

Obama, Argentina and the “Dirty War” in Central America

by Ariel C. Armony

President Obama’s upcoming visit to Argentina coincides with the 40th anniversary of the military coup responsible for the curtailment of political and civil rights, forced disappearances, and the torture and murder of thousands of civilians. The decision of Mr. Obama to honor the victims of Argentina’s brutal “dirty war” by declassifying military, intelligence and law enforcement documents from that period should be applauded. However, the president’s decision could be transformed into an opportunity to release secret records on the complex web of alliances that was responsible, often with U.S. support, for the darkest period of Latin America’s history in the 20th century.

While most commentators focus on the horrors unleashed by the military government which came to power via a coup in 1976, it would be a mistake to think that Argentina’s dirty war was confined to the borders of that South American country.

Toward the end of the 1970s and into the early 1980s, the Argentine military regime expanded its apparatus for repression to other Latin American countries, including Bolivia, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. The Argentine military program in Central America, conducted by veterans of the dirty war, reached its climax with the organization of the Nicaraguan Contras, a force with a significant presence of exiled members



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from Somoza’s national guard, infamous for its ruthlessness and corruption.

The Central Intelligence Agency supported the Argentines in their counterinsurgency activities in Central America. President Reagan directed the CIA to collaborate with foreign governments, including Argentina’s, to destabilize the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. The United States provided the funds for the secret operations while military advisers from Argentina were responsible for implementing the covert program.

The decision to prop up an exile indigenous army trained by a third country and the expansion of counterinsurgency operations to El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras—in partnership with military rulers, death squads, fanatical anticommunist organizations and an underworld involved in arms trafficking and drug-related money laundering—brought together a group of actors that represented the worst of Latin America’s anti-democratic sectors.

The result of this cooperation was disastrous for the region: tens of thousands of people killed or forced into exile by the military dictatorships, illegally appropriated babies taken from parents who were abducted by the security forces, genocide against the indigenous population in Guatemala, a horrendous legacy of torture, and profound dislocations in the social fabric of these societies.

If Mr. Obama were to direct a multiagency review on the involvement of Argentina in the Central America wars and the role of the United States in this operation, he would be making a truly historic decision. Such a move is not only a matter of making new information available to document the history of the most violent period of the Cold War in Latin America, but it could help bring to justice human rights perpetrators from countries such as El Salvador and Honduras, some of them living in the United States.

The current Alliance for Prosperity, the Obama administration's effort to assist the Central American governments to construct more prosperous and safer societies, depends not only on sound economic policies but also on actions that support democratic values, promote the rule of law and protect rights for all citizens, particularly vulnerable populations. Resorting to what Peter Kornbluh of the National Security Archive has called "declassified diplomacy" is an excellent way to build a more prosperous future for Central America by releasing information that aids in the unremitting search for truth and justice.

But "declassified diplomacy" is not just a gesture of goodwill toward our neighbors. It is a responsibility toward millions of U.S. Latinos, myself included, who come from those societies that suffered so much human devastation. We have the right to know what the U.S. government did during those painful times. If Mr. Obama orders a broader declassification effort, he will be supporting the principle of accountability, one of the pillars of U.S. democracy.

For an administration that seemed unclear about what constituted an effective policy towards Latin America for seven years, recent efforts—such as the decision to normalize relations with Cuba, focus on promoting an economically stable and secure Central America and unseal records on Argentina's dirty war—suggest a realistic understanding of the consequences of previous U.S. policies in Latin America. Such initiatives indicate a deeper understanding of how to achieve inter-American stability through a broader sense of U.S. responsibility in the Americas. This would make President Obama's visit to Argentina eminently more consequential and worthwhile in the longer term.

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