

April 20, 1982

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MEMORANDUM TO: WILLIAM P. CLARK

THRU: Bud MacFarlane

FROM: Jim Rentschler

SUBJECT: The Guns of April? - Where we now stand with Argentina, the UK, and Ourselves

The suspension of our peace shuttle and the likely imminence of armed conflict between the UK and Argentina require a very hard look at our next course. En route home from the dispiriting frustrations of Buenos Aires, I offer the following personal thoughts:

-- We promised both parties our best shot at assisting them to find a peaceful settlement; we gave them that shot -- for the time being, at least, there is nothing more to give.

-- Implicit and explicit in our promise was the determination to practice even-handedness so long as the process continued; that stage has now ended.

Tilting toward either of the parties at this moment will undoubtedly damage our relations with the non-tiltee; yet tilting toward neither -- i.e., attempting to prolong an appearance of "even-handedness" or even worse, passivity -- could put larger US strategic interests at risk.

-- The greatest of all such risks may lie in the psychology of leadership: at what point does the US no longer appear "constructively concerned" but instead is perceived by the British and our own public as irresolute, ungrateful, and evasive?

-- The bilateral question for us thus boils down, in both policy terms and public perceptions, to pro-UK or pro-Argentina; the larger strategic question boils down to Pan-America vs NATO.

There will be arguments that the choices set out above are, in reality, neither so stark nor simplistic, and that a US policy course which is both prudent and proper will aim to preserve the best of both worlds.

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BY LOJ NARA, DATE 1/28/08

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I believe such a course will prove illusory. It is a circle that cannot be squared; both sides of the conflict have too much invested in emotional, geopolitical, and historical capital to allow us a safe passage between them. More important, the moves we make -- or fail to make -- with respect to one or the other disputant will have a long-term ripple effect throughout our national security environment.

We need, therefore, to decide -- on an extremely urgent basis -- in which set of relationships (Hemispheric or Atlantic) we are prepared to sustain the most immediate (but perhaps less costly) casualties, recognizing that we cannot escape some significant damage in either case, and could well incur far worse.

This is properly the subject of an early NSC which would carefully weigh a detailed set of options and the consequences likely to flow from each. Meanwhile, in a spirit of total prejudice and partiality, I advance these views:

-- It is essential to back Britain, and for reasons which transcend the already compelling ties of history, language, and formal alliance.

-- Our strategic imperatives in the East-West context and the stakes we have in asserting the primacy of our Western leadership require it.

-- Enforcement and credibility of the UN system -- particularly our strong backing for UNSC Resolution 502 -- justify it.

-- Moreover, our support for the UK must be seen as convincingly generous and resolute (this means something far beyond rhetoric in both the military supply and economic sanctions areas).

-- Failure to back our most important and forthcoming ally at this critical juncture -- to reenact, in effect, a 1980s version of Suez or Skybolt -- will have a profoundly adverse effect on an already shaky alliance and at a time when we can least afford such turbulence (we must understand that an Anglo-Argentine war will be bad for NATO and our own East-West interests, but that this unhappy state of affairs will be infinitely worse should we alienate Britain into the bargain).

To the positive factors which dictate a pro-British tilt, I would add a number of negative observations based on our direct and highly unpleasant experience with the Argentines over the past few days (in connection with which I invite the views of Roger Fontaine, who is a far better informed student of the gaucho psyche than I):

-- The talks in Buenos Aires demonstrated, more than anything else, the emptiness of our bilateral "Relationship" with the Argies. (Ambassador Shlaudeman voiced this same view, heartily seconded by everyone of us who had to deal with them);

-- Even if we achieved a responsible agreement with the Argentines on a politically workable text, there is no assurance that the present junta -- quite possibly an ephemeral expression of leadership -- could or would deliver;

-- None of us ever had the certainty that the Argentine side was negotiating in good faith; indeed, the evidence indicated that we were being strung along (a risk we recognized and were willing to take in the larger interests of averting bloodshed);

-- We were deliberately treated to a series of petty but cumulatively significant, not to say contemptuous, derogatives from simple courtesy (manipulated crowd boos, squalid "holding" conditions for delegation members in the Presidential Palace, excessive rudeness on the part of Security and administrative personnel) which called into further question the seriousness and good faith of Argentine negotiating tactics:

-- On the larger question of what the South Atlantic crisis will do to the inner-American "system" I favor a fatalistic stance, believing as I do that those who are minded to back us would likely do so in any event, while traditional anti-gringo sentiment would line up a number of states against us no matter what role we played in the peace process (again, however, I would defer to Roger Fontaine).

The Argentines with whom we dealt were not, in sum, nice people; in this sense Mrs. Thatcher and her colleagues may from the start <sup>have</sup> read Argentine intentions and operating style more accurately than we. That fact simply reinforces my view that the time of even-handedness, indispensable during a period when we were actively engaged in a peace-shuttling effort, may now be past. We must not lose sight of the assertions with which the President addressed his very first message to Mrs. Thatcher in this crisis: "I told Galtieri that initiating military action against the Falkland Islands would seriously compromise relations between the United States and Argentina" and "while we have a policy of neutrality on the sovereignty issue, we would not be neutral on the issue of Argentine use of force."

Just so. Secretary Haig has undertaken a gallant and gruelling marathon effort to make the Argentines see reason, an effort which I for one strongly supported. But the Argentines have not yet seen reason, and frankly I don't think they ever will -- they may, indeed, be incapable of reasonable compromise in the sense that we understand that concept.

Assuming that a miracle rabbit or two will not pop out of our hat (Pym visit to the U.S., etc.), all of this argues for the earliest possible expression of support for the Brits in ways that are politically unambiguous for them. Unless such practical expression is soon forthcoming -- and absent the kind of Argentine give which now seems unlikely -- I can't imagine that the President would have a comfortable stay in Windsor Castle come early June.

cc: Roger Fontaine  
Dennis Blair