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By WJ/NARA Date 3/2/12



DEPARTMENT OF STATE  
BRIEFING MEMORANDUM

S/S

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November 19, 1977

TO: The Secretary

THROUGH: S/P - Anthony Lake *AK*

FROM: S/P - Richard Feinberg *RF*

President Videla: An Alternative View

A common view has been that President Videla would gradually but effectively move to improve the human rights situation in Argentina, and that he also represented the best hope for Argentine ratification of the Treaty of Tlatelolco. If these views appeared probable when General Videla assumed the Presidency in March, 1976, a year and a half later, they are increasingly difficult to support. It is widely agreed that the GOA is failing to improve its human rights performance, and Videla is unlikely to counter his advisers who are opposed to ratifying Tlatelolco.

Videla probably has good instincts on human rights, but several fundamental factors are preventing him from taking effective action:

--He adheres to the "clandestine war" doctrine, which argues that subversion must be countered with illegal measures. He also accepts that this illegal war be waged in a decentralized manner, with local captains and commanders acting largely on their own. This makes it impossible for the top generals, including the junta, to effectively control the security forces--but does provide the junta members with plausible deniability.

--Videla fails to make a sharp distinction between terrorism and dissent. The loose application of the term "subversive" to the government's enemies has encouraged the security forces to strike not just at

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terrorists but at a wide range of civilian opinion. Certainly less than half of the prisoners and disappeared persons (estimated by human rights groups at 15,000) were active terrorists; some estimates place the figure at under 15%.

--Videla is closely tied to his minister of economics, Martinez de Hoz, whose austere economic policies have hit the middle and working classes very hard. These policies, which have successfully improved Argentina's external accounts, have failed to bring the rate of inflation under 100%. As the government now moves to attack inflation through stringent monetary measures, economic discontent will mount, as a recent wave of strikes foretells. Mounting popular discontent threatens to provoke further official repression. However well intended Videla may be, he will be hard put to fail to take the necessary political measures required by his economic policies.

--Videla's own personality and governing style is to seek a cautious concensus, in order to attain the central objective of maintaining unity of the armed forces. Therefore, even though the moderates in the military are numerically superior and could probably win in a showdown with the hardliners, they are less aggressive in putting their views forward. Videla prefers to accede sufficiently to right-wing pressures rather than risk a rift in the military. In the most recent promotion cycle, Videla apparently failed to make a serious effort to retire certain key hardliners.

These very basic elements help explain why Videla's performance on guaranteeing the security of his citizenry has been--and is likely to continue to be--disappointing.

The presence of Videla and other moderates has probably inhibited the hardliners from attempting to mount an all-out war on "intellectual and economic subversion," i.e., dissenters of all stripes, "speculators,"

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tax evaders, etc. Nevertheless, the numbers of dead, disappeared, tortured and jailed are so high as to have directly touched a large percentage of Argentine families.

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