

4-1-2008

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### Recommended Citation

Krupski, Brittany (2008) "Turning Blind Eyes and Profits: The Foreign Role in Argentina's Dirty War," *Reason and Respect*: Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 12.  
Available at: <http://docs.rwu.edu/rr/vol4/iss1/12>

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## **Turning Blind Eyes and Profits: The Foreign Role in Argentina's Dirty War**

### **Brittany Krupski, Communication '07**

As capitalism has advanced, territorial imperialism has become obsolete. In order to take possession of a country and its resources, it has become necessary to control its economy rather than to occupy it. In this way, an advanced capitalist economy can use an underdeveloped nation as a market for its exports, pumping foreign capital into a country with no method of regulating it. At the same time, corporations can take advantage of cheap labor and raw materials, maximizing profits, which are then drained out of the country. This type of economic relationship benefits the foreign investors, not the local workers, preventing internal economic or social development of the exploited nation. When the United States was still developing, it protected its internal industry by shutting of its economy. Now, it takes advantage of fledgling democracies by pressing them to do exactly the opposite. The result of economic imperialism in such nations is poverty, unemployment, and decreased social welfare. Democracy cannot flourish where social ills are not addressed. Under this model of exploitation and dependency, rebellion is inevitable as is its repression by a conservative elite.

In his influential book *The Clash of Civilizations*, Samuel P. Huntington argues that the future of global conflict will be cultural rather than ideological or economic. According to Huntington, after the Cold War the economic or political statuses of nations were no longer relevant sources of conflict. What became most important was cultural identity, and all future conflict would take place at the borders between opposing cultures, which would be forced to interact with increasing frequency as the world globalizes. It is true that we have witnessed escalating hostility between cultures, particularly that of nonwestern nations and the United States. I would argue, however, that this conflict is the result of economic imperialism, which other nations view as an infiltration of western culture along with a compulsion to consume its products. Coupled with a long history of economic exploitation that has left many developing nations stranded on the periphery, the increasing drive of developed capitalist nations to expand outward can only lead to conflict.

When the people of a nation are cared for by the state and enjoy basic human rights, education, employment, and social welfare, they are more inclined to live peaceably. A nation that surrenders its resources and capital into a foreign power loses the ability to provide these basic needs to its people. Economic liberalism and relationships with the capitalist powers and institutions such as the IMF require that nations use their capital to increase foreign trade and military power, taking money from social programs at the same time that such changes cause dramatic decreases in the quality of life of the middle and lower classes. The results can be devastating for a developing nation and its people, resulting in profound social distress. These results can be seen clearly in the case of Argentina during the past five decades, serving as a critical example of the severe consequences of economic manipulation, the primary cause of conflict in the world today.

As the twentieth century commenced, Argentina was poised to become the great world power of the southern hemisphere. Experiencing an economic surge while expanding both industrially and demographically, there seemed to be no limit to the budding nation's potential. The world economic crisis and a series of military dictatorships would put an end to Argentina's growth, however, thrusting the country into the margins where it would flounder under the influence of foreign economies and multinationals who made easy alliances with the conservative and authoritarian Argentine governments. After a brief reprieve for the working class under the leadership of Juan Domingo Peron, the military's return to power in 1955 and the subsequent reopening of the economy left the popular classes unprotected in a volatile economy controlled by foreign interest. During this period, social resistance groups gradually began to develop and strengthen, climaxing with the activation of urban guerrilla warfare among groups such as the Peronist Montoneros in 1970 and terminating with a period of brutal institutionalized suppression. These years of government repression, one of the most violent periods in our world's history, were not only tolerated, but allegedly supported by such foreign capitalists as Ford Motors and Mercedes Benz. These companies, among others, are accused of setting up detention centers, punishing union leaders, and profiting off the military government while seeking to retain their open door into Argentina's economy. Thus Argentina became during this time another casualty of the costly struggle of the world economy, a struggle that most countries in Latin America knew well.

As the world moved towards modernity it became painfully apparent that Latin America, although an area containing vast wealth and resources, was steeped in poverty. In response to this troublesome contradiction, a socialist movement gradually began to build as Marxist ideology filtered into Latin America. Merged with strong sentiments of nationalism and anti-U.S. imperialism, the Latin American socialist movement stood in direct opposition to the conservative elite and military, who allied themselves with multinationals. Dialogue on a Latin America united by revolution began to crescendo, but by the late 1960s the socialists began to grow restless. The revolution they dreamed of had not occurred during the past decades and the popular classes were largely excluded from the political arena. In 1968, however, violent guerrilla warfare led by Fidel Castro and the Argentine, Che Guevarra, overthrew a U.S. backed authoritarian government in Cuba, leaving Argentina and the rest of the continent looking north. (1)

In Argentina during the 1960s, as in many places in the world, a strong youth counterculture was developing for the first time. The vision of a socialist state that would repair the damage done to the country under capitalism was appealing to the young politically active intellectuals. After witnessing the success of the rural guerrilla campaign in Cuba, some groups of activists began to devise ways to appropriate these tactics in an urban environment. The primary goal of such groups was to destabilize the conservative pro-American military government through acts of terrorism. Groups such as the Montoneros, a leftist Peronist guerrilla organization, gained popular appeal by combining nationalistic Peronist speech with socialist objectives. Unlike traditional Marxists, the Montoneros' fundamental goal was to combat imperialism rather than class struggle. Their principal enemy was the American-allied military regime. Developing a martial chain of command and operating clandestinely, the group began to capture

resources from the state and expose weaknesses in the military government. The use of guerrilla warfare, most importantly the element of surprise, allowed the Monteneros to take hold of entire towns causing embarrassment for the military regime both domestically and internationally.

The Monteneros were careful to protect their image and retain popularity among the Argentine people by using violence prudently and attacking only major symbols of the elite and foreign businesses. Thus, at first, the government was unable to react with excessive violence during the early years of the movement even as the group bombed foreign office buildings, kidnapped executives and military leaders, and destroyed foreign capital investment. The destruction of government and foreign owned property and the creation of a confused and disorganized environment were the main objectives of such groups. Left in a state of social disarray and without political participation, violence, in their view, became the only means to achieve better circumstances.

The return of Peron to the country and to power in 1972 was a great victory for the Monteneros, who saw him as their leader. Their increasing enemies among the military and foreign nations began to become dangerous, however, and when Peron returned he was frightened by the movement that bore his name and opposed to the turn towards socialism. He publicly condemned the radical Peronist groups who had helped secure his return and began to steer his followers back towards the right. He died in 1974, leaving the economy in turmoil. Increasing social unrest, economic woe, and guerrilla warfare led to a military coup in 1976 and one of the most brutally repressive regimes in history. Argentina's so-called Dirty War would put a bloody end to the rebellion and to the entire socialist movement.

Under the military junta installed by General Jorge Rafael Videla, approximately 30,000 Argentines, most of them young students and union members, were arrested, tortured, and killed by the government. Members of leftist organizations and anyone who could be associated with them quickly became one of the "disappeared," men and women who simply vanished under an institutionalized system of counter-revolutionary repression. Within the first year of the regime nearly all the Monteneros had fled or been killed by the government. Using the ideology of national security and claiming such brutal practices were the only method of combating guerrilla warfare, the Argentine military government gained the approval of anti-Communist U.S. foreign policy. (2) Communism is the ultimate enemy of economic imperialism, and an authoritarian regime, even a brutal one, was always preferable to a leftist movement.

Military rule finally came to an end with democratic elections in 1983 after the regime lost all credibility in a costly war with Great Britain over the Falkland Islands. By then the socialist movement had been effectively quashed, and Argentina began a long process of healing. Military trials brought some of those responsible to justice, but thousands of families still did not know what became of their children, their bodies most likely dumped into the Atlantic Ocean. Foreign companies such as Ford Motors and Mercedes Benz, who had been targets of the Monteneros, were later accused of conspiring with the government to detain and torture employees involved in the union. Most recently, U.S.

documents were declassified, revealing that then Secretary of State Henry Kissinger promised U.S. support to the military regime as long as it could tone down human rights abuses in time to appease Congress. He told the Argentina Foreign Minister in 1976, “If there are things that have to be done, you should do them quickly. But you should get back quickly to normal procedures,” and also, “We have followed events in Argentina closely. We wish the new government well. We wish it will succeed. We will do what we can to help it succeed” (Osorio). The authoritarian regime made the spread of pro-Western ideology and the opening of Argentina’s markets to foreign investors top priorities, and so the U.S. saw little reason to interfere despite the unspeakable terrors of the regime’s war on political dissidents.

It is clear that in the modern world, the nature of conflict has changed. In the international competition for dominance, the moves have become clandestine and deceptive. False motives often cloud foreign relations, but in the end all motive is economic. Advanced capitalism thrives on the unequal distribution of wealth; it cannot exist without it. Unfortunately, this leaves large groups of people without adequate social conditions and basic human rights. Where leaders look after their own interests, functional democracy cannot occur. Without free speech, education, and an active press, there cannot be a politically informed society who can adequately choose their own representation. It is under these conditions that groups such as the Monteneros choose violence. When faced with social unrest and an inability to participate in the political sphere, conflict and rebellion blossom. When economics preside over politics, all interaction is divisive and will always be composed of varying layers of two groups: the oppressor and the oppressed. Rather than fighting economic systems then, we should be fighting for human rights. We should fight to become more informed citizens, understanding that if repression can be supported abroad, it can be supported domestically too.

*(1) President Fulgencio Batista seized power in a military coup after it was clear he would not be elected in 1952. Despite this, he enjoyed a healthy trade relationship and formal recognition by the United States government. The pro-Western President lost U.S. support only after increased conflict with Castro’s guerrilla rebels forced Batista’s brutal tactics to become increasingly public.*

*(2) U.S. foreign policy after the Cuban Revolution supported the adoption of the Doctrine of National Security in Latin American countries to soften the impact of the revolution and prevent the spread of communism. Under authoritarian rule, Argentina engaged itself in the development of capitalism and the war against communism initiated by the U.S.*

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