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HIS 352: US Foreign Policy Since 1917

Term Paper

## US-Argentine Relations During the Dirty War: Comparing Two Reports

Perhaps the world's most egregious human rights violations since the Holocaust present themselves to us in the form of the Argentine Dirty War. During this time between 1976 and 1983 Argentina was ruled by a military government which called itself the National Reorganization Process and killed tens of thousands of the country's citizens, mainly communists, journalists, trade unionists, and other left-wing political dissidents, in order to stabilize the regime's control over Argentina. The events of this time period mark an important turning point in the history of United States foreign policy. Jimmy Carter was elected as United States President in 1977 and upon taking office the following year, his presidency marked the first time that human rights were instituted as a nonnegotiable demand of American foreign policy. The Argentine situation was at the forefront of Carter's presidential challenges and his success in ending human rights violations in the South American country is debated. Roberta Cohen and William Michael Schmidli each report on U.S.-Argentine Relations during President Jimmy Carter's tenure in "The Carter Administration and the Southern Cone," a 1982 publication in the academic journal *Human Rights Quarterly*, and "Institutionalizing Human Rights in U.S. Foreign Policy: U.S.-Argentine Relations, 1976-1980," a 2011 *Diplomatic History* publication, respectively. Overall, Cohen and Schmidli provide similar accounts of U.S. foreign policy towards Argentina leading up to and during Jimmy Carter's presidency. They disagree on what could have been done to increase the success of President Carter's human rights-based foreign policy towards Argentina, yet agree that although Carter achieved mixed results in Argentina, his actions were overall a good thing.

Schmidli begins his article by defining United States Foreign Policy before President Carter as ignorant of human rights abuses in Argentina. According to Schmidli, during the 1950s, 60s, and 70s the United States found itself so caught up in the Cold War, it valued fighting communism over protecting human rights, and to such an extent that it actually helped pave the way for Argentina's right wing military's takeover of the country's government in 1976 and its disregard for human rights (356). For Schmidli, it was Robert McClintock, the U.S. Ambassador to Argentina between 1962 and 1964, who

helped shape America's faulty foreign policy towards Argentina through the next decade-and-a-half. Schmidli quotes McClintock in 1962 as deeming the Argentine military, which had just overthrown President Arturo Frondizi, "an asset and not a liability" to the United States given their "fervent anti-communism" (356). The United States military then went on to establish an extensive relationship with Argentina and by 1978, according to Schmidli, had trained 2,766 Argentine soldiers in anti-communist counterinsurgency techniques, as well as provided the South American state with over \$250 million in military aid (356). The United States and Argentine militaries had become so friendly that on the day of the March 24, 1976 coup, U.S. Ambassador to Argentina Robert C. Hill told Washington that it was "the most civilized coup in Argentine history" (Schmidli 359). "Argentina's best interests, like ours," said Hill, "lie in the success of its moderate government" (Schmidli 359). Ironically, according to Schmidli, each of the Argentine service chiefs who presided over the coup and went on to endorse the kidnapping and execution of tens of thousands of Argentine citizens between 1976 and 1983 were trained at U.S. military institutions (358).

For Schmidli, Jimmy Carter's election in 1977 was clearly the turning point in relations between the United States and Argentina, but he points to a growing consciousness for human rights in Argentina within the U.S. government in the few years prior to Carter's election as helping to pave the way for the installation of Carter's revolutionary foreign policy. According to Schmidli, Minnesota State Representative, Democrat Donald Fraser was largely responsible for ushering human rights into the American foreign policy consciousness during the pre-Carter years. In 1973, Fraser worked with the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) to develop a committee that heard over 100 cases on human rights violations in Argentina (Schmidli 364). A year later, at Fraser's urging, the United States Congress created a State Department Bureau of Human Rights, assigned a human rights officer to each bureau of the State Department, and amended the first of a series of acts linking U.S. foreign aid to human rights conditionality (Schmidli 364). Still, incorporating human rights into the American foreign policy agenda was far from complete. According to Schmidli, Henry Kissinger, the American Secretary of State from 1973 to 1977, was still convinced that human rights were irrelevant to United States foreign policy (353). Yet, the rift that developed over this topic between Kissinger and his assistant Robert Ingersoll during this

time, as Schmidli writes, is representative of the atmosphere in Washington preceding Jimmy Carter's 1977 election.

Roberta Cohen's description of U.S. Foreign Policy towards Argentina before the Carter Administration is less historical and less detailed, but it, too, points to a conflict within the United States government over the way it should address the Argentine situation. According to Cohen, President Gerald Ford, Carter's predecessor, was completely unprepared to deal with the human rights crisis in Argentina. Cohen writes that in late 1976, months after the Argentine military's coup, Ford's administration "sent a report to Congress defending continued military aid to Argentina" as in the United States' best interest and as having "little or no bearing on the counter-terrorist capability of the armed forces [of Argentina's military government]" (225). Furthermore, Cohen writes, the State Department under President Ford refused to publicize reports on human rights in Argentina (223-224). Congress finally compelled the State Department to publish the reports in 1976, but according to Cohen, in doing so the State Department minimized the Argentine government's crimes in order to strengthen the push for continued military and economic aid to Argentina (223-224).

As both Schmidli and Cohen indicate, Jimmy Carter entered the Oval Office in January of 1978 amidst a Washington environment prepped for sweeping changes to the American foreign policy agenda and the institution of human rights protection as a nonnegotiable condition for American relations with Argentina. Schmidli and Cohen provide identical reports of President Carter's foreign policy ideology at this time as based on two main platforms. Firstly, both authors note President Carter's belief in public condemnation of human rights violations around the world. Schmidli writes, "Entering the Oval Office at the height of state-sanctioned violence in Argentina, Carter aimed to dramatically shift U.S. policy from subtle support for the military's "dirty war" to public condemnation of human rights violations" (365). Similarly, Cohen states in her article, "The human rights policy of the Carter administration was based on several assumptions, [the first of which was that] the United States had a legal right and responsibility, both under domestic and international law, to speak out against human rights violations" (216). As evidence of Carter's belief in public activism against human rights violations, Cohen references the proclamation of Human Rights Day by President Carter on December 10, 1979, as well as Carter's first Secretary of State

Cyrus Vance's public announcement of reductions in U.S. military assistance to Argentina on human rights grounds in 1977 (220). Secondly, both authors allude to Carter's revolutionary idea that, as Cohen describes, "human rights goals could be effectively pursued along with other foreign policy objectives" (216). The existing, traditional, realist foreign policy logic that prevailed during this time suggested that American demands of global human rights would jeopardize the United States' relations with various world regimes and thus American goals for security and economic gains in the international realm as well. But as both Cohen and Schmidli indicate, Carter vehemently rejected this notion. He believed that human rights transcended ideological background. Schmidli writes, "Carter recognized that the human rights issue could garner support from both liberals seeking to curtail U.S. ties to right-wing dictators and Cold Warriors hoping to utilize human rights as a means to censure the Communist world for its treatment of subject peoples" (365). Furthermore, Schmidli and Cohen both note that Carter's concern for a foreign policy protective of human rights represented his idea of a transition away from the United States' traditional, realist security achieved via military protection and political alliances to a new, world security guaranteed by American principles of democracy. Schmidli quotes Carter as writing in his memoirs: "To me [Carter], the demonstration of American idealism was a practical and realistic approach to foreign affairs, and moral principles were the best foundation for the exertion of American power and influence" (365).

Once in office, President Carter acted immediately to address Argentina's human rights violations and his first move in doing so was to endorse a foreign policy towards Argentina that was rooted in quiet diplomacy, which according to Cohen, meant vigorously raising human rights issues via diplomatic channels (217). Carter chose Patricia Derian to spearhead this movement and named her his Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights. In her approach towards Argentina, Derian was, as Cohen and Schmidli both describe, ironically anything but quiet. Cohen states that for Derian, "diplomacy meant a frank, factual, serious, and unofficial discussion of human rights abuses in the context of U.S. law and policy" (217). She was "uncompromising," as Schmidli describes, and her refusal to accept anything less than the unconditional observance of human rights by the Argentine government towards its citizens epitomized President Carter's conviction in a nonnegotiable foreign policy for human rights (366). Schmidli and Cohen also report United States Foreign Service Officer F.A. Tex Harris as important to Carter's diplomatic core during these years. According to Schmidli, disdain within the American Embassy

itself in Buenos Aires for Carter's human rights push in Argentina for fear of deterioration in diplomatic relations with the South American state was common. Harris, however, worked to promote Carter's policy and made the Embassy a place where Argentine citizens were able to confide in the American government and report the disappearance of fellow citizens (Schmidli 369).

Overall, Schmidli and Cohen report both positive and negative results of Carter's diplomatic core and its efforts to stop human rights violations in Argentina during the Dirty War era. In her fight for human rights in Argentina, Patricia Derian not only clearly communicated Carter's intolerance of human rights abuse to the Argentine government, but she also facilitated a partnership between the American government and worldwide nongovernmental human rights organizations like never seen before (Schmidli 368). Derian worked with Amnesty International, the Washington Office on Latin America, the Argentine Human Rights Commission, and family members of the Argentine government's victims, among others, to draw global attention to human rights violations in Argentina (Schmidli 367). Together, these groups, the International Red Cross, and the American State Department compiled the first set of human rights reports regarding Argentina to contain the quality and accuracy that previous State Department reports under the Gerald Ford Administration did not (Cohen 230). Derian's work was revolutionary. It was the first time that the traditional boundaries between state and non-state actors in the international realm had been crossed (Schmidli 368). Yet in many ways, both Schmidli and Cohen indicate that often Derian's work was unsuccessful. Derian failed to garner much support amongst government co-workers who were not always on board with President Carter's human rights push, and at times her work with the Bureau of Human Rights and Human Affairs was nothing more than an afterthought within the American State Department (Schmidli 371). Furthermore, Tex Harris was quoted as admitting that his accomplishments to deliver human rights to Argentina during the Dirty War era were limited. "The number of people who will actually come to the American Embassy to report a disappearance must be fairly small," he said. (Schmidli 369). As a result, the United States occasionally received criticism from its NGO partners on the grounds that it did not do enough to address the human rights concerns in Argentina (Cohen 231). Overall, Carter's quiet diplomacy refused to take a definitive stand against Argentina and generated nothing more than occasional, inconsistent support from domestic and international partners.

In addition to political pressure, President Carter also applied a variety of military and economic sanctions on Argentina in response to their military regime's human rights violations. Within a month of taking office, Carter slashed U.S. military aid to Argentina from \$48 million to \$15 million (Schmidli 368). By August 1978, the State Department had withheld \$1.25 billion in nonmilitary exports to Argentina (Schmidli 368). Come October, Carter had eliminated all forms of military aid to Argentina (Cohen 226). The United States also stopped its security consultations with Argentina and the sale of police equipments to its government (Cohen 226).

Both Schmidli and Cohen describe President Carter's economic and military sanctions against Argentina as having varied, yet mainly positive short-term results. Both authors argue that Carter's success in this area is proven by a significant reduction in state-sponsored kidnappings in Argentina between 1977 and 1979, the first two years of Carter's presidency. For both Schmidli and Cohen, Carter's sanctions forced the Argentine government to allow an examination of the state of its nation by the Inter-American Human Rights Commission (IAHRC) in exchange for its Export-Import Bank approval by the United States. In the months leading up to the visit, disappearances in Argentina dropped from the 1978 average of 50 per month and prison conditions were improved with hundreds of prisoners receiving formal charges" (Schmidli 370). In ways, both authors acknowledge that the Carter Administration's sanctions on Argentina had shortcomings. For example, although Carter refused to support as many as 28 multilateral development bank (MDB) loans to Argentina, 25 of these loans went through anyway because other nations voted to approve them (Schmidli 372). Still, however, for both Schmidli and Cohen, Carter's ability to curb human rights violations in Argentina to such a large extent held tremendous significance.

Lastly, although Schmidli and Cohen tend to agree that Carter's foreign policy generally had mixed results on human rights observance in Argentina, the two authors offer different reasons as to why Carter's policy wasn't more successful. For Schmidli, Carter failed to consistently dictate the American private business sector's interaction with Argentina. Schmidli references a variety of situations that indicate Carter's problematic inconsistency towards Argentina. "In the first nine months of 1978 alone," Schmidli states, "the Department of State used discretionary authority to approve almost \$120 million in military sales to Argentina, including helicopters and military transport aircraft. An August 1978 decision to reject

212 pending license requests for the sale of more than \$100 million in military equipment to the military junta on human rights grounds thus most likely confused, rather than convinced, the Argentines of the significance of human rights in U.S. foreign policy,” he says (Schmidli 373). Furthermore, Schmidli notes the irony when “In October 1979, for example, the State Department delayed a \$1.6 million sale of a Swearingen Merlin 4A air ambulance to the Argentine military despite having previously sold a similar model to the Argentine Ministry of Public Health” (Schmidli 373). Cohen, however, makes little mention of these inconsistencies and instead understates Carter’s foreign policy in Argentina to have only achieved limited success due to an eventual realization of fundamental differences over ideological, political, economic, and strategic goals between the United States and Argentine governments (242).

Eventually, American-Argentine relations hit a wall. In 1980, Argentina supplied the United States’ Soviet rivals with over 8 million metric tons of grain, and then assisted Bolivia in overthrowing its democratically elected government, both actions of which irritated the United States and led to a complete collapse of their relations with Argentina. Although Schmidli admits that Argentina’s near-cessation of state-sponsored killings may have resulted from President Carter’s foreign policy objectives equally as it may have a feeling on behalf of the Argentine government’s mere feeling that had finished eliminating its threats (370), both Schmidli and Cohen ultimately concede that President Carter’s human rights mission in Argentina was a success. For Cohen, Carter succeeded because he made a stand against human rights violations, distanced himself and the United States of America from a tainted history, garnered support for the United States amongst Latin America, and finally, grew human rights globally (237-238). For Schmidli, Carter’s actions towards Argentina are chiefly important because they mark a revolutionary era in the history of the global human rights process (375).