

Kissinger and Argentina: a case study in US support for state terror

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Only days before the US government and media launched their propaganda campaign over the capture of Saddam Hussein, the US State Department was obliged to release a set of 27-year-old, previously classified documents. These documents provide a revealing glimpse into the real attitude of successive US governments toward dictatorships and terror.

The documents concern a closed-door meeting in October, 1976 between then-US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and the foreign minister of the Argentine military dictatorship, Admiral Cesar Augusto Guzzetti. The documents were brought to light December 4 by the National Security Archive, a non-governmental research institute that specializes in obtaining secret US government documents under the Freedom of Information Act and making them available to the public.

The principal document is a “memorandum of conversation”—referred to in State Department parlance as a “memcon”—that recorded the hitherto secret discussions held between Kissinger and Guzzetti at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York City, where the US secretary of state was participating in a United Nations debate on the Middle East.

Guzzetti gave Kissinger a progress report on the “dirty war” that the Argentine military regime was carrying out against the country’s workers, students and intellectuals:

“Our struggle has had very good results during the last four months,” he said. “The terrorist organizations have been dismantled. If this direction continues, by the end of the year the danger will have been set aside.”

In point of fact, the savage repression unleashed by the dictatorship was only then reaching its apogee. The mass killings, “disappearances” and torture would continue unabated for several more years, claiming the lives of some 30,000 Argentines.

The US government was well aware of both the horrors being perpetrated upon the Argentine people and the real nature of “terrorism” in that country. An internal State Department report assessing the first six months of the Argentine dictatorship was issued just a week before the Kissinger-Guzzetti meeting. It included the following:

“The most spectacular aspect of the counterterrorist drive has been the murderous exploits of the extra-legal, right-wing goon squads. Operating with impunity and usually posing as security officials, the rightwingers are responsible for abducting and/or murdering hundreds of ‘leftist security risks’, including political exiles from neighboring countries, foreign nationals, politicians, students, journalists and priests. A few actual terrorists probably have fallen prey to rightist vengeance, but the great majority of the victims have not been

guerrillas... There is no doubt that most, if not all, of the right-wing terrorists are police or military personnel who act with the knowledge and/or direction of high-level security and administration officials.”

Other reports that were passed on to Kissinger included testimony of American citizens rounded up by the junta on political charges and subjected to hideous torture. One such document cites the case of Gwenda Loken Lopez, an American citizen who was dragged off a bus by security forces in April 1976 after leaving leaflets calling for the release of political prisoners on a park bench. Once back in the US, she recounted her treatment at the hands of her captors from the SIDE, the junta’s secret police:

“I was blindfolded, my hands were tied and I was put up against the wall. An electric device touched my hands. Next I was on the floor...I was being hit...My clothes were being ripped off. Then I think I was on a table held down by four or five guys. They started using the picaná [an electric prod]. Then they tied me down and threw water on me... They questioned me but it was more just ‘Give it to her. There. There. There’. In [the] genital area... They said they’d fix me so I couldn’t have children.”

She testified that another girl held in the same facility was hung upside down, naked and shocked repeatedly with the electric prod. The torturers burned her body with cigarettes and pulled out her pubic hairs. The girl was not a member of a political organization, but happened to be found in a house that the police raided.

Loken Lopez’s case was unusual only from two standpoints: she was a US citizen and she survived. During this same period, the junta was rounding up thousands and torturing them in clandestine detention centers before drugging them and dropping them into the sea from military aircraft.

Kissinger gave an explicit “green light” for the military regime to continue its reign of terror. The State Department memcon records him telling the Argentine admiral:

“Look, our basic attitude is that we would like you to succeed. I have an old-fashioned view that friends ought to be supported. What is not understood in the United States is that you have a civil war. We read about human rights problems but not the context. The quicker you succeed the better... The human rights problem is a growing one. Your Ambassador can apprise you. We want a stable situation. We won’t cause you unnecessary difficulties. If you can finish before Congress gets back, the better. Whatever freedoms you could restore would help.”

As Kissinger then made clear, one of the key concerns of the administration was that Congress would enact sanctions against Argentina for the dictatorship’s crimes against humanity, thereby closing the door on extending fresh US financial credits to the regime.

He urged that the junta move ahead quickly with a request for loans from the US Export-Import Bank, assuring the Argentine officer that, “We would like your economic program to succeed and will do our best to help you.”

The loans indeed flowed, despite limited sanctions imposed by the Carter administration and then rescinded under Ronald Reagan. The end result was a six-fold increase in Argentine foreign debt during the seven years of dictatorship and the bankrupting of the country.

Only a day before the meeting at the Waldorf, Guzzetti had received the same message from Under Secretary of State Charles Robinson in Washington. A memo recording that conversation has Robinson stating the following:

“Argentina is now facing a kind of subversive civil war. During their initial period the situation may seem to call for measures that are not acceptable in the long term... it is possible to understand the requirement to be tough at first but it is important to move toward a more moderate posture which we would hope would be permanent...The problem is that the United States is an idealistic and moral country and its citizens have great difficulty in comprehending the kinds of problems faced by Argentina today.”

Robinson then gave what amounted to an explicit statement of support for Argentina’s right-wing death squads. The memo continues:

“Robinson remarked that in 1850, when the state of California was struggling to become established, the official forces of law and order were inadequate. Consequently, the people organized vigilante groups, but the US has forgotten this bit of history and forgets that comparable conditions exist elsewhere today.”

Robinson’s attitude toward the death squads echoed that of Guzzetti himself, who put it somewhat more chillingly in a public statement just two months before his trip to the US. “My conception of subversion refers to terrorist organizations of the left,” said the Argentine foreign minister. “The subversion and terrorism of the right is not the same thing. When the social body of the country is contaminated by a disease which devours its innards, it forms antibodies. These antibodies cannot be considered in the same way as the microbes.”

Another State Department official present for the meeting with Robinson offered the helpful suggestion that in the case of priests and nuns caught up in the dictatorship’s repression, “[I]t is essential that they not simply ‘disappear,’” but rather be arrested and tried.”

The implicit message was that the thousands of disappearances of militant workers, students and others were perfectly acceptable.

Some apologists for Washington’s policies will no doubt dismiss this irrefutable evidence of US sponsorship of mass murder and state terror by one of the world’s most brutal dictatorships as ancient history—the long forgotten actions of a bygone administration.

Such an alibi won’t wash, however, given the remarkable continuity in personnel between 1976 and the current administration. Kissinger, it should be recalled, was George W. Bush’s first choice to head the independent panel investigating the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. He remains a senior adviser within the US ruling establishment. He was also the political mentor to Vice President Richard Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. Both of these leading figures in the current Bush administration served—at different times—as White House chief of staff during the period when the US government was promoting the slaughter in Argentina, Chile and elsewhere in Latin America.

Bush’s father was the director of the CIA at the time of the Kissinger-Guzzetti meetings and presumably had even more intimate knowledge of the Argentine military’s killing machine.

Aside from the intrinsic significance of a text proving that Kissinger and the US government explicitly supported the murder of tens of thousands of Argentine civilians, the documents unearthed by the National Security Archive shed light on another historical controversy—one that threatens to turn the capture of Saddam Hussein into a serious crisis for the Bush administration.

In late 1983 and early 1984, Donald Rumsfeld flew twice to Baghdad, meeting with Saddam Hussein and his foreign minister, Tariq Aziz, in order to seek closer ties. This was the period when Iraq was using poison gas in its war against Iran, provoking international protests. In March 1984, Washington publicly condemned the use of chemical weapons, while maintaining its strategic support for the Saddam Hussein regime and blaming Iran for the conflict.

When Rumsfeld returned to Baghdad that month, he was warned in State Department briefing notes that “bilateral relations were sharply set back by our... condemnation of Iraq for CW use.” He was urged nonetheless to pursue US financial interests by pushing a contract for Westinghouse and trying to convince the Iraqi regime to accept US loans—from the Export-Import Bank—to build a new oil pipeline.

Detailed notes of Rumsfeld’s first meetings with Saddam Hussein in December 1983 have been released, indicating that no mention was made of Iraqi chemical weapons attacks. As yet, the type of “memo of conversation” that was released on the Kissinger-Guzzetti meeting has yet to surface in regard to Rumsfeld’s second round of talks with the Iraqi leadership, after Washington’s formal condemnation of Iraqi gas warfare.

It is undoubtedly the case, however, that Rumsfeld in Iraq employed a similar modus operandi to that of Kissinger in relation to the Argentine dictatorship. That is, he told the Iraqi regime that US condemnations were strictly for public consumption and that Baghdad could count on Washington’s support.

Both in Argentina and in Iraq, Washington’s feigned concerns about human rights, dictatorship and terror masked strategic interests and mercenary ends. In both countries, US policy has produced tragedy for masses of working people.

As discussions continue over a possible trial of Saddam Hussein for crimes against humanity, it is apparent that there is more than enough evidence to place alongside him in the dock prominent former and current US officials, including Henry Kissinger, Donald Rumsfeld, Richard Cheney and both the senior George Bush and his son, the current president.



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