# US documents implicate Kissinger in Argentine atrocities

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Secret archives released by the US State Department directly implicate former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and other top American officials in backing the brutal military regime of mass murder, "disappearances" and torture that ruled Argentina for more than seven years, beginning in March 1976.

The 4,677 documents declassified late last month spell out a relationship of close collaboration and support offered by the highest levels of official Washington to a military dictatorship responsible for the deaths of at least 30,000 Argentines, most of them workers and students.

The sheer volume of these documents, consisting largely of telegrams, memos and cables that passed between the US Embassy in Buenos Aires and the State Department in Washington, make it clear that the three US administrations that dealt with the junta—those of Ford, Carter and Reagan—were kept fully apprised of the atrocities it carried out. It was well informed largely thanks to US officials' intimate relations with those who directed the death squads and torture centers.

What emerges most clearly from the paper trail left by the State Department is that the US government was well aware that in the name of a "war on terrorism" the Argentine regime was carrying out a bloodbath. Clearly, Washington saw these actions as a necessary defense of both US interests and those of the native ruling elite.

The documents were released as a result of a pledge that Argentine human rights groups, including the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, extracted from then US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright during her visit to the country in 2000. They do not include the equally large and undoubtedly far more incriminating archives that are held by the US Central Intelligence Agency and the Pentagon. Those documents, which would include cables sent by US military and intelligence officers most intimately involved in the bloody work of the dictatorship, remain classified.

The diplomatic language of the State Department partially masks the extent of the US role in Argentina. The real character of US involvement emerges at times in the form of friction between career diplomats in Buenos Aires attempting to preach human rights to the military dictators and those in the key power positions in Washington, who were urging the military to continue the repression.

Among the most telling documents was an October 1976 cable sent by US Ambassador Richard Hill to the State Department concerning the "euphoric" reaction of Argentina's Foreign Minister, Admiral César Guzzetti, following a visit to Washington where he held talks with Kissinger, who was then secretary of state, Vice President Nelson Rockefeller, and other officials.

Hill recounted separate conversations in which both Kissinger and Rockefeller declared that they "understood" the repressive methods being employed by the junta and asked only that the dictatorship "get the terrorist problem under control as quickly as possible."

Other officials gave friendly advice, warning that the military should avoid repression against the Catholic Church and rein in a substantial neo-Nazi faction in its ranks that engaged in blatant anti-Semitic attacks and hung swastikas and other fascist symbols in prisons and torture chambers.

"Guzzetti went to the US fully expecting to hear some strong, firm, direct warnings on his government's human rights practices." However, the ambassador wrote, "Rather than that, he has returned in a state of jubilation, convinced that there is no real problem with the [US government] over this issue."

The State Department's top official on Latin America at the time, Harry Schlaudeman, later described the cable as a "bitter criticism" of Kissinger's role.

On the eve of Guzzetti's visit, Ambassador Hill had sent another message to the State Department saying that he had stressed with the Argentine admiral that "murdering priests and dumping 47 bodies in the street in one day could not be seen in context of defeating the terrorists quickly; on the contrary, such acts were probably counterproductive."

The conversations in Washington echoed the message delivered by Kissinger at a meeting of the Organization of American States in Santiago, Chile four months earlier. At the time, several hundred workers, intellectuals, students and others whom the dictatorship perceived as "subversives" were "disappearing" weekly, picked up by military "task forces" and sent to clandestine concentration camps where they were tortured and murdered. It was Guzzetti who then raised the human rights issue with Kissinger. According to a previously released cable, Kissinger responded by asking how much longer the reign of terror would continue. When Guzzetti promised that the "terrorist problem" would be eliminated within six months, the secretary of state expressed approval.

The declassified files demonstrate that when Kissinger and other top US officials gave the green light to the Argentine junta they were well aware of both the military's methods and its aims.

Many of the documents include sickening descriptions of the torture employed by the Argentine military against its captives. A 1979 embassy memo cites a report listing "cigarette burns ... sexual abuse, rape ... removing teeth, fingernails and eyes ... burning with boiling water, oil and acid, and even castration" as techniques used by Washington's ally.

Also forwarded to Washington by the embassy was a 1977 statement smuggled out of a women's prison detailing the fiendish sadism of the regime. It describes a process involving "days or months submitted to the torture of the electric "picana" [prod], suffocation by immersion, violation by the torturers or by mechanical means, the introduction of rats and spiders into our vaginas, bitten by dogs, watching our relatives or our companions die by torture, losing the children in our wombs."

Other reports describe pregnant women beaten with rifle butts until they miscarried, mothers forced to watch their children tortured and babies seized at birth from their mothers, who were then executed. This is what Kissinger and Co. sanctioned, as long as the process was completed quickly.

US officials also wrote memos making it clear that under the cover of a battle against "subversion," the main aim of the junta was to break the

back of the Argentine working class. One such document drafted for Kissinger by his aide Shlaudeman in August 1976 compared the "national developmental" aims of the military regime with the ideology of Nazism:

"National developmentalism has obvious and bothersome parallels to National Socialism. Opponents of the military regimes call them fascistic. It is an effective pejorative, the more so because it can be said to be technically accurate ... to recover economically, they must break the power of traditional structures, and especially of the labor movement..."

And, while US officials warned the junta against torturing nuns and engaging in overt acts of anti-Semitic terror, it had no qualms about the repression unleashed against the working class. Within a month of the Shlaudeman memo, the military brutally intervened to suppress a strike wave by auto workers, including a strike at the Ford Plant at General Pacheco, near Buenos Aires, which later became one of the military torture centers. Despite having decreed long prison sentences for strikers and strike leaders, the authorities made little use of the legal system. Instead, the junta used a terror campaign of kidnapping, torture and summary executions to suppress working class resistance.

A March 1978 report from the Buenos Aires embassy estimated the number of disappeared at between 12,000 and 17,000. According to the embassy's estimate, the largest share of those abducted and killed consisted of rank-and-file workers and union activists picked up for strike activities. The document put the number between 3,750 and 5,000 workers. In many cases, workers' family members were kidnapped as well. The second largest category of disappeared listed in the document consisted of some 3,000 family members.

The memo drafted by Shlaudeman also detailed the creation of "Operation Condor," an organized collaboration between the secret police of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Uruguay, Paraguay and Bolivia in capturing and executing political opponents across national borders. Each of these military regimes had overthrown constitutionally elected governments with the active collaboration of the CIA and US State Department. Under Condor, opponents of the military repression were kidnapped and "disappeared" in combined transnational operations, which included the use of death squads to assassinate opponents anywhere in the world.

The most infamous of these operations was carried out in the streets of Washington DC, with the car bomb assassination of former Chilean Foreign Minister Orlando Letelier and US aide Ronni Moffit in September 1976.

The documents indicate that the Carter administration (1977-1980) expressed some disquiet within over the junta's policies, publicly emphasizing the issue of "human rights." As two documents from 1978 make clear, however, the central concern was that the indiscriminate repression could provoke a backlash, destabilizing Argentina.

A report dated March 1, 1978 acknowledges that naked bodies of missing victims, decapitated and with their hands cut off, had washed up on Rio de la Plata beaches. A memo sent two weeks later contains warnings from the Buenos Aires ambassador that the repression could radicalize sections of Argentine society around the demand that a list of the disappeared be produced. However, it recommends that the US continue supporting the dictatorship based on the spurious contention that its human rights record was improving.

As other documents make clear, the decline in the number of disappearances merely reflected the thoroughness of the repression during the first two years of the dictatorship. A February 1979 review of the events of the previous year indicates that the number of kidnappings in 1978 had diminished because of "the scarcity of targets after two years of wide-scale repression."

In the summer of 1977, the US Senate passed legislation prohibiting military aid to Argentina if by 1979 the regime had not improved its human rights record. One of the documents released—a letter to Secretary of State Cyrus Vance from Senator Edward Kennedy—suggests that the Carter administration was skirting the law by rushing to transfer military equipment to the junta before the legal deadline

A July 1977 memo from the Buenos Aires Embassy to Assistant Secretary of State Terrence Todmann on the eve of his visit to the Argentine junta spells out the attitude of the Carter administration. It advised Todmann to tell the dictators that the US was "encouraged by Argentine official statements that the war against terrorism is well along toward winning."

It added, however, that he should tell the junta that "what distresses many of Argentina's friends are the dramatic disappearances," citing the case of the abduction of a former ambassador. It expressed no such concern for the thousands of disappeared workers and leftists. Finally, it recommended praise for the junta's economic policy, declaring "our appreciation of the stabilization taking place.... We are encouraged by improvement in the climate for foreign investments."

With the coming to power of the Reagan administration in 1981, new and closer relations were forged with the Argentine junta, which was recruited to provide training and assistance to the CIA-backed "contra" mercenaries in their attack on Nicaragua and to join in other counterrevolutionary operations in El Salvador and elsewhere in Central America. A State Department cable dated March 24, 1981 reports on the initial negotiations that led to these joint operations. While the US embassy continued filing reports on disappearances and human rights violations, Washington ignored them.

Closer US relations did little for the junta's standing in Argentina, however. Growing opposition erupted into massive labor demonstrations by the end of March 1982, including pitched battles in the streets of Buenos Aires. Embassy cables reflect growing concern about the regime's stability.

In April 1982, in an attempt to divert opposition and rally nationalist sentiment behind the military regime, then-junta leader Gen. Leopoldo Galtieri launched an ill-prepared invasion of the Malvinas Islands, a British colonial possession. The junta believed that in recognition of its services in Central America Washington would pressure London to give up the islands. Instead, the Reagan administration backed Britain, helping it carry out a massacre of virtually defenseless conscripts abandoned by the junta on the freezing south Atlantic islands. The humiliating defeat signaled the dictatorship's downfall.

Included among the documents are reports from US intelligence officers that will likely figure as key evidence in a planned trial of Galtieri for his role in the abduction and execution of Argentine exiles captured in Brazil in 1979-1980. The former general is currently under house arrest.

Though many of the most incriminating documents are at least 25 years old, their repeated justifications of the crimes of military assassins and torturers—not only in Argentina but throughout Latin America—in the name of a "war on terrorism" sound all too contemporary.

This is not merely historical coincidence. Kissinger remains a highly influential figure in foreign policy circles. Moreover, those directing the combination of unrestrained US militarism abroad and attacks on democratic rights at home in the current "war on terrorism" had a direct hand in US support for the hideous crimes of the Argentine junta in the 1970s.

At the time of the Argentine coup of 1976, Vice President Richard Cheney was President Gerald Ford's White House Chief of Staff, having served earlier in the Nixon administration and on the transition team that arranged the transfer of power after the Watergate crisis. The man he succeeded in that post was Donald Rumsfeld, who occupied the same position he does today—defense secretary—and oversaw the coordination of military aid to the junta in Argentina and to other Latin American regimes that were using their armies to brutalize their own people.

Together with Kissinger, Cheney and Rumsfeld were part of the core team that plotted US foreign policy during that period.

Kissinger is today sought by courts in Argentina, Chile, Spain, France and several other countries to answer questions about his role in plotting military coups that toppled Latin American governments and in aiding military regimes that carried out massive and criminal repression. He cannot travel abroad without first receiving guarantees that he will not be extradited.

There are ample grounds to place not only the former secretary of state on trial for crimes against humanity, but those who are principal policymakers in the current administration as well.

As they serve as the main spokesmen for aggression against Iraq in the name of a “war on terrorism,” both Cheney and Rumsfeld have questions to answer about their role in crimes carried out a quarter of a century ago under the same slogan. In a decade of unbridled state terrorism that began with the Chilean coup of 1973, they together with other current and former US officials provided indispensable backing to regimes that murdered tens of thousands and tortured and imprisoned hundreds of thousands more.