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U.S. Government Meeting Transcript and Telegram on Military Coup in Argentina, 1976

On March 24, 1976, a right-wing military coup d'état led by General Jorge Videla overthrew the government of President Isabel Perón of Argentina. Even before the coup, right-wing generals in the Argentine military had secretly joined forces with other extreme anti-leftists in Uruguay, Bolivia, Brazil, Peru, and Chile in "Operation Condor." Named after the national bird of Chile, Operation Condor was run by the Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet, who in 1973 had led a military coup against the government of Salvatore Allende, the first legally elected socialist president in South America. Condor enabled Pinochet to seek out, abduct, torture, and kill those Chilean socialists and their allies who were able to escape Chile in the aftermath of his coup and bloody repression. Generals and right-wing politicians in other "Southern Cone" countries of South America, especially in Argentina and Uruguay, participated in the alliance in order to get rid of leftists in their own countries. These countries, internally divided by huge economic disparities, had given birth to various socialist, communist, and guerilla movements, including the Tupamaros of Uruguay and the ERP (People's Revolutionary Army) in Argentina. The communist ERP launched a guerilla campaign in 1969 against a previous military dictatorship, continuing their attacks on the military and carrying out bank robberies and kidnappings of the wealthy, including foreign business executives well into the 1970s.

In the "Dirty War" of state terrorism that followed, the police and military targeted not only communists but students, pacifists,

academics, critics, and everyone on the left who they believed supported the web of terrorism. In October 1975 the coup-leader General Jorge Videla promised that "in order to guarantee the security of the state all the necessary people will die," defining "subversives" as "anyone who opposed the Argentine way of life."¹ Estimates of the dead and "disappeared" from 1975 to 1978 vary between 22,000 and 30,000.

Based on these two documents from March 1976, what seems to be the attitude of the United States toward the coup and the military government? What appeared to be the concerns and interests of the United States? Would you call the United States involved or detached? Does it appear that the United States was globalizing the Cold War or that the Argentine right wing was using the United States to accomplish its own objectives?

THINKING HISTORICALLY

The Dirty War of "disappearing" Argentines had already begun before the coup. To some degree, the coup occurred because Isabel Perón was not sufficiently compliant with military requests to ratchet up the violent response to the ERP. At the State Department Staff Meeting, what concerns does the prospect of greater violent repression raise? How thoroughly do Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and the twenty men at the meeting discuss this? How do they decide to deal with that prospect?

In the telegram from U.S. Ambassador to Argentina Robert C. Hill, the subject line reads: "Videla's Moderate Line Prevails." What does Ambassador Hill mean by that, and how do the contents of the telegram support that judgment? What, according to Hill, are the two sides that Videla was moderating? What signs do you see of Hill's support for the military coup? What words, phrases, or passages in the telegram strike you as euphemisms that downplay the military violence? What examples of ideological language can you find in this and the previous document?

Secret Staff Meeting Transcript, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, Chairman, March 26, 1976

SECRETARY KISSINGER Bill?

MR. ROGERS The chief negotiator in Panama has resigned. It looks as though for personal reasons he's going to be succeeded, in all probability, by Guerra, who's a former Foreign Minister.

¹ John Simpson and Jana Bennett, *The Disappeared and the Mothers of the Plaza* (New York: St. Martin's, 1985), 75-76.

SECRETARY KISSINGER I don't think Tack² is such a great loss, is he?

ROGERS No, sir. It wouldn't seem that way—even in Panama.

In Argentina, although the junta³ has had some pretty good success, we're trying to make whatever estimates we can about what's going to happen. We've asked both the Mission and Washington to do their own visualizations—to compare them. But I think the preliminary estimate has got to be that it's going to go downhill. This junta is testing the basic proposition that Argentina is not governable, so they're going to succeed where everybody else has failed. I think that's a distinctly odds-on choice.

I think we're going to look for a considerable effort to involve the United States—particularly in the financial field. I think we're going to see a good deal—

SECRETARY KISSINGER Yes, but that's in our interest.

ROGERS If there's a chance of it succeeding and if they're not asking us to put too much up on the table. What we're going to try to do, when and if they come up with such a plan, is what we were prepared to do about six months ago. We had worked out as intermediaries a sensible program for international assistance, using the private banks and monetary institutions.

Whether we can pull that off again, I don't know; but I think we're going to hear from them very early on in terms of financial programs.

I think also we've got to expect a fair amount of repression, probably a good deal of blood, in Argentina before too long. I think they're going to have to come down very hard not only on the terrorists but on the dissidents of trade unions and their parties.

SECRETARY KISSINGER But—

ROGERS The point I'm making is that although they have good press today, the basic line of all the interference was they had to do it because she⁴ couldn't run the country. So I think the point is that we ought not at this moment to rush out and embrace this new regime—that three–six months later will be considerably less popular with the press.

SECRETARY KISSINGER But we shouldn't do the opposite either.

ROGERS Oh, no; obviously not.

McCLOSKEY What do we say about recognition?

¹ Panamanian foreign minister Juan Antonio Tack; in 1974 he negotiated an agreement

² Secretary of State Henry Kissinger on eight principles to serve as a guide for a new treaty

³ Panama Canal to eliminate increasing conflict between Panamanian nationalists and the

⁴ United States. [Ed.]

⁵ Government of military officers who seized power in a coup. [Ed.]

⁶ President Isabel Perón of Argentina. [Ed.]

MR. ROGERS Well, we're going to recognize this morning a formal request in response to their request for recognition—as have virtually all the other countries of Latin America. But beyond that, Hill will keep his mouth shut.

SECRETARY KISSINGER Yes, but what does that mean concretely? What ever chance they have, they will need a little encouragement from us. What is he telling them?

MR. ROGERS What? Oh, nothing. He has not been talking with them yet. He has not been invited to talk with them. He's ready to go in and talk with them when and if they request a meeting. But the Generals who are now presently occupying the Ministerial positions are there very temporarily—probably for the week—until the junta can make its final decisions as to whom they're going to appoint. They will make decisions on who they will appoint within a week. We think we know who's the Foreign Minister—which is the key appointment.

SECRETARY KISSINGER Who?

MR. ROGERS Probably a fellow named Vanek, who we have worked with in the past. And if he is appointed, then I think we're in a position to work with him.

SECRETARY KISSINGER But can I see some instructions on what you're going to tell Hill if somebody should come in—

MR. ROGERS Yes.

SECRETARY KISSINGER —because I do want to encourage them. I don't want to give the sense that they're harassed by the United States.

MR. ROGERS No. What I was basically concerned about in the first instance was the public posture.

SECRETARY KISSINGER I agree with that. . . .

Telegram from U.S. Ambassador to Argentina, Robert C. Hill, to Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, March 30, 1976

1. *Summary:* It is too early to make any firm predictions concerning the final success of the experiment in govt undertaken by the Armed Forces on Mar 24. Even so, with Videla now named Pres and his new cabinet now named, it is perhaps a convenient moment to report several short-term conclusions: a) Videla is at least for the time being in a strong enough position to keep the hardliners in check and impose a moderate approach; b) *The terrorists are likely to keep a relatively low profile in the next few weeks*, especially in view of the fact that the Armed Forces have launched a massive drive against them; c) The new govt has not presented its full economic program, but the approach evidenced so far is encouragingly pragmatic and deliberate, and d) Once the govt begins

impose an austerity program, labor reaction may stiffen, but so far it has been almost nonexistent; indeed, absenteeism reportedly ceased to be a problem almost the day after the coup. The USG⁵ of course should not become overly identified with the Junta, but so long as the new government hews to a moderate line the USG should encourage it by examining sympathetically any requests for assistance. *End Summary.*

2. The *coup d'etat* which culminated during the early hours of Mar 24 can now definitely be judged as moderate in character. In their first statements the three members of the Junta indicated they had taken power only to save the country and that their takeover was not directed at any group or sector. They did not attack the memory of Gen Peron, nor did they say anything derogatory about Peronism or any other party. They have arrested some high officials such as Raul Lastiri, Julio Gonzalez and Gov Carlos Menem who are believed to be guilty of malfeasance or abuse of power and they have rounded up a good number of suspected terrorists. But it is now clear that there have been no massive arrests. No one has been put against a wall and no one has been pulled in simply because they happened to be a Peronist or because they served in the last government. Most congressmen, governors and other deposed officials have simply been told to go home. Mrs. Peron herself is in custody but clearly the Junta does not intend to make a martyr of her. If there is an investigation of her questionable activities, it will probably be a fair one, and if she is convicted, her sentence is likely to be nothing more than exile. Indeed, many in the military would like to put her on a plane to Madrid even without an investigation.

3. Several extreme left-wing parties, mostly Trotskyite and Maoist in orientation, have been banned, but the charters of other parties, including the orthodox Communist Party (PCA), remain in force. Political activity is suspended temporarily and the various parties have had to remove signs and slogans from their headquarters. Their organizations are intact, however, and several of the Embassy's sources within the parties have expressed hope that limited political activity may resume within six months or so.

4. Prior to the coup, there had been fears that hardline commanders in the field might exceed their orders and arbitrarily shoot or arrest any labor leader, Peronist or leftist they did not like. As indicated above, however, this did not happen. Videla and his moderate colleagues kept the "hawks" in line. Further, the smoothness with which the coup was carried out and the way in which it was accepted by the people did much to enhance Videla's image. Probably at least for the next several months, therefore, his position relative to that of the hardliners will be overpowering. It is most unlikely that any of them would try to move against him. If they did, they would lose. Thus, for now, Videla's moderate policies seem safe.

⁵ United States Government. [Ed.]

⁶ Those favoring more violent repression of labor and leftists. [Ed.]

5. If fending off the hawks was Videla's first concern, coming to grips with the terrorists was his second. Indeed, in order of importance the second outranks the first, but the new govt needed a firm political base in order effectively to confront the terrorists and thus its first thought had to be for institutional unity. With that now assured, at least for the time being, the Armed Forces have launched a nationwide effort against the terrorists. Many suspected terrorists have been rounded up. Widespread searches are being conducted and shifting roadblocks have resulted in the capture of several guerrillas in Cordoba and elsewhere.

6. For their part, the guerrillas are likely to continue some hit-and-run operations such as *today's assassination of a Police Commissioner*, but they will probably keep a fairly low profile for the next few weeks. Tactically, they will probably want to get the lay of the land and wait for the military to drop its guard. Strategically, they probably hope popular opinion will begin to swing against the military govt within a few weeks. That would be the time to move. They may have some recalculating to do, however, for so far the military have not behaved in the repressive way the terrorists seem to have expected. If Videla can hold to his moderate course, the guerrillas may be surprised to find several weeks from now that the govt continues to enjoy popular support.

7. Equally as pressing as the terrorist problem is that of the economy. The govt has not yet had a chance to present its plan, but the economic team is now in place and looks impressive. The contacts the Embassy has had so far with Econ Min Martinez de Hoz and some of his assistants indicate they have a firm grasp of the problems and hopefully will have a practical approach to their solution. Detailed analysis of economic program will follow ASAP.

8. As encouraging as the new govt's own performance so far has been public reaction to it. Most Argentines were glad to be rid of Mrs. Peron's pathetically incompetent govt. But they did not rush into the streets to cheer the Armed Forces or jeer the Peronists. They approve of what the Armed Forces have done, but they have some healthy reservations. They have seen military govts start off well before, only to fail further down the road. They hope this one will be different and at this point are willing to give it their support. But no one seems to expect miracles, and that is one of the most mature phenomenon about this coup.

9. Even Labor so far is quiescent. Absenteeism, for example, disappeared as a major problem on Mar 25. Many labor leaders have made their peace with the military and are willing to cooperate. For its part, the Junta has handled Labor intelligently and with prudence. Some of the more corrupt labor leaders have been arrested, but most leaders have been left alone. The CGT⁷ is intervened but most unions within it are functioning more or less normally. The crunch, however, has not yet

⁷ General Confederation of Labor; includes most unions and workers. [Ed.]

come and will not until the govt introduces its econ program and begins to impose austerity measures.

10. *US Position.* This was probably the best executed and most civilized coup in Argentine history. It was unique in other ways too. The US has not been accused of being behind it, except by *Nuestra Palabra*,⁸ the organ of the PCA. The Embassy hopes to keep it that way. Clearly, we should not become overly identified with the Junta. That would not be good for them or for us. Nonetheless, Argentina's best interests, and ours, lie in the success of the moderate govt now led by Gen Videla. He has a chance of pulling Argentina together again, stopping terrorism and getting the economy going. His govt, moreover, has promised to solve quickly our various investment problems (Exxon, Chase Manhattan, Standard Electric, etc.) and to bring about a better climate in general for foreign investment. Should Videla's govt fail, that might on the one hand open the door to the hardliners, who would return Argentina to the polarization of the past and who, being more nationalistically inclined than the moderates, would not take as favorable an attitude toward the US and US investments. On the other side, Videla's failure could also bring about conditions under which the extreme left might have an opportunity to make a bid for power, which would clearly run contrary to all our interests.

11. Thus, while we should move discreetly and keep our distance, we should also, so long as the Videla govt sticks to a moderate course, look sympathetically on any requests for assistance it may direct to us.

⁸ Argentine Communist Party periodical. [Ed.]