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THE DOMINO EFFECT OF IMPROPER DECLASSIFICATION

A RETIRED FOREIGN SERVICE OFFICER CONFRONTS FALSE ALLEGATIONS THAT HE WAS A CENTRAL FIGURE IN U.S. ASSISTANCE TO OPERATION CONDOR WHILE SERVING IN LATIN AMERICA DURING THE 1970s.

BY JAMES J. BLYSTONE

Years before I joined the Foreign Service, standing watch as a Marine guard in Buenos Aires in the early 1960s showed me the career path I wished to follow and the part of the world I wanted to concentrate on. In the past year, however, my Latin American assignments have come back to haunt me with a vengeance.

Two events in rapid succession shocked me out of a blissful retirement. First, in April 2005, I received an e-mail from the State Department Legal Adviser's office forwarding a summons from the Argentine Justice Ministry. The document called me to make a sworn statement answering seven questions having to do with the penetration of left-wing guerrilla organizations by Argentine security forces in the 1970s. The order, originated by an Argentine judge in September 2002, had been transmitted to the U.S. Justice

James J. Blystone retired from the Foreign Service in 1994 after 28 years of service as a security and administrative officer in posts including Santiago, Buenos Aires, Rome, Cairo and Riyadh, where he served as administrative counselor and acting DCM. His Washington assignments included a tour as deputy executive director for the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs. Since retiring from the Service, he has been held various positions both overseas and in Washington as a WAE annuitant.

Department and then was kicked around for nearly three years between Justice and State before being passed to me — without any guidance or annotation as to how (or whether) I should respond to the summons. I replied that I did not wish to answer the questions, and the department assured me it would pass my reply back to the Argentine government.

Several months later, in August 2005, I became aware of the publication in the United States of a book, *Predatory States: Operation Condor and Covert War in Latin America*, by Professor J. Patrice McSherry of Long Island University. The thesis of this book is that the U.S. government secretly condoned and assisted the implementation of Operation Condor, a covert Latin American military network created during the Cold War to facilitate the seizure and murder of political opponents across state borders. McSherry identifies me as a linchpin in the alleged U.S. liaison with this shadowy multinational entity.

As best as I can tell, my name first came to the attention of both the Argentine judge and McSherry as a result of a 2002 decision by the State Department to declassify and release under the Freedom of Information Act thousands of documents concerning exchanges between Embassy Buenos Aires and the department during the 1970s. These communications dealt with the conduct of Argentine security services in combating two left-wing guerrilla organizations, the ERP and the Montoneros, during the period commonly known as “the dirty war.” They included reports I

had submitted from 1978 to 1980 in my capacity as the regional security officer based in Buenos Aires. Inexplicably, these papers were released without redacting (blacking out) the names of the drafting officers.

When the documents were first released, the *Washington Post* excerpted and published some of them in September 2002. Alarmed, I called the office of Under Secretary for Management Grant Green and spoke with a special assistant to protest the release of declassified documents that contained my name. I asked the department to consider what practical steps it should take to ensure there would be no ramifications against officers who had faithfully drafted classified reports. But I received no reply.

As of this date, I have not responded to the Argentine inquiry. The only practical effect, I suppose, is that I should not plan on taking a vacation there any time soon! But now the appearance of the book has me concerned as to what other “domino effects” I should expect from the department’s decision to release official reports identifying me as the drafter. Already my name has been sullied as a direct consequence of the release, and I feel abandoned by a department that cavalierly passes me an inquiry from the judiciary of a foreign country concerning my faithful and official service as a U.S. Foreign Service officer, then leaves me high and dry.

A Bill of Particulars

Prof. McSherry’s main charges against me can be summarized as follows:

- A Chilean named Juan Munoz Alarcon, a defector from the secret police agency known as DINA, in testimony given in 1977 to a church vicariate in Santiago shortly before being murdered, reportedly identified me as “very important” to Operation

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Condor in Chile.

- A source in Argentine Army intelligence allegedly informed me in advance that several Argentines were about to be abducted in Lima in June 1980 and then transported to Argentina for interrogation and eventual liquidation. Among them was a Mother of the Plaza de Mayo named Noemi Gianetti de Molfino who was in Lima working with a Peruvian human rights group. Mrs. de Molfino had previously given testimony to a United Nations body concerning the disappearance of her son and daughter-in-law. A month later, Mrs. de Molfino’s body was found in Madrid.

- In this same conversation, I allegedly briefed my source on the political situation in Bolivia prior to the 1979 coup overthrowing the government, clandestinely planned and carried by out by undercover Argentine agents as an Operation Condor action in cooperation with a notorious Bolivian drug kingpin. From this McSherry concludes that I was involved in the coup plot.

- Furthermore, this source also allegedly briefed me on his impending trip to Central America on behalf of Operation Condor. McSherry

asserts that my source may have been an army officer named Col. Jorge Osvaldo Ribeiro Rawson, a high-ranking Argentine military intelligence officer, who she says was involved in the coup in Bolivia and later commanded Argentine covert forces in Central America.

- In another conversation, I supposedly “jokingly asked” my source for details concerning two Montoneros who had disappeared on a trip from Mexico to Rio, whereupon the source proceeded to tell me how they had been seized at the Rio airport and taken to a secret army jail in Campo de Mayo in Argentina.

McSherry claims that these conversations add further evidence to the testimony provided earlier by the Chilean defector that I was a central figure in a presumed U.S. relationship with Operation Condor. She acknowledges having been told by several State Department people she consulted that I did nothing outside of my official duties. Yet she rejects this defense and concludes that I consorted with Operation Condor either as an “intelligence liaison officer or simply someone trusted by the Condor apparatus.” Beyond that, she faults me for not taking any action when given advance warning of an impending murder, which she concludes is crossing the line into complicity, and for allegedly not having expressed any objection, which is tantamount to “providing a green light.”

Embassy Security 101

At this juncture, I need to clarify the role of an embassy security officer and detail what I did in Chile and Argentina as a State Department employee who had no relationship with any of the intelligence services of the United States. My principal functions were to provide security for the ambassador and mission personnel, ensure the security of the embassy compound, protect classified docu-

ments and investigate any improper behavior on the part of embassy personnel. An inherent part of the job was to develop relationships with the security services of the host country in order to collect intelligence on any potential threats to the embassy or its personnel.

During the time that I was in Argentina (1978-1980), in the course of carrying out these functions, I stumbled onto the fact that the Argentine security services were carrying out some operations in neighboring countries. But I do not recall ever hearing the term "Operation Condor" used, either there or in Santiago, by any of my contacts or embassy colleagues. I also did not know the extent of Argentine or Chilean military networking, either with each other or with the security services of other Latin American countries. Nor was I aware of any U.S. role in relationship to that cooperation.

With the exception of the claims concerning my role in Chile, Prof. McSherry's claims are all based on two memoranda of conversation I drafted while in Buenos Aires that were subsequently released to the public under FOIA. From these she has concocted the theory that I was a central figure in a multinational enterprise called Operation Condor. I turn now to responding to each of her particulars:

- During my tour in Santiago, which preceded that of Buenos Aires, I had limited contact with Chilean intelligence officials. In fact, I met with DINA just twice: once, to see what information the agency had in its files on followers of the Allende government who had requested to be paroled into the United States on political grounds; and the second time, to coordinate security arrangements for the Organization of American States conference held in Santiago in 1976. I never met Juan

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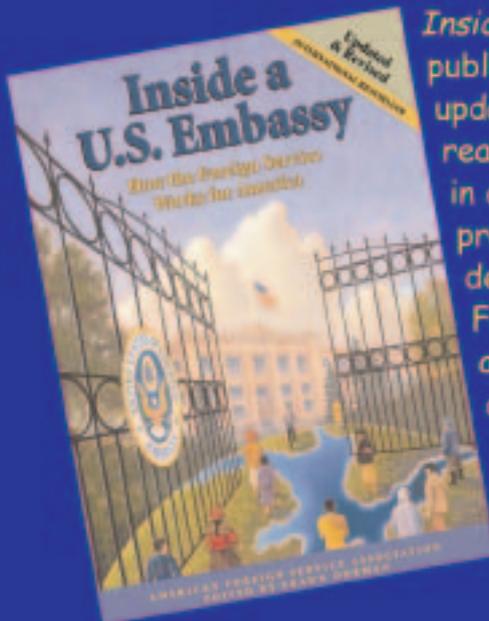
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Munoz Alarcon nor have any idea how he learned of my name or why he accused me of having a connection to a multinational operation of which I had no knowledge. Without access to the testimony he gave to the vicariate, I do not know whether he even made those comments, or whether they are fanciful embroidery added by Prof. McSherry.

• Regarding the disappearance of Mrs. de Molfino in Lima on June 14, 1980, I had asked my contact on previous occasions why the government had found it necessary to permanently “disappear” exiles it had captured aboard. His answer was that many of them had already been captured once before and placed into jail or prison, only to be released by civilian governments. (I did not necessarily take this explanation at face value.) In the Molfino case, I reported the information I received concerning her impending abduction on June 19, 1980, in a memo to U.S. Ambassador Raul Castro. The issue of whether Washington should have intervened actively in this Argentine action was a policy matter above my pay grade to decide.

• In any case, I never obtained any further information as to Mrs. de Molfino's fate. But it is inconceivable to me that the Argentine security forces would have murdered her there and then gone through all the trouble of dumping her body in Madrid when they could have easily disposed of it in their own country, as happened in so many other cases. I can only assume that she was brought back to Argentina and then, instead of killing her, for some reason she was released and permitted to travel to Spain. While this did not happen often, there are other cases in which it was determined after interrogation that the victim was not directly or actively connected to a subversive organization and was let go, on the promise he or she would go into exile

abroad and stay quiet — or in some cases in return for being pressured to carry out intelligence missions on behalf of Argentina abroad. In this particular case, McSherry reports that Spanish Judge Baltasar Garzon opened an inquiry into her death in Madrid, so perhaps there are more details available in the public record concerning this matter.

• Regarding the allegation that I was involved in a coup in Bolivia, I traveled to La Paz to arrange security for Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, who was attending an OAS conference held in that capital city. The coup plotters politely waited until Secretary Vance left town before they proceeded. I had no knowledge nor did the embassy of the impending action until after the fact. So when my Argentine source asked me about the political situation in Bolivia prior to the coup, I had no idea that he was attempting to learn whether the U.S. was aware of Argentina's involvement in the plot. Now, having learned of Argentina's involvement from McSherry's book (if this information is accurate), I understand why he asked the question.

• Without revealing my source's identity (though I can say his name was not "Ribeiro," as McSherry claims), I can confirm that he was a civilian contract employee of the Argentine Army, not an Army officer. He was a source for the embassy's security office long before I was assigned to Buenos Aires. I took pains to cultivate a social relationship with him and got to know him, both as a contact and a personal friend. On those occasions when he revealed some intimate detail concerning Argentine "dirty war" operations, it was often in a casual moment while we were discussing other matters more central to my function concerning the security of embassy personnel in Buenos Aires. I do not believe he was under instruction to reveal these

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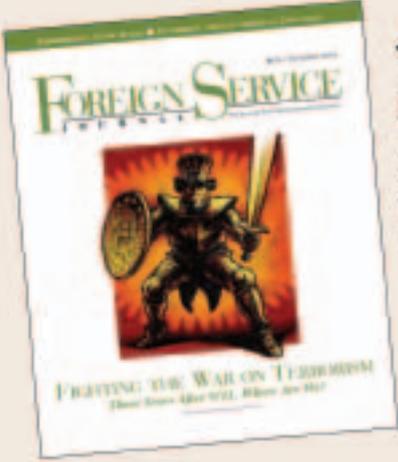
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details to me. It was more a function of our personal relationship. I would even venture to say he crossed the line and told me some of these stories because he was personally troubled by the excesses being committed by the Argentine forces in the course of their war against subversive organizations. As for his planned mission to Central America to gather intelligence there, he never suggested to me that it was in connection with Operation Condor or anything similar.

- Regarding my query concerning the two Montoneros who were seized in Rio, Prof. McSherry reports accurately that I approached this in a casual, seemingly indifferent manner. However, this was to put my contact at ease in order to maximize the chances he would respond to the question. I agree this was no joking matter, and I should not have described it that way.

The ERP and the Montoneros, the two militant organizations engaged in a struggle to overthrow Argentina's military government by force, engaged in violent attacks against the military and police and their families. These were not Mahatma Gandhi-like groups, but an armed insurgency against the government that did not represent the ideals of liberal democracy. If they had ever succeeded in seizing power, they would have installed a dictatorship, most likely on the model of Castro's Cuba, possibly even bringing Argentina within the orbit of the Soviet Union.

It goes without saying that both groups were hostile to the United States and to American interests in Argentina. So there was no reason why the United States would want to see these people come to power. Yet while the U.S. respected the right of the Argentine government to defend itself from this rebellion, it was also shocked by the extrajudicial and even criminal methods used by the military to deal with this insurgency.

***My own discussions with
my Argentine military
intelligence contact
focused on the potential
threat against U.S.
personnel from radical
insurgents.***

The U.S. had an interest in reducing the human rights violations committed by Argentine forces during this armed struggle. The large number of messages that were released under FOIA reveal that almost every office in Embassy Buenos Aires was involved in reporting on the human rights violations taking place, making representations to the Argentine government to conduct itself in a more civilized and humane manner, and making inquiries as to the welfare of specific prisoners of special interest to the United States. The Argentine military did not appreciate these efforts, of course, and resented the fact that they did not have the full support of the United States in what they had convinced themselves was an epochal battle of Western civilization against international communism.

Defusing Tensions

My own discussions with my Argentine military intelligence contact focused on the potential threat against American personnel from radical Argentine insurgents. I determined early on that this threat was minimal, and that continued to be my assessment until the end of my tour. However, I discovered that there was

a latent threat against our personnel from the Argentine security forces.

On one occasion, my military contact informed me of an impending action to arrest all of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo on the grounds that they constituted a subversive threat and that many of them were aware of the locations where armed guerrillas were in hiding. I told my source that this was a mistake that could only bring further harm to Argentina's already sinking reputation abroad, but he said there was nothing that could be done to reverse this decision. When I reported this to Amb. Castro, he immediately telephoned Argentine Army chief of staff General Viola to protest this harebrained scheme, and the action was called off. Of course, this did not win us any friends with my source's superiors in Army military intelligence.

At another point, my source revealed to me that Argentine Army intelligence was interested in bringing the embassy's human rights officer (and later president of AFSA), F.A. "Tex" Harris, in for questioning about his contacts with the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo and other human rights organizations — even abducting him if necessary. I succeeded in neutralizing this threat by having my contact engage instead in an informal conversation with Tex as to the rationale of United States human rights policy. During that exchange, he explained why it would have been foolish and counterproductive for the Argentine military to attempt to interfere with the embassy's contacts with human rights groups.

The embassy's extensive contacts with Argentine trade unions were also viewed with suspicion and hostility by the army's intelligence service. Together with the AFL-CIO, the embassy labor attaché was cultivating the Peronist labor leadership and bringing about a rapprochement between it and the democratic international

trade union movement headquartered in Europe, which was railing against the Argentine military dictatorship in international fora. The AFL-CIO office in Buenos Aires, known as AIFLD, was surreptitiously broken into several times by Argentine security forces, and the AIFLD representative in Argentina was placed under surveillance and even threatened.

At the same time, the embassy labor attaché was summoned one day through a ruse to federal police headquarters for a “friendly chat” with the army colonel in charge. As soon as I learned of this, I paid a call on the colonel and warned him he was playing with fire — Argentina was in danger of having its exports to the United States dumped in the New York harbor by the American labor movement. I made some arrangements to defuse the tension and the threat against the AFL-CIO

representative receded.

One-Way Loyalty?

I served in Argentina during a very difficult and challenging period. I realize there is lingering controversy surrounding whether the embassy and the Department of State should have done more to intervene in this internal war in Argentina. But this does not give Prof. McSherry the right to let her imagination to run wild and spin theories that are not substantiated by the evidence she has accumulated. In my particular case, I feel aggrieved by her false conjectures about my performance, especially because she could have consulted me before going ahead with her book.

I also feel aggrieved that State casually passed along a judicial inquiry based on information I had compiled in the course of my official functions — an inquiry which would

not have been initiated in the first place if my reports had not been made public without any care as to protecting the identity of the drafting officer — and then failed to provide any advice or support to one of its loyal employees who had been placed in a compromising situation and possibly even subject to sanctions by a foreign court as a result of its actions. I have been loyal to the department, but the department has not been loyal to me.

I do not know how many other Foreign Service officers may have been placed in similarly compromising situations in the past as a result of similar circumstances, but I believe the department should play a more positive role in such cases than it has so far. I also believe that AFSA, our union and professional association, should play a supportive role in seeing to it that this issue is raised in the department. ■



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