the station was authorized to pass them for the additional protection of the group. Apparently someone decided this decision should not be made without the consent of the Department of State, for on May 3

the Deputy Chief of the Western Hemisphere Division met with Professor Adolph Berle, Chairman of the Interagency Task Force on Latin America. According to Berle's memorandum of the interview, confirmed by one of the witnesses, the initial presentation stated the group wished the arms in order to overthrow Trujillo. After some examination, Berle determined that the real plan was to assassinate Trujillo, and that the guns were wanted for that purpose. Berle responded that he could not care less for Trujillo, but that the United States did not wish to have anything to do with any assassination plots anywhere, any time. The Agency officer, who had been in a supervisory position with respect to this effort for approximately a year, told Berle he felt the same way.

It may be that the CIA tried to get Berle overruled; on May 5 a cable informed the station that a high-level State Department decision on the submachineguns was pending. Nothing in the files indicates what this cable might have referred to. In any event on May 8 the station was informed that the State Department had disapproved passage of the submachineguns, and this ended the matter.

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g. The Policy Statement

In mid-May, as a result of increasing indications that events in the Dominican Republic were reaching a climax, the White House requested situation reports and contingency plans. This exercise was overseen by a member of the National Security Council Staff. A CIA briefing paper prepared for this purpose stated that the three revolvers and the three carbines had been passed to the dissidents for their use in personal defense "attendant to their projected efforts to neutralize Trujillo." The report implied that both the revolvers and the ammunition had been in the consulate with the carbines, and therefore the limitations on the Special Group authorization technically did not apply.

The CIA liaison officer at the State Department called to his superiors' attention the fact that weapons had already been passed, and apparently submitted a memorandum outlining the reasons why the United States should not be involved in this activity. Among them were that the United States Government should not lend itself to direct political assassination, that the moral posture of the United States could ill afford further tarnishing in the eyes of the world, that the United States would have encouraged the action,

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supplied the weapons, effected the delivery, and then turned over only the final execution to (unskilled) local triggermen, and that the United States could not afford a precedent which might convince the world that our diplomatic pouches are used to deliver assassination weapons.

On May 15 a joint CIA-State Department memorandum was sent the President's National Security Adviser informing him that the plans of the pro-U.S. group were well advanced in the direction of ousting Trujillo "by any means." This memorandum did not call attention to the fact that the United States had supplied weapons to the group.

In the midst of these discussions, the Consul General, who had been in Washington for consultation, cabled on his return to the Dominican Republic that the dissident group planned to "execute action against Trujillo" that evening. The Department replied that it would consider this timing particularly unfortunate in view of the juxtaposition of the Consul General's return from Washington to the Dominican Republic and the inferences which might be drawn therefrom. This exchange of cables was furnished to the NSC staffer.

The state of the covert action program in the Dominican Republic was discussed in the Special Group on May 18, and again on May 25. The Commission has not had access to the minutes.

On May 24, the State Department liaison officer provided the Under Secretary with a draft cable, stating that the need to dissociate the United States from obvious intervention, and even more so from political assassination, overrode the need to secure credit with the Dominican dissidents and with Latin America generally. This draft was approved at high levels in the CIA and the State Department, and was sent to the White House for Presidential review. After some redrafting in the White House, the final version in another hand, stated "We must not run risk of U.S. association with political assassination, since U.S. as a matter of general policy cannot condone assassination." This version was approved by the President in Paris and cabled to the Dominican Republic. It arrived the day before Trujillo's death on May 30. On June 1 the State Department instructed its Consul General, if he could do so "most inconspicuously", to destroy any records concerning contacts with the plotters and any related matters.

TOP SECRET

F. Conclusion

President Ford has firmly announced that assassination is not and should never be a tool of United States policy. The Commission joins in this statement. It is against the constitutional and moral principles for which this republic stands for there to be any direct or indirect participation of any agency of the United States Government in any plans involving the assassination of any person in peacetime.

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