

INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

In August 2002, the U.S. Department of State released thousands of pages of declassified documents on Argentina. The bulk of them were drawn from the period of the military dictatorship, 1976–1983, and reflected on U.S.–Argentine relations with an emphasis on human rights. The declassification followed years of efforts by Argentine human rights groups, judges, and relatives of victims, together with researchers and non-governmental organizations in the United States, to obtain access to information that might shed light on the human rights abuses of the period, particularly disappearances.

The Woodrow Wilson Center’s Latin American Program and the Cold War International History Project jointly held a seminar in Washington, D.C., on March 5, 2003 (with a parallel event held in Buenos Aires in December 2003), to explore the events of some 25 years ago in light of new information contained in the documents. At the same time, and given the depth of Argentina’s economic and political crisis before and after the 2001 default, we were convinced that the discussion of the past could not be separated from the broader context of contemporary U.S.–Argentine relations. Argentina collapsed financially after several years of recession beginning in the late 1990s. It ultimately defaulted on much of its \$150 billion in external debt, and, by decree, converted to pesos billions of dollars of savings and retirement plans held inside the country. Millions of citizens in one of Latin America’s most prosperous countries were thrown into poverty and public confidence in politicians and the political process reached new lows.

The international community, including the United States and the International Monetary Fund, initially responded to this scenario with indifference or outright hostility. The U.S. Treasury as well as the IMF withheld new loans and blamed Argentina for the meltdown, downplaying the role of previous lending and investment policies by public entities and international financial markets. The sense of abandonment experienced by many Argentines was all the more acute given that, for most of the 1990s, Argentina had been touted as a model of the “Washington Consensus” regarding trade liberalization, privatization, and state reform.

This period had also witnessed a period of close friendship between the United States and Argentina, so close, in fact, that one senior Argentine official was moved to describe the relationship as *relaciones carnales*.

This publication explores current as well as past issues in the bilateral relationship. It reflects the perspectives of two groups of experts—scholars, journalists, and diplomats from both Argentina and the United States—whose work has long focused on aspects of U.S.-Argentine relations or who had themselves been direct participants in the policy process.

In this volume, researchers looking back at the period of the “dirty war” of the 1970s paint a complex and nuanced portrait of U.S. policy during the Ford and Carter administrations. In a paper prepared for this publication, *Carlos Osorio* of the National Security Archive describes U.S. support for the military junta and a contradictory message on human rights under the Ford administration; the clash between the Carter administration and the Argentine government over human rights in 1977; the parallel rapprochement and negotiations with “moderates” in the junta; and divisions within the U.S. Embassy in Buenos Aires over the scale of violations and over how forcefully and in what manner to promote human rights. Osorio concludes with a positive assessment of U.S. human rights policy during the period, arguing that, despite inconsistencies in the Carter approach, the work of U.S. Embassy staffers boosted the morale of human rights workers in Argentina, preserving their work if not their lives.

Carlos Sersale di Cerisano of the Argentine Foreign Ministry writes that recalling the Argentine “holocaust,” especially for a new generation of Argentines, has contributed to the consolidation of democracy by reminding citizens of the suffering of living under a military government. It is too early to tell, he says, what if any impact the release of documents will have on the changing of domestic laws (*Punto Final* and *Obediencia Debida*) that have protected members of the military from prosecution.¹ Sersale praises the “tremendous and courageous efforts” of a few U.S. diplomats at the time to save lives, and concludes that overall, the release of the documents has contributed to an improvement in bilateral relations.

University of Minnesota professor *Kathryn Sikkink* focuses on “critical junctures” of repression, arguing that repression is a choice that governments make in the context of ideology and a perception of costs and benefits. The attitude of the U.S. government is crucial in influencing both areas. She cites new material contained in the documents that sheds light on the period

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between June 1976 and January 1977, the peak of repression in Argentina as well as the period of what she calls the “green light” from U.S. policymakers. Sikkink refers to cables reflecting efforts by U.S. Ambassador to Argentina Robert Hill to impress on Argentine military leaders that certain norms could never be set aside in the fight against terrorism. These *démarches* were undermined by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who in meetings with the Argentine foreign minister (a naval admiral) encouraged the government to continue and even accelerate the war against subversion, making no mention of the methods, which included torture and disappearance.

E.A. “Tex” Harris, a political officer in the U.S. Embassy in Buenos Aires at the height of the dirty war, describes policy struggles within the U.S. government over how forcefully to incorporate human rights issues into diplomacy. National security doctrine, in which the Argentine military saw itself as protecting Argentina and Western civilization against “godless communism,” was counterposed against efforts by members of the U.S. Congress, non-governmental organizations, and church groups to make human rights a central component of U.S. foreign policy. Harris relates his own efforts to collect information from relatives of victims of repression, opening the U.S. Embassy to their visits and establishing an internal database unique to that period. He describes a “worm’s eye view” of U.S. decisionmaking concerning an Export-Import Bank loan to a U.S. company, to set up a turbine factory for a wholly-owned subsidiary of the Argentine Navy. His efforts to report on the beneficiary of the Ex-Im Bank loan were opposed by his superiors, and only through his extraordinary efforts did the information reach Washington in time to impact on the loan decision.

María José Guembe of the Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales (CELS) writes that the declassified documents provide an unparalleled registry of the methodology of the repressive system, as well as invaluable documentation for judicial investigations of human rights cases. The anonymity provided to mid-level Argentine officers who served as informants to U.S. Embassy officials resulted in extensive reporting on the organization of the state’s apparatus of terror as well as on individual acts of repression, including disappearances. She notes that the Argentine armed forces have continued to deny the existence of their own documents from the repressive period, although certain archives have surfaced, including those of the Naval Mechanics School (ESMA) and several intelligence units of provincial police.² Guembe outlines steps in the Argentine courts and the legislature to overturn the various laws

that preserve impunity, including the pardons issued by the Menem government in 1989-90. Guembe agrees that the effort to remember and document the past has contributed to the consolidation of Argentine democracy.

In a chapter adapted from his forthcoming book on Operation Condor, Columbia University School of Journalism professor *John Dinges* describes the dirty war in the Southern Cone as the “first war on terrorism.” In discussing Operation Condor, Dinges details the efforts of the security forces of six countries from 1973-1977 to operate across borders, through exchanges of intelligence and prisoners. He describes two kinds of authentic but contradictory U.S. messages about human rights in both Chile and Argentina, one condemning atrocities and the other displaying a “green light” to the abuses used to fight leftist opposition. In Argentina, Dinges portrays the Embassy as essentially ignorant of the approximately 4,000 disappearances that took place in 1976, as well as of the thousand or so killed by the military before the coup. Dinges’ own research, based on a document of an Argentine intelligence battalion chiefly responsible for the repression, places the number of those killed between 1975 and mid-1978 at some 22,000. Dinges calls U.S. human rights policy in Argentina during both the Ford and Carter periods ineffective, noting that human rights violations, including two to three thousand disappearances, continued in the first two years of the Carter administration.

Cynthia Arnson of the Woodrow Wilson Center describes the efforts in the U.S. Congress to end military aid to the Argentine junta in 1977, an initiative opposed by the Carter administration. She traces the emergence of human rights concerns in the Congress to the end of the Vietnam War as well as to specific events in Latin America, particularly the U.S. role in the overthrow of Chilean President Salvador Allende. Arnson describes a protracted effort to terminate assistance led by a handful of liberal Democrats in the House of Representatives, who built alliances with more conservative members of Congress and received the energetic backing of non-governmental organizations. She concludes that the effort to prohibit military aid to Argentina, although successful, was an aberration, occurring at a particular—and short-lived—moment of the Cold War; Congress lifted most of the restrictions at the request of the Reagan administration in 1981. Symbolically, she concludes that the restrictions provided encouragement to a small but politically significant group of Argentine actors pressing for human rights and democratic change.

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In exploring contemporary U.S.-Argentine relations, *Juan Gabriel Tokatlián* of the Universidad de San Andrés offers an overview of the broad contours of Argentine foreign policy. He refers to the major shift in Argentina's foreign policy 14 years ago, arguing that former president Carlos Menem's policy of "pragmatic acquiescence," in which the country subordinated its foreign policy to an external actor, had been costly and useless. The unrestricted alliance with the United States, manifest in Argentina's support for the first Gulf War and in Argentine support for U.S. positions in the United Nations, did not benefit Argentina; today the country is weaker, less relevant in international affairs, and more impoverished than it was a decade and a half ago. Tokatlián argues that the best foreign policy for Argentina would be a good domestic policy, which empowered institutions, developed national identity, and enhanced competence and maturity on the part of political leaders. He faults Argentine leaders for lacking the strategic vision to redesign a failed foreign policy and model of international insertion.

Mark Falcoff of the American Enterprise Institute refers to central challenges in the bilateral relationship, the first of which was the need "to restore a measure of political and moral credibility." For Argentina, distrust towards the United States has to do with the way in which the relationship was oversold during the Menem years, in which a policy of automatic alignment by Argentina with U.S. foreign policy initiatives was met with such gestures as the U.S. designation of Argentina as a non-NATO ally. In the U.S. financial press, Falcoff argues, there was a tendency to radically overstate the extent and profundity of the economic reforms enacted during the 1990s, and private banks and international financial institutions "took to believing their own propaganda" when a more skeptical approach to the economy would have been warranted. Since the onset of the current economic crisis, Argentines have become deeply disillusioned with U.S. indifference to their plight, and Falcoff faults the U.S. belief that "if Argentines simply tighten their belt everything will be all right." He also argues that Argentina's political credibility in the United States is linked to Argentines themselves finding a political leadership in which they can believe.

Argentine economist *Beatriz Nofal* of the consulting firm Eco-Axis describes multiple causes of Argentina's economic crisis, the worst in its history, emphasizing external shocks, domestic vulnerabilities, governance

problems, and mistakes in economic policy, especially adjustment policy. Nofal details the “tremendous social regression” that has left more than half of Argentines below the poverty line, but also cites signs of a precarious economic rebound. Argentine skepticism about closer integration into the world economy and cooperation with the United States has been fueled by Washington’s lack of reciprocity, she argues, at the same time that closer collaboration with the international community did not necessarily mean subordination. She says that a successful and balanced FTAA is needed, one that eliminates agricultural and agro-industrial subsidies and non-tariff barriers to trade and does not widen per capita income gaps. Nofal argues that if the United States wants more Argentine engagement in the war against terrorism, Argentina needs more cooperation in dealing with national and regional problems.

Joseph S. Tulchin of the Woodrow Wilson Center calls for a realistic foreign policy posture on the part of Argentina that is rooted in a sense of the country’s strategic objectives. He argues that Argentina cannot define itself in relation to the United States and insists that, given conditions of asymmetry, it is unrealistic to expect a balanced relationship between the two countries. He describes as a “signal success” the fact that management of the current political and economic crisis was achieved without military intervention.

Since our March 2003 seminar, Argentina has gone through an important electoral transition. Néstor Kirchner assumed the presidency in May 2003, after his chief rival in a second round, former President Carlos Menem, withdrew from the race. Winning with only 22 percent of the vote, Kirchner quickly achieved high domestic approval ratings by his commitment to end “politics as usual,” emphasize the rule of law, and re-establish the legitimacy of the political system. In his first months in office, Kirchner raised the minimum wage, tightened labor laws, cancelled government contracts with certain private sector companies, and purged institutions including the armed forces, the police, and the judiciary. He also supported efforts to establish accountability for past human rights abuses, announcing in his inaugural address that he planned to govern “without rancor but with memory.”³ He has openly supported the overturning of the 1980s amnesty laws, and repealed a decree that prevented the extradition of military officers to stand trial abroad for human rights crimes.

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Kirchner was also active on the international front. He visited Washington in July 2003, meeting briefly with President Bush, who appeared non-committal but supportive of Kirchner's efforts to sign a medium-term agreement with the IMF.⁴ At the same time, Kirchner and his foreign minister, Rafael Bielsa, have emphasized that they will privilege Argentina's relations with Mercosur. Argentina has mapped a more independent course in its foreign policy, joining other Latin American and European countries in opposing the U.S. war in Iraq, and, unlike other nations of the hemisphere, seeking improved relations with Cuba..

What these initial moves augur, both domestically and internationally, is uncertain. In the meantime, we offer these reflections on past, present, and future U.S.-Argentine relations, in the hope they contribute to more intelligent debate on the issues that have united as well as divided our two countries.

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NOTES

1. In August 2003, the Argentine Congress approved legislation to overturn the *Punto Final* (Full Stop) and *Obediencia Debida* (Due Obedience) laws passed in 1986 and 1987, respectively, that effectively ended human rights trials of military officers. Before those laws were passed, nine members of the military junta had been tried and convicted in Argentine courts of human rights crimes, including kidnapping and murder. Convicted officers as well as jailed left-wing guerrillas were pardoned by President Carlos Menem following his 1989 election.

Argentine courts at both the lower and appellate level have declared the laws passed in 1986 and 1987 unconstitutional. The Supreme Court, itself in turmoil due to accusations of corruption and political bias, had not ruled on the matter as of this writing in November 2003.

2. Files from the Directorate of Intelligence of the Buenos Aires police, disbanded in 1998, were declassified in October 2003 by the Commission on Memory of the province of Buenos Aires. In July 2003, President Néstor Kirchner ordered the state intelligence agency SIDE and other police forces to open their files on the 1994 bombing of the Jewish community center of the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA), which killed 85 people and wounded hundreds more. Kirchner also ordered SIDE agents, including a former chief, to testify at a trial of police agents accused of participating in the attack. See Fabián Debesa, "Revelan fichas de la Bonaerense con datos de desaparecidos," *Clarín*, October 14, 2003; Larry Rohter, "Argentina Reviews a Clumsy Case by Its Spies," *New York Times*, July 13, 2003, p. 9; and Guido Braslavsky, "Abren los archivos secretos de las fuerzas de seguridad por la AMIA," *Clarín*, July 22, 2003.

3. Quoted in Larry Rohter, "Letter from South America: Now the Dirtiest of Wars Won't Be Forgotten," *New York Times*, June 18, 2003, p. 4.

4. The agreement was signed in September. On details of Kirchner's Washington visit, see Mike Allen, "Argentine Leader Pledges More Reforms," *Washington Post*, July 24, 2003, p. 17. Newly-confirmed U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Roger Noriega expressed strong support for Argentina. Noting that "Argentina enjoys terrific political support from the United States and the G8 [Groups of Eight leading industrialized nations]," Noriega said that the political will in Argentina to "put its house in order" existed and that "there should be some flexibility on the part of the IMF in responding to this challenge." Quoted in Adam Thomson, "US supports Argentina on IMF talks," *Financial Times*, September 9, 2003.