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Jack Anderson

Legacy of the Tupamaros

For a group that never counted more than 3,000 hard-core members, the Tupamaro terrorists of Uruguay left a substantial and terrible legacy, not only in their homeland but in Latin America and Western Europe as well.

The Tupamaros' impact on Uruguay was both perverse and pervasive. Their terrorist acts created a crisis, which enabled the Uruguayan military to seize control in 1973, transforming what had been Latin America's most solid democracy into another repressive military dictatorship. The "Switzerland of South America" became just another banana republic, its proud history of more than 100 years of civilian rule ignored in the reaction to the Tupamaro violence.

Even today, when Uruguay is beset with 15 percent unemployment and staggering economic troubles, the specter of the Tupamaros has cast a pall over the effort to return the government to civilian control.

How did such a tiny number of young people from the Uruguayan middle and upper classes achieve such a sinister influence over a country of 3 million? They began, like many ultimately disastrous groups throughout history, as idealists, determined to cleanse Uruguay's affluent, complacent society of corruption and indifference to the needy.

Taking their name from Tupac Amaru, an Inca prince who fought the Spaniards in the 18th century, the well-intentioned young rebels became Robin Hoods, robbing from the rich to give to the poor.

But their romantic efforts failed to catch fire, so in 1970 the impatient, frustrated Tupamaros turned vicious. That was the year they murdered Dan Mitrione, the U.S. adviser to the Uruguayan police. Others were killed or kidnapped, including the British ambassador, who was held for eight months in a cage 6 feet long and 2 feet wide.

In their two-year reign of terror, the Tupamaros committed more than 300 bombings and assaults. They became famous throughout the world, and as their notoriety spread, other youthful terrorist groups sprang up in imitation. The earliest German terrorist gang called itself the Tupamaros of West Berlin, and in this country the Weathermen claimed the Uruguayans as their inspiration.

In its operations against the Tupamaros, the Uruguayan army soon learned it was dealing with a well-organized terrorist group with modern equipment and

facilities at its command. Cuba had been training the terrorists since 1968, when the Tupamaro leader made a personal deal with Castro. It took the army several years to break the Tupamaros, after capturing their leader and imprisoning many more. The rest fled.

A secret State Department cable tells what happened next: "After the failure of the urban insurgency, several hundred Tupamaros went to Cuba. During the mid-1970s, Cuba provided some of them with training in military and terrorist tactics, weapons and intelligence. Several of these former Tupamaros subsequently assisted Cuba in running intelligence operations in Europe and Latin America."

Tupamaro volunteers fought in the Cuban-organized "Internationalist Brigade" that helped the Sandinistas overthrow Anastasio Somoza in 1979 and seize power in Nicaragua. And one secret CIA report notes that several Tupamaros were identified as participants in a Cuban-sponsored terrorist convention in Mexico City last October.

Meanwhile, the country the Tupamaros left behind languished under stern military rule. Thousands of political prisoners were interned; 900 are still in prison.

Yet during most of that period, according to a CIA analysis, the "vast majority of Uruguayans viewed economic growth and domestic tranquility as greater priorities than a return to political normalcy."

But fresh winds were blowing across the Rio de la Plata from Argentina. I sent my associate Dale Van Atta to Montevideo to find out what was going on.

One expert he talked to was U.S. Ambassador Thomas Aranda Jr. Like many U.S. and Uruguayan sources, Aranda predicted that Argentina's free elections will encourage Uruguayans to push even more strongly for a return to civilian government.

The restlessness showed itself early—in noisy demonstrations, some of them in the saucepan-banging Chilean tradition. Then in January, the first general strike in 11 years shut Uruguay down.

Nevertheless, the negotiations for general elections this November and a presidential election next March have broken down. The military appears to be digging in. And one of the generals' strongest arguing points is the legacy of fear bequeathed to their countrymen by the Tupamaros.

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