

Lyndon Johnson and the Dominican Intervention of 1965
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Transcript of Tape No. 4: You might get some of them killed, that's the only thing.

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[Footnote added]

LBJ: Mac?

McGeorge Bundy: Yes, sir?

LBJ: How are you doing this morning?

Bundy: Just fine, Mr. President.

LBJ: Well, I didn't know we were in that good a shape.

Bundy: Huh?

LBJ: I didn't know we were in that good a shape.

Bundy: *[laughing]* Why? That we were in—as for people with people with two wars they don't want, we're in as good shape as you can expect.

I don't know whether you've seen the overnight stuff or whether you've had a chance to talk to [Under Secretary of State for Economic Affairs] Tom Mann?

LBJ: No, I haven't talked to him but ... and I haven't seen. I know—

Bundy: We've sent you a two-page overnighter. There is no real news. The sit—It's perfectly clear that the rebels are dug in down in the city with in-town guerrilla techniques of bazookas and mortars, and there's going to be a very tough fight unless they're starved out. And we don't know very much about the tactical situation.

Our own people are all right. [U.S. Ambassador to the Dominican Republic William Tapley] Bennett doesn't want more than the 400 [Marines] he's got at the moment. And we're backed up with good strong forces that, available at intervals of up to about 8 hours now for more battalions from outside the area. We've got another 1,000 men right offshore when we want them, and 2,000 more 8 hours away, and another 2,000 at 1-day intervals from there on, as I understand it. We're not going to need that force unless [Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General] Bus [Earle] Wheeler is very much surprised.

But the political front is the one that's hotting up. There'll be a meeting in the OAS [Organization of American States] this morning. [President of Venezuela Raúl] Leoni has pitched in pretty hard with the clear implication that we're against dictatorships on both sides. If there is this kind of violence by Castro-types in the city, I think we can expect very good support in the OAS, because it is just what about two-thirds of those governments are afraid of. The Castro people have taken out after us pretty hard on the radio, and the Soviets are beginning to do so, although they haven't yet zeroed in very hard.

We have a problem of a request for asylum from [Donald] Reid [Cabral] and [Ramón] Cáceres, who are two of the triumvirs who have been thrown out. We're trying to get them taken care of either by the Papal Nuncio or by some other embassy so that we won't be the ones in the particular position of protecting unpopular people. But they would get stabbed in the back by the commies if they were caught, so we have a certain obligation there.

We will simply be dependent upon information from there as the day goes forward. My guess is that we now have a sufficient force on the ground so that we will have to wait and see if the Dominicans can handle it for themselves with this moral support. But we'll have to keep a sharp eye to be ready to take stronger action if it looks as if the Communists were beginning to win.

Our own people of course have only perimeter defense and evacuation orders. They've taken 2[00] to 300 people out as of last night. That still means, if our figures are right, 800-odd Americans who are not ready to leave or who haven't asked to leave or who are not in an area where they can be removed. We have enclaves at the Embassy and at Hotel Ambassador [Embajador Hotel] polo field.

The Task Force Commander is sending a senior officer ashore, probably has him there now, to be in touch both with the military authorities, the friendly ones, and with the embassy.

And our situation in terms of our own position is strong, but the situation on the other side is simply indeterminate. That, at least, is the way it reads to me after talking to the people around town this morning.

LBJ: Do the rebels have much strength? I thought that General [Elías Wessin y Wessin] had done pretty well with his tanks. I guess [unintelligible].

Bundy: Well, one of the tanks got knocked out, and they're not in a hurry to go through the town, as I understand it now. And I think that we're in a situation where the rebels are pretty well into pockets. But if the police lose their courage, or if the rebels extend their holding in the city, you could have yourself a very tough cleaning-up operation. And it would be ... it would not be a happy decision to have to ask the Marines to do that.

LBJ: No.

Bundy: I don't think it will come to that in the course of the day. I'll be surprised if it does.

LBJ: We want to be very, very careful not to sit here and let them augment their forces. And ... Where are these Castroites coming from? Inside?

Bundy: Oh, this is all inside, as I understand it so far, Mr. President. And I'm quite sure that ... I think we ought to make sure the Navy is watching. But I will be very surprised if the Cubans try anything in the way of an invasion. We certainly ought to watch for it, because it's not a surprise we want to have get away on us.

LBJ: And I sure don't want to wake up there a few hours later and say, "Well, we're awaiting developments" and find out [Fidel] Castro's in charge.

Bundy: I agree.

LBJ: Now, who are we depending on to avoid that? [U.S. Ambassador to the Dominican Republic William Tapley] Bennett?

Bundy: Bennett has so far been very ... Bennett and the [Central Intelligence] Agency; we have a double check, now. And the Agency was extremely slow in informing us yesterday, and we've climbed up and down their backs. It's not [Director of Central Intelligence William] Raborn's fault, but some of his technical people were protecting their goddamn codewords, and it took one of their important messages five hours to get here. Bennett, fortunately, was not interrupted, and it was very, very good work by [Executive Secretary of the National Security Council] Bromley Smith who was feeding that stuff into us yesterday afternoon that allowed us to take those decisions so that the troops were in before nightfall. It would have been damned hard to put them in if we hadn't done it that fast.

So we just made it yesterday, and we've got all those wires have been skinned and bruised during the night.

LBJ: Now, they tell me they have been expecting this and anticipating it and CIA has been telling us about it every day. Is that true?

Bundy: Mr. President, if we go—we'll have to do a check, but I'll have to say that there was nothing in it that gave me any sense of alarm.

LBJ: Let's do that, though. That's what they're already saying—

Bundy: The first I knew of it was when Bennett came up here.

LBJ: They're already saying, "I told you so."

Bundy: You can count on it. You can count on it. There's always some bastard who wants to play that game. But I will; I'll have Brom[ley] Smith do a re-check on it. And I'll talk to my own experts here.

LBJ: Any indication we ought to have a meeting ... Who speaks for us at the OAS? [Ellsworth] Bunker?¹

Bundy: Bunker, unless ... I don't think the Secretary [of State Dean Rusk] will change that. Bunker's awfully good at this sort of thing. And ... [Tom] Mann will be over here at 11:00 for the [J. Irwin] Miller Committee [on East-West Trade] meeting where he will be flanking with [Secretary of Defense] Bob McNamara. Connor can't come and Rusk has asthma or some cheerful sort like that. And he will bring all the dope with him to that meeting.

I'm supposed to be in New York today, and Bromley will be here. Or if you really would feel more comfortable, I can cancel the New York thing. I don't, myself, think it's that kind of a crisis, but I don't want to ... I'm more concerned that you should feel your machine is working.

LBJ: Well, when do you have to know? When are you going to leave?

Bundy: I'm going to leave at 10:30. I'm supposed to be there for lunch.

LBJ: Well, go on, we'll ...

Bundy: Might as well get out of the way and not be a fall for this war? [*chuckling*]

LBJ: No, no, no. No, but I would imagine there are going to be some decisions today that are pretty important. And I wanted to—I was going to go at 2:00, but I think I'd better back that up.

Bundy: I think what I would do Mr. President, is keep it on a standby basis, and I think we can—I *really* believe the problem is one that you ought to look at in the sort of mid-afternoon, and then I *think* the odds are 3-to-1 you'll want to go. I don't *think* there's—I think we've *really* got the contingencies taped here so that it's a matter of ticking off the order. The only tough part is how to be sure which is the right order. I think we did the right thing yesterday, but we're going to—we can't be absolutely sure. We'll never be sure they wouldn't have won without us. We only know that we couldn't take that chance. And that'll be the same shape of the decision from now on out.

LBJ: Well, I think ... I don't think we could have been wrong yesterday. I think when we're going to be wrong is when we—

Bundy: Don't do enough.

LBJ: When we don't do enough, or when we go in and do too much. We haven't done anything now but evacuate.

Bundy: That's right.

LBJ: But if we became a party to the fact [unintelligible].

¹ Bunker was the U.S. Ambassador to the Organization of American States.

Bundy: Now, what we must hope is that ... Bennett, incidentally, does not want the airplanes to buzz, and we've held that up.

Our problem is to have our force operate as potential and not as operational. That's the exact shape of the problem. And, therefore, there ought to be plenty on the scene and visible so that the moral effect will be decisive, it seems to me.

LBJ: Why did he [Bennett] just want 400?

Bundy: Oh, well, I guess he feels that's enough at the moment. I honestly haven't seen the detail of his reporting.

LBJ: It looks like to me that that's the only weakness thing. I can well understand why he wouldn't want them buzzing around.

Bundy: Yeah.

LBJ: I can well understand why [unintelligible]—

Bundy: Well, why don't we have Tom [Mann] quiz that again.

LBJ: I would certainly raise questions.

Bundy: Yeah.

LBJ: If you're going to have any moral effect, and if you are trying to dig out our own people, and if you're trying to locate them out in the hinterland, and ...

Bundy: And if you want it perfectly clear who's strong, then you ought to—yeah.

LBJ: —locate them in the hinterland. And if you want excellent intelligence, I don't see why you keep them on a [aircraft] carrier where they can't see anything. I don't see—

Bundy: Yeah. The politics of 400 and the politics of 1,500 are identical, it seems to me. So we might as well get them ashore.

LBJ: I'd let them get my intelligence. And I'd let them know this and that, so ... you might get some of them killed, that's the only thing.

Bundy: That's the only reason: you increase the risks a little.

LBJ: I would think we're likely to know more about what's happening, we're likely to be a greater deterrent. It seems to me that everything would be in favor of having more people aboard, because we could get our people out better, we could round them up better. We could escort them more.

Bundy: And if we're challenged we—Yeah.

I'll talk to him about that and have Tom bring you an opinion on to the 11:00 [meeting].

LBJ: OK.

Bundy: Right.