

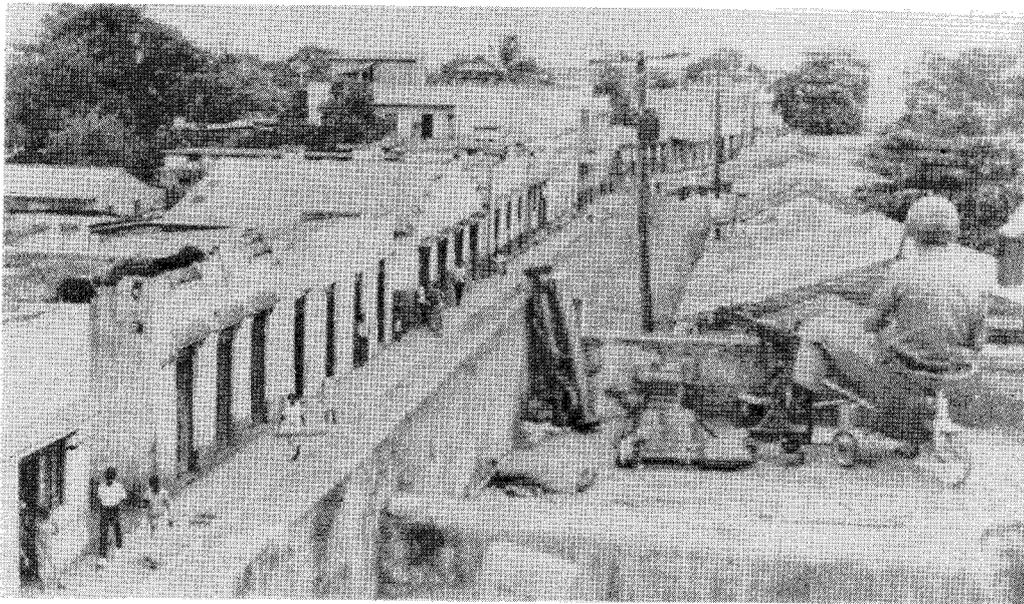
Stability Operations III: Peacekeeping



Once Washington ruled out a military solution to the Dominican crisis, much of the ambiguity surrounding the objectives of U.S. forces in Santo Domingo dissipated. American soldiers would assume a peacekeeping role, the purpose of which was to create and maintain the stability needed by political negotiators—many of whom wore military uniforms—to forge a lasting peace. Peacekeeping did not prohibit the use of force to achieve stability; it did, however, restrict the ways in which force could be applied. To a degree unparalleled in U.S. military history, paratroopers and marines in Santo Domingo found their actions governed by a plethora of politically and militarily motivated directives, guidelines, and rules of engagement. In general, these proclamations dictated that combat operations would be defensive in nature and that soldiers would engage in a variety of activities normally performed by civilian agencies and officials.

U.S. authorities did not issue the rules of engagement and other guidelines in a single package, but piecemeal in response to specific situations. Nevertheless, American forces began to get a clearer idea of what was expected of them immediately after the LOC came into existence. Troops received copies of both LBJ's 2 May speech, in which the president justified U.S. intervention, and a fact sheet that called for the military to protect or evacuate foreign nationals, initiate humanitarian programs, help restore order, and prevent a Communist victory.¹ Although these general missions applied to the Dominican Republic as a whole, most of the activity aimed at accomplishing them would take place in Santo Domingo with its complex of streets, built-up areas, industrial and financial districts, service facilities, and dense population. Militarily, this meant that American forces would engage in city fighting to a degree not experienced since Korea.²

The marines and the 82d both had been trained in urban combat, but they were hardly experts in it. The 82d, for example, conducted an annual urban terrain course, last offered in mid-1964. Since then, new men without this training had joined the division, while paratroopers who had taken the course had become rusty in these skills. World War II and Korean War veterans among U.S. units in Santo Domingo added the insight of personal experience to what training the troops had received.³ For whatever else needed to be learned—and it was considerable—combat would be the in-



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U.S. observation post

structor. Invariably, the first lesson brought home to inexperienced soldiers was that at times a strict adherence to doctrine made good sense; at other times, it did not. In those cases where anomalous situations rendered doctrine inadequate or irrelevant, common sense, flexibility, improvisation, and a generous portion of luck often spelled the difference between success and disaster.

Soldiers manning the ISZ, LOC, and east bank of the Ozama combined traditional tactics and innovative measures to secure and defend their positions opposite the armed rebels. In accordance with long-standing practice, they arranged observation posts (OPs) and individual rifle positions to enhance the firepower of automatic weapons. The resulting network of fortified positions commanded excellent fields of fire and observation. In an urban environment, as a member of the 82d later wrote, one had to make "a rapid mental adjustment from 'high ground and critical terrain' to key buildings and objectives." As a result, command posts were placed in the center of buildings, as much out of harm's way as possible, while observation posts were located predominantly on towers and on the rooftops or upper floors of tall buildings. Paratroopers on top of an eight-story flour mill on the east bank of the Ozama enjoyed a panoramic view of Ciudad Nueva—a bit of military voyeurism the rebels found most disconcerting as evidenced by the amount of fire they directed at the OP, especially after a helicopter deposited a 106-mm recoilless rifle on the mill's roof. While the application of military principles concerning high ground and clear and interlocking fields of fire proved useful in securing positions in and around Santo Domingo, other less conventional approaches proved equally rewarding. Within the city, vehicles abandoned during the early days of the civil war served

as excellent OPs when manned by one or two soldiers with makeshift periscopes.⁴

The occupation of key facilities received careful attention, as demonstrated by the decision on 30 April to include the power plant on the west bank of the Ozama within the 82d's bridgehead and by the marines' incorporation within the ISZ of the Hotel Embajador, a university, and various residences and official buildings. Unfortunately for the Americans, these master strokes were all too few in number. On the debit side, Radio Santo Domingo had deliberately or inadvertently been left outside the LOC, while many industrial, financial, and civic buildings were also located in rebel-held areas. In fact, most key facilities lay under Constitutionalist control until late May, when the GNR captured some during its sweep of the north. Still, U.S. occupation of the power plant made it possible for those running the installation to provide some critical services and, on occasion, to indulge in some mischievous fun: aside from being able to bring electricity to Santo Domingo on a sporadic basis, the troops could shut down Caamaño's air conditioners at will.⁵

Whether manning an observation post, going on patrol, or simply crossing an exposed area to get to the power plant or some other facility, Americans located within sight of Constitutionalist territory quickly learned that



Dominican Crisis, 1965—1966

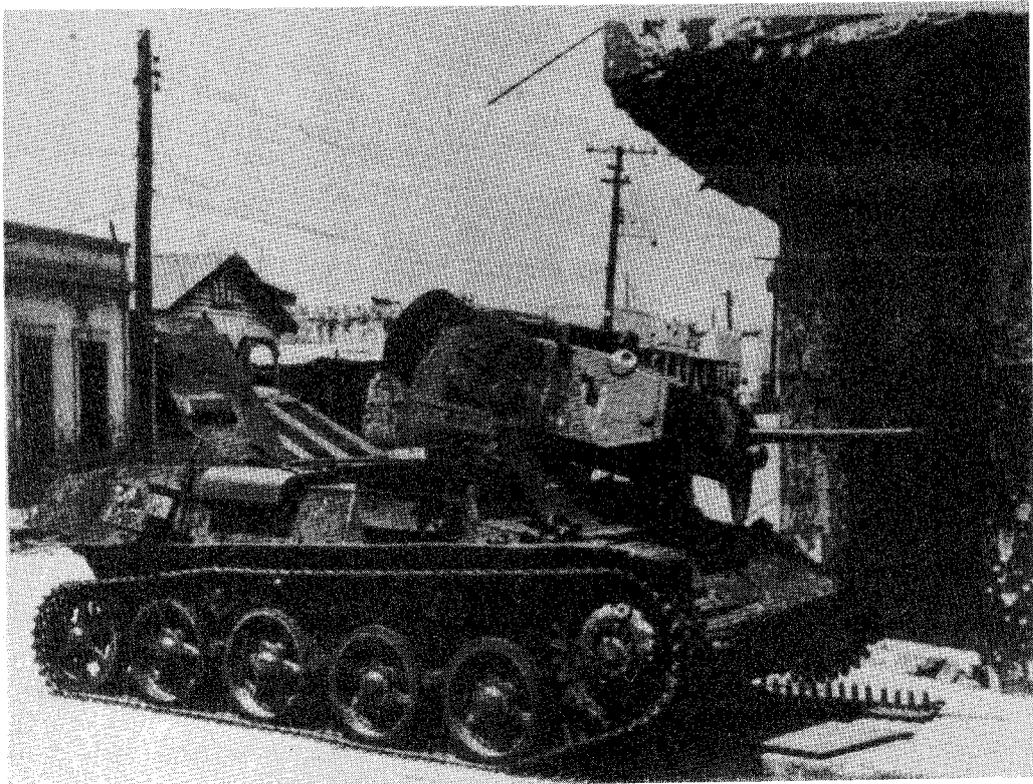
Dominicans and U.S. troops take cover from sniper fire

the greatest threat to their personal safety was not an all-out Constitutionalist attack on U.S. positions (an unlikely prospect) or a projectile launched by an angry Dominican demonstrator; rather, it was the ubiquitous rebel sniper whose harassment of the foreign invaders became a routine but dangerous fact of daily life.

Sniper fire accounted for the majority of American casualties during the intervention. While trees and other natural objects provided some protection from fire, man-made structures afforded little in the way of a shield. The bullet from a sniper's high-powered rifle passed easily through lumber and concrete blocks, the most common building materials in the Dominican Republic. Solid concrete offered some protection but tended to fragment and cause ricochets. For maximum security, soldiers relied on sandbags piled three high in relatively unexposed areas and up to fifteen high on flat rooftops and the like.

The troops at first returned the sniper fire, but the rules of engagement restricted their choice of weapons. The 106-mm recoilless rifle was the largest weapon that could be employed. The advantage of the 106-mm was that it not only killed the sniper but usually destroyed his cover as well. The disadvantage was that sometimes an entire building would be leveled to kill one man. Furthermore, a 106-mm round would sometimes pass through three or four shanties grouped together, thereby increasing the risk of killing or wounding innocent civilians. The back blast of a recoilless rifle fired in one of Santo Domingo's narrow streets or alleys could also destroy poorly built houses in a friendly area. All told, the 106s were best reserved for knocking holes in substantial structures or in the walls of buildings soldiers wished to pass through during the course of a patrol or attack. The recoilless rifle was also ideal for use against the rebels' antiquated armor and against large groups of isolated rebels. And, in at least one case, a recoilless rifle crew on the east bank of the Ozama River sank a boat that had just delivered what was presumed to be ammunition to the Constitutionlists on the west bank. (The rule against firing unless fired on prevented the crew from destroying the ship and its cargo, but as the boat departed the dock area, presumably heading back to Cuba to take on more ammunition or up-country to unload more weapons, rebels on board fired at American positions. With the approval of higher headquarters, the recoilless rifle crew put one round into the superstructure and ended the firefight. The next morning, a second round at the waterline sank the boat off Sans Souci. A Special Forces team brought in to examine the boat's contents found a few small arms, three or four bodies, and five cases of Black Label beer.)⁶

The M79 grenade launcher and the .50-caliber machine gun and spotting rifle served much better as antisniper weapons. The grenade could easily destroy a room in which a sniper was operating and do it without the collateral damage of the recoilless rifle. The .50-caliber machine gun had much the same effect, as its bullets could penetrate the most common construction materials in the Dominican Republic. When U.S. troops could actually see a sniper, the .50-caliber spotting rifle on a 106 presented a "surgical" way to eliminate the problem, either by targeting the sniper him-



Dominican Crisis, 1965—1966

This rebel tank was destroyed by one round from a 106-mm recoilless rifle

self or by placing a round where he was likely to be standing, usually to the immediate right of a window. The M16 rifle was less reliable against snipers given its small caliber and the fact that troops did not have telescopic sights. (Some enterprising men, however, ordered rifle scopes from sporting goods stores back in the United States and converted the scopes to fit their M16s; others brought in M1s with scopes.) A shortage of parts, frequent jamming, and the rebels' possession of 7-mm Mausers (which had greater range than the M16s) resulted in the M16 receiving less than enthusiastic reviews from many of its users.⁷

Marines and paratroopers also took preemptive measures to diminish the volume of sniper fire into their positions. These included widening the LOC, conducting house-to-house searches, and clearing buildings likely to serve as sniper haunts or ammunition caches. Each of these measures necessitated going out on patrol, a dreadful prospect in a built-up, urban area. One company commander in the 82d who later served two tours in Vietnam and took part in the Grenada operation reminisced that patrolling in Santo Domingo was "very, very frightening." Curious Dominicans who talked, laughed, and waved as the soldiers passed by caused only minor distractions. The real terror stemmed from knowing that even when patrolling procedures were executed flawlessly, soldiers still stood exposed to enemy counter-



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U.S. troops firing a .50-caliber machine gun

measures. True cover was a luxury. Streets and intersections offered clear fields of fire for rebel gunners. Moreover, few walls or houses could stop even small-arms rounds, and ricochets off pavement or within doorways could often do more damage than a direct hit. Troops also worried about being lured into rebel cross fire. Platoon and squad leaders shared the additional burden of having to be concerned with the adverse effects that casualties might have on unit morale and discipline.

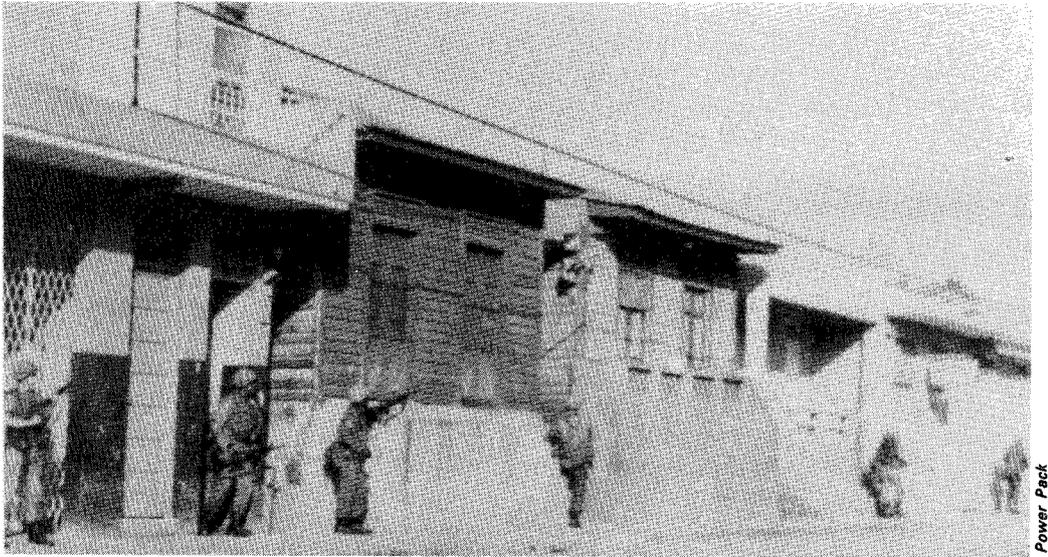
Dangers did not diminish when a patrol reached its objective, especially if the objective were a several-story building that had to be cleared. Doctrine dictated that buildings be cleared from the top down. But in a built-up area, rooftops often became death traps because of their exposure to nearby buildings that were taller and to which the enemy had access. One platoon in the 82d paid dearly to learn this lesson. Assembled on a roof prior to entering a building, it was decimated by a concealed sniper standing in a bathtub and firing a Thompson submachine gun from a building only twenty-five feet away. In light of these dangers, doctrine yielded to common sense. When necessary, buildings would be cleared from the bottom up, with adequate covering fire to discourage anxious snipers.⁸

Within the LOC, expansion of the corridor by patrolling alleviated some of the sniper fire directed at the main east-west avenue, but it increased the instances of friendly fire. Commanders discarded the practice of defending the widened corridor in depth after sniper fire one night resulted in elements of a second-echelon battalion firing into American troops on the front line instead of over their heads. This incident led to the establishment of quick-reaction forces that could plug any break in the line in the



Dominican Crisis, 1965-1966

Marine sniper sighting his target



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U.S. troops on patrol in Santo Domingo

event of an attack. Defense of the LOC would thereafter be “keyed to a line of rooftop and street positions on the perimeters with no depth.”⁹

A second cause of friendly fire had to do with the configuration of the LOC near the ISZ and with lapses of fire discipline. It was not uncommon, according to one source, for rebel snipers to fire over the heads of Army defenders into the security zone, thus prompting the Leathernecks to return fire that often fell short into the 82d’s positions. Such episodes did little to diminish interservice rivalry.¹⁰

In addition to the dangers posed by snipers, friendly fire, and constant patrolling, soldiers stationed in the LOC confronted problems arising from the corridor’s unique traffic-control function. Dominicans wishing to pass from northern Santo Domingo into Ciudad Nueva, or vice versa, invariably had to traverse the LOC, where makeshift barricades of concertina wire, sandbags, and oil drums shut off side streets and alleys, channeling pedestrian and vehicular traffic into a series of checkpoints and roadblocks erected at five or so strategic locations. Nearly 50,000 people a day traversed the corridor making congestion a chronic problem that was compounded by the “undisciplined driving habits” of Dominican cabbies and by an insufficient number of Spanish-speaking troops at the critical bottlenecks. Military police, supported by Army troops and Dominican policemen, manned the checkpoints, where they looked for “subversive” agents and, more important, weapons. The intention was to prevent the flow of arms in either direction across the line. No Dominicans (with the exception of national policemen) could enter the corridor with a weapon, a rule that disrupted the Constitutionals’ efforts during the first half of May to send arms north for the purpose of using them against pockets of Loyalist troops or simply of cach-

ing them for retrieval at a later date should the Americans take over Ciudad Nueva.

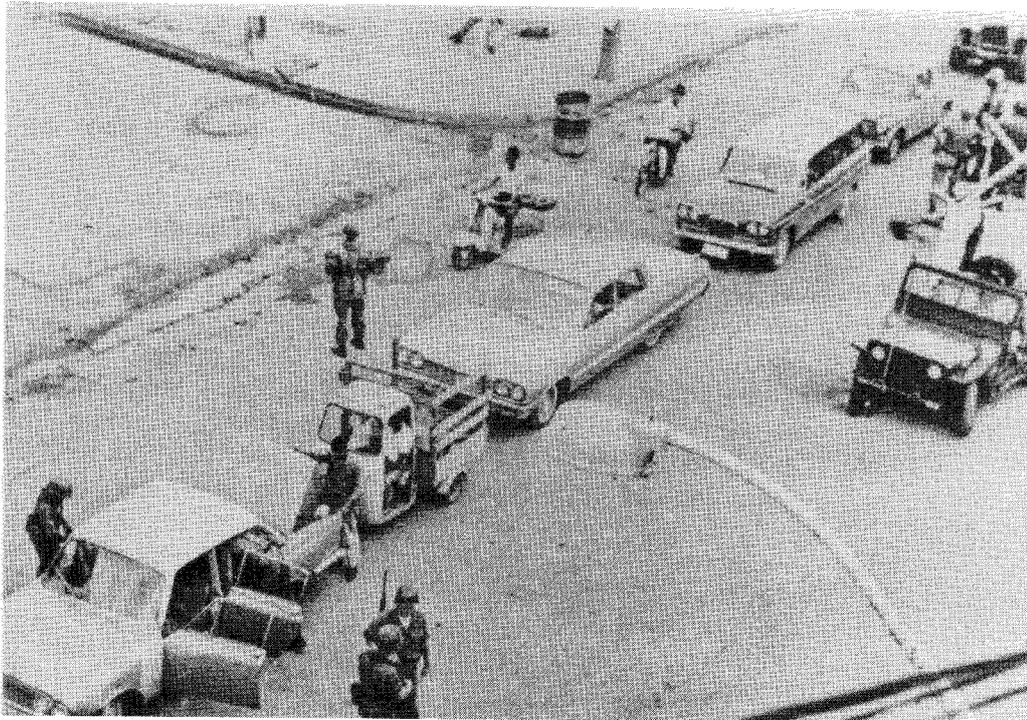
The rebels refused to be deterred by U.S. surveillance measures and adopted several ruses to achieve their objective. Guns were placed in automobile gas tanks. Hearses and ambulances loaded with concealed weapons instead of bodies cleared checkpoints without being searched, often as American soldiers removed their helmets out of respect. After the subterfuge was discovered, the treatment accorded such vehicles at roadblocks became anything but respectful: MPs undertook vigorous searches, even opening coffins that did not appear completely sealed. Another rebel tactic was to create a diversion or mount a full-scale sniper attack during which a vehicle containing weapons would attempt to run a roadblock during the confusion. Again, frustrated American traffic controllers devised countermeasures. The rapid emplacement of emergency barricades during such disruptions discouraged speeding cars and trucks, as did the occasional lobbing of a grenade from an M79 launcher into their paths.¹¹

One rebel deception for smuggling arms across the LOC lent itself to no immediate counteraction. While all Dominican males entering and exiting the corridor were frisked, females were spared the procedure lest the indignity



Dominican Crisis, 1965-1966

Pedestrians and vehicles creating congestion at an LOC checkpoint



Dominican Crisis, 1965—1966

Vehicles lined up at a U.S. checkpoint

of it incite a riot. Thus, women and young girls wearing loose-fitting dresses or maternity clothes could easily slip grenades, pistols, and ammunition through the checkpoints. Efforts by U.S. authorities to obtain female inspectors failed, while less delicate suggestions for eliminating the practice were dismissed out of hand. Reports written during the last part of May claimed that the problem still lacked a solution, although photographs of checkpoint activity indicate otherwise. One photo in particular shows an American soldier with a mine detector and a determined look dutifully passing the device in the vicinity of a young woman's skirt.¹²

Having difficulties crossing over the LOC, the rebels decided to go under it via the city's sewer system. A highly successful ploy at first, the Americans eventually realized what was happening and once again devised countermeasures. A Special Forces team acquired a plan of the sewer system and passed it to corps and division. The Green Berets also assisted the 82d in reconnaissance missions in the sewers, while Army engineers emplaced a series of booby traps that included mines, grenades, barbed wire, trip flares, and, according to some sources, chemical agents. During these preparations, the two sides would often meet, and an underground firefight would ensue. After the engineers installed the obstacles to underground traffic, soldiers above ground removed the manhole covers, lowered lights on wires, and began maintaining a 24-hour watch (in twenty-minute shifts) over the open holes. Underground infiltration fell off markedly after that.¹³



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A paratrooper uses a metal detector to determine if these Dominican women are concealing weapons

The neutralization of the sewer network was but one example of an operation involving clandestine activities during the Dominican intervention. Some of the missions carried out by Green Berets and the 82d, either separately or in tandem, are still classified; certain others are not. Mention has already been made of Green Chopper, the search of the sunken boat, and obtaining the sewer plans and reconnoitering the underground labyrinth. In another clandestine operation, a team from the 82d, after managing to get the blueprints of the telephone cables running from Ciudad Nueva to the north, again went underground, this time to sever the cables and impair



Army Magazine

Manholes had to be watched to prevent rebels from using the sewer system to pass under the LOC

Caamaño's ability to coordinate rebel activities north of the LOC. In another operation, Army Special Forces teamed up with a Navy sea-air-land (SEALS) team to investigate reports of a cache of Cuban arms located near Samana

Bay. The "reconnaissance indicated no arms caches or 3d country involvement in this area."¹⁴

Some of the most important clandestine operations during the intervention attempted to silence Radio Santo Domingo (RSD). Although a poor people by U.S. standards, virtually every Dominican family owned a radio and, because of the country's high illiteracy rate, relied on it heavily for information. RSD, with "numerous outlets, studios, and transmitter sites," was the country's national station, capable of being heard throughout the island. In the hands of the rebels, the station became a powerful propaganda weapon—in fact, the "biggest thorn" in the side of the Americans. While David Phillips was still at Langley, he received a telephone call from a CIA agent with a blunt message. "The difference in Santo Domingo," the agent shouted, "lies in that radio station. If the rebels continue their propaganda they will take over the entire country. The radio must be silenced!"¹⁵

U.S. officials in the Dominican Republic received a similar message from State advising, "Availability of this station to rebel forces highly undesirable and prejudicial to our interest." As though it needed to be said, State indicated its "wish to deny this facility to rebels." Efforts to accommodate this



Radio Santo Domingo