
Reviewed by Cyrus Veeser (Bentley University)
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Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

Dollar Diplomacy by Force: Nation-Building and Resistance in the Dominican Republic makes a significant contribution to the study of Dominican-American relations in the early twentieth century. Ellen D. Tillman’s greatest achievement is thoroughly integrating US and Dominican archival sources, often providing in a single paragraph contrary national views of the same event. The title captures that dual perspective—that a policy which Washington declared could stabilize weak nations without US military control became, on the receiving end, a story of subverted sovereignty and systematic violence.

Tillman’s focus is the attempt by the US government to create a professional, apolitical, and national military in the Dominican Republic before and during the marine occupation of 1916 to 1924. Covering a period previously explored by Bruce Calder, Julie Franks, Wilfredo Lozano, Alan McPherson, Richard Turits, and Bernardo Vega, among others, Tillman traces the evolution of an American-sponsored military from the frontier guard instituted under the customs receivership in 1905 to the Guardia Republicana in the chaotic years after the assassination of Ramón Cáceres in 1911 to the Policía Nacional Dominicana during the occupation itself. Noting that “the story is at its core a transnational one,” she grounds her study in records from the US Marine Corps in Quantico, Virginia, and the Archivo General de la Nación in Santo Domingo (p. 3). The emphasis on bilateral agency goes beyond the sources Tillman so thoroughly mines: she argues that “the delicate balance of foreign imposition and Dominican opposition opened a way for change that could only occur once both Dominicans and U.S. officials reached a point of compromise and negotiation” (p. 7).

Early chapters provide background on Dominican society and the first encroachments of American power. Regionalism was a defining trait of the Dominican Republic, “often more divisive than class in Dominican society” (p. 15). As in other Latin American nations, poor transportation and limited communication allowed relative autonomy to local caudillos, and both the national government and the military were ”centralized more in name than in fact” (p. 17).

Private US investment expanded in the Caribbean republic in the late nineteenth century, and when the nation defaulted on international loans floated by a Wall Street firm, Theodore Roosevelt seized the occasion to declare his corollary to the Monroe Doctrine and install a customs receivership, which undermined Dominican
sovereignty by placing control of the country’s finances in the hands of US officials. This preamble to the later occupation is crucial, since the ongoing but ad hoc US interference nourished powerful anti-American sentiments well before 1916.

Tillman demystifies the supposedly pacific nature of the new policy of dollar diplomacy. As presented to the American public, dollar diplomacy was a benign, innovative method to bring stability to the troublesome nations of the Caribbean and Central America. In the Dominican case, as the New York Times exulted, “Uncle Sam has waved the wand that produces National transformations, and lo! A republic has appeared where government is of the people, peace is assured, and prosperity is perennial.”[1] In fact, even as Roosevelt proclaimed the receivership, US naval officers like Albert Dillingham and Charles Sigsbee used the threat of force to coerce the Dominican government to submit to the arrangement.

With the inception of the receivership, the republic’s security became an American concern, and from its earliest days, US officials felt frustrated by the impotence of the Dominican government. To stifle the lucrative contraband trade with Haiti, Americans created the frontier guard, a first step in what Tillman shows is a twenty-year struggle to build a military body responsive to US interests. The frontier guard offered good pay but, to the disappointment of the occupiers, succeeded in recruiting only the most desperately poor Dominicans. In a fascinating section, Tillman recounts the receivership’s efforts to enlist the descendants of freed American slaves from their community on the Samaná Peninsula in the hope that these English-speaking Protestants would prove to be more “culturally reliable” (p. 45).

The early problems with recruitment foreshadowed what was to come. Dominicans and Haitians along the frontier were united in their opposition to the new force, and the security situation would get much worse before it got better. Near anarchy followed the assassination of Caceras, and from 1912 to 1916, “the receivership and the frontier guard began to enter heavily into the politics of the civil war” (p. 53). The power struggle forced the Dominican government to spend money on defense well beyond what its budget allowed, providing the financial pretext for the military intervention of 1916.

Over those years, US agents came to believe that external military and financial control was the only solution to Dominican political and economic stability. Americans did not grasp the paradox that “any political leader who accepted and used U.S. help … was branded by many as a traitor; but without U.S. support no regime could last long” (p. 50). With the outbreak of the Great War in 1914, Washington saw disorder in the Dominican Republic as an invitation to Germany, above all with the opening of the Panama Canal. US marines landed in mid-1916, and the military occupation made official in November of that year.

The heart of Tillman’s book is what she calls “the story of the constabulary within the U.S. occupation” (p. 204). The creation of the constabulary—a professional army that was unshakably loyal to the central government—was foremost in the occupation’s priorities. Creating a new military that Dominicans would embrace as their own would not be easy. Arriving in Santo Domingo to negotiate a treaty giving legal cover to the US occupation, Rear Admiral William B. Caperton found no takers among Dominican political leaders. “I have never seen such hatred displayed by one people for another…. We positively have not a friend in the land” (p. 72). The fact that Dominican politicians refused to cooperate with the occupiers, however, made military-to-military contacts all the more decisive.

The occupiers soon found themselves beset by the same centripetal force that fragmented the Dominican state. With Washington focused on the European war, US officials had “unprecedented and unequaled command of internal occupation decisions” (p. 1). Tillman argues that the military men assumed "that a centralized state could be militarily imposed and ... that such a structure would resolve the major complications of Dominican government" (pp. 104-105). Yet over time, “military constabulary commanders often replaced central orders with local compromise and negotiations” (p. 104). Thus the occupation adapted to the contours of regionalism that had given rise to caudillos since the country’s independence.

The constabulary that US officials grafted onto existing Dominican military traditions was “anomalous”—was it meant to be an army or a national police? As one marine colonel put it, the constabulary was “never large enough to discharge the military functions incumbent on the national army and was too military to devote itself ... to its police duties” (p. 84). The American occupiers first called it the Guardia Nacional Dominicana and intended it to serve as a police force, yet the Guardia
was not authorized to make arrests for violations of local laws. Tillman traces the oscillation between military and police missions through 1930. It is worth noting that the anomaly lasted nearly a century. Until about a decade ago, the chief of the Policía Nacional Dominicana was routinely a general in the armed forces who retained a military rank. Even today Dominicans often refer to members of the police as guardia, echoing their title from a century ago.

Later chapters of the book document the repeated failure of the occupiers to draw any but the most disadvantaged of Dominicans into the constabulary. Officers arriving from the States tried to upgrade the status of the force, to no avail. After ridding itself of undesirable, the now-undermanned constabulary launched recruitment drives that “brought back not only similar men, but sometimes the very same men who had been discharged in earlier purges” (p. 126). Recruitment into the force was a problem never solved by the invaders. Serving as a grunt for foreign occupiers was low-prestige work, and good families wanted their sons to have nothing to do with the semi-mercenary force.

One problem was the refusal by Americans to promote Dominican officers above the rank of second lieutenant, belying the promise of social mobility. The policy sent a racist message that was lost on no one. As Tillman explains, US officials were hypersensitive to putting nonwhite Dominicans in positions of power “because of fears about what it would do to the racial order at home” (p. 98). Given press coverage of the Dominican occupation by African American newspapers like the Chicago Defender, those fears had some basis.

As with the sections on recruitment, the best parts of this study offer finely grained, bilateral views of such key developments as the purging of Dominican officers from the Guardia Republicana, the attempt to remake the constabulary after February 1919, the struggle against the messianic Olivorio movement, and the repeatedly deferred plan to systematically train Dominican recruits. There is excellent coverage of the constabulary’s struggle to disarm the civilian population in order to suffocate a growing rebellion in the East. The campaign was certain to anger a rural population in any event, but the occupiers underscored their insensitivity by attempting to collect knives and machetes—essential tools of peasant life—as well as firearms.

By allowing us to see events through the eyes of Dominicans and Americans simultaneously, Tillman reminds us that the occupiers had scant empathy for the “invaded.” To the occupiers, Dominican society was violent and disordered while the United States was a paragon of peace and harmony. Yet, as the Dominican representative before the US Senate pointed out in 1921, “lynchings, burnings at the stake, and tar and featherings, now pastimes in some parts of the United States, are unknown and never practiced” in the Dominican Republic (p. 136).

Since the Dominican Republic was not an actual American colony, the eventual return of its sovereignty was a critical, open-ended question. The occupation’s exertions to unify the nation through infrastructure development, education, and creation of a national military had their ironic counterpart in the emergence of a national, and even transnational, anti-occupation movement. By the early 1920s, both the nationalists, who dogged Secretary of State Bainbridge Colby on his post-war goodwill tour of Latin America, and the violent resistance of the gavilleros (armed rebels) moved Washington toward withdrawal. Tillman shows that only after an end date for the occupation had been fixed by the Hughes-Peynado Plan in 1922 did the status of the constabulary rise. All Dominicans appreciated that peace was a prerequisite for US withdrawal, and Americans at last accepted that Dominicans needed to command their own security forces. With the prospective return of sovereignty, the constabulary lost much of its ill repute as a mercenary corps.

Tillman highlights several final ironies as the Policía Nacional Dominicana emerged as a legitimate and unifying force. Although the US used financial disorder as a pretext for the occupation, the Americans forced loans upon the Caribbean nation to cover deficits, public works, and the cost of building the constabulary. And, of course, the creation of more powerful and centralized armed forces provided one of the first Dominican officers commissioned by the occupiers, Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina, with a perfect instrument to seize power and intimidate civilians during his thirty-one-year reign of terror.

This is a useful and important volume for those interested in military history, Caribbean history, and the history of imperialism and US foreign policy. No monograph is perfect, of course. At times Tillman strains under the volume of her archival sources, with details overshadowing the line of argument. Her recognition of complexity and multiple agency at times leads to detailed yet inconclusive descriptions, and her chronology occasionally becomes nonlinear. I was left with some larger ques-
tions as well. Tillman asserts that the constabulary was the "culmination of officers’ desires to show how military force and organization could contribute to the exportation of U.S.-style government" (p. 78). Yet in contrast to European nations, the US armed forces played a limited role in the politics and culture of the United States in the early twentieth century. Policing was mostly a local matter, although federal officials would take greater initiative during Prohibition, as Lisa McGirr’s excellent book, The War on Alcohol: Prohibition and the Rise of the American State (2015), shows. Finally, American military officers hailed from a country that enshrined "states’ rights" and guarded against encroaching centralization. Tillman does not address how American military officers tried to implant a "U.S.-style government" when they sought to centralize and militarize the Dominican Republic. Those questions do not subtract from the many contributions of this welcome study.

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