

# ICWA LETTERS

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## *A Far-off War Permeates Life in Buenos Aires*

# Argentines Lead the Entire World In Opposition to the War in Iraq

By Martha Farmelo

APRIL 13, 2003

**BUENOS AIRES, Argentina** – Days after the war broke out in Iraq, my four-year-old son Camilo and I lay sprawled on the floor scooting decades-old matchbox cars here and there when he suddenly wanted to play that bombs were falling on them. That night he told his father Alan that the US and Iraq were at war, that there were lots of bombs and lots of people hurt. I was sad but not surprised to learn that our efforts to shield Camilo from this war were fruitless. It didn't matter that we never ever turned on the TV or radio in his presence and bit our tongues to keep from mentioning the conflict.

"Why don't they learn to solve their problems with words?" he asked, echoing the anti-fighting discourse he hears at school and home. "Then there wouldn't be so many dead," he said.

The next morning at breakfast, he caught a glimpse of the bloodied corpse of a journalist on the front page of one of the newspapers. Another night at a pizzeria around the corner from home, he saw television images of wounded civilians with bandaged legs. He didn't stop talking about them for days.

Although Baghdad has fallen and people are already debating the prospects



Photo: Lanús University website

"They put their bodies out there for hope," says the title of this picture. The caption continues, "It was last week before a concert for peace on the campus of the University of Lanús," a state school in a southern suburb of Buenos Aires where my partner Alan is teaching a course on Economic History. "In this way neighbors, teachers and students repudiated the war in Iraq... Now they plan to send this photo to the world on the Internet."

for post-war Iraq, the war continues to permeate life in Argentina. Furthermore, Argentines are vocally and overwhelmingly opposed to the war—more than any other nation in the world. Reflecting a trend that spans Latin America, Argentines as a whole, no longer just the left, are enraged at the United States, and feel that way about the people, not just the government. Meanwhile, I feel sick and ashamed about the war, and sometimes frightened by my own anti-Yankee feelings.

Since the war officially began days ago, it has overshadowed all other news stories in all the media, including the Presidential elections that will take place here just 14 days from now. In addition to following each day's military and political developments in Iraq and around the world, Argentines know all about "code orange" and its calls to seal off a room with plastic sheeting and tape, which most people here laugh off as a thinly-veiled, Argentine-style hoax by Bush to stir up fear and support for the war. They find it hard to believe anyone would take such instructions seriously.

I have heard criticisms of sensationalist, pro-war coverage by English-language CNN and Fox TV with surprising frequency, since only the former is available here and most people watch CNN in Spanish if at all. "They report on the war as if it were a soccer game," said our friend Alejandro, who makes a living walking dogs. Trekking through the city with ten or twelve canines strapped to his wrists for several hours a day has taught him plenty about conflict and peacekeeping, at least among animals.

Most people I know watched the Oscars, and they know exactly what Michael Moore said to admonish President Bush that night. In fact, they are familiar with Moore's documentary on U.S. gun violence, *Bowling for Columbine*, which premiered in Argentina ten days ago. The war ends up dominating conversation after conversation, making socializing considerably less enjoyable for me than it used to be.

Accounts of sadness and rage, debates about women soldiers and calls for boycotts against US products have eclipsed the other topics on the 400-person Argentine feminist listserv I signed up for earlier this year. "Thanks for these messages! Thanks for making me feel and cry," emailed one woman to another who had circulated an account of shedding "hot tears" when her little boy fell off his bike, scraping his face and bleeding a bit, which conjured up for her the Iraqi children injured or orphaned by US bombs.

*I have not heard one single Argentine support this war.* On the contrary, a late-January Gallup poll in 41 countries around the world found that 83 percent of Argentines were against a US attack on Iraq, the highest level of opposition of all, followed by Uruguay, Macedonia, Bosnia Herzegovina and Spain, in that order. Only four percent of those polled in Argentina said they would support such an attack even with the approval of the United

Nations. President Eduardo Duhalde has expressed his respectful opposition to the war, though he has not condemned the US, England or Spain.

More than once, I've heard people on the street mutter "Bush, assassin" (a term normally reserved for Argentine dictators or cops who have committed murder) when someone brings up his name. About eight weeks before the war broke out, Gustavo Ressio, the eternally jovial and unshakably right-wing husband of a friend of mine asked me if he could talk to me about my President. Gustavo is unfailingly pro-US.

"You know I like the US and I favor the capitalist system," he told me. "But what the hell is going on with Bush?" His distress and disgust were undeniable. He earnestly wanted to understand what allowed Bush to believe that he had the right to attack Iraq, and why the US people would let him get away with it. I am constantly asked by friends and acquaintances to answer these questions.

Banners with slogans like "Buenos Aires for Peace" have been strung on office buildings or from balconies all over the city, both downtown and in more residential neighborhoods. My partner Alan came home one day asking, "Did you see the rainbow banner just down the street across from the park? They misspelled "peace," he said.

"No, they didn't!," I exclaimed, almost triumphantly. "*Pace! Pace! Italiano!*," I said, dipping my chin and raising my eyebrows at him. Alan and I rib each other, half in



*This rainbow-colored banner strung on an apartment building near our home calls for peace in Italian.*



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*At the most recent anti-war march just yesterday, Argentines chanted Bush, fascista, vos sos el terrorista! (Bush, fascist, you are the terrorist!)*



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Sebastian Hacer - Indymedia Argentina

jest, about which of us is more Italian, I with 50 percent Italian blood who grew up in Buffalo, New York or he with not a drop of Italian blood who grew up on the outskirts of Buenos Aires.

“I guess you *are* more Italian than I am,” he said nodding his head, as if conceding the battle.

There is now a white tent in the historic Plaza de Mayo adjacent to the Executive Offices where people from all religions are encouraged to stop by and pray for peace. Last weekend there was a huge outdoor concert for peace at the Obelisk on wide 9 de Julio Avenue, one of Buenos Aires’ most prominent landmarks. Popular artists condemned the US and sang their hearts out against the backdrop of an enduring, massive red-and-white Coca-Cola sign and perhaps the largest McDonalds in the city.

Argentines aren’t just angry, they’re scared. Last week I met with María Capurro, the young, bubbly, sharp-as-a-tack communications director at the *Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales*, one of the leading human rights organizations. María told me she is frightened by “this US imperialism. After Iraq, what’s next?” she asked. “After the Middle East, of course. Certainly Colombia is next,

and after that, from there toward the South, surely.”

María may sound crazy. However, press reports led many Argentines to believe that President Bush himself singled out the convergence of Argentina, Paraguay and Brazil near the majestic Iguazú falls as part of the Axis of Evil in his report entitled *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. Known as *la Triple Frontera* or “the Triple Border,” this area is considered a sieve for illegal immigrants, arms and drugs and is supposedly home to Islamic terrorist cells. Around the time this report became news, the media reported that Osama bin Laden had been at the Triple Border—just hundreds of miles from Buenos Aires—some-time in the year 2000.

Furthermore, many Argentines have interpreted this Bush report as announcing that the US feels free to attack anyone at any time by asserting that they pose a threat to US interests. If Bush could attack Iraq with so little justification and internal or international support, the argument goes, what will stop him?

(In reality, this document mentions Colombia and makes allusions to terrorist cells in South America and other parts of the world, but does not mention either Argentina or the Triple Border specifically. Other official documents such as the State Department’s *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2000* mention the “triborder” region of South America as a “focal point for Islamic extremism in Latin America.”)

Argentines have experienced devastating (presumably Islamic) terrorism first-hand. In 1992, 29 people were killed and at least 250 injured when the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires was destroyed by a car bomb. Then in 1994, a car bomb destroyed the AMIA (*Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina*), Buenos Aires’ Jewish Community Center, leaving 86 dead and 300 injured. Neither case has been clarified, though the Iranian government was implicated in the latter.

Argentina has the largest Jewish community in the world after Israel and New York. Argentines are adamantly opposed to any participation whatsoever in the war in Iraq and express concern about violent reprisals from both sides, either Bush or Islamic fundamentalists. Last month a poll showed that 87 percent of Argentines believe that the risk of new attacks would increase if Argentina became involved in the conflict.

Argentine opposition to the war reflects a trend in all of Latin America. In an on-line column for the Inter-Hemispheric Resource Center entitled “The Anti-Yanqui Revival in Latin America,” the Center’s Mexico associate Laura Carlsen wrote:

Ten thousand Argentines burned American

flags and threw rocks at the U.S. Embassy. In El Salvador, antiwar protesters shredded flags and shouted anti-American slogans at a luxury hotel where Central American free trade negotiations were being held. In major cities, McDonald's concessions have been sprayed with "Don't finance the war!" and in Sao Paulo the Brazilian Minister of Culture, singer Gilberto Gil, took to the stage to repudiate the U.S.-led invasion. The U.S. Embassy in Mexico stands permanently barricaded with twenty feet of steel crossbars, which daily protests have bedecked with bloodied shirts, paper roses, peace poetry, and angry epithets. George W. Bush has been called everything from the polite "assassin" to the unprintable.

I went to an earlier anti-war march to the US embassy that, fortunately, did not include rock-throwing. It was about ten days before the war actually broke out. I was feeling despondent about the impending attacks, and went to the march to feel not-so-sad and alone, to be uplifted, really.

Obviously, experiencing the war in Argentina is a far cry from experiencing it in my former home of Washington, DC. I imagine that in Washington, no matter how depressing the war, I would have been excited to see lots of people out in protest. As we approached the US embassy here in Buenos Aires, far from uplifted, I had to contain my tears. I didn't anticipate feeling so jarred by seeing US flags spattered with red paint or signs ordering "Yankees Go Home!" Given that I can pass for Argentine, especially when walking in silence, I didn't expect to feel such discomfort as a US citizen, such shame and distress.

On the up-side, since the war broke out absolutely no one asks me why I am living here instead of in the US, a radical change after a year-and-a-half of continually confronting this question. But that's about it on the up-side.

One day I found myself stuck in a 30-minute taxi ride across town with a driver who was verbose and furious at the US—not just the government, but the people. Reflecting what I am hearing more and more in Argentina, and citing a trend in Latin America, Laura Carlsen wrote, "While many organizations fix the blame squarely on the Bush administration, expressions aimed at the U.S. as a whole have become more common."

This taxi driver didn't realize I was from the US, and I was neither anxious for him to find out nor willing to lie by claiming I was from somewhere like Canada. So I kept my mouth shut, even when he shifted topics and asked me whom I planned to vote for in the upcoming presidential elections. "No sé," (I don't know) was all I was willing to mutter, which made him furious all over again. "You don't want to tell me. Why don't you want to tell me?" he insisted. I was exhausted from the tension by the time that trip was finally over.

Later that afternoon, I was sitting in the Ressio's living room telling Gustavo's wife, Diana, the story while Camilo and her son Agustín were off playing. Coincidentally, they were running around with guns and swords.



Photo: Gustavo Ressio

Camilo (left) and his friend Agustín Ressio, after a birthday party.

"I feel guilty," I told her. "The truth is that at times, I feel complicit in this war by virtue of my silence. Right now I feel ashamed of the United States."

I should have lowered my voice. Camilo came running over. Echoing my words, he said in a grave tone in Spanish, "Me, too, Mommy. I feel ashamed to be from that country." □

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