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Johnson's Swift Response To First Foreign Crisis

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In office for only seven weeks, President Johnson and his Administration have been confronted with an ugly crisis in Panama that comes at the worst possible time in the worst possible place.

Latin American affairs is the one area in the field of foreign relations on which President Johnson has gone out of his way to stamp his personal "LBJ" brand.

He named Thomas C. Mann, a fellow Texan from Laredo, head of the entire Latin program, as part of a complete shakeup in the State Department's Latin American division and the Alliance for Progress program.

That there was need for an improvement in the way the United States was handling its relations with Latin America seems amply demonstrated by the blow-up in Panama. At the same time, there is special irony in trouble striking first in the very area where the new President—with considerable fanfare—made his first foreign policy move.

Not only are the riots likely to damage Washington's relations with the rest of Latin America, but the elements in the crisis—the Colossus of the North astride tiny Panama and the Canal—are made to order for Moscow propagandists. In terms of world image, reports that American troops and American Canal Zone police had fired on rioting Panamanian crowds put the United States in the unpleasant position of a big country shooting at a smaller one.

All of these ugly aspects of the situation must have flashed through the President's mind when he received the first reports of the violence in Panama while he was dining at the White House Thursday.

Some time between 8 and 9 p.m. Bill D. Moyers his 29-year-old top assistant brought the first bulletin to the President.

As soon as the President received the first word, he was on the telephone to Mr. Mann, who has the dual title of Assistant to the President and Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs. Mr. Mann spent the evening in the operations center of the State Department, a communications crisis center with a combination lock on the door.

Ralph Dungan, an Assistant to the President who handles Latin American affairs, was stationed in the War Room of the Pentagon.

About midnight, the President retired. He was up again at 6:50 a. m. and at 9:30 a. m. Friday he met in the Cabinet Room with his top security

advisers. Present were many of the men who had advised Mr. Kennedy in the Cuban missile crisis plus some new faces.

Assembled in the Cabinet Room were Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Under Secretary of State George W. Ball, Mr. Mann, Edwin M. Martin, Mr. Mann's predecessor and newly-designated Ambassador to Argentina, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, Secretary of the Army Cyrus R. Vance, Under Secretary of the Army Stephen Ailes, Mr. Bundy, Mr. Dungan and John A. McCone, director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

The President and his aids

planned their strategy and drafted the White House statement that was issued after the meeting. As soon as the hour-and-a-half meeting had ended, the President placed a call to President Roberto F. Chiari in Panama. The two spoke from 11:30 a.m. to 11:50 a.m.

The President called for peace and dispatched a high-level mission to Panama, headed by Mr. Mann.

Thus the Administration responded to its first international crisis. The immediate rupture between Panama and Washington may be repaired in the days ahead.