Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy:

Johnson and the Dominican Intervention of 1965

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by
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On April 28th, 500 United States Marines landed in Santo Domingo, the capital of the Dominican Republic, to quell an internal revolution. A year latter, when the last American troops withdrew, the total number had reached 23,000, not including support personnel and reserves on Naval vessels. The rebellion that the U.S. military was sent there to control, was initiated by several low ranking officers in the Dominican military, and a large number of civilians, who desired to overthrow the ruling military junta and reinstate the previous president. This crisis was years in the making, a violent conclusion to decades of Dominican tribulations.

Why did the government feel it was necessary to intervene in the domestic problems of a small island? Over 40 years later, that question has still not been satisfied.

President Johnson’s intervention into the Dominican Republic poses an interesting case for study. Overshadowed by Vietnam, it has been largely ignored by the academic community and the American public for decades. Yet it happened at one of the most interesting times in American history.

At the time of the Dominican intervention, the United States was locked in a global ideological struggle against the Soviet Union. As the 1960s continued the Cold War moved its front from Europe to the Third World. From Korea to Afghanistan, the U.S. and U.S.S.R. continued their battle over their spheres of influence. In standard
realist fashion, many of these Third World interventions have been interpreted as security struggles that were necessary consequences of a bi-polar system. However, recent revelations show that there might have been more behind these foreign actions than initially thought.

The Dominican intervention is one such case. Beginning right after the escalation of Vietnam began, and having no significant communist involvement, the intervention has become an academic quagmire in and of itself. Why did President Johnson do it? The answer appears to lie in domestic politics. Ridiculed on all sides for his lack of foreign policy experience, President Johnson ordered the invasion of the Dominican Republic to make a political point, and increase his political power domestically, in order to pass his Great Society initiatives.

This paper will begin with a brief background, pre-intervention history of the Dominican Republic. It will then discuss the “domino theory” and the rationale the Johnson administration used to promote the intervention. Thirdly, the paper will examine two cases from Eastern Africa. The analysis will be used to show whether Johnson’s be truly believed in the domino theory, or if he was using its rhetoric for political purposes. It will then go into a discussion of Johnson’s domestic political problems at the time of the Dominican intervention, and analyze what motivating factors were present when he ordered the troops to the small island nation. Fifthly, the paper will discuss the timeline of the intervention itself, and the domestic political backlash suffered by the administration. Lastly, the paper will discuss some other theories purported by scholars, namely a physiological explanation based on President Johnson’s personal life, and give my own modified theory.
Prelude to The Dominican Intervention

For over thirty years, the Dominican people had been under the oppressive boot of Generalissimo Rafael Trujillo. On the 30th of May, 1961, Trujillo was assassinated by a group of his previous supporters, whom had started feeling the burdens of oppression themselves. Immediately, Trujillo’s son took over and continued the violent repression that had preceded him under his father’s reign. Protests began to break out all over the nation shortly thereafter, due to the lack of significant change in the despotic method of governance. Fearing a communist revolution, similar to the one that had taken place in Cuba, the Kennedy administration forced Trujillo Jr. to relinquish power to his acting president Joaquín Balaguer. Threatening intervention if Trujillo, Jr. refused, the idea was to let Balaguer run the country until fair elections could be organized throughout the country. While initially it looked as if Balaguer was going to allow the United States to set up the national elections, in the long run he proved unwilling to relinquish his newfound power, and the United States once again forced a Dominican dictator’s resignation. In Balaguer’s place, a “Council of State,” which consisted of seven administrators, was arranged to run the country, and set up the elections that had been rejected by Balaguer. When the elections took place, in December of 1962, Juan Bosch was elected president.1

However fairly Bosch was elected, his progressive politics caused him to quickly lose support from the United States. When a military coup ousted him just seven months after his election, there was very little remorse expressed in Washington for the fall of the democratic government. The policies he implemented during his seven-month tenure,

especially those of land reform and freedom of press for all political groups, served only to have him labeled as a communist sympathizer in the American press. By the time he was ousted, there was, in Ambassador Martin’s words, “Open hostility to Bosch in the United States on the ground that he was dangerously tolerant of Communists. Some of the stories were inspired by Bosch’s political enemies in the Republic…. I considered the … articles a vicious hatchet job…. But whatever the motives, they fed the fires both in Washington and Santo Domingo.”

The return of the rightwing triumvirate government did not appeal to Bosch supporters throughout the island nation. Nineteen months after Bosch’s fall from power, on the 24th of April 1965, a group of rebels launched a counter coup aimed at reinstating Bosch as president.

The countercoup should not have come as a surprise to the Johnson administration. While there were no obvious signs of massive public uprisings occurring, for over a year the State Department and National Security Council (NSC) had been assessing the threat of a countercoup against the Dominican military. In the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) of January 1964, the portion on the Dominican Republic began:

“…Leftist leaders probably can increase hit-and-run terrorism in urban areas and, over, time may be able to resume guerrilla activity…. If they show ability to

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3 Triumvirate is the name given by the American government to the newly formed Dominican government. It refers to a small group of people, three usually, who wield absolute control over some organization or people. The Dominican government was officially run by six ministers, chosen and removed by the military; the real power remained with the military’s top commanders, thus government officials referred to it as the triumvirate.
sustain such operations, Castro will probably supply them clandestinely with small amounts of material aid.\ldots Thus, over the longer run, the insurgency danger could increase, perhaps sharply. This development would be facilitated if the regime failed to show progress in meeting demands for restoration of political freedoms and for social and economic reforms.\(^4\)

While this shows a real fear of future guerrilla activity in the Dominican Republic, at the time the NSC was sure of the Dominican military’s ability to deal with any rebellions that might crop up. In a sign of support of, and faith in, the ruling party, the NIE also suggested that there was little chance that any other governing body, apart from the triumvirate currently in power, would be able to meet the domestic demands for reform.\(^5\)

The contradiction in the NIE, was that, along with claiming that the triumvirate was strong and capable of governing the country, it also suggested that the triumvirate was incredibly weak and faced a ‘magnitude of problems.’ The government’s biggest concern, the NIE said, was “convincing the populace that it intends to undertake constructive social and economic programs and to provide for an eventual return to representative government.”\(^6\)

Ironically, it was the military coup, the same one that constructed the triumvirate and retained full power over it, that had ousted the first representative government that the Dominican Republic had ever seen. The American government was protecting the very body that had destroyed the fledgling democracy. Bosch’s election was the first fair, and unrigged election the country had ever seen. Running on a platform to reform the


\(^5\) *FRUS*, I:19.

\(^6\) *FRUS*, I:21.
country socially and economically, Bosch had been true to his campaign promises, and begun implementing his new policies rapidly once entering office. His first acts as president included land reform, providing low-rent housing, nationalization of some businesses, and public works projects. At the same time, he was receptive to private foreign investors as long as they were not exploitive of the Dominican people or their land. Historian William Blum described his policies as: “All-in-all, standard elements in the program of any liberal Third World leader serious about social change.”

To some American policymakers, and the conservatives in the Dominican, these policies screamed “Communist.” And while they may have accepted some of Bosch’s policies, the opponents saw his allowance, and encouragement of free speech as his biggest political crime. Indeed, Bosch refused to silence any dissenter, including communists, unless they committed a crime. His strict adherence to what John Stewart Mill had called the most important human right and the cornerstone of a free society, earned him comparisons to Castro throughout the American media. Yet, while Americans were labeling Bosch a “Castro-stooge,” Castro was calling Bosch a “Yankee puppet.”

While the NIE said the triumvirate was capable of accomplishing the economic reforms necessary in the Dominican Republic, it was unable to give President Johnson a clear idea of what their plans were and how they were to implement them. “The present regime has developed no clearly defined program to ease the country’s basic economic problems – widespread poverty, low productivity, and growing unemployment. The triumvirate has, however, made sensible policy statements….” The social reform that the NIE implied was needed on the island, was free elections. However, once again there

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7 Blum, 179.
8 Blum, 179.
9 FRUS, 1:7.
remains the point that, the triumvirate was a product of a military coup that had ousted the first freely elected democratic government in Dominican history; any thought that they would quickly relinquish power, required a poor understanding of Latin American history. It had released a five-step plan to reintroduce elections to the general population, but the NIE said it was so convoluted it was bound “to have an unsettling impact on the general political situation.”  

The National Intelligence Estimate’s overall optimistic view of the situation in the Dominican Republic was not shared by all of the Johnson Administration’s insiders. Ralph Dungan, special assistant to the president, wrote a memo to Tomas Mann suggesting a contingency plan be formulated in case a major upheaval should happen in the small island nation. “The situation is extremely fluid and could go in a number of different directions,” Dungan wrote, “One of these is a deterioration in political and economic conditions which could lead to a Castro-type takeover.” Dungan was vocally reiterating the biggest fear within the administration, that a communist revolution would happen if there were not massive political changes in the Dominican Republic. These fears of a leftist revolution were pervasive in some circles of the administration throughout 1964. Mann’s response to Dungan was simply that he feared an anti-military revolution as well, and that a plan of action was being developed in order to quell the revolution should it arise.

These fears of leftist revolutions, usually labeled ‘communist’ even if there were no political or ideological ties with the Soviet Union, were rampant at the time. The Cold

10 FRUS, 1:8.
11 FRUS, 2.
12 FRUS, 2. Mann’s response to Dungan’s memo is not printed in FRUS, but it, and its content, is mentioned in the footnotes of document 2.
War was at its apex, and politicians tended to see ‘red’ involvement in every major political action, both internationally and domestically. The premises of the anti-communist sentiment, was that if they, the ‘reds,’ gained control of a small area, communist influence would spread to neighboring areas; and the snowball effect that would ensue would soon encompass the world into a single, communist state. This theory of falling dominos was instrumental in the formation of foreign policy during the Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson administrations, but had its roots with Truman.

**The Roots of the Communist Scare and the Domino Theory**

“Communism is an ideology that seeks to defeat us by every possible means.”

After the Berlin Blockade in 1948, Dean Acheson, the Secretary of State under Truman, said, “We couldn’t afford to have the Russians win in Berlin: otherwise Europe was down the drain.” As the problems of a separated Berlin continued into Eisenhower’s tenure, the new administration was just as adamant about the necessity to face down the communists in Eastern Europe, and for the same reasons. David Bruce, the Ambassador to Bonn, said, “To yield little is to yield everything....” Eisenhower said that yielding in Berlin would, “…raise among our friends the most serious doubts about the validity of all the international agreements and commitments we have made with them in every quarter of the globe.” In a summary to Congress, the President said, “any appeasement means disaster.” The Domino Theory, ‘if one falls, they all fall,’ with its

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14 Ninkovich, 177. The quote was given during an interview with Acheson.
15 Ninkovich, 235. The Bruce quote was in a telegram to the State Department; The first Eisenhower quote was in a speech at Yale; Second Eisenhower quote was in a televised speech on Berlin.
birth during the Berlin Blockade, was now extended to the rest of the world under Eisenhower.

In criticizing the French retreat in Vietnam, John Foster Dulles, Eisenhower’s Secretary of State, claimed: if the communists were successful in Vietnam, as they surely would be due to French cowards, than “we could lose Europe, Asia, and Africa all at once…”\textsuperscript{16} Later, during a press conference, Dulles publicly admitted that the administration’s goal was to stop the “dominos” from falling, when discussing Vietnam:

The situation in that area, as we found it was that it was subject to the so-called “domino theory”…. If one went, another would go. We are trying to change it so that would not be the case…. You generally have a whole series of countries that can be picked up one by one. That is the whole theory of the North Atlantic Treaty. As they come together, then the “domino theory,” so-called, ceases to apply. And what we are trying to do is create a situation in SEA where the domino situation in SEA will not apply.\textsuperscript{17}

By creating a simplistic, but powerful image that ordinary Americans could easily imagine, the Eisenhower administration had successfully planted the domino theory into the American psyche. Simply, a large portion of Americans believed that if one small country fell to communism, then the entire world would. It stands to reason then, that every leftwing revolutionary movement during this period could be portrayed as the first ‘domino’ to fall.

As the war in Vietnam escalated during Kennedy’s tenure in office, so did fear that Vietnam would cause the fall of South East Asia, and eventually India and beyond.

\textsuperscript{16} Ninkovich, 222-223. Dulles conversation with Admiral Radford, 24 March 1954.
\textsuperscript{17} Ninkovich, 223. Dulles press conference, 11 May 1954. Note: SEA stands for South East Asia.
Throughout his term, Kennedy publicly reaffirmed his belief in the domino theory. “Our security may be lost piece by piece, country by country, without the firing of a single missile or the crossing of a single border…. If the United States were to falter, the whole world, in my opinion, would inevitably begin to move toward the Communist bloc;”\(^{18}\) and with Kennedy’s death, the same public theory drove the Johnson administration’s foreign policy.

“We think it clear that success for the free in Vietnam will be success for the freedom of Europe.” McGeorge Bundy wrote in a speech draft for President Johnson. The implied was of course, ‘failure in Vietnam would be the end of freedom in Europe.’ Dean Rusk, Johnson’s Secretary of State, reiterated the belief in a comment to some congressmen, “Europe is watching us in Southeast Asia, what would the rest of the alliances mean, and what would the appetites of the other side amount to?”\(^{19}\) If the domino theory was purported for Vietnam, it was implicit in policies elsewhere.

**Africa: Testing Johnson’s Belief in ‘Falling Dominos’**

Two cases of U.S. intervention in Zanzibar and Mozambique by the Johnson administration, both against leftist revolutionaries, happened in East Africa prior to the Dominican crisis. Both interventions can be viewed through the prism of the domino theory, and serve to analyze the strength of the theory. By looking at these two interventions, it is possible to judge how much faith the Johnson administration had in the Domino Theory just before the Dominican crisis occurred. As they took place far outside the reach of the United States’ declared sphere of influence, a close look at these cases can show what the executive branch’s real desire for the containment of communism in

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\(^{18}\) Ninkovich, 272.

\(^{19}\) Ninkovich, 293.
the Third World was globally. However, there are a couple of distinct differences between the situation in these two African instances, and what occurred in the Dominican Republic.

One key difference between these two cases and the Dominican Republic is that both the African revolutions occurred in two of the last remaining European colonies; and as a result, dealt mainly with the overthrow of colonial masters. The other main difference is the revolutionaries’ ties to the international communist bloc. In both of the African cases, there was a much clearer tie to the Soviet Union and China, than there were communist ties to the Dominican Republic and Cuba during the Dominican crisis. In these ways, the two cases are significantly different from the Dominican Republic case, but the differences, give both these cases a right to be used to analyze the importance of the domino theory. But apart from the differences, there are a few key similarities as well.

One of these interventions took place on the strategically important island of Zanzibar; as was the case with the Dominican Republic, the gateway to the Caribbean Sea, and also an island nation. The other intervention took place in the same part of southeast Africa, and also involved an uprising against colonial masters, but it occurred on the mainland of Africa in the Portuguese colony of Mozambique.20

**Zanzibar:** By 1964, Zanzibar had been a British protectorate since late in the nineteenth-century. The Sultan, the official head of state on the island, was little more than a figurehead. The British controlled the police, military, parliament, and, most importantly,

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20 Both of these internal revolutions started in 1964, just a year before the Dominican intervention. The Zanzibar crisis ended in January of 1965, just four months before the Dominican revolution started.
the vital shipping lanes that made up all of Zanzibar’s importance in a global context.\textsuperscript{21} In September of 1963, a group of politicians decided that they couldn’t accomplish their domestic goals under the current political system, and they created a new left-leaning political party called the Umma Party.\textsuperscript{22} To quell the internal political dissent, the British passed the Suppression of Information Act and the Registration of Societies Act. These two acts together made the new party illegal and shut down all publication related to it.\textsuperscript{23} In response to these actions, the youth of Umma organized demonstrations, claiming they were going to burn the city down if the British didn’t rescind the Acts.\textsuperscript{24} The youth movement quickly developed into an armed militia, fighting for a socialist state, and they were backed by the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{25}

In support of the British, the United States originally used gunboat diplomacy as an attempt to intimidate the rebels in Zanzibar. The USS \textit{Manley} was ordered to the island, in case ‘developments [in] Zanzibar require your support in troop movements and evacuation [of] US/UK personnel.’\textsuperscript{26} This same opening move would be used a year later in the Dominican, when the Navy was sent to the island with the mission to evacuate American citizens. Eventually the Umma party successfully took the reigns of power, at which point the Deputy America Consul in Zanzibar wrote an emergency memo to the State Department, clearly outlining the new Zanzibar government’s new policies, and plainly showing the communist bloc’s presence in Zanzibar:

\textsuperscript{22} Wilson, 10.
\textsuperscript{23} Wilson, 11.
\textsuperscript{24} Wilson, 12.
\textsuperscript{25} Wilson, 14.
\textsuperscript{26} Wilson, 14.

2. GOZ does not [repeat] not wish to be involved in cold war propaganda or activities. Foreign policy will be an African policy with goal of African unity.

3. Domestic objective will be to eliminate poverty and make good life for all Zanzibaris. To accomplish this Zanzibar must be a socialist state, we do not have the time US and Great Britain had to develop their economies. GOZ wants accept all forms aid from United States in order build nation.27

This memo showed how the new government was willing to work with the United States, but that it was openly claiming itself a socialist-state. This was something that the Johnson administration, with its theoretical belief in falling dominos, could not allow.

With the help of the CIA and MI5, the U.S. was able to orchestrate an overthrow of the Umma party, and had Zanzibar unite with Tanganyika to create Tanzania. This put Julius Nyerere, the President of Tanganyika and a firm anti-communist, in firm control of the situation, and made the communists in Zanzibar a small minority within their new country, thereby removing all their power.28 In one masterful move, the U.S. insured that the domino didn’t fall, and removed the threat of it occurring by placing the usurping colony in the control of another friendly nation.

To truly understand the importance of this small intervention, it is important to understand that Zanzibar was a key shipping port for all trade in the Indian Ocean. A

27 Wilson, 21-22. Babu was the leader of the Umma Party, which had just successfully taken over the Zanzibar government.
28 Wilson, 80.
large part of oil coming from the Middle East to the United States flowed through the small island on its way around the Cape of Good Hope. Zanzibar’s deep sea ports, location, and shipping infrastructure, made it a strategic economic place, and there was no way that the United States could allow it to become communist, or even let the communist bloc have a small amount of control over it. The importance of Zanzibar to the United States, did not carry over to Mozambique, a much larger mainland colony just 200 miles south of Zanzibar.

The Mozambique revolution began in late 1964, but the roots of it lay a few years in the past. Mozambique: In 1962, the three leading left-wing political movements in Mozambique, all of them exiled by the Portuguese, joined forces to create the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique. Over the course of two years, FRELIMO built up its munitions slowly, and began their insurgency against Portugal in September 1964, with only 250 men. Throughout its revolution, FRELIMO was supported by both China and the Soviet Union, encompassing everything from recognition as the only legitimate authority in Mozambique, to economic and military aide. On top of the overt help from the communist bloc, the FRELIMO was outspokenly ‘Marxist-Leninist.’ During their revolution, they passed out communist propaganda to the citizens of Mozambique, and all of their commando training books were translations of those written by Mao and Che.

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30 Henriksen, 182-187. The majority of the military aide was funneled through Egypt and Angola. But there were Chinese military advisors sent to help the rebels in the field.
31 Henriksen, 190.
Interestingly, despite the far more blatant involvement of the global communist bloc, the United States was less involved in Mozambique than the Dominican Republic, or even Zanzibar. The Johnson administration’s sole contributions towards thwarting FRELIMO, was through monetary aide and minimal military advice to Portugal. The military advice consisted solely of tips on how to fight insurgents, tips learned from Vietnam, and the monetary aide was minimal.33 It could have been that the US government disagreed with Lisbon’s goals of maintaining their colonies, but Vietnam started as an operation to help the French maintain control of their colony. It could also be that at this point the US military was spread too thin to help Portugal, as this crisis was reaching its peak during both the Dominican crisis and the escalation of Vietnam. But whatever the reason for minimal help was, it is clear that the administration was not as concerned about the domino theory in Mozambique as they were elsewhere. Seeing how adamant the administration was with containing communism in southeast Asia because of the purported fear of dominos, it stands to reason they would have felt that the consequences of a communist Mozambique would lead to a communist south Africa, and eventually an entirely communist Africa. Thus, a true belief in falling dominos would have forced them to be more direct in their attempts to undermine the FRELIMO.

It is interesting to note that these two African communist revolutions happened at the same time, and within two hundred miles of one another. However, there were two very different responses from the same administration. A memorandum sent to President Johnson about Zanzibar read: “We are concerned by evidence of growing Chinese Communist effort and influence in Africa, … and possible Chinese involvement in

33 Henriksen, 176. The annual aide from the United States to Portugal, was less than $5 million a year. During Eisenhower’s tenure, the received much more, but under the presidencies of Kennedy and Johnson, including during the rebellion, the aide was much less. 174.
Zanzibar. There is a variety of evidence that the Chinese are making a major long term effort in Africa.” The fear of communism toppling the dominos to Washington is evident in this quote. It should also be noted however, that they saw ‘possible Chinese involvement in Zanzibar,’ and the Chinese involvement in Mozambique was overt. Yet President Johnson and his men were more concerned with an island being the first domino rather than a mainland country. If there was going to be a massive spread of communism throughout Africa, Mozambique would have been much more dangerous; its porous borders being perfect for exporting communism covertly.

According to the domino theory, the dominos could start falling anywhere, and if any single nation fell to communism, no matter how small or insignificant, eventually Washington would fall to communism as well. Thus, there was a discrepancy between the United States’ responses to the two African cases discussed above. Does the inconsistency in east Africa mean that the Johnson administration’s officials, and the President himself, did not believe in the domino theory? Certainly ignoring a successful communist uprising while destroying one in the neighboring country at the same time says there were other factors involved, other than the declared fear of communism. The economic implications of Zanzibar joining the communist bloc would have been much worse for the West than Mozambique, as they would have lost access to some vital shipping lanes in the Indian Ocean; and the domestic implications of this loss could have been a temporary decline in access to oil, the commodity that was the corner stone of the Western economy. Mozambique joining the communist bloc on the other hand, would not have had near the same effect on the American way of life as Zanzibar.

34 Wilson, 36.
President Johnson and his administration’s lack of consistency regarding communist revolution worldwide, show that they were more concerned with the domestic implications of a communist revolution, as opposed to the loss of ideological partners. The domino theory’s importance to the executive branch was rhetorical, it served as a tool to use against the public in order to garner support for an intervention, but was in no means their guiding principal. Thus, whenever the domino theory was used to justify an intervention, it is likely that there were other motives behind the action.

**Why Intervene?**

In order to determine what motivated the Dominican intervention, two questions have to be asked. Did Johnson really believe that there was a communist threat, or the possibility of one, in the Dominican Republic? And what were his motivations for intervening, whether or not there was a communist threat?

These questions can draw several different conclusions. The first two conclusions, revolve around the idea that there was the threat of communism in the Dominican Republic, and that the domino theory motivated the President; the third possibility states that there was a possible communist threat, but it was not the domino theory that encouraged intervention; and the last three conclusions say that Johnson did know that there was no communist threat in the Dominican Republic, but that domestic politics encouraged him to intervene.

These possible conclusions are:

A. President Johnson really did fear that there was a dangerous communist influence in the Dominican Republic, and his belief in the domino theory caused him to intervene.
B. President Johnson feared that there may eventually be a communist threat in the Dominican, and intervened to stop it before it flourished. Once again, it was his fear of dominos falling that caused him to make the decision.

C. The President thought there might be a communist threat, but did not feel that it was dangerous to the United States. Instead, he intervened because political opponents might convince the public that a communist Dominican Republic would decrease American security.

D. Johnson knew there was no communist threat, but, like solution C, he felt that political opponents would use a fake threat to attack him.

E. Johnson knew there was no communist threat in the Dominican. He thought however, that the Dominican crisis gave him the opportunity to appear strong and decisive on matters of foreign policy, and ordered the intervention based on these grounds.

F. President Johnson knew that there was no communist threat, but he thought that an intervention would boast his popularity and secure his desired political coalition.

The first two domino theory answers can be discarded already. Johnson lack of consistency with regard to communism globally, makes it apparent that he was not a firm believer in the domino theory. Whether he believed in a communist threat in the Dominican or not, and what motivated the intervention, still remains to be seen.

**President Johnson and Foreign Policy**

The American public’s fear of dominos falling was heightened in the Caribbean Sea by the communist revolution in Cuba and the rise of Castro. The existence of a communist
country so close to United States’ borders, only served to intensify American fears of communism. Thus, the entrance of a new Marxist country in the American sphere of influence, would have had catastrophic consequences for whichever president under who’s watch it happened. Whether the Dominican rebels where communist or not, ceased to be a relevant point to the administration when paired next to the toll their political capital would have had if another Caribbean island joined Cuba in a communist alliance. The backlash caused by such a union would have shattered Johnson’s ability to govern, and greatly hindered his chance at reelection in 1968. Realists would argue that security was still the motivating factor for the intervention; however, it wasn’t security, after all Castro was not perceived as a significant threat after the Cuban Missile Crisis. It was the need to build domestic political coalitions that drove the administration to act.

In 1965, at the time of the Dominican intervention, Johnson was walking a fine political line, especially in relation to foreign affairs. Throughout his first year in office, and into the 1964 elections, Vietnam had been a continuous thorn in President Johnson side. In June, before the elections, he was being criticized for his lack of gumption, in relation to Southeast Asia, from all political fronts.

Just two months into his presidency, Johnson was being criticized by the media and politicians alike, for his inability to deal with foreign relations. The New York Herald Tribune accused him of being reactive towards foreign problems, saying he dealt “with international trouble only after it has occurred.” The New York Times described Johnson as “insecure,” when dealing with foreign diplomats. And political scientist John Roche, president of the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), told Bill Moyers, Johnson’s chief domestic advisor, that “the intellectual community’s ‘major concern about Mr.
Johnson’ is feeling that we may revert to the FDR emphasis on domestic affairs at the expense of foreign affairs. People … in the ADA are waiting to see if the President is going to develop a positive foreign policy.”35

As the elections neared, the criticism toward Johnson continued. Pollster Lou Harris found, in July of 1964, that 58 percent of Americans felt Johnson’s handling of Vietnam was poor, while only 42 percent felt he was doing a satisfactory job. The poll’s conclusions confirmed for the White House that foreign policy was the issue that Goldwater would beat them on.36 Johnson’s dilemma was much greater than just satisfying the public on foreign issues. If he was to take a more definitive stance in Vietnam, Johnson risked losing support from the left for his ‘Great Society,’ but if he looked weak on international relations, he risked losing the entire American public. The Gulf of Tonkin resolution (August 10, 1964), and the powers granted to Johnson through them, gave the President the necessary congressional nod to make a bold statement to his critics.

After the elections, President Johnson was ecstatic. Gaining two seats in the Senate, 37 in the House, and winning in an electoral and popular landslide, Johnson believed that he possessed a mandate for the continued formation of his Great Society. Yet in order to extend and expand FDR’s legacy to include himself, he needed serious political support from wherever he could get it. However, foreign events continued to conspire against him.

The U.S.’s military escalation in Vietnam really began to grow in March of 1965. Polls appearing shortly before the massive escalations began, showed that 46 percent of

35 Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 84. All three of these quotes appear on this page.
36 Dallek, 147.
the public wanted Johnson to “do what we need to do in order to maintain strength for the
democratic position.” Only 31 percent of the sample wanted the President to work
towards negotiations with North Vietnam.37 These polls, along with Canadian Prime
Minister Pearson’s support, where key motivating factors for the President in his
decisions to intensify the Vietnam War.

Only one month latter, Johnson was struck with another international event. The
difference was that this one was only a few hundred miles off the American coast, and
once again it appeared as if Johnson had let an international crisis take him by surprise.

**Dominican Intervention**

Before the Dominican uprising, there was no hint within the administration that there was
going to be any kind of revolution. What fears there had been in early 1964, had almost
vanished by April 1965. Ambassador Bennett had written a letter to Tomas Mann about
Bosch’s continued overt efforts to undermine the triumvirate in February, but Mann
brushed off the warnings in his reply. Bennett wrote, “[Bosch] is constantly sending
instructions and exhortations, both public and private, to his followers here… [and] he
has become more and more bold in his activities…. I do not see why he should be
allowed to make public speeches in Puerto Rico attacking this Government with which
we have friendly relations…. My own feeling is that Bosch is basically anti-American.”
But Bennett also said that Bosch’s main point he was driving home to his supporters was
that, “the American Government’s real heart lies with Juan Bosch.”38

Mann’s reply was simple, “From a legal standpoint, we have no evidence that
Bosch has violated or conspired to violate any U.S. laws. What he has done is exercise

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37 Dallek, 260.
38 FRUS, 18.
the right of free speech…. Although we can agree that [the overthrow of the triumvirate] is what he hopes to accomplish, after going over the statements we can attribute to him, we would also have to agree that he has carefully phrased what he has said to avoid anything approaching outright or clear-cut incitation to rebellion.” Mann continued by saying that the administration’s analysis of the situations showed that Bosch was losing support both domestically in the Dominican Republic and internationally, and that he, or his followers, did not pose a significant threat to the stability of the island nation.39

Two months later, just weeks before the rebellion, the CIA released a memorandum suggesting that elections be postponed for one year in order to allow the Bosch and Balaguer factions in the country to die down.40 No other mention of the Dominican Republic was made within the executive branch, until April 25th, when the White House Situation Room told President Johnson that fighting had broken out in Santo Domingo.41 The situation in the Dominican was considered so stable by the government, that Ambassador Bennett had left the country on the 23rd to visit his parents in Georgia.42

“We’re going to have to really set up that government down there and run it and stabilize it some way or other. This Bosch is no good.”43 With these word, said just hours after fighting broke out in Santo Domingo, President Johnson made it explicitly clear to

39 FRUS, 19.
40 FRUS, 20. The United States was not pleased with either of the two previous leaders. While on two different ends of the political spectrum, neither was will to have Dominican policy dictated to them by the State Department. Balaguer wished to be dictator as Trujillo had been, and Bosch wished to construct his nation’s domestic policy as he saw fit.
41 FRUS, 21.
42 FRUS, 20. In the footnotes, it mentions that Bennett was out of the country for family reason when the fighting broke out. When he heard that a rebellion had started, he instantly went to Washington for a series of meetings with Secretary Rusk and Mann.
Thomas Mann, his Under Secretary of State for Economic Affairs and previous Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, what the end goal of the United States’ executive was. The events, conversations, and decisions that followed over the next month, show a President plagued by the fear of the domestic political implications of failure to respond to the Dominican crisis appropriately.

The initial stated rationale to the public for intervening in the Dominican crisis was to protect American lives. At the time it was estimated by the State Department that there were 2,400 American citizens in the Dominican Republic.44

As fighting in the Dominican Republic continued, the greatest fear that the administration had was the negative publicity a communist takeover in the country would mean for the President. In a Cabinet meeting during the morning of April 30th, Bundy made this fear explicitly clear, “One thing is clear: a Castro victory in the D.R. would be the worst domestic political disaster we could possibly suffer.” Bundy went on to list exactly what the necessary action for the administration was in order to convince the public that it was in their best interest to quell the Dominican uprising. The key to this strategy was to “Show indisputable evidence that Castro-Communists are in control in the D.R. (CIA ought to prepare full dossiers). Vital that this be proven without a doubt.” This would be done during the press conference that was scheduled for the President latter that day. Without public support, the domestic ramifications would have been even worse, but as Bundy pointed out, a second communist country in the Caribbean was the last foreign policy issue the administration wanted to deal with concerning the public. Johnson’s

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44 FRUS, 35. Meeting with the Congressional Leadership on April 28, 7.27-8.10 p.m.
reaction to the need for greater involvement was, “I want us to feverishly try to cloak this with legitimacy.”

President Johnson’s necessity to appear strong on matters of foreign policy was due in a large part to the chronic negative publicity he received on the subject. The need to ‘cloak’ the intervention ‘with legitimacy,’ shows that he was not concerned with actual supposed communist threat, but with the need to convince the American people that the threat was there. It seems obvious, as this was a room full of politicians, that domestic political capital, foreign political capital, and security would have been foremost on most of these men’s minds; the fact that domestic political capital was the only aspect mentioned, and that it was brought up by the National Security Advisor (a position not prone to thinking about domestic political issues), serves to magnify the extent to which the administration feared the domestic ramifications if the intervention was unsuccessful, or the public realized it was a paper tiger.

Just after this meeting, the Joint Chiefs of Staff sent instructions to General Palmer, the commander of American forces assigned to the Dominican Republic, which read:

“Your announced mission is to save US lives. Your unannounced mission is to prevent the Dominican Republic from going Communist. The President has stated that he will not allow another Cuba – you are to take all necessary measures to accomplish this mission.”

As was stated in the cabinet meeting, to sell this to the American public, they had to “open press corps – show evidence of Castro takeover – evidence irrefutable.”

45 FRUS, 45. Cabinet meeting on April 30th, 8:30 to 10:45 a.m. Notes on meeting kept by Valenti. Both Bundy’s and Johnson’s quotes took place towards the end of the transcriptions for the meeting.

46 FRUS, 43.
McNamara continued his plan to sell this intervention to the American public by implying that they need “[Dominicans to] ask us to come in to save their island from communism.” A point reiterated by Bundy.47

These conversations that occurred throughout April 30th, reiterate the administration’s fear of the domestic political backlash that would occur should the Dominican Republic fall to communists. In fact, they show the administration actively planning several steps ahead, and deciding what information they had to bring to the public before they even had it. In essence, they were plotting how to cook the information in such a way that the American public would support the intervention. The biggest problem with their plans however, was that there was no communist threat within the Dominican Republic, or no notable one.

Before the President gave his address to the nation, he discussed his written remarks with several of his top aides. The point of the address was in part to convince the American public that there were communist elements hijacking the rebel movement in the Dominican, and that the United States had to intervene to stop these Castroistas. However, there was strong objection to these comments from several of Johnson’s advisors. McNamara believed that the President should not “point a finger to the Communist’s participation in [the insurrection].” He said that Johnson would have “a pretty tough job proving that the Inter-American system was being menaced by powers outside the republic and were trying to gain control.” Johnson tried to point to Raborn’s estimates that eight communists trained by Castro were taking control of the rebellion.

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47 FRUS, 42.
McNamara insisted that while there may be people involved who were trained in Cuba, there was no proof that Castro was directing their movements in any way.\textsuperscript{48}

Bundy also joined McNamara in trying to convince the President to cut all mention of the communists from his address. He criticized the CIA’s estimate of the communist threat, claiming, “…nobody has yet said that anyone of these Communists is actually in command of a column.” He also cautioned the President against even “point[ing] the finger that hard at the Communists,” as it might commit the United States to a “civil war against Communists that aren’t in charge.”\textsuperscript{49} In the end, the President toned down the rhetoric against the communists to just vague references, such as, “people trained outside the Dominican Republic are seeking to gain control of the rebel movement.”\textsuperscript{50}

These ambiguities about communist control of the rebels continued throughout the intervention. In a desperate attempt to convince the public that there were in fact communists in control of the rebellion, the Johnson administration repeatedly put out lists of communist leaders and encouraged reporters to back them up. As the list grew from 8 to 77, there was little evidence that these lists were to be taken seriously. Organizations checking the lists, showed that the majority of the people on them were in prison, out of the country, or not even liberals at all but staunch conservatives.\textsuperscript{51} Eventually, it became evident that President Johnson was unable to prove that there was any communist threat at all. The fact that the administration knew this from the beginning, as witnessed by both

\textsuperscript{48} FRUS, 48.
\textsuperscript{49} FRUS, 48
\textsuperscript{50} Beschloss, 305. Conversation with friend Abe Fortas.
\textsuperscript{51} Dallek, 266. ‘The conservative party’. Blum, p. 182. ‘Out of the country.’
McNamara and Bundy above, suggests that this was not the real underlying motive from the beginning.

Bundy’s comment during the cabinet meeting on the 30th of April indicates that the real motive behind the intervention was domestic politics. After the initial deployment of troops, President Johnson had called Everett Dirksen and Gerald Ford, the Senate and House minority leaders respectively, and said, “I have just taken an action that will prove that Democratic presidents can deal with Communists as strongly as Republicans.”52 Not really intent on stopping the insurrection for the sake of the Dominican people, or even U.S. security, Johnson was admitting to his political rivals that it was an action to show the American people, no matter how insubstantial the evidence was, that he was just as capable as a Republican at keeping them safe. And, more importantly, the President was capable of, and dealing with all the international problems.

Johnson’s insistence on continuously pushing the communist threat on the public certainly did not stem from the fact that he felt there were serious communists in the Dominican Republic, ruling out possible conclusion C. As shown above, it is evident that the “proof” he had of this being a Castro initiative, or that communists had any control over the rebellion at all, was practically nothing. Most telling, is his apparent need to “cloak” the intervention “with legitimacy.” This suggests that he knew he was using flimsy evidence to support the idea that there was a communist threat.

Due to the lack of evidence that the Republican minority felt it was imperative to intervene in the Dominican Republic, it is unlikely that they would have used a lack of response, on Johnson’s part, to discredit him. However, because Johnson did intervene, it

52 McPherson, 137.
is impossible to tell whether they would or would not have. Nothing in the transcripts during key decision-making meetings, suggest that this fear was being seriously discussed. As a result, answer D to the proposed questions above is most likely false. If preempting the Republicans had been Johnson’s key motivating factor, there would have been more evidence of that.

It seems that the real answer, as to why Johnson intervened in the Dominican Republic, lies in both answers E and F. Two factors seemed to have motivated his decision to intervene. The first goal of the intervention was to silence his critiques on foreign policy issues, and prove to them that he was extremely capable of keeping Americans safe. As a result of this, the President would be able to increase his personal political capital, and have an easier time passing the domestic legislation on his agenda.

Unfortunately, by the end of the intervention, the President’s tactic to appear capable in dealing with foreign problems had failed, and the domestic backlash that the administration feared came out in full force.

**Backlash: Domestic Problems Caused by Intervention**

As the Dominican intervention continued and escalated, Johnson began having regrets of having initiated it. The executive branch was faced with the task of rebuilding the Dominican government, and in the United States they were having more and more pressure put on them to do it fast, but do it ‘correctly.’ This meant that Congress was fed up with Johnson’s foreign debacle, but if he messed up the end game, Congress would hang him. The President’s problem was that he had to create a government that was not too rightwing, because the Dominican people would rise up in arms again, but he could not create one that was too liberal either. If he did, Congress would accuse him of
handing the country over to ‘a bunch of communists.’ Johnson had the FBI and CIA both check every name that was suggested to him for cabinet posts separately, to avoid one misstep.\footnote{Beschloss, 332.}

At the same time that Congress was pigeonholing him, the American public was calling the President’s cabinet reactionaries. Angered at the criticism Johnson yelled at George Ball, “I’m not going to let … a bunch of little yellow pinkos run them out of the government…. They’re not getting rid of me for four years, and they’re not getting rid of them.” Johnson’s anger was understandable. After a year and a half of criticism about his poor foreign policy, he had now started two major interventions in an attempt to ‘drive back communism,’ and save political face. While incredibly liberal on domestic issues, he felt he was in a no-win situation with regards to foreign policy. Here were the people who had helped elect him in the biggest landslide since FDR, and they were making it harder for him to do the job they had asked him to do.

Worse than either the Congressional oversight, or the public criticism, was, what Johnson saw as the betrayal of Robert Kennedy. Johnson had always mistrusted Kennedy. When he was Vice President, he was convinced that Kennedy was attempting to convince President Kennedy to remove Johnson from the ticket, and later, after JFK’s assassination, Johnson saw Kennedy as his biggest political rival, as someone who was attempting to pull the Democratic Party away from him. Every anti-Johnson action that happened, the President saw as a political maneuver by Kennedy to discredit him. Apart from the rumors that JFK was going to replace Johnson on the ticket, the president also
accused Kennedy of drawing out the Bobby Baker case solely to discredit him.\textsuperscript{54} However, the real bitterness came after the ’64 elections.

During the elections, when Kennedy was running for Senator of New York, Johnson attempted to patch up their relationship by campaigning heavily in the state, despite the fact that he had virtually no chance of losing it. He did it in order to allow Kennedy to appear next to him, and gain the Senatorial office through presidential coattails. After the elections, Kennedy refused to acknowledge Johnson’s help publicly, despite profusely thanking him in private. This only served to further Johnson’s mistrust of Kennedy.\textsuperscript{55}

The Dominican intervention caused the final break between President Johnson and Kennedy. Furious at the way Johnson was handling foreign relations, Kennedy started attacking Johnson on the floor regularly. Johnson, furious at Kennedy, told Robert McNamara to sit the Senator down for a talk: “[Kennedy] wanted to demonstrate his independence… I think we ought to talk to him about it, because this is where most of our real trouble’s coming from…. It’s going to be difficult for us to very long prosecute effectively a war that far away from home with the divisions we have here – and particularly the potential divisions.”\textsuperscript{56}

In the end, the Dominican intervention killed Johnson’s political capital. The Cold War hawks saw it as an utter failure, and liberals were angry that Johnson did not use the

\textsuperscript{54} Dallek, 41, 42, 135-143. Bobby Baker had been Johnson’s secretary and chief aide for eight years while Johnson was majority leader. In 1963, it came to light that he had committed some felonies, bribing people and using his political power to mussel people into doing what he wanted them to do. As Attorney General, Robert Kennedy forced an incredibly thorough FBI investigation, and Johnson was convinced that the only reason so much detail was given to the case, was so that Kennedy could discredit him.

\textsuperscript{55} Beschloss, 106-7, 123-6. ‘Ridding’ Presidential coattails to office, is the idea that candidates win based on how popular the head of the tick is, the presidential candidate.

\textsuperscript{56} Beschloss, 264-5. On pages 366-7, Johnson has a conversation with Edwin Weisl about Kennedy spreading false rumors. By this time, there was no love lost between the President and RFK. Johnson saw Kennedy as his biggest political rival, and Kennedy saw Johnson as a usurper and incompetent.
Organization of American States (OAS). In a long, forlorn conversation with his friend Abe Fortas, Johnson encapsulated his feelings about the intervention:

To [have people think] that we’ve lost a lot of prestige and we went [into the Dominican Republic] for the purpose of setting up a satellite state…. They’re already demanding an investigation. Arthur Schlesinger’s [Americans for Democratic Action] yesterday wants a full investigation, and they’re going to get one…. 57

Sometimes I take other people’s judgments, and I get misled. Like sending troops in there to Santo Domingo. But the man that misled me was Lyndon Johnson…. I’ll ride it out.58

**Personal Flaws: Johnson’s Personality**

Of the three levels of analyzing foreign events, the individual level is both the hardest to prove, and the easiest to accept.59 Personality theories rely on discovering personal flaws in the key decision maker, and showing how that particular personality flaw or strength was the direct cause of a specific action.60 For example, someone might argue that Kaiser Wilhelm’s narcissistic tendencies were the direct cause of World War I.61 The said personality flaws do not have to be psychotic though, it can be sub-conscious biases as

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57 Beschloss, 338. Both parts of this quote came from the same conversation with Fortas. Beschloss edited out the second part, but McPherson, the next footnote down, quotes it at the beginning of his article. This conversation took place at 5:10 p.m., on 23 of May 1965.


59 The three levels of analysis are international, national, and individual. International means that it is international issues that are directing foreign policy, such as security during the Cold War. National looks at foreign policy as it relates to domestic issues. And the individual level looks at the key player, usually the most prominent, and analysis their personalities to see why certain foreign policy initiatives were taken.


61 This example is my own. Whether it is true or not, it serves to show how a cognitive theorist would start with a personality flaw, and reach a conclusion.
well.\textsuperscript{62} This bias can be anything from white supremacy, to a strict belief in the domino theory. What is important in individual theories, is not whether the personality flaw was preconceived or predisposed, but that one existed and it was the direct cause of an action. This can be extremely tricky for several reasons. The most obvious is that there is no way to know for certain, without written documentation, whether the decision maker really had these problems or not. In the end, most individual theories are pure speculation.

Some scholars argue that a personality flaw in President Johnson caused the Dominican Republic intervention. The analysis stems from Johnson’s childhood, arguing that the difficult family life the President had growing up was the reason he sent troops into the Dominican Republic. The argument states that Johnson’s need to contain communism did not stem from any ideological ideals, but from his parents, and the way the way they raised him.\textsuperscript{63} The President’s flaw: He needed to please everybody at all times in order to maintain peace.\textsuperscript{64} This problem stemmed from having an overbearing, impossible to please mother, and an alcoholic father.

To come to these conclusions, anecdotes from Johnson’s life are used to show the interaction between Johnson and his parents, and how these interactions created inherent needs in the President. The Dominican intervention can then be analyzed through the prism of his personality, using the conversations with his advisors to show how the President was trying to please them, and the American people and Congress, all at once. The President’s initial order for intervention was to save American lives, and this was declared to please the political left; he then ordered the escalation to stop the phantom

\textsuperscript{62} This is known as Cognitive analysis.
\textsuperscript{64} Woods, 750-1.
communists from creating a second Cuba, a policy to please rightwing Americans and Congressmen.65

The biggest problem with the personality argument, is that it in essence relies on the fact that groupthink occurs before the specific action takes place. In fact, several advisors were involved in the decision to intervene in the Dominican Republic. While the administration did react fast initially in order to evacuate any American citizens who wished to leave, there was serious discussion about the decision to land troops and escalate American involvement before the intervention actually took place. There was in fact a serious lack of groupthink; Bundy and McNamara’s willingness to standup to Johnson on proof of communist involvement in the Dominican Republic is just one example.

The other problem with this analysis, is the fact that it implies that Johnson was at the mercy of sub-conscious personal problems, negating the fact that he may have in fact been an astute politician with a calculating mind. Of the many examples of Johnson’s ability to think through political problems, one of the biggest was the way he used Eisenhower’s popularity to increase national support for the minority Democrats. By splitting the Republicans on foreign policy issues, Johnson was able to increase the power of the Democratic caucus at a time when they should have been incredibly weak politically.66

While this form of posthumous psychiatric analysis might be psychologically satisfying, it fails to grasp the whole scope of both the President, and the political climate of the time.

65 Woods, 766.
Conclusion

President Johnson was by no means a foreign policy president. He considered himself a domestic reformer, and the heir of FDR. Yet domestic pressure on him continued to grow, forcing the President to focus more on international events. Not entirely sure what the nation wanted in terms of foreign policy, Johnson assumed that the American people wanted him to be tougher on communism. As a result, when the Dominican crisis happened, he saw it as an opportunity to silence his critics on foreign policy, and as a way to boast his popularity, and therefore political power.

What ended up happening was exactly the opposite of what President Johnson had hoped for. The intervention into the Dominican Republic was a political catastrophe for Johnson. Expecting praise for showing a strong international presence, the President ended up losing his support on the right and, more devastatingly, the left. His anger over the matter was aimed at the American public, for not understanding him, giving him the support he felt they promised him during the elections, and Robert Kennedy, who undermined his foreign policy agenda in Congress, after Johnson had made sure he was elected. What frustrated Johnson the most though, was the fact that his foreign policy disasters were destroying his domestic policy agenda. News stories began appearing that “the Great Society is being drastically cut back to accommodate the war budget in Vietnam.” In the end, the war and the Great Society programs, forced Johnson to suspend tax credit, raise taxes minimally, causing the economy to take a slight drop.

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68 Dallek, 310.
President Johnson had attempted to use the Dominican as a method to consolidate his power for the easy passage of his domestic policies, but in the end the backlash destroyed him.

By the time it came to prepare for the ’68 elections, Johnson decided not to run. Doomed by his unpopular foreign policy, he tapped his Vice President, Hubert Humphrey, to run in his place. Perhaps he had been right about Robert Kennedy as well, as the Senator had joined the presidential race, and it appeared as if he was going to win the Democratic nomination before being assassinated. Perhaps, if Johnson had not invaded the Dominican Republic, he would have been able to keep his liberal coalition together, but the desire to include the political right in the coalition, and silence his critiques caused him to believe that intervention was the best course of action. This belief that he had to appear decisive for his own political gain, ended up causing him to make one of the major decisions that destroyed his political capital, lost him support from his allies in congress, and made him unable to run for reelection.
Bibliography


