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Washington reaps what it sowed in Argentina

By Joseph T. Eldridge

The Reagan administration came into office believing that the best way to improve relations with Latin America was by making strategic alliances with authoritarian governments, especially Argentina. Instead, the United States is on the verge of the worst deterioration of hemispheric relations since the 1930s.

After vacillating for weeks, Secretary of State Alexander Haig announced on April 30 that the US would back Britain in the showdown over the Falklands (Malvinas). The delay derived from the awkward dilemma of having to choose between two countries viewed as friendly and important to US interests. For the Carter administration, Argentina's grotesque human-rights record automatically excluded it from preferred ally status.

The Carter human rights policy, more energetically applied in the Western Hemisphere than elsewhere, tilted toward democratic countries. Therefore the Andean Pact countries (Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru), being for the most part constitutional governments, were assiduously cultivated. They were considered generally stable and more reliable allies. After the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, the US looked to the Andean countries to moderate the escalating crisis in Central America.

The Reagan administration, however, placed a higher priority on mending fences with the Southern Cone's military governments. The courtship with Argentina was particularly intense. In a few short months Argentina went from pariah to strategic hemispheric ally. In the past year, Argentina has been favored with goodwill visits by General Edward Charles Meyer, Vice-Admiral Charles Bagley, and Generals Vernon Walters and Gordon Sumner. The last two held special ambassadorial status. Former President Viola was among the first official guests at the White House. Last fall General Galtieri enjoyed two weeks of administration hospitality.

The Reagan administration also energetically sought to reverse legislative sanctions against Argentina for massive human rights violations. The 1977 law prohibiting military sales and credits succumbed to a powerful White House lobby blitz. Congress did prevail in insisting that the President certify that human rights had improved before military aid could be restored. This certification was under consideration when the Argentine military invaded the Falklands.

The fiercely anticommunist ruling military reveled in their newly acquired respectability, obtained at a remarkably low cost. Argentina did not have to ease up on internal security procedures or phase out active support for the Bolivian generals' coup or initiate steps for a transition to civilian rule. On the contrary, the Reagan administration encouraged Argentine adventurism in Central America, recruiting Argentina's help in exporting the US's anti-communist crusade.

Argentina's willingness to carry its own brutal counterinsurgency campaign to Central America quickly made it a key factor in US covert plans. Press accounts indicate that the CIA enlisted Argentina's help in training a paramilitary unit for use against Nicaragua, and Argentina military advisers were dispatched to Honduras.

But the Reagan administration's courtship was based on the erroneous assumption that Argentina would be a reliable ally. First, Argentina does not have a stable government. Administration officials, predisposed to place confidence in authoritarian governments, confuse order with consensus. Secondly, the military, accustomed to absolute rule, is unpredictable and often arbitrary. Frightened by a chaotic economy and rising popular protest, it became even more adventurous. Desperately seeking to shore up deteriorating support, the military capriciously invaded the Falklands.

The Reagan administration and General Galtieri both seriously miscalculated the solidarity of the new alliance. President Reagan's advisers failed to recognize the inherent irrationality and instability of military governments.

They failed to see the peril in encouraging Argentine adventurism in Central America. The Reagan administration made the generals feel that aggressiveness abroad was safe. Under the Carter administration, Argentina would have had no illusion about US support and would have been much less likely to have seized the Falklands.

The Reagan administration may preside over the most serious outbreak of popular Latin American antagonism toward the US in recent history. In the Argentine military's view, the Reagan administration is guilty not only for siding with the British but also for betrayal, a more serious offense.

Argentine and Latin American anger has been fueled by two other administration errors. First, the administration has failed to distinguish between the merits of Argentina's claim to sovereignty over the Falklands and the unacceptable use of force. The administration ought to have publicly recognized Argentina's sovereignty claim, thereby defusing the charge that the US was backing "colonialism."

Secondly, the administration's timing was terrible. By not immediately coming down hard on Argentina, the US found itself out of step with other global allies. Then, by announcing that the US would back Britain the day before the Royal Navy attacked, Secretary Haig seemed to condone aggression. Perversely, Haig's pro-Britain posture came just as the other NATO allies were beginning to moderate their support for Britain and the day after the Organization of American States voted unanimously to endorse Argentina's sovereignty claim over the Falklands. Secretary Haig's declaration was a body blow to the Latins and shook their faith in the OAS. A prominent OAS ambassador warned me of a "galloping deterioration of relations with the US."

Joseph T. Eldridge is director of the Washington Office on Latin America.