

Latin America's "Dirty War": How Much Did the US Know About the Kidnapping, Torture, and Murder of Over 20,000 People in Argentina?

Open Letter to President Obama: Now, Obama has the chance to apologize for American Complicity in the Dirty War.

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Dear Mr. President,

After a historic visit to Cuba, later this month on March 24, you plan to be in Buenos Aires, Argentina, on the 40th anniversary of a vicious military coup that resulted in the secret kidnapping, torture, and murder of more than 20,000 people, including leftist guerrillas, nonviolent dissidents, and even many uninvolved citizens caught in the web of terror.

In [an October 1987 article in *The Nation*](#), I broke the story about how the murderous generals and their neo-Nazi minions received a "green light" for their clandestine repression from Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.

Although buttressed by other sources, the *Nation* story was largely based on a memorandum of conversation I received from Patricia Derian, the wonderfully feisty activist and Mississippi civil-rights hero.

Appointed by President Jimmy Carter as the first assistant secretary of state for human rights and humanitarian affairs, Patt played a key role in bringing to life Carter's desperately needed post-Vietnam and post-Watergate Human Rights Revolution.

The "memcom" Derian gave me was based on her 1977 conversation in the Buenos Aires Embassy with then-Ambassador Robert Hill, a conservative five-time GOP ambassadorial appointee. It was Hill who had bravely waged a behind-the-scenes struggle against Kissinger's secret stamp of approval for those who had earlier staged the coup, refusing to back off when Kissinger's aides warned Hill he might be fired even as he sought to save lives in Argentina.

"It sickened me," Patt told me in the home she shared in Alexandria, Virginia, with fellow Mississippi human-rights crusader Hodding Carter III, her husband and Jimmy Carter's State Department spokesman, "that with an imperial wave of his hand, an American could sentence people to death on the basis of a cheap whim. As time went on, I saw Kissinger's footprints in a lot of countries. It was the repression of a democratic ideal."

Of course, the public record is now littered with even more Kissinger detritus from around the world.



A drawing from the original publication of "Kissinger and The 'Dirty War'" (Rico Lins)

Not only was there the overthrow of a left-wing, democratically elected government in Chile by Kissinger ally Augusto Pinochet, plunging one of the hemisphere's oldest democracies into terror; the Chilean's only mistake, his Argentine "dirty war" counterparts said privately, was that the trans-Andes self-proclaimed "Captain General" had *too publicly* murdered his opposition.

Kissinger's legacy includes selling out our Kurdish allies to the shah of Iran; giving Indonesia's generals a "green light" to invade East Timor, where they murdered tens of thousands of people, and telling President Richard Nixon that helping Soviet Jews emigrate to escape oppression by a totalitarian government was "not an objective of American foreign policy." The list goes on...

Even though President Carter and Pat Derian had put Argentina's regime at the top of their list of human-rights violators, trying to stanch the bloodshed, Kissinger returned to Argentina in 1978 as the generals' "guest of honor" at World Cup soccer games, some of them not far from some of the hundreds of death camps holding *los desaparecidos* (the missing).

Argentine President Jorge Rafael Videla meeting with Henry Kissinger and President Jimmy Carter in 1977

In 1982, Argentina's military learned, at the hands of the British during the Falklands/Malvinas war, that while it was easy to torture and kill Catholic nuns, it could not defeat a conventional armed force. In 1983, a real Argentine hero, Raúl Alfonsín, was elected president, offering the world a post-Nuremberg model as he put the dirty "warriors" on trial in civilian court.

While seeking to tame the military through the rule of law, Alfonsín found that he could not do the same when dealing with the gross indebtedness to US banks (including one—Chase Manhattan—that was run by Kissinger's patrons, the Rockefellers) that the police-state regime had bequeathed to him and others it had once ruled with an iron fist. In 1989, as Kissinger watched from the sidelines, Alfonsín was forced out of office early.

However, the former secretary returned to Buenos Aires that same year, this time as the "guest of honor" at the inauguration of Carlos Menem, already known to be a highly corrupt Peronist and someone who promptly went on to pardon the same military dirty "warriors"

hailed by Kissinger before they were jailed by Alfonsín. (Menem himself later was indicted for covering up the identity of the real murderers in the 1994 AMIA Jewish community center bombing that resulted in the deaths of 85 innocent people.)

Mr. President, last year Bill Clinton apologized to Mexico for a backfired US “war” on drugs that has fueled spiraling violence there. Despite US Ambassador Noah Mamet now saying that your trip to Buenos Aires is *not* related to the coup anniversary, human-rights groups in Argentina have called on you to apologize for US support for the dirty “war.”

The inspiring and (hopefully) ultimately definitive work of Carter, Derian, Hill, and others in fighting the tragic and still fresh Kissinger legacy suggests that, in asking for forgiveness for the American role, even in this bitter election year, you would send a great and meaningful bipartisan message of US support for human rights.

Very respectfully,

Martin Edwin Andersen

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