

the tiny local Royal Marine garrisons put up a spirited defence and then surrendered.

In London and internationally the reaction was speedy. The United Nations condemned Argentina's resort to arms and called for the withdrawal of its troops. After a short period of shock the British government decided to back up its diplomatic effort to restore British rule with the deployment of a large naval amphibious force towards the islands. The forward elements of this armada were under way in the astonishingly short period of less than four days, a reaction totally unexpected in Buenos Aires or among Argentine military planners.

South Georgia was quickly recovered and the first British military moves took place in and around the islands in the first week of May. These included strategic bombing of the airport at Port Stanley, the capital, and the sinking of the Argentine cruiser *General Belgrano* by the nuclear submarine *Conqueror*. The war now began in earnest with the British landing later in the month and marching over three weeks to retake the capital. The Argentine land forces crumbled under the onslaught and the navy failed to appear to contest Royal Navy control of the seas around the islands. Only the air force, largely opposed to the Falklands adventure from the beginning, put up a good fight and saved Argentine military honour.<sup>7</sup>

Throughout the conflict diplomatic activity was intense. The European Community and the Commonwealth in general backed the United Kingdom while Latin America, with the full exception of Chile and the early exception of Colombia, supported Argentina. But while European and Commonwealth assistance was active and concrete, Latin American remained merely vocal. The United States remained neutral for much of the campaign but public opinion, long critical of the regime in Buenos Aires, eventually obliged Washington to support London. This it did with both diplomatic and military means, although the extent of the latter is often exaggerated.

### **The End of the Military Government**

Defeat in the Falklands, especially after popular hopes had been raised to fever pitch, and news of defeats largely hidden from the Argentine people, was disastrous for the military regime in Buenos Aires. Discontent, already surfacing in the months before the invasion, exploded and General Galtieri and the other members of the government were forced to resign. The armed forces had totally lost what prestige they had garnered from victory in the counter-insurgency 'war' and in a context of mishandled economic policies, it now appeared that they were equally incapable of organizing an effective defence of the country. They could ill afford to give up power too quickly, however, given the dangers of popular vengeance for the excesses of the dirty war.

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<sup>7</sup> See the excellent Francisco Bendala, Manuel Martín and Pérez Seoane, *La Campaña de las Malvinas* (Madrid: San Martín, 1995) for a full and balanced description of this campaign.