

Reflections on the Anglo-Argentinian War

by J. Nef and F. Hallman

It is forbidden to kill; therefore all murderers are punished unless they kill in large numbers and to the sound of trumpets.

Voltaire

On April 2 Argentina invaded one of the last vestiges of British colonial rule, located 350 miles off its coast. The occupation of the Falkland/Malvinas Islands cast this previously little-known territory under an instant spotlight. British warships were promptly dispatched while the world watched — at first almost in disbelief — the escalation of a conflict so fraught with absurdities and paradoxes as to seem a comedy of errors. But with a deadly celerity, and at the cost of untold lives, the ugly “joke” soon turned into tragedy.

Can it be, in this supposedly sophisticated and cynical age, that governments are still able to mobilize entire populations into battle for such concepts as “national prestige?” Certainly the propaganda of both sides would have us believe so. Yet, it is never armed conscripts or recruits who start such wars; they only give their lives to them. Who then, stands to benefit, and what, if any, are the material stakes involved? In this case, the rewards at first appear negligible. Neither the islands nor their strategic location would seem to warrant the risks of armed confrontation. Nevertheless, rumors of oil off the coast persist, and to the South lurks the unfailing scent of Antarctica's untapped wealth. The long-term stakes may, in fact, be immense, not to mention the legal implications that a settlement on the sovereignty issue may have for other obviously important and populous overseas territories, such as Hong Kong. However, this is at this time purely speculation. With the dearth of overt discussion on such matters, it is difficult to determine to what extent these potentialities may be influencing the immediate conflict. (Certainly, no regime claims

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to exhort its public towards risking life and limb except for matters of “highest principle!”)

Needless to say, analyzing war is not an easy task, especially since its root factors tend to be obscured and convoluted by sensationalist and anecdotal accounts. Given the nature of currently available information, what are the possibilities of gaining insight into the South Atlantic crisis? As a general proposition we suggest that the war was the result of the simultaneous convergence of three interrelated trends — systemic, national and psychological — which have affected both actors. This configuration created the collision course which made the apparently irrational outbreak almost inevitable.

Domestic versus global stability

The first explanation involves the increasingly fluid and unstable nature of the international stage itself. One of the most striking developments since the Second World War has been the breakdown of the old colonial system, which for Britain has meant the withdrawal of forces from seas where British rule once prevailed. The Persian Gulf, and more to our point, the South Atlantic, are two such examples. The result has been the creation of a political power vacuum which today's dominant powers have been unable to fill. At the same time, an East-West confrontationist view of the world has compounded and confused peripheral instabilities. Given the tendency of major rival-powers to exchange blows by proxy, there are few conflicts, however parochial and limited in origin, which can avoid ultimately taking on international dimensions. The East-West world view has a further impact: even in cases where the influence of one major power is notably absent or insignificant, the mere suspicion of its presence on the part of a rival power may induce in the latter a kind of reflexive interventionism.

In the case of the United States, the maintenance of stable economic dependence in a rapidly-changing and volatile global environment becomes increasingly difficult. In order to preclude erosion of the status quo (i.e., to preserve “stability”), it has adopted a conscious policy of support for regimes which the current ambassador to the U.N. terms “friendly authoritarian governments.” Essentially, what Mrs. Kirkpatrick recommends is the active promotion of virtually any regime, no matter how repressive, provided it holds to a strong anti-communist orientation. In many instances, the consequences for local populations can only be described as devastating. In Latin America, El Salvador and Guatemala are examples of this