

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Whose Heroes?

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Dear Peter,

I have never felt as tense upon arriving in a new country as I did that September morning in the Buenos Aires airport. Having read reams of articles on the torture and repression practiced by the Argentinian government, I found my palms filled with cold sweat, my eyes searching for sun-glassed goons, and my voice with difficulty identifying myself as a correspondent to the immigration officer. Once my fears for my personal safety had been quelled by a local correspondent, I became quite excited by the prospect of interviewing various Argentinians, particularly such world-renowned human rights heroes as Nobel Peace Prize winner Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, and the so-called Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo.

As my week in the nation's capital drew to a close, I felt extremely depressed. It was not because I hadn't achieved what I had set out to; to the contrary, I was pleased with the quantity and quality of interviews I had conducted. Rather, that the human rights heroes I had so long admired, were treated as untouchables by their own people. It has been difficult to accept that reality, and even more, to understand it.

The explanation most often given is fear. Afraid that they or their children will suffer the consequences most Argentinians have not spoken out against the government, or supported those who do. That's a legitime answer in part, but only in part.

A very large percentage, if not the majority of the population supported the military coup in 1976. The economy was in shambles, with inflation soaring to over 738%. But what was even more intolerable was the reign of terror. In the early seventies, intensifying in the 1973-1976 period, left and right-wing groups carried out a widespread campaign of bombings, kidnappings and

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killings. While the principle targets of this campaign were political figures, many innocent people got caught in the cross fire. Argentinians comment that during those years, leaving and returning to one's home safely each day was an unsure proposition.

Claiming that only they could eradicate this terrorism, the military took power in 1976. It is important to note that one year prior to the coup, the then president Isabel Peron had announced an all out campaign against terrorism. However, the military forces who were in charge of its implementation, made much less than a half-hearted effort. They preferred to let things get worse to later justify their coming to power.

Their coup, as the first phase of their "dirty war" against terrorism, received wide spread public support. When the first youths were dragged from their beds, their workplaces, or off street corners at gunpoint by government forces, many neighbors and even some relatives believed it was in the best interest of their nation, for surely these were proven terrorists. But as the age of those kidnapped decreased to include young university and high school students, as the number of victims climbed into the thousands, and as the many accounts of brutal torture began to leak out, the military regime's gallant crusade against terrorism began to lose its shine.

Between 1976 and 1979, when the bulk of 15,000 or more disappearances took place, the Argentinian people remained silent, and with reason. Probably if one or ten or even one hundred had spoken up, they or their children would have also disappeared. Some believe that if thousands had taken to the streets in protest, perhaps the deeply divided military government would have ended or at least limited their dirty war, thereby saving thousands of lives. It is difficult to imagine who could have organized such an event and stayed alive long enough to witness it. The political parties suffered more than their share of deaths, and even the woman who organized such an un-ideological group as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo was "disappeared" in 1977.

But that is the past. What is more difficult to understand is the present. Even though three years have past since the last major wave of disappearances, the Argentinians have yet to organize a major public protest against their government's mass murder. Fear can no longer be used as the only explanation. The military regime has slackened government controls on the press, allowed the main labor federation to reorganize (although still claiming that it is illegal), and not kidnapped anyone in over a year. Further, people are quick to criticize the government, even in public places; however, their complaints almost exclusively center on the economic situation. Despite this more lax climate, only 600 mothers have joined the Plaza de Mayo movement. And of these, only a handful go to the Plaza each week to stand in front of the main government building, and demand a justification for the unjustifiable: the government's "disappearing" (that is, kidnapping and most probable killing) of their children.

Some say strong nationalistic pride is part of the reason the Argentinians don't protest, and reject those who do. To this day, despite all the proof, many are unwilling to admit that their government committed the atrocities it did. And they resent those who not only bring these atrocities to light, but do so in the international arena. There is a Mexican saying that dirty laundry should be washed in one's home. The Madres del Plaza de Mayo, Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, and more recently, Jacobo Timmerman, have come under violent attack in their country because they wash their nation's dirty laundry, not only publicly, but in international waters.

Bringing up Jacobo Timmerman's name in public conversation was particularly interesting given the stir he has created in the United States. This former publisher of one of Buenos Aires leading newspapers, and author of a vivid and grueling account of the torture he suffered in the hands of his country's government, has few friends in Argentina. The left dislikes him because he fired many of their own when they once attempted to take over his newspaper and because he supported the coup in 1976. The Peronistas resent him for the articles his paper published against their administration; at one point Mrs. Peron became sufficiently irate with its articles to have the paper closed down for several days. And most recently, the military forces and right wing have turned against him for his book, which portrays the government as brutal and anti-semitic. Argentinians are quick to fault Mr. Timmerman for being a money-motivated opportunist who falsely accused the government of anti-semitism in order to make a bestseller. Most agree that there are anti-semitic individuals in their society, and in their government. However, they strongly reject that the government is anti-semitic, and consider Mr. Timmerman's book an untruthful, outrageous attack on their homeland. In the harsh critiques against Timmerman and his book, few comment on his account of the torture he underwent. For some reason, it is nonchalantly accepted, a given of little significance.

The offices of Service for Peace and Justice, the human rights organization directed by Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, are located on a quiet side street. The reception room is dimly lit by one lightbulb suspended in mid air. The paint is peeling around the portraits of Pope John Paul II and the deceased archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador. I had expected this office to be bustling with clients and supporters. During my more than hour-long, Wednesday-afternoon interview with Mr. Pérez Esquivel, only two people dropped by. As recipient of the 1980 Nobel Peace Prize, he is entitled to a government paid pension for the rest of his life. The government has yet to pay him a penny of it, and probably never will. There has been no public outcry over that; few of his countrymen seem to care.

Toddlers, not wanting to be seen, often will cover their own eyes. This seems to be the game some Argentines are playing: they cover their own eyes against their government's shocking crimes, in the hope that non-Argentines will also not see them. It is ironic that they, who repeatedly make the distinction between the United States government and the U.S. people, can't make the same distinction in their own backyard. Mr. Pérez Esquivel and the mothers of the "disappeared" have not criticized their people, but the military apparatus which governs them.

Finally, Argentina is a predominantly middle class society. And as middle classes around the world, they place high value on stability, tranquility, and maintaining the status quo. Although in absolute terms, 15,000 is a considerable number of people, relative to Argentina's population of 27 million, it is not. The majority of families went unscathed by the "disappearances". It seems many of these just don't consider human rights to be a problem, at least not their problem. Their problem is the economic situation.

At present, Argentina is suffering 12% unemployment, a 200% inflation rate, with the peso having been devalued to a third its value vis-à-vis the dollar since January. Sales of automobiles have dropped by 75% in the last year, and unused capacity in industry is estimated at 50%. In a country which once prided itself in having a lower illiteracy rate than the United States, 50% of the primary school-aged children have dropped out because their parents can't afford to buy them the uniforms, books, and school utensils needed to attend. Subsequently, the government is shutting down many schools. Argentina, which once had the highest economic growth rate in the world, now has people scavenging for food through its garbage pits in the tourist city of Bariloche. The electricity has been cut off in entire towns and urban neighborhoods because the people don't have the money to pay. Alicia, a populous of 35,000, has declared bankruptcy.

It is rare to find a people so extremely pessimistic about their nation's future. Once Argentines believed that the twentieth century was to be theirs. Now, after various decades of poor economic management, they watch with despair as Mexico and Brazil fill the political and economic leadership roles they long had coveted.

The huge government bureaucracy is the cause most often given for the country's economic woes. James Nielson, editor of the capital's English daily, the Buenos Aires Herald, explained it this way:

"In 1976, the government pursued a policy of trying to transform Argentina from a sort of rather scruffy populist, quasi-socialist economy into a private enterprise economy in which foreign business would be allowed to operate

here quite openly; in which there would be no currency restrictions; in which capitalism would work its magic and wealth would sprout out on all sides. Unfortunately, the government, being dominated by the armed forces, could never quite bring itself to reduce the size of the state which is very, very large here. In fact, according to some economists, the state's participation in the economy is even larger than in communist China. I find this very hard to believe because I've always assumed that in China it was a hundred percent. But the mere fact that very serious and respected economists can actually state this indicates that the Argentine state is very, very large indeed. Its role in the Argentine economy is bigger than that of the British state in Great Britain say, and certainly in the productive area, much bigger than the Swedish state in Sweden. The idea, of course, was to hack down government spending, balance the budget, and thus reduce inflation. As the government simply expanded the state sector, despite its protestations to the contrary, and spent vast sums on it and also on buying arms, it hasn't really brought inflation down at all. In fact, our present inflation is running at a year-on-year level of about 120% and everybody expects it soon to reach 200 or 300 or even 400% again."

While the generals still hope to name one of their own to the presidency in 1985, some well-informed politicians and journalists in Argentina don't think the Argentine people will put up with the military regime and its economic policies much longer. Only yesterday, 50,000 Argentines filled the air of Buenos Aires with their cries for "peace, bread, and work". This march, as others throughout Argentina, was organized by the CGT, the country's principal labor federation. They represented the largest public demonstration mobilized since the military took power five years ago. Despite the government's prior condemnation of the march, and massive "security mobilization" (complete with helicopters, and armored cars mounted with machine guns) along the demonstrators' route, most made it to the mass at Saint Cayetano's Cathedral. Saint Cayetano is considered the protector of work, peace, and bread.

While peaceful marches of this type have little chance of bringing down a military regime bent on maintaining power, they do manifest the Argentines increasing unconformity to stay silent as their standard of living deteriorates. It is a first step. It will be important to watch the ones which follow.

Sincerely,