

Memorandum by Mr. Charles C. Hauch of the Office of Middle American Affairs to the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs(Mann)¹

[Washington,] August 23, 1951.
confidential

Subject: Strange story of the vessel *Quetzal*, formerly the *Fantasma*

This is the kind of story which could happen only in the Caribbean—or possibly in the Balkans of the old days.

About a month ago the Dominican Foreign Office gave our Embassy in Ciudad Trujillo a new bill of charges of revolutionary plotting against Trujillo.² One of the charges was that the vessel *Fantasma* which had been seized by the Cuban Government from the Cayo Confites revolutionists when that expedition was broken up in 1947, had recently been turned over by the Cuban Government to Caribbean plotters against Trujillo and would be used in a new attempt against the Dominican Government. Information received about the same time from our Embassy in Habana indicated that the vessel had been sold at auction to a group apparently headed by the Cuban Deputy and long-time active foe of Trujillo, Enrique Cotubanama Henriquez, President Prío's brother-in-law. A message from our Embassy in Guatemala at the same time was to the effect that the vessel had been sold to the Guatemalan Government. According to both Embassies, the vessel was to be reconditioned in Cuba and to sail to Guatemala, assertedly to participate in legitimate commercial activities; the crew, however, continued to be composed of Cuban, Dominican, and Guatemalan veterans of the Cayo Confites affairs. The vessel's name was changed to the *Quetzal* and it was apparently transferred to Guatemalan registry.

On or about July 25 the *Quetzal* sailed from Cuba bound for Livingston,

Guatemala, but failed to arrive. About the middle of August, the Dominican Foreign Minister³ informed Ambassador Ackerman⁴ that President Trujillo planned to release publicly a strong statement regarding the activities of the vessel, with supporting documents in order to make known to all anti-Trujillo plotters that the Dominican Government was aware of their schemes in the hope that this would deter them. In the mean time the United States Coast Guard office in Miami had been requested by sources not divulged to Washington Coast Guard headquarters or to the Department whether it could supply any information on the fate of the vessel.

It was not until the receipt of Ciudad Trujillo's despatch 105 of August 17⁵ that we received information indicating that the Dominican Government was fully aware of the fate of the crew and probably of the vessel, and probably had a hand in preventing its arrival in Guatemala. According to a public announcement put out by the Dominican Government on August 16, the Captain of the vessel, one Alfredo Brito Baez, is now in the Dominican Republic, "having reentered the Dominican Navy after having been abroad on special service". Ambassador Ackerman has been confidentially informed that all the crew are also in the Dominican Republic. He had not obtained any definite information as to the fate of the vessel, but says it is believed that it has either been turned over to the Dominican Government or scuttled. The Naval Attaché is investigating this point.

One possible explanation of the change in course of the vessel after leaving Cuba is that the Captain and/or the crew were bought off by Dominican agents to sail the vessel to the Dominican Republic, or to scuttle it somewhere on the high seas and be picked up by a Dominican vessel. Another possible explanation is that a unit or units of the Dominican navy intercepted the vessel after it left Cuba and took it and its crew to the Dominican Republic, or sank the vessel on the high seas after removing the crew.

The vessel's documents, which the Dominican Government asserts have come into its possession and which were published in the Dominican newspaper *El Caribe* on August 16, are cited by the Dominican Government as proving that the vessel was engaged in revolutionary activities against it. Actually there is nothing in the published documents definitely establishing this. It appears from the documents that the actual owner of the vessel may have been the Dominican revolutionist Miguel Angel Ramirez, one of the leaders of the Cayo Confites and Luperón⁶ affairs. The only document allegedly found on the vessel which might be interpreted as evidence of a recurrence of active revolutionary plotting was an undated receipt signed by Ramirez for a quantity of arms and ammunition received from Costa Rican authorities at San José. However, this could very well be a receipt for the arms received by Ramirez from the Costa Rican Government (i.e. Figueres)⁷ prior to the Luperón invasion attempt in 1949 (during the OAS Caribbean Investigating Committee's activities last year it was ascertained that some of the weapons seized by the Dominican authorities at Luperón had originally been licensed for export from the United States for the use of the Costa Rican Government.

Another interesting point in this whole affair is that the Captain of the *Quetzal*, Alfredo Brito Baez, has been out of the country for some time, and, if I remember correctly, was the Captain of another vessel of which the Dominicans were suspicious early last year, after it had been sold by a Cuban firm and taken to Guatemala. Captain Brito told us at that time that he was a Cuban, but now the Dominican Government asserts he is a Dominican who, as stated above, has "reentered the Dominican navy after having been abroad on special service."

Information just received from Habana is that the Dominican Charge has left precipitously for the United States asserting his life is in danger from Dominican exiles and their sympathizers, who are asserting publicly the vessel was captured and sunk by the Dominican armed forces. It is conceivable that the incident

might lead to a new flare-up in Caribbean tension and necessitate OAS action.¹⁰

¹ Addressed also to Mr. W. Tapley Bennett, Jr., Officer in Charge of Caribbean Affairs, Office of Middle American Affairs.

² Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina, President of the Dominican Republic.

³ Virgilio Díaz Ordoñez.

⁴ Ralph H. Ackerman, United States Ambassador to the Dominican Republic.

⁵ Not printed.

⁶ For documentation on this incident, which involved an attempted invasion of the Dominican Republic in June 1949, see *Foreign Relations, 1949*, vol. ii, pp. 451 ff.

⁷ José Figueres Ferrer; he had become President of the Founding Junta of the Second Republic in Costa Rica in May 1948.

⁸ The following handwritten notation, initialed by Mr. Bennett, appears on the source text: "There is also today's reappearance—in President Prio's mansion— of Enrique Henriquez after two days of being 'kidnapped'. All this means that the pot is boiling again—we can expect repercussions from Guatemala soon. If the Dominican navy did capture or sink the Guat. vessel, then that is an act which would ordinarily be considered an act of war."