



## How to Intervene and Get Out

By Alan McPherson  
History News Service



U.S. planners in Iraq have gained little inspiration from the past, especially from the shopworn Vietnam analogy. That war haunts both supporters and opponents of the 2003 U.S. invasion, and more so as the occupation enters its

third year.

Supporters of the Iraqi war say the "liberation" of Iraq has helped Washington kick the "Vietnam syndrome," the fear of sending U.S. youth into harm's way. Opponents answer that the conflict is a "quagmire" dragging down U.S. resources and morale.

It's possible that both are wrong. Why? Because there's another military intervention from the past they have ignored -- the 1965 war in the Dominican Republic. It was 40 years ago this spring that Lyndon B. Johnson's administration landed more than 23,000 troops in Santo Domingo, the Dominican capital, to stop what it believed was a communist insurgency there. The action was heavily criticized because Johnson exaggerated the threat of outside communists in what was a civil conflict. Yet the President got what he wanted -- a U.S.-friendly government in place and the U.S. troops back home in a year.

By emulating this achievement, the Bush

administration might help Iraq go the way of Santo Domingo in 1965 instead of Saigon in 1975. In April 1965, the strategy of the United States militarily was admirable. When violence erupted in Santo Domingo, hundreds of U.S. paratroopers landed quickly to protect foreigners. A few days later, tens of thousands more joined them. That unmatched firepower put a stop to any resistance that might have caused U.S. casualties. It also separated the warring Dominican factions and saved Dominican lives.

The 82nd Airborne Division, the main U.S. fighting force, was also patient and meticulous. It identified the capital as the trouble spot and focused all its might there. It then set up checkpoints and searched houses one by one. Weeks after the landing, both the rightist Dominican military and the leftist rebels had no choice but to lay down their guns and negotiate an interim government.

In Iraq, by contrast, the U.S. military swiftly beat Saddam Hussein's forces, but it committed fewer troops for the aftermath than many said were needed. U.S. soldiers soon spread themselves too thin. It took them more than a year to clear out Fallujah block-by-block, Santo-Domingo style. By that point, the Sunni insurgency was popping up in other cities.

In 1965, Johnson even succeeded where he failed. When he first heard of a conflict in Santo Domingo, he cared little about the specifics there and instead worried that any instability anywhere was a threat to free peoples everywhere. The CIA and the embassy also gave him faulty intelligence from the field, which fed Johnson's fears. Sound familiar?

One result was that the Johnson White House was sure that Cuba's Fidel Castro was behind the Dominican conflict just as much as Bush thought he had a "slam dunk" case that

Saddam's Iraq had weapons of mass destruction.

Another failure of LBJ's Caribbean intervention was that Johnson intervened without first getting the blessing of the Organization of American States -- just as Bush gave little chance to United Nations diplomacy before invading Iraq.

In the Dominican situation, Johnson learned from his mistakes. He admitted (to his advisers, at least) that his anti-communism had "misled" him into an unnecessary commitment. He also suggested as much to the public by letting OAS diplomats mediate, since they understood Dominican politics better than he did.

In Iraq, the Bush team, and the president especially, have yet to admit any mistake -- ideological or tactical. Nor have they lived up to their promise to let the UN take a bigger role in post-invasion Iraq.

The Bush administration is in need of positive models of intervention from the past. At the very least, it should take heart that the successful supervision of elections in Iraq was also attempted in the Dominican Republic -- and was also successful there. In 1965, after the interim government was up and running, U.S. forces stayed just long enough to guard the ballot box in a largely fair presidential contest. Dominican voters ushered in a conservative government, but a representative one. For many, the next twelve years of hard-line rule were no picnic. But for Johnson, stability had been achieved.

Bush should be so lucky.

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**Pictured at top (left to right):** Cleopatra, Justinian I,  
Thomas Paine, Ulysses S. Grant, 1954 sit-in at Woolworth's  
lunch counter protesting segregation, Che Guevara.