

## Visit to Buenos Aires, December 1977

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At the request of the AAAS Committee on Scientific Freedom and Responsibility, which is chartered to maintain an awareness of actions of foreign governments which circumvent scientific freedom, I made a 10-day visit to Argentina last December. The purpose of the visit was to demonstrate the concerns of the American scientific community for the plight of their colleagues who, as the consequence of excessive antiterrorist activity by the military government in Argentina, have been imprisoned, dismissed, forced to emigrate, and, in some cases, tortured and killed.

It was not the purpose of the visit to provoke a confrontation with the authorities or to censure their actions. The aim was to meet with Argentine officials in order to impress upon them the depth of U.S. scientists' concern for the loss of human rights and scientific freedom and to explore new openings for moderating and restoring conditions under which scientists and scholars could return to their work without fear of arbitrary arrest or dismissal. It is my belief that these two purposes were achieved.

It is obvious to me that there is a bad scene in Argentina. Information from a large number of reliable, neutral, and objective sources has sufficiently documented the arrests and abductions of more than 8000 citizens since the military government took office in March 1976. The scientific community has been affected heavily by the actions of the government, and physicists, psychiatrists, and psychologists appear to have been especially singled out for a harsher measure of treatment, and yet typical in that thousands of others, from all levels of society, have been similarly affected. This situation is not without precedent. Over the past 30 years the scientific community in Argentina has become accustomed to random dismissals with the changes in their government. What is

particularly alarming about the current situation, however, is the element of fear and reprisal that accompanies these dismissals and the personal horrors of abduction and arrest without charges. The definition of subversion adopted by the military is so broad that even criticism of government policies is dealt with as criminal activity.

The Argentine authorities knew the reasons for my visit and placed no obstacles in the development of my itinerary or requests for meetings with senior officials. They made themselves accessible, heard me out attentively, and showed receptiveness to the initiative of a nongovernmental organization. Permissions were given to interview the heads of scientific institutions, cabinet ministers, and other senior officials. I also met with individual scientists who have been imprisoned and the relatives of those who are still missing. There was no harassment at any stage of the visit.

These courtesies and absences of constraints do not alter the basic facts. The preemptive actions of the state security forces have, with a few exceptions, made a shambles of scientific freedom in Argentina, and the reports with which we are so familiar are not exaggerated. Although their Atomic Energy Commission (CNEA), under Admiral Carlos Castro Madero, and some small laboratories such as the Instituto de Investigacion Bioquímicas, under Dr. Luis Leloir, are functioning, and from my visitor's eye quite efficiently, they stand in stark contrast to the general situation. While it would be naive to look for a total reversal of the government's policies because of external pressures, I do not think I am mistaken in sensing that President Carter's stand on human rights has been effective and has moved the people of Argentina. For the innocent victims of the government's harsh antiterrorist policies, the President's emphasis on human rights gives a sense of important outside support. By successfully touching the

conscience of government officials committed to support that policy, the President has made a most important contribution. Many of them, while continuing to argue for the necessity of stern measures under present conditions of sporadic terrorist activity, almost invariably go out of their way to acknowledge the value of individual thought in a society committed to a wide variety of philosophies. It is apparent that the moral force of President Carter's relatively simple and generally stated position is helping to move people in the right philosophical direction in a part of the world where American presidents have not been particularly successful.

There is never an easy solution through which justice, domestic peace, and mental tranquility can be quickly brought about after a period of such turmoil as that through which Argentina has gone during these past few years. Even those who have seen their sons and daughters disappear and whose efforts at due process have been repeatedly frustrated recall the period of terrorism as one which nearly destroyed their country, and they support the initiatives of the government to curb this destruction. As much as they desire the return to normalcy, it is the pace at which institutions are permitted to reestablish themselves, the excessive force that continues, the lack of regard for individual rights and openness which they cannot, indeed refuse, to understand. If we are at the beginning of a transition toward a better day, it is also necessary to seek ways to escalate such actions. Scientists in Argentina want and need to communicate. Those who have decided to stay have strong feelings about not leaving, waiting it out, making things better. Invitations to meetings in the United States and elsewhere, carefully selected for quality and visibility, where Argentine scientists could participate, would be most helpful. They want to communicate, but do not have the means to do so on their own.

During my visit, I was encouraged by several signs of gradual moderation within the attitudes of the present government. There is a definite hint of a new flexibility, though one cannot predict to what extent it will affect the still operative antiterrorist policies. It is to be hoped that both terrorists and others caught in dissent will be treated openly, legally, and through understandable civil proceedings. I was personally assured by Admiral Emilio Messara, a member of the ruling military junta, that 500 prisoners would be released in the near future and that this would be only a first step

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toward further relaxations. Despite additional arrests since my departure, the Christmas release of almost 400 political prisoners who had been held without charge gives hope that initiatives toward a progressive program for further release and disclosure may very well lead to other government moderations. This action is apparently consistent with the understandings given by President Videla during his visit to Washington, D.C., last summer.

Although these are the largest numbers of political prisoners released to date and therefore important, they are not a sufficient base on which to demonstrate progress and restoration of the general well-being. We can all know if the new flexibility and openness by the Argentine government is genuine if further initiatives manifest themselves through such actions as the following:

- a continuing program of prisoner release, particularly those individuals who are being held without charge;
- identification of those individuals who have been killed through government security forces actions;
- identification of those individuals who are still imprisoned without charge; and
- a reinstatement of the rights of habeas corpus and a general policy of open and judicial proceedings in the antiter-  
rorist activities.

It seemed apparent to me that there is general approval of the present government in Argentina by its citizenry. Not so certain, however, is faith in its ability to recognize what needs to be done and the will to change the present climate of fear and resentment. The opportunities available to this government to take steps toward normalcy and the specter of an alternative, such as showed itself during the height of the terroristic period, are the current government's greatest strengths. It must be considered a sign of relative weakness, however, that many people support the current junta only because people do not want to take the chance that things will get worse before they get better. A government cannot expect to ensure its stability on that basis.

With respect to the scientific community in Argentina, a commitment by the government to additional and continuing actions lessening the restrictions on their research and teaching activities appears to be a good possibility. I would expect that commitment to demonstrate itself in the following ways:

- a reinstatement of those scientists and engineers randomly fired from the national research institutes and universities since March 1976, reflecting the expressed intentions of Dr. Otano Sahores, State Secretary for Science and Technology, to now consider applications for reinstatement;

- the replacement of military representatives by civilian experts in government research centers and the national universities; and
- a broader and more visible program to encourage the return of top Argentine scientists, many of whom have emigrated to Brazil, Mexico, and Spain since the military coup.

While the situation in Argentina is an unhappy one, we must face the fact that the government is strongly entrenched and has substantial support from the people. The brightest prospect for betterment of the repressed and imprisoned scientists is through step-by-step progress toward moderation, acknowledging the positive actions which the government now seems ready to take, and encouraging others. We are not in a position to tell the government what to do, nor is this a position we wish to assume. But as observers to a situation which directly affects the lives of our foreign colleagues, it is our responsibility to demonstrate our commitment to those conditions which we believe are necessary for the development and advancement of science and the general welfare of scientists. In this light, the AAAS visit to Argentina can be viewed as establishing important contacts which can be developed in the months to come on behalf of our sorely troubled colleagues and their country in which they have such faith.