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THE SOUND OF ONE HAND CLAPPING

A Preliminary Study of the Argentine Press
in a Time of Terror

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Guest Scholar, The Wilson Center

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ABSTRACT

The Sound of One Hand Clapping

A Preliminary Study of the Argentine Press in a Time of Terror

When a society's institutions begin to crack up, what holds a country together? This paper argues that in the case of Argentina, where ruthless and powerful terrorist groups, backed by a mass movement of close to a million people (in a population of 26,000,000), came close to destroying the institutions of traditional Argentine society, it was the failure of the press that caused a tragedy of such magnitude. When the military seized power without opposition and with passive popular assent on March 24, 1976, only the press was in a position to provide checks and balances to excesses which were bound to be committed in the absence of normal constitutional controls. The will of the judiciary had been destroyed by the terrorists, and the politicians had no voice because they had no credibility. If the Argentine press had been prepared to do its minimum duty by keeping the public informed, other voices would have been heard and the worst excesses checked. Instead, the Argentine press submitted to self-censorship, which the author believes is the worst form of censorship, and became an accomplice in the "disappearance" of thousands of people whose abduction by the security forces went largely unreported in Argentina. The paper sets the scene in a broad historical framework which reveals the trials and tribulations of the Argentine press over the years, and argues that the press could, and should, have done better.

THE SOUND OF ONE HAND CLAPPING

A Preliminary Study of the Argentine Press in a Time of Terror

Robert Cox
Guest Scholar
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The breakdown of democracies in Latin America has not resulted in the destruction of all democratic institutions in countries under military rule. Indeed, as most military regimes claim that they are really saviours of democracy, institutional forms are generally maintained and some individual liberties are protected. The concept of freedom inherent in the Western world--and paid at least lip service in those Latin American countries where democracy has broken down--persuades most people that it is better to live in a right-wing authoritarian, or even totalitarian, state than in a left-wing "people's democracy." The degree of freedom enjoyed by the inhabitants of authoritarian or totalitarian states in the Western world, however, does not seem to me to depend upon the actual institutions of the state. It is a truism, but it is nonetheless true, that the freer the press, the freer the society. The familiarity of Jefferson's remark that "Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government I should not hesitate to prefer the latter" does not deserve contempt. I believe that in Argentina over the past decade particularly--one of those useful "extreme cases" thrown up by turmoil--we can see why the press should be valued as a support system for democratic principles when democracy itself is in a state of collapse.

In contending that many of Argentina's miseries today, and in particular the tragedy of the 3,000 to 20,000 people¹ who have disappeared over the past five and a half years, have been exacerbated by a breakdown in the flow of information to the public, it is necessary to examine the state of the Argentine press in an historical context. The collapse of the media in Argentina did not begin on March 24, 1976, when the military, with the visible and audible consent of the vast majority of the Argentine people, assumed power.

I. Principle of Freedom--Tradition of Censorship

As part of the Spanish empire, the Vice-Royalty of the River Plate, which was to become Argentina, slumbered in literary darkness. Only Church publications and Spanish-Guaraní dictionaries (for the Jesuit settlements among the Guaraní Indians in the north) were permitted. The independence movement of 1810 established the principle of freedom of the press when the Revolutionary Junta suspended a royal decree of August 22, 1792 which forbade the publication of news about the French Revolution. But by the end of 1817 the press was being required to demonstrate

"moderation at all times, when treating all subjects."² Censorship quickly followed, although the principle of freedom of the press was maintained in a way that seems to have established something of a tradition by the announcement of severe punishments for abuses of it. The number of newspapers published in Argentina fell from 43 in 1833, to 15 in 1834, to only three in 1835. "Why would Rosas [identified by liberals as Argentina's first dictator] want newspapers?" asked a "student of the press."³

The constitution of 1853, however, established freedom of the press as a basic principle:

Substantial freedom was enjoyed by the nation's newspapers for the 90 year period which ended in 1943. Although it is true that this liberty suffered minor threats and interference during that era, it was nevertheless a golden age for Argentine journalism and the country produced a number of newspapers whose standards were rated highly throughout the world.⁴

The "golden age" ended within hours of the revolution of June 4, 1943, when press censorship was imposed "to prevent the diffusion of rumors, news and editorials which might contribute to the creation of an atmosphere of inquietude in the population." The Ministry of Interior quickly tightened up this injunction by announcing: "The press will abstain from publishing events, with the exception of material released by the chief of the armed forces or previously authorized by him."

The Argentine press, which had been the freest in Latin America, was soon sapped of its vigor and independence with the rise to power of the fascist-minded military officers who found themselves led, grudgingly rather than willingly, by Colonel Juan Domingo Perón. Under Perón, the Argentine press went into an eclipse from which it has never fully recovered. Perón consolidated a system of press control and news management which has continued in force, strengthened under some governments and weakened under others, up to this day. The Under-Secretariat of Information and Press, which became part of the presidency on May 31, 1946, had orders to "supervise the conduct" as well as powers to ration newsprint and film. This omnipotence waned after Perón was overthrown in September 1955, but the Government House press secretariat has continued, under a number of different titles, to try to rein in the media ever since. Open, unashamed, and unabashed persecution of not only dissenters but also of anyone showing reluctance to join the sycophantic chorus formed by the press reached its height under Perón. So did the toll extracted from the liberal press. La Prensa, the newspaper with the greatest reputation in Latin America, was closed and confiscated on January 26, 1951. Although it was returned to its owners and reopened on February 3, 1956, La Prensa was never able to recover its previous prosperity or prestige. From a daily circulation of 460,000 in 1950 (with sales of well over half a million on Sundays), La Prensa's drawing power has dwindled to under 100,000 today. La Nación, the other major voice of Argentine liberalism--Sarmiento said that it called things by their name and "put its hand where the pain was"⁵--thundered its dissent for some months after La Prensa's surcease, but its courageous editor, Alberto Caprile, died on April 5, 1951, and La Nación's opposition to Perón's

dictatorial rule became a subdued rumble. La Nación's judicious editorial policy since the wreck of La Prensa has paid off commercially. It has grown at the expense of its older rival and today boasts a circulation of over 220,000 and a goodly share of the lucrative advertising which once seemed La Prensa's by birthright. Although both of these newspapers continued to make the lists of the world's best newspapers, they are both pale shadows today of their former selves. Argentine journalists, who in private are fierce self-critics, argue that the compilers of such lists are helped in making their choices by a total ignorance of the Spanish language.

Although several major newspapers have emerged over the past 30 years, they all bear the tell-tale marks of the Perón years. Clarín, which was founded by Roberto Noble, a nationalist politician with conservative roots who became a crusader for industrial development, is, in terms of circulation, advertising revenue, and the talent (reasonably well paid, for once) of its staff, Argentina's leading newspaper. Tomorrow marks its 35th birthday. It has a daily circulation of over 400,000 and Sunday sales were soaring to double that figure--an uneconomic proposition because of the cost of newsprint for the bulky tabloid--so the print run was purposely held down. But despite its predominance, Clarín exerts surprisingly little influence over official or public opinion. This is undoubtedly because Clarín's editorial position has a tiny political base. It speaks for a minority party (the MID) which is almost exclusively concerned about economic development, and Clarín has tended to ignore wider issues of political philosophy and ethics. Crónica, which was founded in 1963 by a young press photographer who had made a little money by producing a magazine for fans of the Boca Juniors soccer club, claims the largest sales, when its morning and evening editions are combined, for any newspaper in the Spanish language. Its success can be traced to measures introduced after Perón's overthrow which sought to remove all traces of Peronism from Argentina. Created with the most slender resources, Crónica tapped the hidden springs of Peronist populism and at its peak in the early 1970s sold close to a million copies.

The underground power of Peronism was apparent as soon as the disenchantment among his followers at Perón's alacrity in capitulating in the face of a military uprising in a provincial garrison had worn off. But not until the early 1960s was it realized that the Peronist myth could be parlayed into a mass circulation. The repression of Peronism, and the restrictions imposed upon the press with the aim of keeping Perón out of sight and out of mind, created a mystery and regenerated a legend. But Law 4161, forbidding the use of Peronist emblems, the singing of the party song, the Marcha Peronista, or any apologia for Peronism was meant to achieve the same results as denazification in Germany after the war. It was not used to suppress information or the right to express an opinion, although Peronists who wanted to express themselves politically could hardly be expected to give up the rich folklore of Peronism, with its quasi-religious overtones, simply because the government set up by the armed forces had decided that it was bad for the nation's health. And so Peronists today look back on the years that followed Perón's overthrow as a black period in which there was no press freedom for them.⁶ But the state of press freedom was not as bad as it seemed to Peronists at the time. La Prensa's studied refusal to name

Perón--the newspaper continued to use a revolving stock of descriptive phrases such as "the fugitive tyrant" or "the deposed dictator" in place of Perón's name almost to the very eve of his tragic but triumphal return to Argentina 18 years after his expulsion and condemnation to oblivion--simply served to keep an old wound open and festering. The press as a whole, encouraged by the military government which simply hoped that Peronism would go away, kept Perón shrouded in mystery and frozen in time. It was no wonder that he could return in 1972 at the age of 77, on a flying visit that was to demonstrate the massive following he enjoyed, to be hailed by millions of young people who had never known the reality of Peronism in power as--to cite one of the graffiti "headlines"--"Super-Macho."

There had been no return to the Golden Age of journalism in Argentina after Perón's overthrow. The habit of self-censorship and automatic compliance with the official view of things had continued. The bad habits acquired by the press under a dictatorship are not easily shucked off. The state radio network, which accounts for all but a handful of broadcasting stations in Argentina--apart from a scattering of purely local operations--was still in the hands of the government. Only the television stations established after Perón's ouster (he had established one state TV channel) had nominal independence, which was exercised according to the degree of freedom allowed by the successive governments. Even the short-lived and genuinely democratic People's Radical Party government (1963-66) was tempted to attempt to manage the news because of the continued existence of the structure of press control set up on October 21, 1943, by the military and strengthened under Perón. The Radicals did not give in to the totalitarian temptation, but President Arturo Illia's administration succumbed to a military coup, and he was removed from office in June 1966 after a virulent press campaign orchestrated against him by the armed forces themselves.

The Peronists undoubtedly had a raw deal after Perón's overthrow, but it is equally true that the only elected governments in the roughly two decades between the flight of Perón and the Peronist restoration (Illia and, previously, President Arturo Frondizi, who took office in 1958 and was ousted by the armed forces in March 1962) did not have a fair press. There were always several newspapers or magazines working for a coup in league with groups of officers or military intelligence services. With the birth of Crónica, the Peronists had a mass-circulation newspaper favorable to their cause, although the newspaper's founder, Hector García, was always more attuned to the commercial possibilities of the Peronist mass market than to its political potential. And Clarín, because of Frondizi's conviction that the Peronist movement must be harnessed to his development theories, was always prudently sympathetic. So the Argentine press struggled on, reflecting in an inchoate way the conflict between those who sought to integrate the Peronist movement into national life and those who would have liked to see it disappear or undergo a miraculous transformation. The years between Perón's flight and his return were not the best of times for the Argentine press, but they were not the worst of times. Dissent was tolerated, and was expressed in scores of Peronist publications. Investigative reporting was possible. And, most important of all, while there was an attempt to hide from reality on the part of anti-Peronists who went on believing that Peronism

could be legislated away or, failing that, could be ignored so that it would wither away, the Argentine people could keep themselves informed. A terrible change in the climate was taking place, however. I think that sinister difference can best be illustrated by examining the case of Rodolfo Walsh.

In June 1956, a Peronist uprising was put down by the execution of 27 people, including the ringleader, General Juan José Valle. Walsh, who was 30 at the time and a short-story writer, interested, by his own account, only in chess apart from literary matters, heard that there had been a survivor among a group of unidentified civilians shot on a garbage dump in the Buenos Aires suburb of José León Suarez. Walsh investigated the shootings and wrote about them in two magazines, Revolución Nacional and Mayoría. The latter, for which Walsh wrote a nine-part serial which appeared in successive weekly editions between May 27 and July 29, 1957, was a Peronist publication. The result of his investigative reporting appeared in book form in 1957 under the title Operación masacre. At least two other revised editions were published, in 1964 and 1969, in which Walsh continued to call for an investigation into what he bluntly said were "not executions but murders."⁷ Although judicial inquiries were carried out, Walsh concluded in a postscript in the 1969 edition of his book that it was impossible to hope for justice "within the system." He wrote two other investigative books: ¿Quién mató a Rosendo?, which is about the murder of a Peronist labor leader in May 1965, and El caso Satanowsky, another probe of an unsolved murder, that of the lawyer handling the transfer of shares of La Razón from the heirs of Evita Perón to the previous and present owners, the Peralta Ramos family. Walsh said that his investigation of the Satanowsky case confirmed what he had found to be the pattern in his other books: "The dead well and truly dead and the murderers proved guilty but still at large."

On March 23, 1977, just one day short of the first anniversary of the military coup which deposed Perón's widow "Isabelita," Walsh launched a vitriolic attack on the military in the form of an open letter distributed by a self-styled Clandestine News Agency (ANCLA). Walsh accused the military of abducting political opponents and murdering them, disposing of their bodies in the sea or anchoring them with concrete at the bottom of a lake. He lambasted the government and the armed forces on every possible count, detailing alleged torture methods, denouncing 15,000 abductions, 10,000 imprisoned, and 4,000 killed by the military, and criticizing economic policy. Two days later Walsh, who had arranged to meet his wife and daughter at a railway station in Buenos Aires, disappeared. His wife claimed that he had been abducted and had been seen in a military garrison, one of the alleged concentration camps later denounced by Amnesty International.⁸

The "open letter" was more emotional than it was factual. It was used as propaganda by the Montoneros, a terrorist organization usually labeled as "left-wing Peronist," and contained dubious information based on reports put out by the Clandestine News Agency (ANCLA), which may have been linked to the terrorists and whose dispatches were themselves suspect because they contained some fact, much distortion, and a great deal of "black" propaganda. It seemed a suicidal gesture at the time. Walsh himself ended the letter with the observation that he had wanted to mark

the anniversary of the coup by sending his personal reflections to the military junta "without hope of being heard, with the certainty of being hunted, but true, nevertheless, to the commitment which I assumed a long time ago, to bear witness in difficult times."

The whole affair remains to be investigated as Walsh investigated the garbage-dump killings 20 years earlier. His disappearance was not reported in the Argentine newspapers, apart from oblique references in the English-language Buenos Aires Herald. It was later learned that the day of his disappearance his house in the Buenos Aires suburb of San Fernando was surrounded by uniformed men, sacked (even the bathroom fittings were removed), and then subjected to a fusillade of shots, as if the attackers had been angered to discover the place unoccupied. But Walsh has never reappeared, and the quotation printed on the flyleaf of Operación masacre⁹ has today taken on the ominous overtones of a prophecy come tragically true:

A rain of blood has blinded my eyes . . .
and I wander in a land of barren boughs:
If I break them I bleed;
I wander in a land of dry stones:
If I touch them they bleed.
How can I ever return
to the soft quiet seasons?

In December 1977 and January 1978 reports circulating abroad, credited to the Clandestine News Agency (ANCLA) but believed to be bogus by his family, said that Walsh, who was described as a second officer in the Montoneros and responsible for placing a bomb in the Buenos Aires police security headquarters which killed 22 people and injured another 60, had died in a gun battle. This was never confirmed.¹⁰

II. Trampling the Grapes of Wrath

What had changed in the 20 years that had passed since Rodolfo Walsh's first foray into the minefield of investigative reporting and the inflammatory letter that resulted in his disappearance? There had, indeed, been a deep sea change in the country. There was a national sense of impending doom before the military stepped in on March 24, 1976, brought about by the rising crescendo of violence, the visible signs of collapse in the government, and the failure of either the Peronist movement or opposition politicians to come up with any alternative other than the all-too-sadly-familiar military coup. But overriding the shared frustration of another failure--never mind the causes--of civilian government was the country's state of psychic shock, which was the outcome of the terrorist assault on the fragile fabric of Argentine society. The military were gripped with a desperate sense of mission. Although the remark has been seized upon as proof of some diabolic intention on the part of the military, Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Idelfonso Pascarelli's ringing statement to the troops of his artillery unit, in the presence of all the top Army commanders and representatives of the other two armed forces on June 12, 1976, is surely better seen as a revelation of the state of mind of the armed forces two and a half months after the "no quarter" war against "subversive delinquency" had begun:

Destiny has driven us to live in the fire. Never before in its history has our land seen a struggle similar to the one we face today, which does not recognize either moral nor natural limits, which is fought above all good and evil and which exceeds the human level even though men provoke it. Not to see this or not to want to see it is not simply blindness but the greatest possible offense to God and the Fatherland.

On the same page 10 of the morning newspaper La Opinión in which Pascarelli's speech is reported on June 13, 1976, another Army commander, General Cristino Nicolaidis, is quoted as saying that:

An individual who is involved in subversion, who has taken part in combat, is a delinquent and for me he is irrecoverable.

These declarations were made in the heat of the battle against terrorism after the armed forces had suffered a long list of casualties and deaths, feeling, while under civilian rule, impotent. Impassioned speeches at seemingly endless funeral services were trampling the grapes of wrath throughout the 1970s.

From June 30, 1969 to the end of 1978, terrorists killed 99 members of the Army, including five generals and 23 colonels. The Navy had 19 of its men assassinated, two of them admirals. The Air Force lost ten men, seven of them senior officers. A total of 347 policemen, nine border guards, and six prison officers were killed by terrorists. The wives of two senior Army officers as well as the wife of the Federal Police chief were also killed by terrorists, along with four children, including the 15-year-old daughter of the Navy commander-in-chief.¹¹

Some later statements give an idea of the attitude of mind of the military after the terrorists had been defeated.¹² On May 29, 1979, which is Army Day, the then commander-in-chief and member of the ruling Junta, Lieutenant General Roberto Viola, explained:

This war, like all wars, has a dimension that is different from the value of life. For that reason it is a war. Dams and barriers are broken. Life and death are gambled away in the pursuit of victory. The worst thing is not the loss of life; the worst thing is to lose the war. For that reason, the Army, which today has restored the value of life, can say to the country that we have carried out our mission. That is the only and, we believe, sufficient explanation. The price of this is known to the country and to the Army, too. This war, like all wars, had an aftermath: tremendous wounds that time and only time can heal. These wounds are the number of casualties: the dead, the wounded, the detainees, the ones who are absent forever. The Army knows it and feels it because it is not inhumane or insensitive. The terrorists, with unbridled arrogance believed that by assassinations they could break the will to win of the Armed Forces and of the immense majority of the population. Unfortunately, the terrorists were men and women, who had been born on this generous soil. They were wrong; they were deceived and

they deceived and darkened the land of their birth. They deceived their supporters, whose anxiety they provoked which nobody today can legitimately assuage. These circumstances will undoubtedly widen the breach left in the wake of the war, because blameless families, affected by the pain, are also Argentine. The Army knows this and feels this. Its only explanation is the liberty which our homeland entrusted to it for safe keeping.

And this year, also on Army Day, his successor, Lieutenant General Fortunato Galtieri added:

The ethical justification of the struggle against subversion lies in our victory.

The "profound moral conviction" of the military was noted by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights,¹³ which quotes the chief of the Argentine delegation to the Inter-American Defense Board, Division General Santiago Omar Riveros, as saying:

. . . We waged the war with a doctrine in hand, with written orders from the Superior Commands, we never needed paramilitary organizations, despite accusations to the contrary, we had a surplus of our own strength and legal organization for combat against irregular forces in an unconventional war. . . . It is a simple matter of not knowing or being aware that this war of ours was conducted by the Generals, Admirals or Brigadiers in each force. It was not conducted by a dictator or any dictatorship, as world public opinion is being led to believe. The war was conducted by the Military Junta of my country through the Chiefs of the Armed Forces. . . .

General Riveros also declared, in the same speech, that:

. . . in subversive wars, where the actors use every means of terror at their disposition and all the arms they can find, anyone who tries to defend himself with bouquets of roses will lose the war.

. . . a counter-offensive was launched against us from the pro-Soviet centers and those who play their game, demanding disappeared people and blaming governments for not using orthodox methods to fight such delinquents.

The statements by the military had a cryptic ring from the start. In his very first speech as President in April 1976, Lieutenant General Jorge Videla announced:

Only the state, for which we cannot accept the role of a mere spectator, will monopolize the use of force and consequently only its institutions will carry out the functions connected with internal security.

But the unexplained disappearances continued, and two years later his words were recalled after 13 people, including two French nuns, were kidnapped by men claiming to be police.¹⁴

And so other statements of President Videla were examined in an attempt to find a clue to the growing list of disappearances. In Montevideo, in October 1975, General Videla had warned in a speech to assembled Army commanders from all over the Americas that "as many people will die in Argentina as is necessary to restore order." But President Videla himself had also consistently tried to deal with the problem of the disappeared people, and admitted that some people may have been the victims of "excesses" committed in the battle against subversion.¹⁵ Yet as the Argentine Council of Bishops pointed out on April 10, 1978, the admission of excesses had not, as far as it was known, resulted in any measures to deal with them or any punishment for those responsible for them.¹⁶

Whether angry, defensive, or simply elliptic--and all were made largely in response to foreign pressure--the military statements have done nothing to pierce the area of darkness surrounding the disappeared people. "Do not ask for an explanation where there are none," said Lieutenant General Viola in an earlier speech.¹⁷ There are explanations, of course, but it is safer not to ask. Since the coup, 68 journalists have disappeared, at least another 36 have been killed, and hundreds have gone into exile. The Argentine press's response to the challenge of what will surely rank as the country's major story in recent years and, perhaps, the greatest human tragedy in Argentine history has given us the answer to the famous question of the Zen master: "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" Another answer came from the news editor of La Nación, in response to a question from a visiting BBC correspondent who asked him why the newspaper was silent about the disappearances: "Our readers are not interested. . . ."18

It is simple to trace the surface cause of the press's ban on news about the disappeared. On April 22, 1976, Clarín reported that following a meeting on the previous day between editors and the Public Information Secretariat, it had been agreed that there would be no more restrictions on the press. Prior censorship, which is specifically forbidden in the Argentine Constitution, had been imposed for 24 hours following the coup the previous month but had been abandoned because of bureaucratic snags--there were arguments between officers of different services over what should be censored and enormous delays ensued. Metropolitan editors had also agreed to cooperate with the new government after a set of "principles and procedures" for the mass media had been distributed to the press. (See Appendix) But on the evening of April 22, all newspapers received telephone calls instructing them:

As from today it is forbidden to report, comment on, or make reference to subversive incidents, the appearance of bodies and the deaths of subversive elements and/or members of the security forces unless they are announced by a responsible official source.

A second paragraph, apparently an afterthought, added: "This includes kidnappings and disappearances."

In the federal capital only La Prensa and the Buenos Aires Herald reported the new restriction, which was seen as an attempt to cover up the news of the appearance of bodies bearing the hallmarks of brutal assassination. A report on the discovery of the murdered victims appeared in the Buenos Aires Herald, but they went unreported by other newspapers.

The ban on the reporting of the disappearances was never made formal. Those newspapers which questioned the telephoned message were simply provided with an unsigned slip of paper, containing the typewritten instructions, at Government House, but the new rules were never issued on official paper or with any signature. The Buenos Aires Herald made a point of securing copies of habeas corpus writs and continued to publish reports of disappearances that it could check out. Its offices were besieged by people, often frightened at the thought of publishing anything about their missing relatives but all seeking advice and not knowing what to do to trace them. La Opinión, a tabloid newspaper modeled on Le Monde and founded, edited, and partly owned by Jacobo Timerman, often published reports of disappearances which had been published previously in the Herald, attributing them to the latter.

III. A Growing Climate of Fear

As self-censorship took hold of Argentina amidst an increasing climate of fear, only a handful of newspapers, most of them in the provinces, continued to try to keep their readers reasonably well informed about what was going on.

The cover-up of the disappearances, the decision to ignore silent demonstrations which began to be held regularly by mothers of missing children every Thursday afternoon in Plaza de Mayo, and the alacrity with which information published abroad was denounced as being part of an "anti-Argentine" campaign, while no attempt was made to probe its veracity, can be explained by the press's instinct for survival on one hand and the wish, on the part of the overwhelming majority of the press, to support the military. Perhaps some editors were nudged into blind acceptance of the new order or refrained from questioning the restrictions imposed on the press by a feeling of guilt about their acceptance in the past of what they were now condemning so vociferously. At the same time, the knowledge that journalists were being arrested, beaten up, and even secretly imprisoned--apart from the continuing terror of the disappearances--without even their own publications printing a word, most certainly strengthened their natural caution.¹⁹ Mea culpas abounded in the public prints, and some magazines managed to turn them to commercial advantage. An example was the magazine Gente's special issue covering the period from May 25, 1973 to the day of the coup²⁰ which played up all the disastrous events the magazine had scrupulously played down while they were actually taking place.

Harassment, fear, and guilt feelings aborted any birth of a "loyal opposition" press after the coup. The press became a largely laudatory chorus. Even those newspapers, principally Clarín, which were totally opposed to the junta's choice of economy minister and policies felt that in order to attack economic measures they truly detested it was necessary to sing loud songs in praise of the military. Many journalists withdrew

from the fray to mental or physical exile. Rodolfo Terragno retired honorably, closing down his left-of-center magazine Cuestionario on June 30 rather than accept the directions of the Public Information Secretariat. But he left the country after his name was placed on a "death list" which was circulated among other journalists.

What is more difficult to understand is the attitude of long-established independent newspapers such as La Nación, whose prestige was so great and whose reputation protected them from any insidious charges that their editors were closet Marxists or their staffs infiltrated by terrorists. Why did they simply turn a blind eye to the highly visible and undoubtedly newsworthy consequences of a war against terrorism which was producing a new strain of terrorism more venomous, in some aspects, than the evil the military had pledged to extirpate from Argentina? In the early days after the coup it was possible to believe--and I have no doubt that this was true--that reporters had only a hazy idea of what was going on and editors had no idea whatsoever that terrorist methods were being used to counter terrorism. There was an immediate and natural revulsion to the suggestion that the security forces themselves could be involved in kidnapping. Most people believed that the cases that they heard about could be attributed to parapolice groups running wild or vigilante vengeance squads. The government itself consistently and insistently promised that it would monopolize the use of force so that even relatives of victims could not bring themselves to accept the fairly convincing evidence that abductions were too well planned, involved too many men and too many vehicles and too much equipment, as well as the clear complicity of the police, to be the work of free-lance agents.

As the truth gradually dawned on working journalists who were as close to the action as the military allowed,²¹ the input of "guidance" by the military increased. Journalists were told that there were always missing people in wars and that innocent people were killed in them. And then it was explained to them that the armed forces were fighting a war like none other in the history of mankind. And given the murky circumstances and shadowy incidents involving their own colleagues which were going unreported, it is not surprising that nobody had the temerity to point out that it is the basic duty of the journalist to inform the public up to the limit of his possibilities.

It is not impossible that the decision of the press as a whole to take a vow of silence about the disappeared people was influenced by two other factors: a disquieting feeling that perhaps the press had devoted too much space and--in some cases--awed respect to the terrorists and their exploits in the past; and that the excesses of the press during the somewhat libertine first year and a half of the Peronist government had to be paid for in the coin of total support for the regime.

IV. The Crucial Breakdown

From May 25, 1973 until the end of 1974 when the Montoneros went back underground and were eventually outlawed, the newsstands of Buenos Aires groaned under the weight of an outpouring of previously banned pornography and political obscenity. Magazines which openly extolled violence vied with the flowering of eroticism and (for Argentina) exotic

"how to do it" books on sex. A new crop of humor magazines appeared which, basking in the warm and grimy water of the new permissiveness, brought a large number of unlovely obsessions bubbling up from the depths of the national psyche. But it was the glorification of violence and the cult of murder that was the most disturbing manifestation of the state of mind and revelation of the passions of the revolutionary left. Some of these publications, like the issue of La Causa Peronista²² which carried a chillingly detailed account of the kidnapping and murder of former president Lieutenant General Pedro Aramburu by two of his killers, caused a deep impact on public opinion and is still cited today as proof that the terrorists were and are ravenous monsters, quite beyond the pale of normal human feeling. There were scores of political magazines on sale openly, representing most shades of opinion. Some were agonizingly dull, but others were horrific. The April 17-May 3, 1974 edition of Liberación por la patria socialista, for example, carried another anatomy of a murder written by one of the terrorists who planned the killing. The article, one of a series called "Revolutionary chronicles," was illustrated by a photograph of the victim, Admiral Hermes Quijada, which is gradually obliterated by what appear to be bullet holes as the grisly narrative unfolds.²³ These surface expressions of "the new left" in Argentina are compelling evidence of disturbed minds and itchy fingers on triggers. They also helped to convince many people that not only were the terrorists irrational--which is an acceptable if debatable point of view--but that they were also diabolic and unworthy of study, not meriting even an attempt to understand what made them the way they were, let alone grant them a scintilla of compassion.

The most dangerous reflex action to the cruelty and studied inhumanity of the terrorists, however, has been the out-of-hand dismissal of any consideration of the possibility that the elements which fused to form these modern demons could be products of flaws in society. With its thought processes blocked by a rush of blood to the head, and fear clutching at its heart, the press was finally left with only indignation to fire apoplectic editorials. But even these outraged expressions of civilized rejection of barbarity had a somewhat hollow ring. It was, after all, only yesterday that most of the press was using soothing euphemisms such as "special formations" to describe the terrorists. The semantic evolution from "guerrillas" through "extremists" on to "illegal organizations," stopping only briefly on the usage trail at a committed word such as "terrorist" before adopting the now obligatory label of "subversive delinquent," is an illustration of the press's sensitivity to the shifting nature of power in the process that Argentina has been undergoing over the past decade of intensified violence.

The vulnerability of the press cannot be underestimated either. Individual newspapers were consistently under attack throughout the 1970s. Ultra-right-wing publications such as Nueva Provincia in Bahía Blanca, toughened up by Peronist persecution during the 1940s and 1950s, immediately fell foul of strong-arm unions when the Peronists returned to power, and were subjected to strikes, boycotts, and armed attacks. Most major metropolitan and provincial newspapers came under attack from one side or the other--and quite often from both. La Voz del Interior of Córdoba, one of the leading provincial newspapers and highly respected for its democratic views and its fearless and impartial reporting, was visited on

January 23, 1975 by hooded men, whose police boots and the bottoms of their uniformed trousers were clearly visible. They calmly ordered all the staff out of the printing plant and proceeded to blow it up, destroying the printing machinery. Only an international and national outcry provided La Voz del Interior with the guarantees that enabled it to go on printing, using the press of another newspaper in Córdoba, despite continued threats and harassment from the right-wing Peronist government in power in Córdoba at the time. La Voz del Interior welcomed the military coup with undisguised relief. So did most newspapers and journalists, because they believed that the threats that many of them had received by now from both sides would cease arriving by mail, by telephone, and in the form of bombs that destroyed their homes, offices, or plants. The relationship between the terrorists and the press was not symbiotic in Argentina. To achieve the effect they required, the terrorists believed in direct action. For example, when the Marxist-Leninist People's Revolutionary Army (ERP) decided that they wanted a pre-election statement published just before Argentina went to the polls in March 1973, they kidnapped Hector García, the proprietor of Crónica and Channel 11 television station, and dictated what they wanted printed on the front page of Crónica on March 9. Just prior to the next elections, when Perón and his wife received a massive 62.8 percent of the votes, the "August 22" splinter group of the ERP kidnapped the attorney of Clarín and secured the publication of a front-page statement and several scurrilous articles inside and on the editorial page in return for his freedom.²⁴ The same day, the newspaper was attacked by a group of right-wing trade-union thugs, who shot up the newspaper offices, wounding two members of the staff, and hurled incendiary bombs into the printing plant. David Kraiselburd, the editor of El Día of La Plata, one of the country's staunchest champions of democracy and freedom of the press, was killed on July 16, 1974, when police closed in on the hideout where he was being held by terrorists. El Día suffered other threats and harassment from the left and then intimidation from the right because of its dedication to the principles of independent journalism. Most magazines and newspapers have been under the gun, rocked by bombs or subjected to other forms of intimidation at one time or another. From the extreme right-wing nationalist magazine Cabildo, which is noted for its eulogies of Hitler and Nazism and its Der Sturmer-like attacks on Jews, and whose editor was threatened with assassination in a dummy copy of his own publication, to unsophisticated armed attacks by rightists on left-wing newspapers and vice versa, the entire press in Argentina has suffered one form of terrorism or another and quite often both at the same time. A case in point, involving one exposed and totally unprotected individual, follows.

On December 6, 1976, Roberto Vacca, a 34-year-old magazine writer, was abducted while returning home on the Buenos Aires subway after completing the editing of his weekly television program, a travelogue with some investigative pretensions, called "Secret Argentina." His family and friends aroused the alarm the next day by doing the rounds of all Buenos Aires newspapers. By badgering editors, the family secured some publicity in three metropolitan newspapers, arguing Vacca's reputation as one of Argentina's best-known journalists and his clear innocence of any involvement in subversion. But a majority of the major newspapers ignored Vacca's abduction. He was simply another unmentionable desaparecido--different only from the other disappeared people (already measured in the thousands only eight months after the military coup) in that he was a journalist and

had a few friends in the media who were prepared to risk the military's displeasure if publication might save Vacca's life. But the partial press campaign for his release, led by the English-language daily newspaper the Buenos Aires Herald, which printed a running story, day after day, with a photograph of Vacca and appeals to witnesses of his kidnapping to come forward, did have some effect. The Church raised its voice in protest and the police also asked for information--a gesture some saw as shamefaced and others as cynical. And on December 22, Roberto Vacca reappeared. He received reporters at a table on a cafe terrace and handed them a prepared statement. He said that he had nothing to add to his written description of his three weeks in captivity. His statement was an extraordinary document. While he managed to give an idea of the harrowing circumstances under which he was held (he was blindfolded throughout and confined to a tiny cell with a radio playing at full volume for hours on end), his statement tried to present his captors in the best possible light. He went to great pains to praise his tormentors, declaring that he had been "magnificently treated" and pointing out that his kidnappers had been so considerate that they had noted that his birthday fell on December 18, and on that day they had given him sweets as a gift. Roberto Vacca knew, like other kidnap victims who had extolled the humanity of their kidnappers, that he would have to live, in the future, with the knowledge that he might be picked up again at any time and be asked to explain his behavior. His pathetic efforts to emphasize the "humanity" of his captors, while subtly trying to give an impression of the horror of his ordeal, responded to reality. He wanted to go on living and working in Argentina, and in order to do this he had to give his obedience and pay his obeisance to the constituted power--at that time the shadowy men with guns in unmarked cars who could decide whether he lived or died.

Roberto Vacca's joy upon being released was short-lived. The declaration demanded by his kidnappers as part of the price to be paid for his freedom--and as payment for the unwelcome publicity--infuriated the Montoneros, and on December 23 one of the terrorist commando groups released an open letter to him. Accusing him of aligning himself with the government, the Montoneros advised him to leave the country or face the consequences: ". . .our combat group will act with decision and it will not be 'handshakes and sweets' that you will receive from us." Roberto Vacca left immediately for Montevideo and has lived in exile in the Uruguayan capital ever since.

Roberto Vacca's experience is probably unique. His situation, as someone in the middle, someone between two fires, is not. Because he was a journalist who had many friends working for the media, a hue and cry went up when he disappeared--although coverage of the case was not complete (La Nación, for example, only reported the affair after his release) and for Vacca's protection there was no coverage of the Montoneros' threat. But the publicity his case received, while it may have saved his life, would not have helped him get a job, if he had not been threatened by the Montoneros or if he had decided to take a risk and stay in Argentina. Yet, simply because he was a journalist he was afforded some protection. Nevertheless, unless friends or relatives acted quickly to secure massive publicity, a victim of an abduction may have his fate sealed. In the case of two prominent journalists--Rafael Perrota, former editor-proprietor of Buenos Aires' leading financial daily El Cronista Comercial and his

successor, Julian Delgado--who disappeared in June 1977 and June 1978, respectively, the decision of both families to keep the disappearances secret in the hope of securing their release through the payment of a ransom or through high-level contacts may have been crucial in deciding their fate. In most of the recorded cases of missing journalists, there was a delayed outcry or no press comment at all. This may be explained by bemused shock of relatives who simply did not know what to do in such unfamiliar circumstances. Many assumed that their relatives had been arrested and would eventually be traced in jail. Sometimes paralyzing fear set in simply because of the terrorizing effect of the disappearance itself. When someone vanishes and all the normal procedures adopted to trace people or ascertain whether they have been arrested produce no information but simply deepen the mystery and heighten fear, the sense of despair and hopelessness can be overwhelming. In the face of the enormity of the crime of refusing to grant the victim a decent burial, or even acknowledge his death--something which has outraged humanity from the dawn of civilization, and has been abominated from Sophocles to Sartre--people quail and society becomes a wasteland; its institutions--police, courts, ministries, armed forces, the church--seem a cruel mockery. Here is the crucial breakdown of the press in Argentina, the single hand beating the air soundlessly.

It is not that journalists did not know. Along with the 68 men and women of the press who have disappeared, apparently forever, there are those who, like Vacca, have resurfaced after their abduction. On record are three cases: photographer Eduardo Frías vanished in July 1977 for two weeks but gave no explanation; Oscar Serrat, who works for Associated Press, was abducted on November 11 of the same year but released after 18 hours following an outcry by the international and national press. By contrast, Juan Ramón Nazar, editor of La Opinión, a newspaper in Trenque Lauquen in the province of Buenos Aires, was kidnapped on July 21, 1977 by unidentified armed men and remained a nonperson until he suddenly returned home over a year later, on August 26, 1978. He has steadfastly refused to give any information about his abduction.

V. The Terrorist Legacy

When journalists do not want to know and even refuse to inform the public when they are forced to know, newspapers have no reason to exist. Their role as entertainers or propagandists can be performed much more effectively by radio and television. As both these means of communication are under direct military control in Argentina today (or under strict supervision in the case of the relatively few privately owned radio stations), newspapers, as in Jefferson's time, provide the only counterbalance to government. And when, as also in Argentina today, military rule has replaced representative institutions entirely, newspapers have a duty to represent the people. This--with a few honorable exceptions--the Argentine press has manifestly failed to do. All investigative reporting in areas relating to the military government has virtually come to a stop. The civilian members of the administration, however, remain fair game. Even more shamefully, the press has refused to take up cases brought directly to their notice by the people involved. When people searching for missing relatives went to report the circumstances of the disappearances to newspapers, they were treated as if they were cranks. Only by using

personal influence, through contacts or parentage, was it possible for relatives of missing people to get newspapers to publish news items. The newspapers did, however, accept paid announcements--priced at double the rate of normal advertisements. This had the effect of sounding the alarm in the case of some abductions and also helped to inform the public. Successive advertisements placed in La Prensa and La Nación (which would not always accept them) by human rights organizations had a tremendous impact, particularly a list of over 2,000 disappeared people which took up three entire pages of the May 17, 1978 issue of La Prensa. But government warnings dissuaded La Prensa from publishing a complete list of over 5,800 names at a later date. Parents of missing children have gone to enormous lengths in an attempt to secure a sympathetic ear and, if possible, some help in tracing them. A wealthy Jewish industrialist whose 22-year-old son and 21-year-old daughter-in-law were abducted from their home on May 18, 1978 has virtually given up his business to devote his life to efforts to trace the couple. He has conducted an advertisement campaign in all the major newspapers appealing to God for help. Then he prepared booklets which he mailed to every bishop in Argentina.²⁵ He writes letter after letter, makes visit after visit to government offices, and swears that he will go on until he has located them. He refuses to believe that they are dead. He does not think that the press will ever help him. His hope lies in the Church, which has consistently, although cautiously, called upon the government to take steps to resolve the multiple dislocations caused by the problem of the disappeared people.

This untackled issue, like a dormant volcano, overshadows all the other malaises of a society with faulty communications simply because of its potential explosiveness. But the aftermath of terrorism and the continuance of counter-terror have caused profound traumas which can only be treated if they can be discussed openly. The savagery of the terrorists has saddled Argentina with a terrible legacy--a set of standards that are predicated on what the terrorists did. Terrorism is presented as an absolute evil so that any means used to counter it can only be, at worst, a lesser evil. From this argument flows the rationalization that anyone who criticizes anything done in the fight against subversion is himself subversive. Who, then, can make a stand on principles, or even professional ethics, in the case of the press? Very few, indeed, and it may be seen that those who have done so have been standing on very firm ground--or have thought they have been.

VI. Fear is the Censor

The one newspaper that has consistently supported human rights--the human rights of the victims of the left-wing terrorists to begin with, and then additionally of the people sucked into the entrails of the anti-subversive apparatus--has been a newspaper with a tiny circulation (17,000) and which is published, apart from its editorials, in English. The Buenos Aires Herald, although consistently liberal throughout its 104 years of existence, was looked upon by the ultra-left as the mouthpiece of imperialism and the multinationals. This helped the newspaper insofar as it was not looked upon as being totally Marxist when the pendulum swung the other way, but it is as deeply detested by right-wing nationalists as it is by left-wing extremists. Its views are banal: its editorials call for democracy and decency, it is opposed to torture, the death penalty

(although it has wavered over this principle when it seemed that there was no end to the escalation of cruelty and barbarity), and doing away with people without trial or decent burial. It has stuck to its guns in the face of harassment, threats, and intimidation. Its editor, the author of this paper, was jailed briefly in April 1977, charged with violating a security law that forbids any mention of the subversive organizations (the Herald had reported that the Montoneros' leaders had fled the country) but finally cleared in September. He finally took a year's leave of absence and left Argentina after an orchestrated campaign of intimidation which climaxed in a death threat to the family addressed to his 11-year-old son. James Neilson took over the editorship in March 1980 and received no threats until the beginning of July, when, in a two-week period, he was subjected to a systematic terror campaign culminating in a telephoned death threat. Over a fortnight, 18 bombs were placed at or posted to principal Herald advertisers, who were warned not to support the newspaper. Neilson received mysterious visits at his flat, false advertisements were placed in another newspaper in his name, and menacing letters were sent to his wife. In all, apart from the bombs, one of which was defused outside the apartment building where Neilson lives, the Herald's editor was subjected to 10 acts of intimidation within almost as many days. Both Herald editors happen to be British subjects and had the protection which this affords. After meeting with the British ambassador, President Videla announced that Neilson would be granted "every protection" by the Argentine government.

La Prensa has consistently argued against outside interference in Argentine affairs and has been highly critical of human rights organizations. But although it did not cover disappearances, nor comment on them, it did agree to carry advertisements by relatives trying to get some action from the government and some reaction from public opinion in the hope of discovering the fate of missing people. La Prensa's columns have also carried the most outspoken and courageous articles on the plight of the disappeared people. They have been written by the newspaper's regular columnist, Manfred Schönfeld, who returned from Europe, where he had served as the newspaper's correspondent in London and Bonn, to discover what he described as "a taboo which could become a trauma."²⁶ Schönfeld has been the target of thinly disguised threats and undisguised warnings, again from unidentified sources.

Riobo Caputo, the editor of El Litoral of Santa Fe, thought that nobody stood on firmer ground than he. His newspaper faithfully reflects his arch conservatism and nationalism. Caputo merely printed a news item reporting the presence in Nicaragua of Argentine terrorist leaders. He was thrown into jail on July 24, 1979 for violating the security law (the same charge brought against the editor of the Buenos Aires Herald) but because of ill health was allowed to stay in his own home under house arrest. Although Caputo was cleared of all the charges against him in August, the security law, a piece of catch-all legislation brought in by the Peronist government when it was more interested in silencing the press than putting down terrorism, remains in force and can be used against any journalist who steps out of line. Bail is forbidden under the terms of the law, and the jail sentence, if the individual is found guilty, is from eight to ten years.

Jacobo Timerman, widely recognized as Argentina's most outstanding journalist, founded La Opinión in 1971. Modeled on Le Monde, the daily newspaper was an immediate success, hailed by many as the best newspaper in the Spanish-speaking world. Although it was left-wing in outlook to begin with, the editorial policy changed as the governments changed in Argentina. Timerman was hated by both extremes and recounts the story of how he once received two death threats in the same day--one from a right-wing murder squad and the other from Marxist terrorists. At the time of the coup, La Opinión backed the military and had been closed by Mrs. Perón's administration.²⁷ The newspaper's staff and its character placed it slightly to the left of center, but Timerman's Jewishness, his espousal of Zionism, and the appeal of his newspaper to left-wing intellectuals made him highly suspect. He was not standing on firm ground and he knew it; but after the Buenos Aires Herald, La Opinión was the most outspoken newspaper in defense of legality and civilized standards. On April 15, 1977 Timerman was arrested by an Army commando squad, disappeared for a while (during which time he underwent torture), and finally ended up in jail charged with aiding subversion. He was cleared of all the charges against him and allowed to return home under house arrest in 1978. Then, despite enormous international pressure on his behalf and a Supreme Court order calling for his release, he was held like a ritualistic scapegoat under an institutional act termed "revolutionary justice" by the government. He spent 30 months in captivity, and when he was finally released following a second Supreme Court ruling in his favor, one general rose up in rebellion despite the government's attempt to placate hostile Army opinion by expelling him from the country, stripping him of his citizenship, and confiscating most of his property. The saddest side of the Timerman affair was the failure of the rest of the press to stand by him. Only a handful of his colleagues spoke up in defense of his right to receive justice. Many were afraid to express their thoughts. If Timerman was accused of subversion--a charge that looked unlikely from the start and was rapidly revealed to be ludicrous long before the courts cleared him--then to defend him would run the risk of being found guilty by association. The failure of the press as a whole to stand by its own kind reveals the debilitating effect of fear. The Buenos Aires Herald editorialized:

No matter how free the Argentine press may be in theory, it is still not free from fear, which is a far more effective, insidious and debilitating censor than any official department set up for that purpose could ever be.²⁸

VII. The Terror Abates

Fear in Argentina has kept the truth from its people because the press has simply been too scared to report on the atrocities which cannot be laid at the doorstep of left-wing terrorists. In case after case, where out-of-control security forces are suspected of being responsible for killings, the press has covered up evidence in order to give the impression that left-wing groups were to blame.

Fear in Argentina has created a situation in which there is more information available outside Argentina about what has happened over the past four and a half years than in the country. The people of Argentina

have a distorted, lopsided view of their own history which could cause a trauma similar to that which afflicts the German nation. Yet while the Argentine people may, because of the failure of the press, be able to say they "didn't know," the feeling, already apparent today, that they really "didn't want to know" may strengthen as the years pass. The press has already missed two opportunities to provide the public with a more balanced view of the past. As early as 1976 the government invited Amnesty International to send a mission to Argentina. The report of the mission was published early in 1977, but the Argentine press ignored the Amnesty International report and published only the government's response. The same technique was adopted to cover up the findings of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, whose report was published on April 11, 1980, although the government did list the Commission's conclusions and recommendations--four pages out of a 294-page report--as well as its own 154-page reply. There is a dangerous imbalance between the flow of information within Argentina and the information available abroad through the work of foreign correspondents who, although harassed and hampered and occasionally threatened, have managed to report--and abroad people do know the sound of two hands clapping. Yet many foreign correspondents have not been satisfied with their coverage of Argentina.²⁹ However, detailed foreign reporting of events in Argentina that have not been covered by its own press only increases the distortion between "reality" as sensed by Argentines from the information available to them and what they see as a "bad image" based on malicious information received abroad. The truth, of course, is that the Argentine government has been trying to cover up part of the truth while its opponents abroad (who run the gamut from fugitive terrorists seeking to continue the struggle through the media, to well-intentioned human rights crusaders) have been trying to put the worst interpretation on another part of the truth.

There is no substitute for a free press, if you really want to know what people are feeling and if you want to avoid an unexpected kick from behind (as both the Shah and Somoza learned to their cost). The most we can hope for in Argentina is a gradually freer press, and despite the setbacks the outlook is better than it was. The 1979 World Press Freedom Review of the International Press Institute notes:

One of the bright spots of 1979 was a marked reduction in the number of journalists murdered, kidnapped or imprisoned in Argentina. Whereas in the previous three years 57 journalists had been listed as missing and a large number had been found murdered, in 1979 the terror abated.³⁰

The review went on to note two murders, one kidnapping, and an eight-day abduction, as well as two arrests and one death threat, but continued:

There is more reason to hope, however, that the practice of journalism may be getting safer as the military government feels itself less threatened by armed dissidents and in greater control of the inflationary economy.

As fear lifts, so must despair. A catatonic view of Argentina, a country troubled but also blessed with diversity, responds to mood rather than a detached review of Argentina's resources. It is too easy to paint

a grim picture. In a report on a colloquium on Argentina³¹ held earlier this year, the rapporteur, Jack Child, outlined these perceptions of the future, as drawn from the discussion:

Perceptions of the future. . . fell generally into the following categories:

1. The pessimists (seemingly a majority), who saw no real hope for a change from the pattern of frustration, malaise and perpetual crisis or any possibility of basic national conciliation after the violence of the past decade.
2. The extreme pessimists, who predicted a chaotic self-destruction of the system which could be avoided only by increasing repression, terror and counter-terror.
3. The cautious optimists, who saw signs of more responsible political actors, of more rational economic policies and of a willingness among the military to withdraw from the active political scene.
4. The unexpectedists, who pointed out that Argentina had come up with surprising developments in the past (Peronismo was given as an example) and might do so again.

Peter H. Smith, writing in Current History, calls for an effort to grasp the complexity of Argentina and realize that "the problem is intellectual and political and economic, and it is profoundly human."³²

The problem in Argentina itself is also the lack of information and an atmosphere of fear in which nothing can be discussed frankly. Without a concerned and committed press, none of the institutions can function properly. The return of rule of law, for example, depends on a press that will insist that justice be done. A government without newspapers, without an effective press, is two severed hands, for without genuine information and without an informed public opinion, there will be no sound of hands clapping evermore.

VIII. Some Conclusions

In the last three months of President María Estela Perón's government there were at least 20 acts of intimidation and violence against the press.³³ Democracy, such as it was, flickered out in a cacophony of mutual recrimination between a wounded press and a dying government. In those last three months, two journalists disappeared, one was kidnapped and threatened, three more were arrested, newspaper offices and the homes of journalists were attacked with firebombs and machine guns, the country's top-rated television discussion program was banned, and the media was subjected to death threats from both left-wing terrorists and right-wing murder squads as well as a barrage of legal action from the government. Mrs. Perón, in an hysterical speech, denounced "speculative subversion by those who want journalistic terrorism as a system." The Argentine Newspaper Publishers' Association rejoined by denouncing the threats, attacks, kidnappings, and murders, and by warning that freedom of the press was embattled and in dire danger. During the entire 34 months of the Peronist coalition

government, the press was under the gun, a target for both left- and right-wing extremists. Under the elected government, press freedom was progressively restricted. All privately owned metropolitan television stations were taken over by the government and plans were made to place all radio and television under state control. Apart from security laws which were used to silence the press, other legislation was introduced with the aim of controlling the flow of information within Argentina and from abroad.³⁴ The press was harried by strikes, by the printers' union, which even sought to dictate the content of newspapers,³⁵ and by the government's failure to pay multimillion dollar debts for its own advertisements. State control of the media was also extended by the creation of an agency, an adjunct to the state's own news-service, Telam, to handle government advertising. Harassment and intimidation of the press characterized the entire period of the constitutional government. At the same time there was a distinct polarization of the press, with the initial blossoming of some 50 left-wing magazines and newspapers, and the response, as the pendulum swung the other way, of about 40 right-wing publications. On both extremes were magazines calling for blood and violence. On May 18, 1975, the body of Jorge Money, a young business news reporter for La Opinión, was found in a park on the outskirts of Buenos Aires. His body bore the marks of savage torture. Journalists called a strike which closed most Buenos Aires newspapers, but within a few months the murder of journalists seemed almost commonplace and no motive for a strike.

It is against this background of fear that the response of the press, in welcoming the military coup of March 24, 1976, must be seen. The press looked to the military for protection--particularly those centrist and left-of-center journalists who had undergone constant threats from an organization calling itself the Argentine Anti-Communist (sometimes Anti-Imperialist) Alliance. Some journalists, such as Jacobo Timerman, the editor of La Opinión, had been receiving death threats from both the extreme left and the ultra right-wing "Triple A." The press, along with the vast majority of the Argentine people, wanted an end to all violence and believed that the military would swiftly impose law and order.

Weakened by years of compromise, disillusioned by its experience under the "democratic" rule of the Peronist government from 1973 to 1976, and brought to its knees by the violent assault on it by both the left- and right-wing terrorists, the press was in bad shape to fulfill the difficult, delicate, and dangerous role of sustaining respect for individual rights. It failed the test, but the press was partially successful in keeping hope alive by reminding the military of their oft-repeated promise to found "a modern, stable and pluralistic democracy" in Argentina. As the tide of fear recedes, the press may be able to do more in edging Argentina back to normality by encouraging the judiciary to show more independence and simply by publishing more information. The fear of terrorism--not just of the terrorists themselves but also the fear of appearing to support them--continues to dominate everything in Argentina. The dehumanization of the enemy and the pathological urge to see enemies everywhere has been aided by the failure of the press to do its basic job in reporting the news. The press put on blinders when faced with the challenge of reporting the war against terrorism. It had been conditioned by decades of state intimidation and outright controls. And, in many cases, editors simply saw their role in suppressing news or in looking the other

way as a patriotic duty--the continuance of a tradition which enabled conservatives to view electoral fraud in the 1930s as in the national interest, which allowed loyal Peronists to brush off evidence of corruption and immorality as "mere anecdotes," and which eventually allows anyone to justify anything on the grounds of necessity or as the unfortunate means to ultimately good ends.

Secretaria de Estado de Prensa y Difusión (SEPYD)

PRINCIPLES AND PROCEDURES TO BE FOLLOWED
BY MASS COMMUNICATION MEDIA*

PRINCIPLES

1. Foster the restitution of fundamental values which contribute to the integrity of society; such as, for example: order--labour--hierarchy--responsibility--identity--honesty--etc., within the context of Christian morals.
2. Preserve the defence of the family institution.
3. Tend towards the informative and formative elements which contribute towards the nation's cultural enrichment in its widest spectrum.
4. Offer and promote, for youth, social models which answer to the values mentioned in (1) to replace and eradicate the present ones.
5. Strictly respect the dignity, the private life, honour, fame and reputation of the people.
6. Work towards the eradication of stimulants based on sexualism and criminal violence.
7. Take firm and consistent action against vice in all its manifestations.

PROCEDURES

8. Publish information checked at source and never of a sensationalist character.
9. Do not enter fields which are not for public debate because of their effect on audiences which are not prepared (educated) or because they are unsuited to their physical and mental age.
10. Eliminate all obscene words and images that are vulgar, shocking, or have double meanings.
11. Eradicate sources which seek effect or are truculent in the use of word or image.

*Source: Andrew Graham-Yooll, The Press in Argentina. See also notes 10, 24, and 33.

APPENDIX

12. Tend towards the correct use of the national language.
 13. The total prohibition of all forms of subliminal propaganda is reiterated.
 14. Eliminate all mass propagation of the opinion of persons not qualified or without specific authority to give opinions on subjects of public interest. This includes interviews and/or street polls.
 15. Journalistic articles should not be published or broadcast if they they have been paid for, unless the phrase "Advertising space" is prominently displayed and includes the name of the organisation or person responsible for it. This kind of publicity cannot be included on front pages or covers.
 16. Advertising and paid news items should not be included in news programmes on radio, TV, cinema, theatre, or any other cultural or information media.
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Carlos A. F. Corti, Capitán de Fragata,
Press Director

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¹The figure of 3,447 is the number of cases of disappeared people that the Interior Minister, General Albino Harguindeguy, said had been reported to the ministry in his statement to the Inter-American Human Rights Commission. He said that he had no information about 2,092 cases, that 172 of the names were repeated, 16 people on the list were currently detained, 73 had reappeared, and 18 were dead. The figure that the Commission considered the most realistic is 5,818 disappearances between January 7, 1975 and May 30, 1979. These are the cases documented by the Argentine Permanent Assembly for Human Rights, the Commission of Relatives of Disappeared People and Political Detainees, the Argentine League for the Rights of Man, and the Ecumenical Movement for Human Rights. (See Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Argentina by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Organization of American States, Washington, D.C., 1980, page 148.) The figure of 10,000 to 20,000 invariably cited by Amnesty International is based on the experience of human rights workers in Argentina, who have found that for every case reported, at least four cases remain undisclosed. This estimate is based on field work in small towns and is not backed by any firm evidence. In the U.S. State Department's annual review of the state of human rights around the world (published in the morning newspapers of February 6, 1980) another estimate is also included, that of the New York City Bar Association mission which visited Argentina in 1979 and said that it considered a figure of 10,000 as more accurate.

²See George Blanksten, Perón's Argentina (rev. ed.; New York: Russell & Russell, 1967), chapter entitled "On the Mind of Man," which deals with state of the press before and under Perón.

³Ibid., pp. 200-201.

⁴Ibid., p. 201.

⁵Calván Moreno, El Periodismo argentino (Buenos Aires: Editorial Claridad, 1944), p. 222.

⁶Raúl Jassen, Romper el peronismo (Buenos Aires: Editora de la Reconquista Criolla, 1977), p. 103.

⁷Rodolfo Walsh, Operación masacre (Buenos Aires: Sigla, 1957; Continental Service, 1964; Jorge Alvarez, 1969).

⁸See Testimony on secret detention camps in Argentina (London: Amnesty International, February 1980), and Testimony of Graciela Geuna on La Perla Camp (Córdoba) (London: Amnesty International, March 1980).

⁹The quotation attributed to T. S. Eliot, which is in English, appears in the 1957 and 1964 editions only.

¹⁰Andrew Graham-Yooll, The Press In Argentina 1973-8 (London: Writers and Scholars Educational Trust, May 1979), p. 143.

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- 11 El Terrorismo en la Argentina (Buenos Aires: Argentine Executive Power, 1976).
- 12 There were only three left-wing terrorist attacks of any significance in 1979 and none, so far, in 1980.
- 13 Inter-American Commission on Human Rights report, p. 135.
- 14 Buenos Aires Herald, April 18, 1978, p. 8, and April 5, 1976, p. 6.
- 15 La Opinión, December 13, 1977, p. 1.
- 16 Buenos Aires Herald.
- 17 See Reader's Digest, June 1980, p. 104.
- 18 Disappeared in Argentina (London: Index on Censorship, March 1980), p. 46.
- 19 Two random examples of incidents involving prominent journalists shortly after the coup: On May 3, Enrique Llamas de Madariaga, a leading television personality who was working at the time for Channel 11 and La Razón, was kidnapped from his home in Palermo Chico, the most fashionable neighborhood in Buenos Aires, by armed men in civilian clothes who produced police identity cards, and taken to a deserted spot near a major highway outside the federal capital and severely beaten up. Only the Buenos Aires Herald reported the incident and Llamas de Madariaga said he preferred not to comment. On July 20, Luis María Albamonte, who was editing Ultima Hora, the mass-circulation morning newspaper which had replaced Crónica when the latter was closed, charged with "sedition" in December 1974, was arrested and thrown in jail for eight days because the military objected to the way the newspaper had handled the report of the death, after a gun battle, of the leader of the People's Revolutionary Army, the Marxist-Leninist terrorist group. Albamonte's imprisonment was never reported.
- 20 Fotos-Hechos-Testimonios de 1035 Dramáticos días, published by Gente y la actualidad (Buenos Aires: Editorial Atantida, May 3, 1976).
- 21 Although reporters were given tours of the combat zones in the battle against rural guerrillas in the province of Tucumán, the press was not given facilities to cover operations against urban guerrillas.
- 22 La Causa Peronista, Buenos Aires, September 3, 1974. In the possession of the author.
- 23 Published by Editorial Liberación, Córdoba. In the possession of the author.
- 24 The Press in Argentina 1973-8, p. 33.
- 25 In the possession of the author.

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²⁶ See La Prensa, December 12, 1978, p. 11, and La Prensa, April 25, 1980, p. 9.

²⁷ The idea that events can be controlled by controlling the press is not new to Argentina. Perón first showed how it could be done, and the government organ he established--the Press Secretariat--was not dismantled and continued, under successive governments, to a greater or lesser degree depending upon their concern for the forms of democracy, to do its utmost to manage the news. Mrs. Perón complained of "journalistic terrorism"--by which she meant any criticism or news coverage that showed her government in an unfavorable light. She considered closing a newspaper, as her late husband had done almost a quarter of a century earlier. On November 9, 1975, La Opinión published a front-page editorial under the heading: "La Opinión should be closed." It would be a positive measure, said La Opinión, because "throughout the whole time that La Opinión does not appear, inflation will disappear, subversive delinquency--whether of Peronist or Marxist origin--will cease assassinating Argentine citizens, the ultra-right-wing terrorism will abstain from throwing cadavers into ditches. There will be no more kidnappings of executives to oblige them to grant wage increases, the ranchers will end their strikes and there will be plenty of beef, there will be no more wild-cat strikes and productivity will increase to the natural benefit of the companies and their workers, the internal conflicts affecting Justicialism will disappear, the economic situation will be more than booming, Brazil will produce less steel than Argentina and, on top of everything else, no public functionary will help himself to the people's money: corruption will cease to exist. What more can you ask of a government?" Three months later La Opinión was closed down for ten days for "continuously publishing false news or distorting the truth."

²⁸ Buenos Aires Herald, June 29, 1979, p. 10.

²⁹ In his book Coups & Earthquakes (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), Mort Rosenblum devotes a chapter (pp. 193-202) to the difficulties of reporting on human rights, based largely on his experience in Argentina.

³⁰ IPI Report, London, December 1979, p. 6.

³¹ Report on the "Colloquium on Contemporary Argentina," School of International Service, The American University, Washington, D.C., May 23-24, 1979.

³² Current History, February 1980; Argentina: The Uncertain Warriors, p. 86.

³³ The Press in Argentina (see also notes 10 and 24) contains a detailed chronology of the vicissitudes of the Argentine press during the Peronist Restoration and the first two years of the military government.

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³⁴Decree 587 of August 20, 1973 banned foreign news agencies from distributing national news in Argentina and also established obligatory (but, as it proved, unenforceable) limits on news content. The decree proposed that 50 percent of all news published must be Argentine, 30 percent must cover events in Latin America, with the remaining 20 percent devoted to the rest of the world. Decree 1273 of May 13, 1975 set up a registry for foreign news agencies with the expressed aim of preventing news about Argentina which is published abroad being reprinted in Argentina.

³⁵When Perón died on July 1, 1974, the printers' union decided that during the four days of official mourning newspapers must restrict their coverage to his life and events related to the funeral of the late president. Only the Buenos Aires Herald attempted to resist the imposition, and was unable to produce its issue of July 3 because printers refused to countenance the insertion of a summary of sports news, the weather forecast, a crossword puzzle, and a round-up of world news. La Prensa was bitterly attacked (and the printers' union suggested it should be closed down) because it published an obituary of Perón which was not laudatory.