

America Between Friends



The Reagan Administration's Mishandling
of the Falklands War

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When war broke out between the United Kingdom and Argentina over the Falkland Islands in April 1982, the United States was suddenly put in the difficult position of having to choose between friends. Though the Reagan Administration would outwardly declare its neutrality in the conflict, the Administration was sharply divided into “Latino” and “Europeanist” camps. With President Reagan initially hesitant to commit to either party, two opposing agendas appeared within the U.S. government. This created a tremendous disconnect between the aims of the subsequent American diplomatic effort and the actions of the U.S. military and produced a bumbling and contradictory response that undermined American interests. Predictably, the U.S. eventually came out in full support of its European ally, but not before it had ultimately alienated both the Argentines and the British. In the end, the American response displayed a disturbing lack of coordination or agreement between three key political actors and the U.S. would emerge from the Falklands War with little to show for its involvement.

Argentine claims to sovereignty over the Falklands, known to them as the Malvinas, had existed since the British had forcibly taken the islands in 1833. The two parties had attempted since the mid-1960s to resolve the dispute but had achieved little success. For the Argentines, the issue was of paramount importance—as U.S. mediators would soon learn. One mediator, Walter Gompert, described the Argentine position:

There is a genuine national feeling that the country will remain less than whole...until the Malvinas are returned. Far from dissipating when economic and political conditions on the mainland worsened, the passion for the Malvinas only intensified. The proximity of the islands, and the image of a tiny British garrison hanging onto real estate of such great value to Argentina and seemingly little interest to London, made the British presence all the more repulsive, heightening the Argentine sense of frustration.¹

Argentina made no secret of its desires to repossess the Falklands and attempted to force the U.S. to its side by framing the issue as one of European colonization. It declared at the creation of the Rio

¹ David C. Gompert, “American Diplomacy and the Haig Mission: An Insider’s Perspective,” *Falklands War: Lessons for Strategy, Diplomacy and International Law*, (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1985) 108.

Pact in 1947 that it no longer recognized European possessions within the security zone then established and hoped the U.S. would support its position.² While the U.S. maintained that the Rio Pact did not effect questions of sovereignty, Argentina continued to press its claim within the Organization of American States and the United Nations. However, the U.K. could present a number of persuasive arguments in favor of its position—the most significant being that the Falklanders had no wish to come under Argentine rule and wished to retain their association with the British. Depending upon whether the issue was a sovereignty dispute or a matter of a people's right to self-determination, the U.S. could favor either side. Instead, it consistently remained neutral on the question of the Falklands.

Because the British controlled the islands, the Argentines interpreted the U.S. position as tacitly favoring the U.K. They realized no move could be made against the British without assurances of American neutrality, and American relations with Argentina had remained strained throughout the Carter Administration. However, when the U.S. suddenly began courting the Argentine military junta to aid its anti-communist efforts in Central and South America, the Argentines suddenly felt like they had “[stepped] into a warm bath. Suddenly everyone who had been freezing you out was giving you bear hugs.”³ High-ranking American officials began visiting Argentina the year before the war; according to David Luken, a U.S. analyst for Latin America, “the United States wanted to appear willing to back Argentine claims on the Malvinas, and didn't want to specifically rule out that they would support some sort of military feint to bring the negotiations to a head.”⁴ To the Argentines, the subtle change in the American position seemed like an opportunity to finally bring the U.S. to the table. At best, Argentina hoped that the U.S. could be brought to bear considerable pressure on the British as it had during the Suez Crisis. At worst, they believed the U.S.

² Douglas Kinney, *National Interest/National Honor: The Diplomacy of the Falklands*, (New York: Praeger, 1989) 300.

³ Lowell Gustafson, *The Sovereignty Dispute over the Falkland (Malvinas) Islands*, (Oxford: Oxford, 1988) 133.

⁴ Ibid 132.

would remain neutral, but the formal invasion of the Falklands would still “serve as a catalyst in creating a favourable diplomatic atmosphere to resolve the dispute.”⁵ As a result, the military leader of Argentina, President Leo Galtieri, and his Foreign Minister, Nicanor Costa Mendez, began to discuss the possibility of invading the Falklands while visiting in Washington in December 1981.

While then-Secretary of State Alexander Haig later denied that any U.S. official knowingly encouraged the Argentines, he did not refute that Argentina expected U.S. neutrality in the matter, and, after the war, Galtieri openly admitted to feeling surprise and betrayal at America’s actions against his country during the conflict.⁶ Speaking in 2003, Gompert asserted that the Argentine leadership leading up to the war was a “bad combination of very worldly and well informed diplomats who made a terrible misjudgment and also really didn’t like the British, and a poorly informed, poorly led military junta that was having difficulty taking reality into account.”⁷ However, it seems likely that U.S. officials were preoccupied with other matters and, as a result, handled the Falkland issue less than carefully. It would be the first of many poor judgments the U.S. made. Certainly the military junta made a number of miscalculations over the course of the conflict, but the U.S. was also confusing the U.K.

Prior to the invasion on April 2, the Falkland Islands were of little real importance to the British government. Even the U.K. Ambassador the UN admitted the “the very improbability of a war between Britain and Argentina” over 1800 islanders that were over 8000 miles away from London.⁸ However, the invasion outraged all segments of British society to an unanticipated degree. In Parliament, “indignation at the Argentine seizure of the Islands outweighed, indeed overwhelmed, the party political dimension” and even the Labour opposition vowed to fight against a “bargain

⁵ Lawrence Freedman & Virginia Gamba-Stonehouse, *Signals of War*, (Princeton: Princeton, 1991) 81.

⁶ Louise Richardson, *When Allies Differ*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996) 115.

⁷ “The Falklands Roundtable,” *Ronald Reagan Oral History Project—Miller Center of Public Affairs*, 15-16 May, 2003 <http://millercenter.virginia.edu/scripps/diglibrary/oralhistory/falklands/falklands_2003_0515.html>.

⁸ Anthony Parsons, “The Falklands Crisis in the UN,” *International Affairs*, 59-2, (1983) 169.

basement Mussolini.”⁹ Without so much as consulting the United States, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher immediately sent a 36-ship Task Force to restore British authority and, on April 3, she asked for the U.S. to condemn the invasion, withdraw its ambassador, and begin an arms embargo of Argentina. Instead, the U.S. again declared its neutrality on the matter. For the British, this was akin to being stabbed in the back; the British government was “appalled by the fact that the United States should claim neutrality in a dispute between its closest ally and a fascist dictatorship.”¹⁰

The U.S. did not immediately recognize the seriousness of the emerging conflict. Within the Administration, the situation was compared to a comic opera and there was a general “disbelief that in the modern age countries could believe [these islands] were worth fighting for.”¹¹ America’s long history of taking a “hands-off” approach to the Falklands predisposed the Administration to consider the conflict nothing more than a nuisance. Eventually, however, it became apparent, in the words of Gompert, that American foreign policy interests “were on were on a collision course with one another: on the one hand, the Anglo-American special partnership and the principle of non-aggression, on the other, our Latin American relationships and our ability to maintain peace and tranquility in this hemisphere.”¹² It was recognized that either Thatcher or Galtieri would survive the crisis, but not both. Seen within the context of the ever-present Cold War, the U.S. was forced to pick between its own interests. Certainly, no one condoned Argentina’s blatant land grab via armed force, but the Administration had a hard time understanding what the fuss was about. Later, Reagan would go so far as to refer to the Falklands as only “that little ice-cold bunch of land down there.”¹³

While Reagan had a close working relationship with Thatcher and was personally supportive, he did little to ensure that the U.S. put forth a coherent foreign policy during the early stages of the

⁹ D. George Boyce, *The Falklands War*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) 46; Richardson 119.

¹⁰ Richardson 120.

¹¹ Freedman & Gamba-Stonehouse 154.

¹² Gompert 110.

¹³ Ronald Reagan, “Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session With Editors and Broadcasters From Midwestern States,” *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, National Archives and Records Administration*, 30 April 1982 <<http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1982/43082b.htm>>.

conflict. The U.S. voted with the U.K. on Security Council Resolution 502, which denounced the Argentine invasion, but the Administration appeared to hold a sympathetic attitude towards Argentinian representatives.¹⁴ Later, when asked about the Reagan Administration's response, the British Ambassador to the U.S. would tell the House of Commons that the problem with the U.S. government was that "[w]hen you say the U.S. Administration, I am sorry to be pedantic but there is the Pentagon view, the State Department view and the White House view."¹⁵ When it came to the Falklands War, each aspect of the government had a different agenda. However, the White House showed a strange disinterest in the conflict during its earliest phases. It was widely believed that push come to shove Reagan would ultimately come down on the side of the British; he had warned a drunken Galtieri of this in so many words hours before the invasion. But the White House's chief concern was maintaining Reagan's personal popularity and minimizing the damage the conflict might cause to American anti-communist efforts in Europe and South America.¹⁶ As a result, the U.S. response was shaped primarily by actors within the State and Defense departments.

On April 7, the National Security Council met to discuss the conflict in what was described as a chaotic gathering. It quickly became apparent how divided the influential players were between the "Europeanists" and the "Latinos." The debate within the Administration was framed by these two disparate poles. The Europeanists were led by Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger. He had personal ties with the British and vigorously advocated supporting them against Argentina. He was supported by Under Secretary for European Affairs, Lawrence Eagleburger, who stressed that the credibility of the NATO alliance would be severely damaged if the U.S. did not support the U.K. Thatcher was both ideologically in-line with Reagan and also one of the few proponents of additional American missile deployments in Europe at the time. The collapse of her conservative

¹⁴ Virginia Gamba-Stonehouse, *The Falklands/Malvinas War*, (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1987) 147.

¹⁵ Richardson 119.

¹⁶ Ibid 120.

government would undermine everything the President hoped to achieve in Europe. On the other side of the debate were the Under Secretary for Latin American Affairs, Thomas Enders, and the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Jeane Kirkpatrick. While neither could outwardly support Argentine aggression, both argued adamantly that the U.S. should remain neutral in the conflict. Kirkpatrick presented a myriad of reasons for her position. She believed that American support for the U.K. would undermine the Administration's interests in Latin America and turn away a likely ally in Argentina. She also thought that the U.S. was in no way obligated to come to Britain's aid as part of the American commitment to NATO. Her time in the UN had taught her that "our historic best friend frequently ignored our opinions, and, more serious, our interests, and then did not consult with us until after decisions had been made."¹⁷ Thus, she concluded, "because Britain herself made clear that she saw the NATO commitment as limited to the NATO area, and because Britain did not stand with the U.S. elsewhere; and, finally, because under existing arrangements, the British already enjoyed the tangible benefits [military aid and intelligence] that the U.S. would in any case make available," that there was little reason to rally automatically to the U.K.'s side.¹⁸

Secretary of State Haig was caught somewhere in the middle. While his natural sympathies were with the U.K., he felt that British intransigence on the Falklands issue put them under some obligation to come to a diplomatic settlement.¹⁹ At the same time, he was under pressure to score a diplomatic victory to offset growing criticism of his position from within the Administration and from the media. He prevailed upon Reagan to allow him to act as a mediator in the crisis. While he admitted to the British ambassador that the U.S. "was not at heart impartial" and "that America could not privately be even-handed in anything involving its closest ally,"²⁰ he hoped that the U.S. could maintain an outward stance of neutrality long enough for him to broker a settlement between

¹⁷ Jeane Kirkpatrick, "My Falklands War and Theirs," *National Interest*, Winter 1989/1990, 17.

¹⁸ *Ibid* 17.

¹⁹ Freedman & Gamba-Stonehouse 158.

²⁰ Nicolas Henderson in G.M. Dillon, *The Falklands, Politics and War*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989) 142.

the two sides. Emulating his earlier benefactor, Henry Kissinger, Haig engaged in rapid-fire “shuttle diplomacy” between London and Buenos Aires throughout April 1982.

While Haig initially had the leverage to get both sides to move their positions somewhat, the mediator was out of his element. As a former U.S. army general, he perceived the world entirely within the scope of an East-West conflict and had little idea of the complexities of North-South relations. Thus, not only did he not understand the dispute, but “he thought Britain was acting out of purely foreign policy considerations and, Argentina, out of domestic affairs. In reality, it was the other way around.”²¹ He did not anticipate Britain’s emotional response to the invasion of U.K. territory and the violation of its sovereignty or Argentina’s obsession with gaining sovereignty over the islands. When he was caught in a Catch-22 where the British would only discuss sovereignty on the condition of Argentine withdrawal and the Argentine’s would only withdraw on the condition of gaining sovereignty, Haig found little room to maneuver. The President, for his part, could only suggest that “if only Britain could sink an Argentine ship perhaps [their] honour would be satisfied.”²² This was not to be the case.

Meanwhile, the British attempted to present a veneer that they were willing to negotiate with Haig. Compared to the mobs and armed guards that awaited the Americans in Buenos Aires, the British greeted Haig’s mission warmly and he was well-provided for in London. However, the U.K. embrace was really nothing more than a façade and a public relations move in order to curry favor with the U.S. In reality, the British found Haig’s eagerness for a settlement unsettling. An advisor to Thatcher believed that Haig’s desire to avoid armed conflict was so great that he warned that “Haig would have been happy with any settlement, including once which gave Argentina everything it wanted.”²³ It did not help that the Secretary of State “didn’t cut a very good figure on British

²¹ Gamba-Stonehouse 152.

²² Freedman & Stonehouse 181.

²³ Richardson 133.

television...He was seen rushing back and forth all the time and saying stupid things...He didn't inspire confidence."²⁴ To make matters worse, in addition to Haig's inexperience on the issue and his poor public persona, his discussions with the British were further undermined by the efforts of his nominal subordinate, Jeane Kirkpatrick, at the UN.

Kirkpatrick had been open about her sympathies for Latin America from the beginning. Even Haig had agreed from the start that the U.S. had to support the British-backed effort at the UN to condemn the invasion. However, even then, Kirkpatrick ensured that U.S. support for what was to become Security Council Resolution 502 was not unequivocal. She moved to temper to language in the resolution, preventing the UN from denouncing Argentina as an "aggressor."²⁵ She then distanced herself from the decision by forcing her subordinate to vote for the resolution in her stead. Throughout the early part of April, the Ambassador proved to be a significant distraction for Haig and a serious matter of concern for the Thatcher government. On the night of the invasion of the Falklands, April 2, Kirkpatrick had graciously appeared, along with a number of senior Administration officials, at a banquet in her honor given by the Argentine ambassador. If this was not yet a sufficient message to the British, then her later interview with *CBS News* was truly a cause for concern for the U.K. about the potential American stance. During the interview, she theorized that "if the Argentines owned the Falklands, the moving in of troops [was] not armed aggression."²⁶ She even floated the idea within the NSC that, considering the U.S. had long been neutral on the sovereignty dispute over the islands, it perhaps "could also be neutral as to whether Argentina had been wrong to use force."²⁷

In retrospect, Kirkpatrick's actions were the most visibly damaging to the American efforts to avoid open conflict. She infuriated the British—who, with Thatcher at the head, had no intention

²⁴ Ibid 139.

²⁵ Gamba-Stonehouse 149.

²⁶ Gustafson 136.

²⁷ Freedman & Gamba-Stonehouse 157.

of backing down—while continually encouraging the Argentine junta to believe that the U.S. would eventually push forth some sort of agreement that would benefit them. As a result, the Argentines held to their demands for sovereignty long after Haig had abandoned diplomatic channels, still clinging to their hopes for American involvement. In fact, despite Kirkpatrick's intimations or Haig's intentions, the U.S. was providing substantial aid to the U.K. well before the failure of Haig's shuttle diplomacy and even before the April 2 invasion.²⁸ Unbeknownst to Congress, the White House, or even Thatcher herself, the British had something of a secret ally within the Pentagon: Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger.

Weinberger was “unabashedly pro-British” and “pledged to the United Kingdom both emotionally and intellectually.”²⁹ The Pentagon supported the U.K. from the beginning, allowing them access to American facilities on the British-owned Ascension Island and providing intelligence and material assistance, but Weinberger went far beyond the call of duty and the letter of the law. In his memoirs on his time in the Pentagon, he described the system he set up for the British: “I directed that I be told, within twenty-four hours of our receipt of a British request, whether it had been granted; and if not, why not, and when would it be granted?” His instructions were carried out so “magnificently” that “some fifteen in-baskets in the normal chain were eliminated.”³⁰ His efforts to aid the British were so extensive that he began holding, as one British admiral termed it, daily “What-can-we-do-for-Britain today” meetings.³¹

While much of this support was due to strategic worries by the Pentagon that the U.K. could not actually win a war at such distance from the British Isles, it was also due to close, personal ties between the two armed forces. One example of this early in the conflict happened when an American base commander refused access to British forces at American facilities at Ascension

²⁸ Ruben Moro, *The History of the South Atlantic Conflict*, (New York: Prager, 1989) 321.

²⁹ Ibid 320.

³⁰ Caspar Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace: Seven Critical Years in the Pentagon*, (New York: Warner Books, 1990) 214.

³¹ Richardson 128.

Island. The situation was resolved by a quick phone call between two friends: the British chief of staff and his friend, General David Jones, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Afterwards, the American commander was ordered to aid the British “but not to get caught doing it.”³² The collusion between the two militaries was extensive; even British Admiral Sir Henry Leach admitted that the Pentagon “went further than politicians would have permitted had they known at the time.”³³ While Weinberger informed Reagan of what he was doing, few officials were aware of the extent of U.S. military aid including the National Security Council and Margaret Thatcher herself. As she “raged at the treachery of her erstwhile ally,” the British Defense Secretary, John Nott, noted that he “was not inclined to tell Thatcher how the good the military help was at the beginning when we were mad the Americans.”³⁴

After Carl Bernstein, of Watergate fame, broke the story that the U.S. was aiding the U.K. on April 14, not only was Haig furious at the apparent damage to his mediation effort but the Argentine junta began to grow concerned over the American position. The Argentine Foreign Minister Costa Mendez threatened to call a meeting of the OAS to address the British threat. Haig tried in vain to temper the junta’s worries, and Argentina ultimately called a meeting of the OAS despite the explicit objections of the U.S. On April 28, with the abstention of the U.S., the OAS resolved to urge the U.K. “to cease the hostilities it is carrying on” and “to refrain from any act that may affect inter-American peace and security.”³⁵ It was only with a strong effort on the part of the U.S. that the resolution did not call for further action towards the U.K. Even still, the U.S. was put in an uncomfortable position; according to Douglas Kinney, the U.S. suddenly was faced with a Third World that “seemed to be applying *against* rather than *in support of* self-determination this

³² Ibid 125.

³³ Ibid 123.

³⁴ Ibid 127.

³⁵ “Resolution 1,” *Organization of American States*, 28 April 1982, avail. on-line: <http://www.falklands.info/history/82doc007.html>

ideology [of opposition to decolonization] which the United States had all but invented when most of the world was not self-governing.” Within the American mindset, he writes that: “Decolonization, which seemed to occupy so much nonaligned rhetoric and paper so long after the populations which sought independence were granted it, was de facto over. It was certainly not to be applied when the population objected” as was the Falklanders did.³⁶ In an ironic twist, instead of criticizing the Monroe Doctrine, Latin American countries decried the U.S.’s apparent abandonment of it.

Nevertheless, the United States ultimately gave up its efforts at mediating the conflict and, in a NSC meeting on April 30, decided to come out in full support of the U.K. While the U.S. continued to encourage diplomacy through backchannels, including the Peruvian president and the UN Secretary General, it now began working overtly with the British in their attempt to retake the Falklands. American diplomacy had failed—the only question remaining was how much damage had been done to U.S. interests.

When it came to America’s relations with Latin America, Kirkpatrick was resolute in her opinion on the matter:

I believe Britain emerged from the Falklands war stronger, her reputation enhanced. The U.S. emerged from the Falklands war weakened in the hemisphere and no stronger in Europe. I came away from the experience convinced that we Americans are not very good at thinking and acting coolly in support of our interests in the way that the British and the French regularly do.³⁷

In 2003, Harry Schlaudeman, US Ambassador to Argentina during the conflict, concluded the opposite, suggesting that “in terms of our long-term relations with Latin America, I don’t think the war had any effect whatsoever.”³⁸ While it is true that the U.S. was able to reengage the Argentine government after the junta’s predicted fall, Kirkpatrick maintains that the war “was a factor added to the prior existence of other factors. Columbia and Peru, from time to time, and Panama, make

³⁶ Kinney 131-132.

³⁷ Kirkpatrick 20.

³⁸ “The Falklands Roundtable.”

references to U.S. lack of solidarity with Latin America. It is a living memory, the war.”³⁹ Her last point may well be the most important—when Mexican President Vicente Fox withdrew from the Rio Pact in 2001, he cited American inaction during the Falklands War as a prime example that the security treaty had long become antiquated and obsolete.⁴⁰ While American relations with Latin America would return to some modicum of normalcy, the war was an obvious blight on America’s record in the region.

One would hope that the negative implications of American involvement would be balanced by positive developments in the traditional American “special relationship” with the U.K. This, too, did not happen. Not only were the British irritated with the reluctance the U.S. showed as an ally, but the U.S. made one final—and truly bizarre—diplomatic blunder at the UN less than a week later. After the UN Secretary General reported his failure at mediating the dispute, Spain and Panama placed a resolution before the Security Council calling for an immediate cease-fire. By early June, a British victory over Argentina and the reconquest of the Falklands seemed imminent. The U.S. began attempting to salvage American relations with Argentina, and Reagan himself implored Thatcher to avoid humiliating the Argentines. With the tide now turned in her favor, the Prime Minister felt no reason to acquiesce to the American request or to the UN’s calls for a cease-fire. Therefore, on June 4, the U.K., along with the U.S., vetoed the Security Council’s attempt to call for an immediate cease-fire.

By itself, the event was not terribly remarkable; if anything, it reflected a growing concern within the international community that Britain was becoming the more “intransigent party in the dispute.”⁴¹ What happened next, however, captured “in microcosm the confusion and incompetence

³⁹ Richardson 157.

⁴⁰ “Mexico resigns from Americas defense treaty, calling it Cold War relic,” *The Associated Press*, 6 Sept. 2002.

⁴¹ Boyce 81.

marking U.S. policy in this period.”⁴² While under instructions by Haig to cast a veto with the British, Kirkpatrick believed a veto would further damage American interests without necessarily aiding the British; she suggested the U.S. abstain instead. At the last minute, Haig decided to go along the idea to abstain, but, by the time he reached the Ambassador, she had already followed through on her initial instructions to veto the resolution. Instead of letting the matter drop, Kirkpatrick was told to announce the U.S.’s desire to abstain, perhaps in the hope of garnering some good will in Latin America. Thus, just moments after vetoing the cease-fire resolution, Kirkpatrick announced to the shock of that Security Council: “I have been told that the it is impossible for a country to change its vote once it has been made known but my Government has asked me to put it on record that if it were possible to change votes, I should change it from a no to an abstention.”⁴³

With the council in an uproar over Kirkpatrick’s announcement, the British Ambassador was able to quite literally able to walk out of the Security Council without being questioned about his veto. Even more astounding was the fact that Reagan was not informed of any of this. The President “cheerfully sat down to lunch beside a scowling Mrs. Thatcher, blissfully unaware of the commotion in New York” as his bemused response to inquiring reporters soon made evident.⁴⁴

The complete incoherence of American action during the entire episode ultimately undermined even its attempt to enhance its ties with the U.K. In the aftermath of the war, relations between the U.S. and the U.K. were not improved in the slightest. Relations were strained further the following year when the U.S. joined Argentina at the UN in again calling for a resumption in talks to settle the Falklands’ question, and, in what was seen in some circles as a sense of ingratitude for American help, Thatcher roundly criticized Reagan’s invasion of Grenada in October 1983. In fact, it can be argued that the only public show of gratitude for America’s efforts occurred in 1988

⁴² Richardson 156

⁴³ Freedman & Gamba-Stonehouse 355.

⁴⁴ Richardson 156

when Caspar Weinberger was dubbed Knight of British Empire for his services during the Falklands War. What had gone wrong?

For one, the Falklands were not important geopolitically to the U.S. within the context of the Cold War. As a result, the U.S. could not fathom the idea that islands would become an international flashpoint. Furthermore, neither the American government nor for that matter the British could anticipate Argentina's desire to get their Malvinas back. Additionally—and all three countries share the blame on this—all parties assumed that there was no way large-scale hostilities could break out over the matter. The U.S. was clearly unconcerned, and the U.K. could not bring itself to belief that the Argentines would move against them with force. As for Argentina, the junta misjudged both the extent to which the U.S. would remain neutral and the resolve the British showed in retaking the islands. After all, they had no reason to believe the British would fight so passionately for possessions that were non-vital and, more important, so far from home. Even Kirkpatrick never believed war would break out: “I could not conceive that the British Government—which gives so much evidence of having lost the taste for empire and war—would or should go to war over the Falkland Islands.”⁴⁵

While this assumption colored the U.S. response from the start, much of the blame for the lack of coordination on America's part has to be placed squarely on Reagan's shoulders. The lack of coordination from the top was perhaps most damaging. The President's distance from (and perhaps disinterest in) the issue was apparent to all involved; both the British government and the Argentine junta realized that Haig, Kirkpatrick, and Weinberger were the real actors in power. As a result, both belligerents were indirectly playing the U.S. against itself in their bids to gain American support. Even as Haig attempted to play the role of dutiful mediator, he was undermined from both sides,

⁴⁵ Kirkpatrick 17.

Kirkpatrick supporting the Argentines and Weinberger, the British. In a very real sense, the Reagan Administration's right hand did not know what its left hand was doing.

While the Falklands War is the story of a one American blunder after another, it is also the tale of three divergent personalities within the Reagan Administration: the overwhelmed mediator, the antagonizing ambassador, and the over-eager secretary of defense. The United States, by mere virtue of its influence on both parties, should have been able to negotiate some sort of settlement. As one U.S. ambassador commented, "We misread Britain, we misread Argentina, we were complete amateurs at the United Nations, we ended up pleasing no one and offending everyone."⁴⁶ In the end, even if the U.S. escaped, as Schlaudemann says, with no real long-term damage to its interests, it accomplished nothing for itself. Its diplomatic efforts were a complete failure, and the U.S. was unable even to salvage a strengthened relationship with the British for all its efforts. Unable to agree to any real objective other than the avoidance of open hostiles between the U.K. and Argentina, the U.S. ultimately ended up powerless to keep to its friends from going to war with each other.

⁴⁶ Gamba-Stonehouse 59

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